

Promoting Equity in Education: Lessons from Ghanaian Education Policy Texts

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ABSTRACT: *This paper addresses the issue of equity in education by exploring how Ghanaian education policy texts foregrounds equity and address inequities. We used a critical pedagogy lens and equity theory to highlight how Ghanaian teacher education policy, national teacher standards and assessment policies promote equity and situates it at the centre of curriculum framework, classroom teaching and learning as well as assessment. From our analyses of policy texts, Ghanaian school classrooms are to be equitable and become places where students' uniqueness is recognised, respected and supported. The pedagogic relations and student-student interactions are to promote equity. However, we highlight gaps in knowledge about equity literacy among teachers; how they understand equity in the classroom; how teachers actually promote equity in classroom and the challenges they face in so doing; as well as how learners experience equity in the classroom. Therefore, we argued that there the need for research into equity literacy among teachers, how they promote equity in the*

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classroom and how students experience it. This necessitates research into how teachers promote equity at the school site in terms of teacher-student and student-student interactions.

KEY WORDS: *equity, inequities, curriculum, assessment, learning practices, equity literacy*

INTRODUCTION

Equity has been discussed internationally (World Bank Group, 2021; Ainscow, 2020) and evidence exist that “the notion of equity in education is important and has moved people in the past and will continue to move people in the future” (Ismail, 2012: 922). Internationally, Education for All (EFA), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) highlight equity as a major theme (Haug, 2020). SDG 4 is to ensure inclusive and equitable education (UNESCO, 2017). However, it is argued that achieving equity in education is multi-layered and will require the cooperation of governments, multi-nationals, social movements, academics, researchers, policy makers, and world institutions to seek innovative ways to achieve good quality education for all at the different levels of education so as to achieve the SDGs (Edusei, 2021). In the school, promoting equity is about educators and learners choosing to embrace rather than shy away from the unique backgrounds, identities, and experiences that individual students bring to the institution (DiFranza, 2019; Woofter, 2019). Inequities have a lasting impact on promoting lifelong learning as envisaged by the SDG 4.

Discussing equity in education in Ghana is not out of place. First, it is both a constitutional requirement and a national security matter (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2022) for an ethnically diverse society such as Ghana. Over the years, equity remains an important of ongoing efforts to improve education (Martinez & Kirkwood-Tucker, 2011). Ghana has adopted SDG Goal 4 which calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and the provision of life-long learning opportunities for all (Ministry of Education, 2017). Also, Ghana’s Inclusive Education Policy (GES 2015) emphasises that the country’s inclusive education approach is to ‘create an education system that is responsive to learner diversity and to ensure that all learners have the best possible opportunities to learn’. Ghana's Education Strategic Plan (ESP) 2018-2030, which outlines the vision and policies for achieving the goal of transforming Ghana into a 'learning nation,' promises to take Ghana on the path to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (Ministry of Education, 2019). According to the Ministry of Education (2019 p.3), the ESP 2018-2030 revolves around the ambition to, among other things improve “equitable access to and participation in inclusive education at all levels”. Before the ESP, Ghana’s commitment to equitable education has been outlined in the FCUBE, the establishment of Girl’s Education Unit. Free Senior High School policy, free feeding, free books, free uniform, the capitation grant policy among others (Edusei, 2021; Adzahlie-Mensah, 2014). As these policies promote access, (Dawson, 2017) reminds us that access constitutes only one of the myriad facets of equity issues involved in education.

Although there is a great deal of research done on education and a steady stream of research being released that investigates and summarizes the many different approaches to raising educational standards (Anlimachie & Avoada, 2020; Ahiatrogah & Bervell, 2013), most of these focal points are on access, quality, content, and instruction (Wolf et al., 2018; Cenoz, 2015). Equity appears to be relegated. By equity, in education, we mean that all students are provided with equivalent opportunities and are treated fairly (Centre for Public Education, 2016). Equity requires that individuals should be treated based on their peculiar needs - students' backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and intrinsic motivation, to promote fairness and inclusion (UNESCO, 2017, p.17). This notion of equity appeared lost in educational analysis in Ghana. As Adzahlie-Mensah (2014) argued, those who have read much of the quantification research in Ghana, are accustomed to reading about Ghana's progress towards achieving EFA goals such as gender parity and increased access (World Bank Group, 2021).

