

Perceptions of Social Inequality and the Emphasis on Justice-Oriented Values: A Study Among Public Elementary Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions among public elementary school teachers in Kibawe West District, Schools Division of Bukidnon, during the School Year 2025–2026. Anchored on Critical Pedagogy Theory, the research explored how teachers' awareness of economic disparities, educational inequity, gender and identity bias, cultural marginalization, and structural discrimination influences their promotion of equity, critical dialogue, learner empowerment, ethical reasoning, and inclusive curriculum practices in classroom instruction. The study aimed to determine the level of both variables and the significance of their relationship.

A descriptive-correlational research design was utilized involving public elementary school teachers through complete enumeration. Data were collected using an adapted questionnaire and analyzed using means, standard deviations, and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation.

Results revealed that teachers generally held high to very high perceptions of social inequality and placed a high to very great emphasis on justice-oriented values, particularly in empowerment and critical dialogue practices. Furthermore, the findings indicated a strong, statistically significant relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values. The results suggest that teachers with greater awareness of inequality are more likely to integrate inclusive and justice-centered approaches into classroom discussions, highlighting the importance of strengthening socio-political awareness in teacher development programs.

Keywords: Social inequality; Justice-oriented values; Critical pedagogy; Classroom discussions; Equity education; Teacher perceptions; Inclusive teaching; Elementary education.

INTRODUCTION

Social inequality remains a persistent and complex issue that permeates educational systems worldwide, including the Philippine context. Teachers play a crucial role in shaping young minds, and their perceptions of social inequality inevitably influence how they approach value-laden classroom discussions. When educators either underemphasize or overlook issues of social injustice, students may develop limited critical awareness of systemic disparities affecting society. This study explores how teachers perceive social inequality and how those perceptions shape their emphasis on justice-oriented values in instruction. In doing so, it seeks to determine whether their classroom practices help cultivate students' critical consciousness and democratic participation, or instead reinforce existing social hierarchies.

In the local context, educational institutions in the Philippines are continuously challenged to address growing socioeconomic gaps among learners. Teachers in both public and private schools encounter students from diverse backgrounds—some of whom face food insecurity, lack of learning materials, or limited access to technology. According to David et al. (2021), social inequality was made even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, which magnified the digital divide and exposed the unequal distribution of educational resources in the country.

Consequently, teachers' understanding and awareness of these disparities play a pivotal role in framing classroom discussions that promote inclusivity, empathy, and justice.

Nationally, the Department of Education (DepEd) has made efforts to integrate values-based education and social awareness into the K-12 curriculum through initiatives such as the Values Education Program and *Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao* (EsP). However, the extent to which teachers internalize and actively promote justice-oriented values such as equity, human dignity, and democratic participation varies widely. As noted by Agbisit (2020), many Filipino educators express a commitment to moral instruction but struggle to address controversial or systemic issues such as poverty, discrimination, and corruption due to institutional constraints and a lack of training. This suggests a gap between policy intentions and classroom implementation, raising concerns about the effectiveness of justice-oriented education in developing socially aware citizens.

From a broader international perspective, educators worldwide are increasingly being called upon to become agents of social change. Freire's (1970) concept of "critical pedagogy" emphasizes the need for teachers to engage students in dialogues about power, injustice, and oppression, empowering them to question and transform their realities. Recent studies support this view, indicating that teachers' personal beliefs and sociopolitical consciousness significantly affect how they incorporate justice themes into their teaching (Kumashiro, 2020; Picower, 2021). In multicultural and economically diverse societies, promoting justice-oriented education is not only a moral imperative but also a pedagogical necessity.

In this light, examining teachers' perceptions of social inequality becomes essential in understanding their readiness and willingness to integrate justice-oriented values into their daily classroom discourse. As justice-oriented education calls for both cognitive awareness and affective commitment, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research that explores the intersection of teacher cognition, values education, and democratic citizenship. By identifying prevailing attitudes and instructional practices among teachers in the Kibawe West District, Schools Division of Bukidnon, the research seeks to inform teacher training programs and curriculum policies that promote social justice education at the grassroots level.

