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Promoting quality education through inclusivity and equity in Ghana's educational system: A meta-synthesis

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Abstract

With this meta-synthesis we examined Ghana's ongoing efforts to advance quality education through inclusive and equitable initiatives using national policies, programmes, and strategies. Inclusivity is about integrating students, regardless of ability, gender, or socio-economic status, in mainstream (traditional) education. Equity entails the fair distribution of resources and opportunities, such that every child can participate meaningfully and achieve. In this study, we employed a structured thematic analysis of existing policy documents and research reports to identify common themes, challenges encountered, and advances in the educational landscape. These are the Inclusive Education Policy, the Girl-Child Education Programme, Special Education interventions, and the Free Senior High School policy. The policies have increased access by targeting systemic barriers and resource deficits, and, therefore, participation. However, issues that remain, including inconsistent implementation of policy, insufficient funding, and socio-cultural pushback, are among the barriers to genuine educational equity. We found that greater community investment and better infrastructure planning, along with evidence-based decision-making, are essential for making strides toward real progress. We suggest the need for comprehensive teacher training, as well as adequate resources and effective monitoring and appraisal systems to support accountability and quality improvement. Ultimately inclusive and equity education in Ghana must be a joint effort undertaken by all stakeholders that recognise diversity, fosters participation, and enables all learners to participate meaningfully in the broader development of the country.

Keywords: accessibility; education system; equity; fairness; Ghana; inclusivity; quality education; resource distribution

Introduction

Education is key to people's growth and the growth of countries. It underpins economic development, social transformation, and individual empowerment (Roy & Swargiary, 2024). Ensuring quality education for all has become a fundamental objective in Ghana. Notwithstanding decades of endeavour, there remain profound disparities across income classes, as well as geographic and cultural differences. Built-in barriers that restrict equitable access to education and exclude participation still exist, posing a threat to the country's vision of inclusive development and to individual capabilities.

Quality education, as defined by Fägerlind and Saha (2016), is more than academic achievement. It aims to stimulate critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability among students. This objective has always been emphasised by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ghana Education Service (GES) as well as corporate and development partners (Abubakari & Al-Hassan, 2016; Agbeme, 2018; MoE, 2008). Quality education for young learners across Ghana cannot be defined solely by the construction of infrastructure or the provision of improved teaching materials. To meet this goal, there should be a system that emphasises inclusivity and equity to both policy and practice (Malik, 2018; Nnokam & Sule, 2017).

In this study, the meaning of inclusivity in education is building learning spaces which respect and honour the abilities, skillset, situations and backgrounds of all learners. It is about being involved, having and belonging, and equal opportunity, ensuring that children with disabilities, girls and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are integrated in mainstream education (Nketsia, 2018; Opoku, 2022). Educational equity focuses on ensuring equitable access and outcomes by providing support that reflects each learner's needs (Abrams, 2024; Quinn, 2023). The principle of inclusivity and equity combined is key to quality education and sustainable development (Hudson, 2019; Takyi, Amponsah, Asibey & Ayambire, 2021).

Systematic weaknesses remain despite pledges of education for all and equitable delivery. Research indicates persistent challenges, including poor infrastructure, weak teacher morale and an overloaded curriculum, affecting effective teaching and learning, particularly in rural and deprived regions (Mangendi, 2018; Musah, 2022). Challenges like these have exacerbated the disparity between urban and rural students and restricted the education system's adaptation in Ghana's social and economic diversity (Akyeampong, Rolleston, Ampiah & Lewin, 2012; Senadza, Ayerakwa, Mills, Oppong & Asare, 2019). Historical reform efforts such as the Education Act 1961, the 1992 Constitution and the Education Strategic Plan (2010–2020) sought to improve these disparities through free and compulsory basic education and inclusive education (Mantey, 2014; MoE,

2013). Research indicates that poor implementation, a lack of funding and socio-cultural issues hamper the actualisation of such objectives (Adams, 2016; Sarpong, 2019).

While much has been written about how inclusive and equitable education works in practice in Ghana, a substantial research gap still exists. Much of what is available from the literature has to do with programmes, school environments and policy review, which usually leads to a limited list of evidence. Therefore, it results in no integrated synthesis of study results that delineates the role of inclusivity and equity on quality education in Ghana. This gap, therefore, needs to be bridged to aid in policy reforms and development that are evidence-based and aligned to the National agenda to advance Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 by promoting inclusive and equitable quality education for all (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2017).