However, it is documented that education in Ghana is struggling mostly because of issues of (in)equity in terms of infrastructure provision, teacher deployment and resource allocation among others (Balwanz & Darvas, 2013). Also, previous school-based research has focused on questioning school social relations highlight that there are marginalities that epitomises inequity within school social relations (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2014; Agbenyegah, 2011). Dei (2004:237) pointed to schools as "sites and sources" for the manifestation of "bias, discrimination, exclusion and marginality". According to Dei, the inequity problems of "differences and disparities in Ghanaian schooling go back to colonial times" when teachers use "the self as a knowledge base [to] deny "heterogeneity ... and maintain glaring disparities and inequalities that persist and grow along constructed lines of difference" (p.247). Other recent and emerging critical analysis of schooling in Ghana, argued that schooling and classroom practices pose national security risks of perpetuating colonialism, sequestration and reproduction of knowledge and promoting authoritarianisms (See Adzahlie-Mensah, 2022; Akyeampong and Adzahlie-Mensah, 2018; Adzahlie-Mensah and Dunne, 2018; Dunne and Adzahlie-Mensah, 2016; Adzahlie-Mensah, 2014). In particular, Adzahlie-Mensah's (2014) detailed analysis of schooling regimes provided typical insight into how school and classroom practices in a Ghanaian basic school were couched in authoritarian terms. Using the works of critical scholars, Adzahlie-Mensah provided ground-breaking analysis of the marginalising relational complexities in school social relations, school codes of discipline as well as teaching and learning practices. In particular, he detailed how such practices tended to create various zones of exclusion with attendant demeaning identities that have the potential to traduce efforts at promoting social equity.

In this paper, we follow the emerging tradition of critical analysis to examine equity provisions in policy texts and how those are to be reflected in classroom teaching and learning process as well as assessment practices. This contribution hopes to fill an important gap – addressing the dearth of studies examining how teachers and students are to experience equity in the classroom. We analysed policy texts that directly have consequences for the classroom level and which can directly affect systemic change in concerted, long-term efforts to achieve complete equity.

The theoretical framework

We used Freire's (1972) idea of critical pedagogy which challenges patterns of inequity and merged it with equity theory. In critical pedagogy, the best teachers are those who show the students where to look but do not tell them what to see (Freire, 2013). This theoretical frame is antithetical to 'poisonous pedagogy' (Miller, 1982; Cotton, 2013) where students and their identities are treated pejoratively. Critical pedagogy slights the banking and the battery methods of education as a colonialist approach to knowledge production (Ilett, 2019; Kocevar-Weidinger et al., 2019) that is prevalent in inherited formal education practices in ex-colonies where certain individuals are viewed as more knowledgeable, superior, and privileged than others. As postulated by Freire (1972:46-47) critical pedagogy depicted the colonialist approach in terms of authoritarian classroom relations in which:

1. The teacher teaches and the students are taught
2. The teacher knows everything and the students know nothing
3. The teacher thinks and the students are thought about
4. The teacher talks and the students listen –meekly
5. The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined
6. The teacher chooses and enforces his or her choice and the students comply
7. The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher
8. The teacher chooses the programme content and the students comply
9. The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with professional authority which he or she sets in opposition to the freedom of the students
10. The teacher is a subject of the learning process while the student are mere objects

As an alternative, critical pedagogics postulated a Rawls' (1971) type of *theory of social justice* approach to education that challenges disempowerment, othering and marginalisation. The critical pedagogy approach is student-centred – it de-centres the traditional classroom, which positions teachers at the centre (Freire, 2013). Critical pedagogy's goal is to emancipate marginalized or oppressed groups by developing, according to Paulo Freire, conscientização, or critical consciousness in students. It aims to liberate and to humanize students so that they can reach their full potential (Freire, 2021). Critical pedagogy thus focuses on awakening critical consciousness as a way to lessen authoritarianism, marginalities and objectivization within the schools (Cotton, 2013; Matteson & Gersch, 2019; Tewell, 2020). This dovetails into critical literacy where students are invited and encouraged to question the techniques of social practice in the everyday classroom, to confront the system with a view to discard what appears to be employed in oppressing and marginalising some people (Cotton, 2013; Tewell, 2020).