While numerous studies have explored social inequality and justice education independently, limited research has investigated the direct relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their actual emphasis on justice-oriented values in day-to-day classroom discussions, particularly in the Philippine context. Most existing literature focuses on curriculum content, student outcomes, or broad policy implementation, leaving a gap in understanding how individual teacher perspectives shape instructional practices that promote critical awareness and equity. Moreover, few studies localize this inquiry to specific school districts, such as the Kibawe West District, where socio-economic disparities are distinct and culturally nuanced. This gap underscores the need for research that bridges personal teacher beliefs and classroom-level enactment of justice-based values to inform context-sensitive professional development and curricular reform better.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions. Specifically, it aims to (1) assess the level of teachers' awareness and understanding of social inequality, (2) determine the extent to which justice-oriented values are incorporated in classroom discourse, and (3) analyze the correlation between these two variables. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to enhancing teacher education programs by emphasizing the importance of socio-political consciousness and justice-based pedagogical approaches.

This study is anchored on Critical Pedagogy Theory, originally proposed by Paulo Freire and later expanded by contemporary scholars. At its core, the theory posits that education should not be neutral but rather serve as a tool for social transformation. It emphasizes the role of teachers in fostering critical awareness and empowering students to challenge and question societal injustices. In this context, educators who deeply understand social inequities are more likely to promote justice-centered learning, encourage reflective dialogue, and create inclusive classroom environments that affirm diverse perspectives and lived experiences.

Recent scholarship affirms the continuing relevance of this theory in today's educational settings. A study by Garcia and Hoelscher (2021) emphasized that teachers who apply critical pedagogy intentionally integrate social issues into classroom conversations, thereby developing students' capacities for ethical reasoning, empathy, and

civic engagement. They found that awareness of social challenges such as poverty, gender bias, and cultural exclusion led teachers to intentionally shape classroom discussions that reflect values of fairness and justice. Likewise, Macaspac (2023) highlighted how Filipino educators who embraced critical pedagogical principles engaged students more effectively in discussions about real-life social problems, using these as entry points to develop moral reasoning and active citizenship.

By grounding instruction in critical pedagogy, educators connect their understanding of social inequalities with purposeful efforts to embed justice-oriented values in teaching. This theoretical lens supports the study's intent to examine how educators' social consciousness influences the depth and quality of value-driven classroom discourse, reinforcing the belief that transformative education begins with reflective and socially aware teaching.

