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Cultivating an Inclusive Learning Environment: A Case Study of Cultural Diversity Management in Atebubu Senior High School

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Abstract

This case study investigates the management of cultural diversity at Atebubu Senior High School to analyze how these efforts influence inclusion and academic success among students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Grounded in the Sociocultural Theory of Learning, which underscores the significance of social and cultural contexts in cognitive development, this research employs a qualitative approach, and the phenomenological research design. The study's population includes all teachers and students at the school. A purposive sampling method was used to select 34 participants, consisting of 4 teachers and 30 students. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the participants, focus group discussions, observations and document analysis. The findings reveal several achievements, including the successful implementation of culturally responsive teaching practices, enhanced cross-cultural understanding among students, and improved academic performance linked to inclusive teaching strategies. However, obstacles such as insufficient teacher training, limited resources for diversity programs, and challenges in addressing cultural biases within the school community were also identified. Based on these findings, the study recommends that educational practitioners, policymakers, and researchers should prioritize enhancing cultural diversity management practices and actively work to create inclusive learning environments in secondary schools.

Keywords

Inclusive learning, Cultural diversity, Sociocultural Theory of Learning, Secondary education

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Naz and Afzal (2023) assert that an inclusive learning environment is an educational setting that actively embraces and supports the diverse needs of all students, ensuring that everyone has equal access to learning opportunities and resources. This approach recognizes and values the unique backgrounds, abilities, and experiences of each learner, fostering a sense of belonging and community (Chima et al, 2024). Studies have shown that students thrive in environments that celebrate their unique backgrounds and perspectives (Basnet, 2024; Marvi, 2022). When schools actively promote cross-cultural understanding and collaboration, students develop critical thinking skills, empathy, and a greater appreciation for diverse worldviews (Hariyadi & Rodiyah, 2023). Furthermore, exposure to diverse learning environments has been linked to improved academic performance, increased social cohesion, and enhanced preparation for living and working in an increasingly interconnected world (Rundstrom et al, 2020).

The growing cultural heterogeneity within educational settings presents both opportunities and challenges (Vasilyeva, 2022). While diversity can enrich the learning experience and expose students to a wealth of perspectives, it can also give rise to sociocultural tensions, communication barriers, and inequities in educational outcomes (Machnik, 2022). Many schools, particularly in developing nations, struggle to effectively leverage this complex system and ensure that all students, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds, can thrive and reach their full potential (Markey et al., 2021).

Studies have also emphasized the importance of fostering inclusive learning environments that recognise and value the cultural diversity of students (Naz & Afzal, 2023; Tamang, 2022; Vasilyeva, 2022). They indicate that creating such environments is crucial for several reasons: they promote equitable access to educational opportunities, enhance students' social-emotional development, and improve academic performance. Furthermore, inclusive learning spaces help

cultivate intercultural competencies, preparing students to thrive in a globalised society. By embracing cultural diversity, schools can also reduce instances of discrimination and bias, fostering a sense of belonging and community among all students. These studies underscore the need for schools to adopt a holistic approach that addresses systemic barriers, promotes cultural awareness, and empowers students from diverse backgrounds (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Nieto & Bode, 2018).

In the context of developing nations, research has explored the unique challenges faced by educational institutions in managing cultural diversity, such as language barriers, disparities in access to resources, and the prevalence of traditional cultural norms that may conflict with inclusive pedagogical practices (Dei, 2010; Karanja & Austin, 2014). Similarly, in the Ghanaian context, literature on inclusive education tends to concentrate on the basic and university levels, overlooking the unique dynamics and challenges faced by senior high schools. Research has examined various aspects of diversity in higher education, including the experiences of international students, faculty perceptions of diversity, and the implementation of diversity policies at educational institutions (Amevor, 2018; Opoku-Asare & Siaw, 2015).