The critical pedagogy approach encourages ethical interactions, inclusive teaching style and engagement of learners as active agents in their own education (Freire, 2021; Tewell, 2015). It challenges authoritarian curriculum modes that solidify social class distinctions and inequalities (Adzahlie-Mensah and Dunne, 2018). It promotes social justice, democracy, and

the empowerment of students in the classroom. Critical pedagogy stresses the importance of the relationship between educators and students, as well as the co-creation of knowledge.

In research, an important aspect of applying critical pedagogy is to examine how policy documents promote equity in the teacher-student and student-student relationships. This includes provisions on how to recognize and challenge different forms of bias that impact both the teachers and learners' experiences. Our goal is to facilitate critical discussions, focusing on understanding how Ghanaian educational policy encourages critical consciousness and equitable education for all. At a broader level, we seek to initiate a discussion about how the Ghanaian education systems enables teachers to use active and inclusive learning approaches as well as prepares students and teachers to challenge their own beliefs, and to break free of exclusionary social practices.

In so doing, we employed the equity pedagogy variant of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy inherently embodies equity pedagogy beyond recognizing and valuing differences to promote equitable education (Banks and Banks, 1995). According to Banks and Banks (1995), equity pedagogy is an educational approach in which teachers develop teaching strategies and cultivate classroom environments that better support all students, especially those who have been disadvantaged in school and the outside society. Equity pedagogy is context-based - uses social physiognomies, familiarities and viewpoints of culturally dissimilar learners as avenues to teach them more effectively. It is also relationship-based and promotes a culture of care, mutual respect, trust and cooperation.

In terms of educational analysis of equity, critical pedagogy research questions the system, the structures, and It examines how some people – teachers and students from a certain social class, or possessing certain characteristics - within the school system can be disparaged or perceived to be superior to others (Cotton, 2013; Matteson & Gersch, 2019; Tewell, 2020). The advantage of equity theory is its emphasis on analysing inputs and outcomes (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2022; Adams, 1963). Outcomes are as important as inputs in determining classroom equity. For example, while a student may speak more in class than others, he/she may still feel not treated equitably if the perceived rewards of the participation is not commensurate with the input. Thus, in implementing equity pedagogy in the classroom, inputs include equity sensitivity among teachers and students with attention to both distributive and procedural justice (World Bank Group, 2021). This creates a comparison to other members of the class (Ainscow, 2020). Individual's sense of equity is determined by how they perceived their situation as similar or different from others. The complexity in equity theory is that the teachers' efforts to enable one student learn may be perceived as a bias by others (Gorski and Pothini, 2018). Therefore, inputs of both teachers and students can determine equity outcomes. Similarly, when a student remains quiet, a teacher's regular efforts to include the student by inviting her/him to contribute to classroom discussions can be read as singling out the individual for attention. Therefore, discussing equity is a slippery adventure, requiring careful reflection and balancing act. Our focus in this work is to look at equity from the point of policy texts that inform teaching and learning practices within Ghanaian classrooms.

The need for critical pedagogy analysis of schooling in Ghana is provided by insights emerging from various studies into school practices (Adzahlie-Mensah and Dunne, 2019; Adzahlie-Mensah, 2014; Agbenyega and Klibthong, 2011; Alhassan and Adzahlie-Mensah, 2010). For example, Agbenyega and Klibthong (2011:407) identified that “the teacher is a teacher and the student is a student”. Also, Adzahlie-Mensah’s (2014) analysis argued that, in school, students were treated as ‘nobodies’ while Adzahlie-Mensah and Dunne (2019) described students in Ghanaian schools as ‘colonised bodies’. Dunne and Adzahlie-Mensah (2016) identified that the hidden curriculum implemented in Ghanaian basic schools do position students as subordinate subjects. Our effort is to examine current policy positions to appreciate the extent to which they promote equity pedagogy and literacy within the curriculum and among teachers. Therefore, in this research, we draw on the equity pedagogy variant of critical pedagogy to examine how school policy texts fundamentally challenge the perpetration of marginalising social practices, and identities within school practices. We focused on analysing curriculum provisions governing pedagogy, policy provisions that define teacher-student and student-student interactions during classroom teaching and learning as well as policies on assessment of teaching in order to generate knowledge about classroom equity.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is carved out from an ongoing research into classroom equity. The evidence discussed were from document analysis grounded in the understanding that, policy texts define social relations within social institutions (Devault & McCoy, 2001). Therefore, we analysed school policy documents with the belief that they set the parameters for a person’s ability or inability to navigate the structural and political sub-systems that impact learning and participation in educational programs (Wright, 2003). Four documents analysed. These were National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework; The National Teachers’ Standards for Ghana: Guidelines; National Pre-Tertiary Assessment Framework; National Pre-tertiary Education Curriculum Framework. These documents constituted the set of policy provisions that regulate teacher practices at the school site and the micro level of classroom interactions. The National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework is “the central vehicle for the transformation of Initial Teacher Education in Ghana ... [with] the aim to train increased numbers of effective, engaging and inspirational teachers” (Ministry of Education, 2017: 2). The National Teachers’ Standards for Ghana: Guidelines were analysed by reason of the requirement that the “Standards should be seen as one common core set of standards that apply to all teachers at all levels” (Ministry of Education, 2018: 6). National Pre-tertiary Assessment Framework is a storehouse policy document of all principles, practice and conduct of assessments associated with learning at the pre-tertiary levels of education in Ghana (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020: 1). The National Pre-tertiary Education Curriculum Framework is the policy guideline against which the school curriculum will be reviewed and revised (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020: iii). The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three themes were established. These were curriculum provision for equity; equity in classroom teaching and learning and equity in assessment of learning.