Figure 1 Presents the Schematic Diagram of the Study

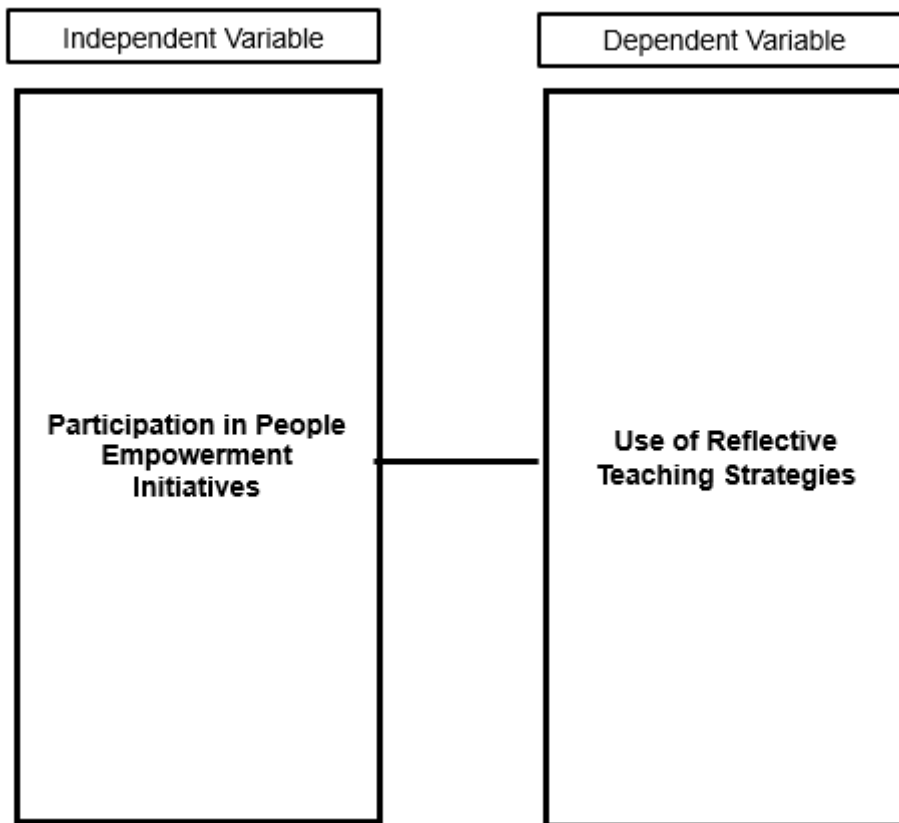


Figure 1 presents the schematic diagram of the relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality (independent variable) and their emphasis on justice-oriented values (dependent variable).

This study aims to examine the relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions.

Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of teachers' perception of social inequality in terms of: (a) economic disparities, (b) educational inequity, (c) gender and identity bias, (e) cultural and ethnic marginalization, and (d) structural discrimination?
2. To what extent do teachers emphasize justice-oriented values in classroom discussions in terms of: (a) promotion of equity, (b) critical dialogue, (c) empowerment and agency, (d) ethical and moral reasoning, and (e) inclusive curriculum integration?

3. Is there a significant relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions?

Hypothesis of the Study

The hypothesis was tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

H₀: There is no significant relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions.

Delimitations of the Study

This study examines the perceptions of social inequality among public elementary school teachers and how these perceptions influence their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions. Specifically, the research is limited to public elementary schools within the Kibawe West District of the Schools Division of Bukidnon. The respondents consist of full-time teachers currently assigned to various grade levels in these schools.

The study centers on teachers' understanding of issues related to economic disparity, educational access, gender and identity bias, cultural marginalization, and systemic discrimination. It also examines how these understandings are reflected in their teaching practices, particularly in promoting equity, critical dialogue, and inclusive moral instruction.

Furthermore, this study does not include private school teachers, secondary education levels, or student perspectives. Thus, the findings apply only to the context of public elementary education within the specified district, and generalizations beyond this scope should be made with caution.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations.

First, the use of self-report data may introduce social desirability bias, as teachers may provide responses that reflect socially acceptable views rather than their actual classroom practices. Although confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, such bias cannot be eliminated.

Second, the study may be affected by common method variance, as all variables were measured using the same instrument and by the same respondents. This may inflate the observed relationships between variables.

Third, the study utilized Pearson correlation analysis, which is appropriate for identifying relationships but does not control for potential confounding variables such as teaching experience, grade level, or prior training. The absence of multiple regression analysis limits the ability to determine whether the observed relationships remain significant when these factors are considered. Future studies are recommended to employ more advanced statistical techniques, such as multiple regression, to provide a more robust analysis.

Fourth, the descriptive-correlational design limits the ability to establish causal relationships. While significant associations were found, it cannot be concluded that teachers' perceptions of social inequality directly cause their emphasis on justice-oriented values.

Lastly, the study is context-specific to the Kibawe West District, and therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other educational settings or regions.

METHODS

This chapter presents the research design, locale, respondents, sampling procedure, research instrument, data gathering procedure, scoring procedure, statistical treatment, and ethical considerations employed in the study.

These methods were selected to systematically examine the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions.

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive–correlational research design. The descriptive component was used to determine the extent of teachers’ perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions. The correlational component examined the relationship between these two variables.

This design is appropriate because the study does not involve manipulating variables but instead focuses on describing existing conditions and identifying possible associations. It provides a systematic basis for understanding how teachers’ social awareness relates to their instructional practices, making the findings relevant for educational planning and policy development.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in Kibawe West District, Schools Division of Bukidnon, Philippines. The district consists of public elementary schools serving learners from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, including Indigenous communities and low-income families.