Despite the recognition of the benefits of cultural diversity in educational settings, many senior high schools in Ghana face significant challenges in creating inclusive learning environments that effectively support culturally diverse students (Opoku-Asare & Siaw, 2015). Existing research has primarily focused on students with physical or cognitive disabilities, neglecting the unique experiences and needs of learners from varied cultural backgrounds (Agbenyega & Klibthong, 2014; Oppong Asante & Sorkpah, 2015). This oversight contributes to a narrow understanding of inclusion, which fails to address the complexities of cultural diversity and the sociocultural tensions that can arise within classrooms (Tamang, 2022).

Furthermore, many schools struggle with cultural biases and stereotypes among teachers and students, leading to communication barriers and exclusionary practices (Chima et al, 2024). The lack of adequate training for teachers in culturally responsive teaching methods further hampers their ability to engage diverse learners effectively (Vasilyeva, 2022). As a result, there is a pressing need to explore how cultural diversity is managed at the senior high school level in Ghana, identify the specific challenges faced, and assess the effectiveness of current efforts aimed at fostering inclusive educational environments (Sabela et al, 2022). Without a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics, schools may continue to fall short in ensuring that all students, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds, can thrive and achieve their full potential (Basnet, 2024).

Research Questions

1. How effective is cultural awareness and inclusivity managed in Atebubu Senior High School?
2. How does cultural diversity impact the academic performance of students in Atebubu Senior High School?
3. What is the nature of cultural integration and inclusion in Atebubu Senior School?
4. What professional development and diversity training do the teachers of Atebubu Senior High School possess in cultivating an inclusive learning environment?

The study was grounded in the Sociocultural Theory of Learning (STL) (Vygotsky, 1978). The STL posits that an individual's cognitive development is shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded (Alkhudiry, 2022). This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural, historical, and institutional factors that influence the learning and development of students from diverse backgrounds (Kholis, 2023).

At the core of this theoretical framework is the concept of the "zone of proximal development" (ZPD), which refers to the range of tasks that a learner can accomplish with the guidance and support of more knowledgeable individuals, such as teachers or peers (Vygotsky, 1978). In the context of a culturally diverse school setting, the ZPD can be understood as the space where students can be supported to explore cultural differences, develop intercultural competencies, and engage in meaningful learning (Li & Xu, 2023).

The theory is significant to the study in various way such as cultural responsiveness, which implies understanding and responding to the cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of students (Lai, 2023). This aligns with the study's focus on the school's efforts to promote cultural awareness, sensitivity, and inclusion. It also offers collaborative learning which talks about the role of social interaction in learning informing the study's examination of how the school facilitate cross-cultural collaboration learning among students (Zhou, 2024). The theory equally acknowledges the role of teachers in ensuring an inclusive learning environment. It underscores the critical role of teachers in scaffolding learning and supporting students within their ZPD (Alkhudiry, 2022; Li & Xu, 2023). Therefore, the current study adopts the Sociocultural Theory of Learning as the guiding theoretical framework as it delves into the complex interplay between the individual, social, and institutional factors that shape the experiences of students and teachers within the culturally diverse environment of Atebubu Senior High School.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Design

This qualitative study used the phenomenological research design to explore the experiences, perspectives, and practices of teachers and students in the growing nature of culturally diverse learners in the classrooms (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research provides an exploratory analysis

of people's beliefs, actions, and perceptions (Patton, 2015). The use of a phenomenological research design is justified for several reasons. First, phenomenology focuses on understanding the lived experiences of individuals, making it particularly suitable for exploring the nuanced experiences and perspectives of teachers and students in culturally diverse classrooms. Second, the phenomenological design allows for the identification of common themes and patterns across participants' experiences, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how cultural diversity impacts teaching and learning.