Findings: Equity in Ghanaian education policy

The discussion in this section emerges from analysis of data from classroom teaching, learning and assessment practices. The discussion is categorised under two main themes - classroom teaching and learning practices; and assessment of learning.

Curriculum provision for equity

In this first section of the analysis, we discuss the curriculum provision for equity in response to Ghana's commitments to achieving SDG Goal 4 and Ghana's Inclusive Education Policy (GES 2015). We observed, from the analysis of policy documents, that equity features prominently. First, the National Pre-tertiary Education Curriculum Framework positions equity as one of the main issues that should foreground any curriculum activity. It provides that "inclusive education practices will be put in place to ensure equity in educational provisions in the next 10 to 20 years" dating from the year 2020 (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020: 5). The policy position was that

it is necessary to ensure an equitable distribution of resources based on the unique needs of learners and schools. Ghana's learners are from diverse backgrounds, which requires the provision of equal opportunities to all, and that all strive to care for each other both personally and professionally (p. 21)

This position is noted as one of the core values and makes explicit the national commitment to equity and the reasons for striving towards achieving equity in education. First, it recognizes the diversity of children in Ghanaian school classrooms. This appreciation calls attention to equity literacy (Gorski and Swalwell, 2015). Second, it recognizes the need to provide resources that support the diverse needs of the different categories of children in the Ghanaian school classroom. Third, it calls attention to the need for equalization of opportunities for all students. These are important provisions that support the achievement of equity goals. On the premise of the provision, it can be argued that the curriculum framework abhors inequity and does not support oppressive and discriminatory curricula practices. On these grounds, we proceeded to examine the equity provisions in teacher education curriculum as a pathway to understanding curriculum provision for equity in the classroom.

The primary document we examined to ascertain the equity provisions in teacher education curriculum was the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework. From our analysis, the framework highlights equity as a major issue in the curriculum. It locates equity and inclusion as one of the cross-cutting issues that must run through all aspects of the teacher education curriculum. It asks that

Cultural and social linguistic diversity in Ghana is manifest in all classrooms. Understanding this is key to addressing barriers to learning, and teaching for diversity (Ministry of Education, 2017: 8).

As a cross-cutting issue, the curriculum framework explains that student teachers should learn equity and inclusivity through: (a) Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills: that is, general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and technological pedagogical and content knowledge (PCK), (b) Subject Curriculum Knowledge, (c) Knowledge of Special Education Needs of pupils, gender, etc. and (c) Literacy and Supported Teaching in school. Specifically, the framework requires that, teacher education should be modelled in such a way that teachers “general pedagogical knowledge and PCK should make them aware of the issues of equity” (p.42). As part of the requirements in the framework (Ministry of Education, 2017:16), it is expected among other things that both in-service and pre-service teacher