The locale was purposively selected due to its contextual relevance. The presence of social and economic disparities provides an appropriate context for examining how teachers perceive inequality and integrate justice-oriented values into their teaching practices.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study were public elementary school teachers in Kibawe West District. These teachers are directly involved in classroom instruction and play a critical role in shaping learners’ social awareness and values.

Their professional experiences provide valuable insights into how social inequality is understood and addressed in classroom settings. As frontline implementers of the curriculum, they are well-positioned to integrate justice-oriented principles into daily instruction.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents by School

School	Number of Population	Sample Size
Balintawak ES	6	6
Gutapol ES	8	8
Kibawe Central ES	23	23
Kiorao ES	4	4
Labuagon ES	7	7
Marapange IS	15	15
New Kidapawan IS	6	6
Old Kibawe ES	15	15
Romagook ES	14	14

Spring ES	12	12
Talahiron ES	11	11
West Kibawe ES	16	16
Total	137	137

Sampling Procedure

The study used complete enumeration sampling, in which all public elementary school teachers in the district were included as respondents. This approach ensured full representation of the population and minimized sampling bias.

Given the manageable population size, complete enumeration was both feasible and appropriate. It allowed for a comprehensive analysis of teachers' perceptions and practices across all schools in the district.

Research Instrument

The study utilized an adapted questionnaire based on established literature, including Reimers (2020), UNESCO (2021), Banks (2016), Freire (1970), Westheimer and Kahne (2004), and related works.

The instrument consisted of two parts:

Part I: Perceptions of Social Inequality

- Economic disparities
- Educational inequity
- Gender and identity bias
- Cultural and ethnic marginalization
- Structural discrimination

Part II: Justice-Oriented Values in Classroom Discussions

- Promotion of equity
- Critical dialogue
- Empowerment and agency
- Ethical and moral reasoning
- Inclusive curriculum integration

All items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

Validity of Instrument

The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The overall instrument obtained a Cronbach's alpha of **0.95**, indicating excellent internal consistency.

For subscales, the reliability coefficients were as follows:

- Perceptions of Social Inequality = **0.93**
- Justice-Oriented Values = **0.94**

These values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, confirming that the instrument is highly reliable.

The instrument was adapted from validated frameworks (Reimers, 2020; UNESCO, 2021; Banks, 2016), supporting its content validity.

Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Schools Division of Bukidnon and school heads. Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection.

Questionnaires were distributed either personally or electronically, depending on accessibility. Respondents were given sufficient time to complete the instrument. All collected data were handled confidentially and used strictly for academic purposes.

Scoring Procedure

A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure teachers' responses:

- 5 – Strongly Agree
- 4 – Agree
- 3 – Neutral
- 2 – Disagree
- 1 – Strongly Disagree

Mean scores were computed for each indicator and interpreted using the scale below.

Table 2. Scoring Rubrics of the Study

Scale	Mean Range	Qualitative Description	Interpretation
5	4.21–5.00	Strongly Agree	Very High Perception
4	3.41–4.20	Agree	High Perception
3	2.61–3.40	Neutral	Moderate Perception
2	1.81–2.60	Disagree	Low Perception
1	1.00–1.80	Strongly Disagree	Very Low Perception

Statistical Treatment of Data

The following statistical tools were used:

- Mean and Standard Deviation
- Used to determine the extent of teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values.

- Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to determine the relationship between variables. More advanced statistical analyses, such as multiple regression, were not included in the scope of this study.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards in research. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and no identifying information was disclosed.

Approval was secured from relevant authorities, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents, analyzes, and interprets the findings of the study on teachers’ perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values in classroom discussions in Kibawe West District. The presentation is organized according to the research problems, using mean, standard deviation, and Pearson correlation to provide a clear and systematic interpretation of the data.