3.2 Sampling

The participants in this study comprised four teachers and thirty students, all from Atebubu Senior High School in the Bono East region of Ghana. The teachers were purposively selected due to their roles as counselors, which equipped them with insights into the challenges faced by students on campus. The thirty students, consisting of fifteen males and fifteen females, were also purposively selected to ensure representation of the diverse backgrounds within the school's population. All the students held various leadership positions and were abreast of the relevant information relative to inclusivity since the student body report to them on their issues. Ethical procedures during data collection included seeking informed consent from all participants, ensuring confidentiality of their responses, and clearly explaining the purpose of the study. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions, thus safeguarding their autonomy and well-being throughout the research process.

3.3 Instrument

The researcher used interview guides, observation, and focus group discussions to collect data from the participants (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The interview guide gave the participants the

chance to create their own narratives in relation to their teaching experiences. It enabled them to express themselves enough to prevent wandering (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The data collected was tape-recorded after obtaining audio-taping consent from the participants (Creswell, 2013). Field notes were taken in case the recorder developed a fault during the process, and these notes were then written against their corresponding data for the data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Lessons of the teacher-participants were observed twice in different classes to ascertain whether some of the concerns raised during the interviews were true or otherwise (Patton, 2015). The observation notes were written against the corresponding data for the analysis.

The students were put into two focus groups, each consisting of fifteen members. The researcher assured the participants of their anonymity and moderated the discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The views of all the groups were captured and analyzed.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data collected through interview schedules were analyzed thematically. Data generated was several revised and the recorded audio-tapes were replayed and organized to bring forth meaningfulness of the data collected for the study. It helped in identifying the consistencies and differences in the data collected. The researcher then transcribed, analyzed and interpreted the data. The data was presented in emerging patterns and themes supported by verbatim quotations under each section.

As the researcher attributed quotations to the interviewees, the participants were identified as Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, Teacher D and Student 1, 2, 3, among others for ethical reasons. The data was continuously revisited to analyse and to establish gaps and relationships of the data

collected. The researcher then interpreted the findings and discussions in relation to the themes from the data to address the research questions of the study.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the data was grounded on the information provided by the participants.

4.1 How effective is cultural awareness and sensitivity managed in Atebubu Senior High School?

Asked about the aura of cultural awareness and sensitivity in the school, the teachers revealed that students in their school rarely banter with their colleagues on issues of culture. Excesses of cultural denigration have been encountered and the culprits are either asked to sign a bond or their parents invited to the school for cautioning. This has served as deterrence to other students who might want to go along that tangent. Teacher 'A' said:

> *"When fresh students report, we always have a week of orientation for them. We talk about the school being a family with differences and no one is superior to the other. In their dormitories, they are paired base on cultural backgrounds. The Akans are mixed with the Northerners and so forth. We always sensitize them when they are fresh and they grow with it. But if they fight, the rules and regulations of the school will have to be applied fairly" (Teacher 'A')*

The response of Teacher 'B' to the question of effectiveness of cultural awareness and sensitivity in the school was not different from Teacher 'A'.

> *"Some of our students are indifferent to other tribes because of the stories they may have heard about in their homes. It is the collective work of the staff to therefore be vigilant and look out for such students. If they are identified in the first year, our counseling programmes take care of it to address the issue of tolerance to uplift the image of the school. We always chop success in orienting our students to be aware of the cultural backgrounds of their colleagues." (Teacher 'B')*

In responding to the same question, Teacher 'D' explained that the cultural awareness and inclusivity advocacy must be championed by teachers because students have belief in their teachers.

> *"If every teacher is to take few minutes of the lesson to campaign on this, it will surely go down to the last student on the latter who does not believe in this. Unity is all the world needs and this must actually start in our school." (Teacher 'D').*

The findings confirm Castaneda (2004) that cultural sensitivity is beyond just awareness. It must include showing of respect, empathy and an understanding of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It creates an inclusive and welcoming environment for everyone. It is apparent that cultural awareness and sensitivity are not mere traits but crucial competencies for teachers in increasingly multicultural classrooms today.