- *demonstrates an ability to integrate his/her curriculum, subject and pedagogical knowledge, and plans for and uses differentiated interactive instructional strategies and resources to improve the learning outcomes of all learners irrespective of gender, disabilities, or geographical location;*
- *has a good understanding of the learners, their development, their needs and their socio-cultural and political backgrounds, as well as a respect for their rights as human beings;*
- *views learners as active constructors of knowledge and is therefore able to create learning contexts that are learner-centred and encourages learners to collaborate with others;*
- *is competent in the use of different pedagogical strategies including project-based, enquiry-based, and problem-based instructional and learning strategies, to meet the diverse needs and learning styles of learners;*
- *exhibits potential attitudes, values and beliefs that are in tune with the code of ethics of the teaching profession.*

The provisions pointedly connect to promoting equity in various ways including the deploying of instructional strategies, pedagogical strategies and the professional attitudes, values and beliefs in tune with professional code of ethics of the teaching and learning. A careful reflection on the provisions show it asks for respect for all learners, requiring that teachers view learners as active constructors of knowledge and to encourage learner-learner collaborations. The teachers are to develop competencies in creating a teaching learning environment that nurtures potential, ensuring that the needs of individual learners are addressed in an equitable manner. From instructional strategies, through assessment practices, to classroom interactions among teachers and students, teachers are expected to adopt practices that promote equity as a first step to improving “learning outcomes for all learners irrespective of gender, disabilities, or geographical location” (Ministry of Education, 2017:16). From this perspective, it is expected that student teachers are “equipped with appropriate teaching-learning strategies that support inclusion and equity during the teaching-learning process” (Ministry of Education, 2017: 42). In terms of assessment, the framework provided that teachers should possess assessment literacy, which makes it possible for them to attend to the differentiated needs of various categories of learners from different contexts and backgrounds. As the framework puts it, teachers are to be educated that

Assessment literacy, understanding the principles and practices of assessment and testing, is key to effective planning for differentiation and making provision for all pupils in the ages, subjects and contexts being taught (Ministry of Education, 2017: 8)

As the Ministry explained, developing this competency is identified in the framework as one of “the issues that cut across all the four pillars and are necessary for teachers to ensure learning for all” (p. 69). This meant that teachers would be equipped with appropriate teaching and learning strategies as well as classroom practices that support equity during classroom processes. Thus, the issues of equity are included in teacher education to help teachers in different ways: a) develop the capacity to identify equity issues; b) appreciate what they should do to make students understand issues of equity; c) develop awareness of appropriate approaches to identifying and addressing equity issues; and d) to teach reflectively in ways that improve learning outcomes for all students. Therefore, it can be argued that, at the policy level, the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework provides grounds for equity in the classroom. Teachers (both pre-service and in-service) are expected to be educated in the context of an ecology of equity (Ainscow et al., 2020) and to develop competencies that support equitable classroom practices. However, how this manifest in practices remains largely unexplored. Grounded research that examines classroom processes and practices to establish how equity is understood by teachers and promoted according to the policy provision will be fundamental in developing monitoring mechanisms and in-service training to sustain the achievement of equity goals.

Classroom teaching and learning practices

This section specifically discusses the analyses of classroom practices expected of teachers. The policy document that we analysed was the National Teaching Standards for Ghana: Guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2018:16). The guidelines set out the minimum levels of practice that all trained teachers must reach to play a critical role as members of the profession. It details the professional values and attitudes, the professional knowledge and the professional practice expected of teachers. It states that, the standards are

.... clear expectations of skills that teachers should be able to demonstrate. They may be used in training institutions, schools, inspectorate bodies, continuous professional development at an individual, school or cluster-based level, training, induction, and self-development. College principals, tutors, head teachers and mentors in schools, as well as student teachers and teachers themselves, will use the Standards as the key reference point in their assessment (Ministry of Education, 2018: 16).

From this provision, the standards have been designed to set out a basic framework within which all teachers should operate from the point of initial qualification. The Teaching Standards has requirements that support equity in teachers’ professional practice. There are two major sides - Managing the learning environment and Teaching and Learning. In terms of managing the environment, the Standards set by the Ministry of Education (2018:15), the teacher is required to ensure he/she

- *Plans and delivers varied and challenging lessons, showing a clear grasp of the intended outcomes of their teaching.*
- *Carries out small-scale action research to improve practice.*
- *Creates a safe, encouraging learning environment.*
- *Manages behaviour and learning with small and large classes.*

In terms of actual teaching and learning, the teacher is expected to ensure he/she:

- *Employs a variety of instructional strategies that encourages student participation and critical thinking.*
- *Pays attention to all learners, especially girls and students with Special Educational Needs, ensuring their progress.*
- *Employs instructional strategies appropriate for mixed ability, multilingual and multi-age classes.*
- *Sets meaningful tasks that encourages learner collaboration and leads to purposeful learning.*
- *Explains concepts clearly using examples familiar to students.*
- *Produces and uses a variety of teaching and learning resources including ICT, to enhance learning.*

A cursory look at the standards show they place responsibilities on teachers to ensure that all students under their care are addressed in ways that ensure their progress. Teachers are required to use a variety of instructional strategies appropriate for mixed ability groups, pay attention to all students and to enhance meaningful and purposeful learning for all. Also, teachers are expected to ensure that all students reach their full potential by using various strategies and tool to enhance learning. Therefore, it is expected that classroom practices and processes will be inclusive and equitable, encouraging the participation of all learners. Thus, at the face level, it can be argued that there are effective policy provisions for equity in the classroom. What seem to be missing is that the National Teaching Standards do not provide explicitly for the day-to-day monitoring of standards. What it provided for was the “Self-monitoring of professional development for teachers’ upgrading” (Ministry of Education, 2018:35). It details further that

Evidence that a student teacher or teacher can meet all of the Standards must be in the form of a professional portfolio organised according to the three domains. --- evidence collected by the student teacher or teacher over time. As a critically reflective practitioner, the professional portfolio provides the starting point for the continued development of the teacher in their induction year and for subsequent years (p.15).

Portfolio building helps teachers to reflect on their personal development including their reflections on objectives of what and how learners should learn and the teacher makes learning relevant to their learners. As the standards require, the teacher must make sure lesson objectives

are clear to learners at beginning of lessons and their progress towards these is monitored; lesson structures and tasks vary, target females and males equally and are pitched just beyond what learners already know to stretch and inspire. It requires that teaching strategies include using whole class, group, pair, individual work and ICT to expand or consolidate learning. The teacher is expected to develop skills that enables him/her recognise when some, most or all learners do not understand a concept or do not achieve the intended learning outcomes, and addresses this as soon as possible through individual teaching, re-teaching content or setting homework.

However, this provision places responsibility of monitoring equity on the teachers' ingenuity. Appropriate self-evaluation, reflection and professional development activity is critical to improving teachers' practice at all career stages. The standards set out clearly the key areas in which a teacher should be able to assess his or her own practice, and receive feedback from colleagues. As their careers progress, teachers will be expected to extend the depth and breadth of knowledge, skill and understanding that they demonstrate in meeting the standards, as is judged to be appropriate to the role they are fulfilling and the context in which they are working. One of the way teachers are expected to demonstrate their attainment of the standards related to managing the learning environment is to ensure the following outcome (performance).

long-term and short-term (termly, weekly, daily) plans show clear understanding of how learners are to progress, with reference to the curriculum and learning outcomes expected. Lesson evaluations. Reflections in portfolio [and] lesson evaluations by learners (Ministry of Education, 2018: 23)

This provision is important in the sense that it affords the opportunity for the students to reflect on the teachers' outputs and to provide feedback. The student feedback can help teachers to fundamentally re-structure their teaching and learning approaches and to address particular concerns that individual learners may have expressed. A corollary to this requirement is the demand on teachers to create safe and encouraging learning environment. The exemplar in the standards is the guidance that

The teacher is warm, friendly, and fair, offers praise and encouragement (particularly for females in mathematics and science subjects), and withholds any form of corporal punishment or threatening behaviour. Learners laugh, smile, and learn. Learners are not afraid to answer or ask questions and are not publicly or privately reprimanded for wrong answers. The teacher pre-empts any bullying or teasing. The teacher encourages good hygiene e.g. handwashing, ensure their learners get access to water, food and latrines in order to learn. Their classroom is neatly organised, clean, with displays to encourage learning (Ministry of Education, 2018: 23)

From an equity framework perspective, this should make it possible for teachers to ensure all children are treated equitably. This seems to require that teachers are equity literate. Equity here goes beyond provision of fair opportunities for all students. It includes commitment to the

protection of vulnerable members of the class from the aggressive behaviours that frustrate their participation. Equity, thus, includes the elimination of barriers to access for all. What is not immediately visible is what equity training teachers receive and how that is manifesting in their professional practices in the implementation of the standards in the everyday classroom. For example, the standards require that