With this study we aimed to bridge the literature on inequality and policy-oriented research on inclusivity and equity in Ghana's education system. Linking previous research to today's policy setting, it reveals trends, difficulties and possibilities for promoting educational inclusivity. This perspective extends existing findings and provides policy recommendations for politicians, educators and researchers interested in promoting the equity of education in Ghana.

The Concept of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is now a central feature of global education reform. It sets out to meet the varying learning abilities of every child, to eliminate exclusion based on criteria such as disability, ethnicity, language, gender, and socio-economic status. However, a universally accepted definition of the term has still not been agreed upon. Armstrong, Armstrong and Spandagou (2010) note that the meaning of inclusion varies by context and the perspectives of different stakeholders. For example, Poon-McBrayer and Wong (2013) describe inclusion as putting children with disabilities in mainstream schools in an environment without discrimination. Fundamentally, inclusive education works to ensure that all students have the opportunity and support they need to be their best, both in and out of school.

Studies demonstrate that acceptance and inclusion have been demonstrated to improve learning outcomes, support appreciation for difference and support dismantling discriminatory beliefs (Šukys, Dumčienė & Lapėnienė, 2015). Ainscow, Booth and Dyson (2006) differentiate narrow inclusion, which can focus on learners who need more protection than non-disabled students, from broad inclusion, which encompasses all

categories of learners. The influential Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) was fundamental in providing an international perspective on inclusion in education, framing it as a global obligation to fair and equitable education and prompting shared practice elsewhere (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020; Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). From this basis, academics like Banks and McGee Banks (2010) and Poon-McBrayer and Wong (2013) call for systemic reforms that reach all marginalised groups, not only those with disabilities. They contend that inclusive education is inseparably bound with social justice.

Such reforms are a necessity for inclusive education. Ferguson (2008) and Winter and O'Raw (2010) argue that true inclusion goes beyond curriculum transformation. It will take intentional work to rebuild school settings that challenge the way all learners learn. Similarly, Omwami and Rust (2020) and Tomlinson (2017) claim that inclusion is about dismantling exclusionary structures that generate inequality. Innovative practices in integrating inclusive practices into their regular education systems, such as those supported by Ainscow (2020) and Peters (2004), must work with changing culture and attitudes to promote these practices.

The broader discussion positions inclusion as a philosophy of education and the domain of human rights. Slee (2018) and Swargiary (2024) recommend schools that encourage diversity and view diversity as a strength. Rieser (2012) articulates inclusion as constitutive of systemic reform which requires new ways of doing curriculum and teaching (Florian, 2019; Fullan, 2015). Likewise, Doughty and Allan (2008) and Sydoriv (2024) assert that inclusive learning is a place where all children feel included and recognised. This vision is supported by flexible curricula and inclusive school environments.

However, uncertainty inhibits effective implementation. The lack of a universally agreed upon definition, as highlighted by Sheehy, Nind, Rix and Simmons (2004), makes inclusive principles far more difficult to uphold. Ainscow (2005) and Mufambisi (2018) argue that inclusion is not a fixed state but a dynamic process that continually progresses toward equity. According to Muthukrishna and Schlüter (2011), educational systems should treat diversity as an advantage and develop equitable learning experiences that account for these factors.

In this sense, inclusive education is intimately tied to equity and social justice. Artiles, Harris-Murri and Rostenberg (2021) and Lipsky and Gartner (2013) note that inclusion is not limited to academic activities; it is a human rights policy. Studies link inclusive schooling with better academic, social and emotional outcomes, particularly among children with disabilities

(Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Vrieling-Teunter, De Vries, Sins & Vermeulen, 2024; Westby, 2017). Yet, there are still omissions in realising inclusive ideals as common practice, especially in Ghanaian and other African education systems. Continuing challenges remain in teacher training, institutional provisioning, and resources (Christie, 2013; Lourens & Swartz, 2016).

Despite extensive global gains, inclusive education in parts of sub-Saharan Africa is still in its initial stages. This situation is further curtailed through ignorance and external societal attitudes (Bott & Owusu, 2013; Charema, 2010). It shows the need for studies concentrating on specific settings. By extracting and evaluating the numerous existing studies in Ghana, we intended to merge and synthesise independent results into a coherent and integrated picture of how inclusion is defined and implemented in Ghana's schools. Not only does this meta-synthesis draw from a global perspective; it also paints an image of local practical aspects of inclusivity.