In the focus group discussion with the students, most of them confirmed that they felt at home. For instance, Student 1 said:

> *"The cultural programmes we do in the school do not make me to miss home much, just that I miss mum."*

Few incidences they said happened and were quickly resolved by the housemasters. But Student 2 stated that:

> *"Because I am a cripple, most of my colleagues do not come close to me especially in the dormitory and during lessons. They even call me names."*

Teacher 'C' confirms what Student 2 said by saying that:

> *"We have not really been able to deal with disability issues in this school. For me, we all think we are normal people but that is not true. We will take our time and address this issue so that innocent individuals do not suffer." (Teacher C)*

The researcher observed lessons of the participants to confirm what they said during the interview. The teachers demonstrated a high degree of cultural awareness by showing interest in learning about the diverse nature, traditions and values of the students. Student 2 was equally catered for by the teachers. Student 2 had challenges with the colleagues but not the teachers. This aura fosters a sense of belongingness among the students as it also promotes mutual respect and understanding.

4.2 How does cultural diversity impact the academic performance of students in Atebubu Senior High School?

In an attempt to reveal the impact of cultural diversity on the academic performance of students, Teacher 'A' said:

> *"At the beginning, students who are culturally different struggle to adapt and adjust to the teaching styles of the classrooms when it comes to participation and making of contributions during presentations and discussions in class. As times go by, they improve and their scores also begin to be better. There are some who are naturally good and those ones even though are timid when they come fresh, their scores are always better. The lousy ones set a pace of excellence by their participation but soon are caught up by the adjusting students" (Teacher 'A')*

Teacher 'C' also said:

> *"Most at times, academic performance depends on environmental factors. The change of one's environment can affect one's thoughts. What I do in the class is grouping the students and giving each a role in their presentations. This usually works as reserved students are all brought out to participate. With time, it becomes normal and the class begins to be interesting. Performance in their tests is based on intelligence. Nobody is victimized based on cultural diversity." (*Teacher 'C'*)*

Teacher 'B' explained that students' performance in class are influenced by cultural diversity and said that:

> *"Most Ashantis in my class tell me theirs is business and not books. The Northerners can take the books. This actually reflects on their tests scores as much seriousness is not attached to their studies. But students who are serious no matter where they are coming from are good. They take their studies serious and excel in school." (Teacher 'B')*

Some students also made some revelations during the group discussion. Most of them believe that if they are determined, they can excel in their academics. Student '12' said:

> *"My desire is to work hard and succeed in school. The struggles of learning to adapt and adjust to my school's environment can be somehow challenging. Crossing from one different world to another has not been easy for me. But this cannot stop me. I am determined to overcome every difficulty to excel in my academics. When I first came here, my scores were not good but with time now I*

> *am getting them better. I will leave this school as one of the best students." (Source: Student 12)*

The response of Student '24' to the question of the impact of cultural diversity on academic performance of students was not much different from that of Student '12'.

> *"I see schooling as a way to succeed and a balance of different worlds helps me to understand the difficulties and to look for a way to conquer it. I have to work hard to get good scores in class. This cannot be easy but I have to be persistent in my effort to succeed as a stranger here." (Student 24)*

From the discussions of Students 12 and 24, it is evident that students face challenges in understanding the social and educational shifts in school. But they are determined to work hard to overpower the challenges in adapting and adjusting to the numerous changes and to succeed.

During the researcher's observation of the lessons of the teacher-participants, it was revealed that some students do not participate in class. When probed further, the teachers admitted that such students were good but shy to talk in class for the fear of making mistakes. Hence, they prefer to write tests than to contribute in class. When it came to the group discussions and presentations, such shy students contributed massively to support their group. But they never availed themselves to lead in the presentation. The teachers showed commitment in helping such individuals to be of themselves and do whatever they can to succeed in school.