The teacher ensures that quiet or non-participating learners contribute and learn, differentiating questions or work accordingly; ensures full participation by girls; seats learners with disabilities near to front to see or hear better; provides resources appropriate to their needs such as plates to teach geometry to visually impaired learners, or Braille, or adapts ICT accordingly; notices when learners are absent, not engaged or paying attention and alters strategies accordingly (Ministry of Education, 2018: 24)

This provision summarizes the need for equity literacy (Pivoda & Stickney, 2020) practices among teachers in the classroom. Their pedagogic practices are expected to be emancipatory and empowering, adopting an equity pedagogy (World Bank Group, 2021; Banks and Banks, 1995). Teaching practices and teacher-student relationships are expected to be collaborative, engaging and inclusive. All children and learners are expected to have the opportunity they need to participate as full members of the class and to achieve the learning outcomes expected of them. Each student is to be supported as an individual and be provided all the resources the student needs to learn. Teachers are expected to use a variety of teaching strategies to ensure that all students are enabled to learn.

Assessment of learning

The focus of this section is equity in assessment of learning. The primary documents analysed here is the National Pre-tertiary Assessment Framework, National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework and the National Teaching Standards for Ghana. The focus of this document is to provide everyone involved with assessment in Ghana (such as teachers, policy makers and parents), with a reference manual that clearly outlines how the curriculum standards – knowledge (and its use), skills and values– that are central to the new pre-tertiary education curriculum will be assessed (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020). According to the framework, learner assessment in Ghana is done:

To ascertain the level of learners' performance against curriculum standards and core competences in order to make decisions regarding selection, remediation, promotion, certification, proficiency and competency (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2020: 4)

The National Pre-tertiary Assessment Framework identifies six core competences including critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration, cultural identity and global citizenship, personal development and leadership, and digital literacy. It details the importance of school-based assessment and requires that assessment must emphasize

a learner-centred approach to learning and seeks to develop high ability thinking skills, problem solving skills, cooperative learning, teamwork, moral and spiritual development and formal presentation skills on the part of the learner ... In order to capture the full range and levels of competences, a variety of formal and informal assessment situations are necessary to provide a complete picture of the learner's progress and achievements in all subjects. Classroom assessment must be clear, simple and manageable, and explicitly anchored in learner-centred principles and practice. Teachers must elicit reliable and valid information of the learner's performance in the basic competences (p. 15-16).

From our analysis, we observed that the word 'equity' was mentioned only once in the document. The relevant provision was that

All assessment procedures, benchmarks and methods should be revised to ensure equity for all learners, and also provide appropriate and suitable learning equipment, materials, and tools for assessment. (p. 32)

We explored equity provisions in the national standards regarding the allied ways in which assessment should be conducted. We analysed the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework and the National Teaching Standards' assessment requirements. This is important for the reason that it is difficult to discuss learning separate from assessment practices. This is overtly established in Ghana's national teachers' standards' expectation of a qualified teacher. According to the Ministry of Education (2018: 44), any qualified teacher

.... should be able to plan for and use differentiated, interactive instructional strategies, engaging learners to achieve higher outcomes for all and particularly those who are more vulnerable; those with disabilities, girls and those who need cognitive challenge, and use assessment productively in achieving those outcomes.

The expectation draws a direct correlation between classroom teaching and assessment. Therefore, discussing equity in classroom teaching is not complete without corresponding discussion of how those are connected to assessment practices and processes. It is noted that knowledge of instructional and "assessment strategies is key to supporting the learning and progress of all pupils" (Ministry of Education, 2017: 27), recognizing the role of "assessment to support differentiation and learning, core skills." Therefore, it is detailed that teachers

need to draw on a range of knowledge and weave it into coherent understanding and skills in order to become competent and to connect content, and teaching and assessment in the classroom.

To be equitable, the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework requires that teachers are trained to apply assessment strategies drawing on equity and inclusivity (Ministry of Education, 2017: 42). An important aspect of that is that they develop the capacity to "apply assessment strategies that take into consideration the cultural, social and linguistic diversity of

the learners” (p. 42). In the context of this provision, we can argue that the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework centres equity literacy and expects teachers to apply equity pedagogy in enabling all learners to learn more effectively.