Level of Teachers’ Perceptions of Social Inequality

Table 1. Overall Level of Teachers’ Perceptions of Social Inequality

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Economic Disparities	4.15	0.529	Very High
Educational Inequity	3.88	0.264	High
Gender and Identity Bias	4.10	0.378	High
Cultural and Ethnic Marginalization	3.91	0.477	High
Structural Discrimination	4.16	0.431	Very High
Overall	4.04	0.416	High

The findings reveal that teachers’ perceptions of social inequality are evident at a high level (M = 4.04, SD = 0.416). This indicates that teachers generally demonstrate strong awareness of various forms of inequality, particularly in terms of structural discrimination and economic disparities, which obtained the highest mean scores.

The high level of awareness suggests that teachers are cognizant of how socioeconomic conditions, institutional structures, and cultural factors influence learners’ experiences. This finding supports the work of Reimers (2020), who emphasized that teachers must understand social and economic disparities to design inclusive learning environments. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) highlighted that addressing structural inequality is essential in achieving equitable education.

However, the slightly lower mean in educational inequity and cultural marginalization indicates that some dimensions of inequality may be less visible or less consistently recognized in classroom contexts. This may be explained by the findings of David et al. (2021), who noted that economic disparities tend to be more observable (e.g., lack of resources), whereas other forms of inequality, such as cultural marginalization, are often more subtle and systemic.

These findings can be further explained through Freire (1970)'s Critical Pedagogy Theory, which posits that awareness of social injustice develops through reflection and experience. The variation across dimensions suggests that teachers' critical consciousness may still be developing unevenly.

Moreover, the results align with Agbisit (2020), who found that Filipino teachers are aware of social issues but may not fully engage with all dimensions due to limited training and institutional constraints. This reinforces the need for deeper professional development in recognizing less visible forms of inequality.

Extent of Teachers' Emphasis on Justice-Oriented Values

Table 2. Overall Extent of Teachers' Emphasis on Justice-Oriented Values

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Promotion of Equity	4.10	0.538	High
Critical Dialogue	4.32	0.417	Very High
Empowerment and Agency	4.41	0.574	Very High
Ethical and Moral Reasoning	3.91	0.477	High
Inclusive Curriculum Integration	3.88	0.264	High
Overall	4.12	0.454	High

The results indicate that teachers emphasize justice-oriented values in classroom discussions to a high extent ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.454$). Among the dimensions, empowerment and agency and critical dialogue obtained the highest mean scores, suggesting that teachers frequently engage learners in discussions and activities that promote participation and social awareness.

This finding strongly aligns with Westheimer and Kahne (2004), who emphasized that justice-oriented citizenship involves critical thinking and active engagement in addressing social issues. The high level of critical dialogue indicates that teachers are fostering these competencies among learners.

Furthermore, the findings support Freire (1970), who viewed dialogue as a key tool for developing critical consciousness. Teachers who facilitate open discussions enable learners to reflect on social realities and question inequality.

The strong emphasis on empowerment and agency is also consistent with Picower (2021), who argued that teachers play a crucial role in challenging inequities by encouraging student voice and participation. Similarly, Kumashiro (2020) emphasized the importance of anti-oppressive education in creating inclusive and equitable classroom environments.

However, relatively lower mean scores in ethical reasoning and inclusive curriculum integration suggest that deeper integration of justice-oriented values into instructional content may still be needed. This finding is supported by Macaspac (2023), who noted that while teachers may engage in discussions about social issues, embedding these concepts into curriculum design requires more structured training and support.

Additionally, Sims et al. (2021) found that professional development plays a critical role in strengthening teachers' ability to implement equity-based practices, suggesting that continued training may enhance these lower-rated areas.

Relationship Between Teachers’ Perceptions of Social Inequality and Their Emphasis on Justice-Oriented Values

Table 3. Test of Significant Relationship Between Variables

Variable	r-value	p-value	Interpretation
Economic Disparities	0.833	0.000	Significant
Educational Inequity	0.810	0.000	Significant
Gender and Identity Bias	0.715	0.000	Significant
Cultural and Ethnic Marginalization	0.902	0.000	Significant
Structural Discrimination	0.861	0.000	Significant
Overall	0.864	0.000	Significant

The findings reveal a very strong and statistically significant relationship between teachers’ perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values ($r = 0.864$, $p = 0.000$). This indicates that as teachers’ awareness of social inequality increases, their implementation of justice-oriented practices in the classroom strengthens.