From the respondents, it was evident that cultural diversity impacts the academic performance of students. Teachers must adopt equity pedagogy which will allow them to modify their teaching to enhance and facilitate academic performance of students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Gay, 2010). Researchers have indicated that if teachers want to increase participation in the classroom and academic performance of the students, then they must modify the instruction on the cultural language strengths of the students (Banks, 2016).

Darling-Hammond (2010) shows that when high-quality teachers who are experts and use content specialization, child development and pedagogy in class, the performance of students increases. Teachers therefore can improve the performance of students if they have knowledge about the culture, language, values and learning characteristics of the students.

4.3 What is the nature of cultural integration and inclusion in Atebubu Senior School?

The respondents were also asked about the nature of cultural integration and inclusion in the school. Teacher 'D' said:

> *"What I understand by the word inclusiveness is not to discriminate. Any time I show partiality, I am not abiding by the tenets of inclusivity. If somebody discriminates against me I will not be happy so I do not also discriminate against somebody. All the students are here to learn and we the teachers are mandated to teach them. Whether the person is disabled or otherwise, the person has the right to learn. No culture is superior to the others. When a class is highly diverse and I give an example, I asked to see if others can apply it to their social settings and we share. Where the example does not apply, we just leave it there and appreciate their different way of doing things." (Teacher 'D')*

Teacher 'C':

> *"We are not all the same. We are different people with different ways of seeing the world. I do not expect someone to be like me. The differences in our classrooms make it unique and beautiful. I always tell students not to be angry if their colleagues think, act and see things different from them. Whether the person is blind, amputated or deformed, we are all human beings. I teach social studies and when it comes to examples I always entreat my students to situate it in their social setting. This brings out the differences and we share to get more insights from where we do not understand. All the students are given equal opportunities and no one is discriminated." (Teacher 'C')*

Teacher 'A' asserts that the social-emotional growth of students increases and they have a greater feeling of community.

> *"The issue of cultural integration and inclusion is multifaceted and shaped by factors such as historical, social and individual. With this, we are proactive in creating a welcoming and inclusive learning school environment. The culture of*

> *the school and the curriculum are crucial in shaping the experience and perception of students about inclusive environment. We usually emphasize on providing opportunities for the students to share their cultural backgrounds and traditions in a sage and supported environment. But we the teachers must first be the agents of promoting cultural integration and inclusion in our classrooms. We must display our professionalism to include and give equal chances to all." (Teacher 'A')*

From the discussions of the student-participants, it became evident that there is the need for inclusive policies and practices that will create an equitable and accessible of educational resources for all students. Student '6' stated:

> *"We do not have enough resources to match our colleagues in other schools. We hear that they have enough computers, textbooks, dormitories and the rests. But here, we struggle for every time including where we will sleep. How can we learn? Our teachers try to address the issues of prejudice, bias and discrimination. They educative us on the effects of bullying and the need for just practices in the classrooms. Because of all these, we feel at home and socially we connect with one another here in school." (Student '6')*

Student '29' affirms what Student '6' said.

> *"Feeling comfortable in school can increase your academic success. There is nothing to fear. We just learn and want to improve upon our grades. That is what we are here for, to be better persons in the future. Our teachers show professionalism in the way they handle us. We are in a peaceful academic community. (Student '29')*

From the researcher's observation, students learning environment was conducive and accommodated their diversities. Students were comfortable to ask any kind of question. If the question was inappropriate, in a nice way the teacher gently redirected the attention of the class to what was being taught.

The nature of cultural integration and inclusion is collaborative and transformative in a school that requires active participation from all stakeholders. It was revealed that there was a greater feeling of community, academic success and an increased in social-emotional growth by students. However, resources for teaching and learning were not fairly enjoyed by the participants. There

were also efforts by the school to educate and maintain the culture of coexistence that will promote the academic success of the students. This was done through the empowerment of teachers in displaying professionalism of handling students. By the way of fostering a culture of respect, empathy and inclusion, a school can be a place of support where students feel valued, respected and this will help them to embrace the cultural diversities at the same time learning from and with others. Cultural integration and inclusion demand more than the mere binary divide between teachers as those who give knowledge and students as the receivers. The relationship with students demands that they are respected and be aware of their concrete world conditions that shape them (Freire, 1998). This affirms the assertion of Peterson (2004) that positive attitudes from the school's environment, changes in pedagogy and the policy and structure are necessary for a successful inclusion and integration of culture.