National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework requires that “teachers need to become assessment literate” (p. 22), and “with skills to construct effective assessment” (p. 25) through courses focused on “knowledge of classroom assessment” (p. 28). We observed from our analysis of the framework that equity is a central theme in assessment literacy which was defined in the National Teacher Education Curriculum Framework as meaning that teachers

.... know and can apply the principles and procedures for sound classroom assessment of (summative), and assessment for (formative), learning. They also need to know how to use the information from their assessments to support their planning for differentiation, identifying and making provision for the needs of all pupils in the ages, subjects and contexts ... (Ministry of Education, 2017: 43)

The provision clearly states that assessment must make provision for the needs of all pupils in relation to their ages, subjects and contexts. This, as the framework puts it, is to “ensure that all pupils, regardless of social, cultural, academic and linguistic differences, can access the curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2018: 44) This fundamentally grounds equity at the centre of assessment in Ghanaian schools. Practically, the National Teaching Standards (Ministry of Education, 2018: 15) requires that the teacher:

- *Integrates a variety of assessment modes into teaching to support learning.*
- *Listens to learners and gives constructive feedback.*
- *Identifies and remediates learners’ difficulties or misconceptions, referring learners whose needs lie outside the competency of the teacher.*
- *Keeps meaningful records of every learner and communicates progress clearly to parents and learners.*
- *Demonstrates awareness of national and school learning outcomes of learners.*
- *Uses objective criterion referencing to assess learners.*

The exemplars include that assessment modes are integrated into daily practice and include learners’ verbal responses and written responses; the teacher gives formative feedback to individual female and male learners; and teachers assess fairly, using pre-determined criteria and do not compare learner with learner (Ministry of Education, 2018). The teacher keeps regular, detailed and legible records of learners’ assessment, both ongoing, formative and summative assessment, analyses any disparities between females and males, and uses these to inform planning and teaching on a daily basis. Learners are aware of the progress they are making, and how to improve, as are their parents, through written and verbal means of communication.

Also, and more specifically, The National Teachers' Standards for Ghana (Ministry of Education, 2018) requires that teachers need to develop the following essential teaching and assessment strategies:

- collaborative learning and assessment strategies;
- a project-based approach to teaching and learning and assessment;
- lesson planning templates to incorporate core skills;
- assessment of core skills through the use of purposely-designed assessment tools;
- observation schedules, case studies and portfolios;
- experiential pedagogy, and;
- lead student models.

We observed that one of the main Continuous Professional Development expectations of all in-service teachers is to “participate regularly in CPD, including school-based development, to: support student teachers, maintain high standards and inform equitable assessment.” The mentor system in the Supported Teaching (STS) for student teachers was to “support student teachers in developing their teaching and assessment, ensuring it is inclusive” (Ministry of Education, 2017: 48). They are to graduate with “assessment skills to teach at the age, ability and aptitudes of the learners they are training for.” This provision centres equity literacy as a pre-requisite for teacher qualification and practice. It is therefore expected that teachers in Ghanaian classrooms will adopt equity pedagogy in teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

The discussions in this paper highlight how Ghanaian policies on teacher education and classroom practices foreground equity. The arguments developed show that teacher education policy, national teacher standards and assessment policies promote equity and situate it at the centre of all teaching and learning. The understanding of equity goes beyond the provision of fair opportunities, to context-based equity pedagogy that requires teachers to account for social physiognomies, familiarities and viewpoints of culturally dissimilar learners as avenues to teach them more effectively. It requires relationship-based learning environment that promotes a culture of care, mutual respect, trust and cooperation. Teacher education policy, curriculum policy, teaching standards and assessment policies require teachers to practice in an ecology of literacy. Thus, it is expected that classrooms are equitable and become places where students' uniqueness is recognised and respected. Teaching and learning processes are to be inviting or fostering of students' potential. Inequities between students and teachers should reflect years of investment and progress toward equity. The pedagogic relations should foster the pedagogic rights of students thereby promoting equities among students in the learning process. However, there is little knowledge about equity literacy among teachers and how teachers promote equity in the classroom. Also, the literature has little evidence the challenges teachers face in promoting equity in the Ghanaian classroom. The research evidence of how learners experience equity in the classroom, appears scanty and less directly explored. This necessitates research into how teachers promote equity at the school site in terms of teacher-student and student-student interactions. Therefore, we argued that there is need for research into how teachers

promote equity in the classroom and how students experience it. Also, there is need for research into classroom equity and how education policy can address inequities in the classroom.

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