This result is strongly supported by Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, which explains that individuals’ beliefs and perceptions influence their behaviors. In this study, teachers’ awareness serves as a cognitive factor that shapes their instructional practices.

Similarly, the findings align with Freire (1970), who emphasized that awareness of social injustice leads to transformative action. Teachers who recognize inequality are more likely to integrate justice-oriented values into classroom discussions.

Empirical evidence further supports this relationship. Garcia and Hoelscher (2021) found that teachers who are more aware of social inequities are more likely to incorporate social justice themes into their teaching practices. This strengthens the validity of the study’s findings.

In addition, recent research by Vangrieken et al. (2024) highlights that teachers’ engagement with equity-oriented practices is influenced not only by individual awareness but also by professional collaboration and support systems. This suggests that both personal and institutional factors contribute to justice-oriented teaching.

Among the variables, cultural and ethnic marginalization showed the strongest correlation ($r = 0.902$), indicating that sensitivity to cultural diversity significantly influences inclusive teaching practices. This supports the argument of Reimers (2020) that culturally responsive awareness is essential in promoting equity in education.

However, it is important to consider that the strong correlations may also be influenced by self-report data, which can introduce common method bias. Despite this limitation, the consistency of significant relationships across all variables strengthens the conclusion that awareness and practice are closely linked.

This study utilized Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationship between variables. While this method is appropriate for identifying associations, it does not control for potential confounding variables such as teaching experience, grade level, or prior training. The absence of multiple regression analysis limits the ability to determine whether the observed relationship remains significant when these factors are considered. Future studies are recommended to employ multiple regression or other advanced statistical techniques to provide a more robust analysis of the predictors of justice-oriented teaching practices.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that public elementary school teachers in Kibawe West District possess a substantial level of awareness regarding various forms of social inequality affecting learners. Their strong recognition of socioeconomic differences and systemic challenges indicates that teachers are generally sensitive to contextual factors that influence student learning. Such awareness reflects a professional understanding of the realities experienced by learners in rural and diverse educational settings.

It can also be concluded that teachers actively integrate justice-oriented values into classroom discussions through practices that promote equity, encourage dialogue, and empower students to participate meaningfully in learning activities. These instructional behaviors suggest that teachers recognize their role not only as facilitators of academic knowledge but also as contributors to learners' social and moral development. Nevertheless, the presence of variations across some indicators implies that further professional support may still be needed to strengthen the consistent application of inclusive practices.

Moreover, the significant relationship between teachers' perceptions of social inequality and their emphasis on justice-oriented values confirms that awareness and instructional practice are closely interconnected. Teachers who are more conscious of inequality are more inclined to implement teaching approaches that foster fairness, empathy, and participation. This reinforces the importance of strengthening teachers' social awareness as a pathway toward improving justice-oriented education and inclusive classroom environments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, it is recommended that teachers continue to enhance their awareness of social inequality through professional reflection, collaborative discussions, and participation in training programs focused on inclusive and equity-centered education. Strengthening teachers' understanding of learners' diverse realities may further improve their responsiveness to students' needs and promote more supportive classroom environments.

School administrators and education leaders are encouraged to design and implement professional development programs that focus on justice-oriented teaching strategies, inclusive curriculum development, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Providing structured opportunities for teachers to share best practices and experiences may help ensure consistent integration of equity-based approaches across classrooms within the district.

The Schools Division Office may consider developing policies and instructional support mechanisms that promote justice-oriented education, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Initiatives such as resource provision, contextualized curriculum materials, and community engagement programs may help strengthen teachers' capacity to address social inequality effectively.

Future researchers are also encouraged to conduct similar studies involving broader populations, including other school districts, secondary education levels, or student perspectives, to provide deeper insights into the relationship between teacher awareness and justice-oriented instructional practices. Expanding the scope of research may contribute to more comprehensive educational policies and interventions aimed at promoting equitable learning environments.

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