4.4 What professional development and diversity training do the teachers of Atebubu Senior High School possess in cultivating an inclusive learning environment?

When asked about the professional development and diversity training of teachers, Teacher 'B' revealed that teacher training institutions imbibe in their students the spirit of inclusivity but as to the practicality of it is another issue.

> *"The programmes run in teacher training institutions are good. We learn about the best methods and practices to adopt when the class is diverse. For some of us, I always go by the relationship-centered method because it helps me to be a good friend to everybody in the classroom and to specifically help them to learn. My students are my friends and we understand each other." (Source: Teacher 'B')*

Teacher 'A' explained that the school does at times organize in-service training for the teachers to supplement what they have learnt during their training.

> *"Once in a while we go for in-service training. But that is not enough. Our students are culturally diverse and you need experience to lead them. We want more of the*

> *in-service training to help us build upon what we learnt during our training. As for the students, they are my friends. They know I am fair when relating to them. We love each other."* (*Teacher 'A'*)

This supports what Darling-Hammond (2010) claimed when he stated that it has been long overdue in Ghana for such significant shift. With the introduction of the new curriculum at the pre-tertiary level, it could go a long way to curtail some of these setbacks. In-service training should be organized periodically to equip teachers with the basics of handling diverse classrooms.

Relating to the same question asked, Teacher 'D' responded that:

> *"We teachers are at the dire times and will always have to find a way. They are our students and we are their family. If we are not trained well enough to help them, then our country has no future." (Teacher 'D')*

Teacher 'C' also said:

> *"The kind of training we receive is the kind of training we also give to our students. If we are not constantly trained, we cannot meet the demands of our present times. We have to be innovative and creative to teach. We love our students and whatever it will take us to see them through, we are prepared." (Teacher 'C')*

The data revealed that teachers who undergo training have a profound shift in the awareness, attitudes and practices in relation to diversity and inclusion in the classroom. Teachers who adopted relationship-centered methods reported stronger bonds with students from a variety of backgrounds which enhanced their understanding of each student's unique needs and learning preferences. It is also revealed that professional development and diversity training have an impact on teachers' growth in the profession and the capacity to make equitable and culturally inclusive learning environments. Policy makers should therefore be prepared to address the social, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds of students during the training of teachers (Perry & Bevins, 2019).

5.0 CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the school was aware of cultural diversity and had taken steps in sensitizing the students during orientations for freshers and also through the classroom interactions with the teachers. It is apparent that cultural awareness and sensitivity are not mere traits but crucial competencies for teachers in increasingly multicultural classrooms today.

Also, cultural diversity impacts the academic performance of students. Therefore, teachers must adopt equity pedagogy to allow them modify their teaching to enhance and facilitate academic performance of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

On the nature of cultural integration and inclusion, there was a greater feeling of community, academic success and an increased in social-emotional growth by students. However, resources for teaching and learning were not fairly distributed by the stakeholders. Positive attitudes from the school's environment, changes in pedagogy and the policy and structure are necessary for a successful inclusion and integration of culture.

Finally, the study concluded that it was revealed that professional training of teachers has a profound shift in the awareness, attitudes and practices in relation to diversity and inclusion in the classroom. Teachers who adopted relationship-centered methods reported stronger bonds with students from a variety of backgrounds, which enhanced their understanding of each student's unique needs and learning preferences

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended that policy makers must prioritize fair distribution of resources, inclusive curriculum, and culturally sensitive professional development and training programmes for teachers.

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