Exploring the Concept of Equity in Education

Ensuring education equity requires that all students have the material resources, opportunities, and backing they require to succeed academically and personally (Ainscow, 2016; Jordan, 2010). While equality creates a system of uniformity of access, equity acknowledges and addresses differences, starting with differentiated training to meet specific needs of different groups of learners (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Theoharis, 2024). This difference matters: equality assumes equivalence while equity tries to establish fairness (Au & Raphael, 2000; Levin, 2003).

The international focus on educational equity arose due to research suggesting that mere access does not ensure future success. In 1968, a review of studies found that differences in student learning outcomes were associated more with significant social and economic disparities rather than the resources available in schools (Gamoran & Long, 2007). Subsequent research reinforces this perspective and claims that the goal for equity is to overcome systemic prejudices and disparities in opportunities within education (Atlay, 2019; Van Avermaet, Van Houtte & Van den Branden, 2011). In settings such as Ghana, this distinction is crucial: even where national policies have expanded access, structural inequities continue to impede genuine connection and educational achievement (Takyi et al., 2021).

Equity has two integral elements, namely, fairness and inclusivity (Ainscow, 2016). Fairness is designed to protect against various educational inequalities (such as income, gender, or nationality) preventing all students from accessing an effective system and inclusivity to achieve (Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2012). The same principles are

embodied in constructs such as Scott's (2006) plan that sets the same inclusive objectives of full access, resource allocation in a just manner, and responsibility at all levels.

Social justice and the moral duty to educate have been more frequently connected as issues of educational equity (Dworkin, 1983; Jones, 2009). According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD], 2012) and the World Bank (2005), equity is fundamental for the construction of inclusive societies and sustainable economies. Yet, financial, structural and teacher resource constraints that obstruct these goals persist in African education systems (Appels, 2024; Pfeffer, 2015). Equity is no longer an abstract good but a real need to strike a practical balance between quality and justice.

The concept of equity together with the notion of inclusivity links the conceptual constructs of the research. While inclusivity implies that different students gain access to the resources and opportunities required by the curriculum, equity ensures that this access results in fair opportunities and outcomes for disadvantaged students. Collectively, they serve as the bedrock for educational reform. However, as recent Ghanaian studies demonstrate, systematic evidence connecting inclusive policies to equity outcomes is still scarce and scattered. With this study we aim to reduce the gap through a meta-synthesis of the relationships underpinning inclusivity, equity and quality education and to show how these constructs intersect in Ghana's dynamic educational landscape.

The Inclusive Education Policy and Practice in Ghana

In the fight for fairness and social equity, inclusive education in Ghana has evolved, just as the global landscape of education has. Many of these significant international agreements, such as the Salamanca Statement and Sustainable Development Goal 4, are driving this shift. These documents emphasise the importance of all students, irrespective of a wide variety of characteristics, having access to quality education.

Equity in education means that every student has the right to a fair share of resources and opportunities and support to achieve their potential, regardless of their background (Ainscow, 2016; Jordan, 2010). Understanding that socio-economic, cultural, and educational circumstances can affect both learning experiences and learning outcomes (Mitchell, 2016; Munns, Sawyer & Cole, 2013), social value education is now being recognised as essential. Educational systems promote equity and close the access and achievement gaps to ensure that each student receives the tailored attention and resources needed to flourish (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Theoharis, 2024).

In Ghana, the principle of equity has been at the forefront of the reform agenda in educational reform and is currently embedded in legislation such as the Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education (FCUBE), the Free Senior High School Policy and the Inclusive Education Policy (Obuobi, 2024). Although both are consistent with education policy and implementation differs by region (MoE, 2018), these programmes demonstrate the government's commitment to combat exclusion by poverty, disability and gender.

Equity and equality are often confused but they are not synonymous (Brayboy, Castagno & Maughan 2007; Levin, 2003). Equality is the concept of providing all students with the same resources, treating them alike, despite their challenges (Bicard & Heward, 2013; Minow, 2021). The problem herein lies that what may seem right on paper, fails to recognise what is special in the needs of students. Equity, on the other hand, is context-dependent: it allocates resources based on individual circumstances so that they converge towards the same end (Au & Raphael, 2000; Simpson, 2024). Many students suffering from poverty or barriers related to language, for example, should be supported to access and to learn (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Gorski, 2017).

Studies in Ghana show that even with advances in policy, disparities in school enrolment and completion rates in rural and urban communities still exist (Akyeampong, 2018). This exposes the disconnect between rhetoric and reality, which should serve as motivation for further investment in inclusive practice.

The emphasis on equity has been the recent focus of educational debates (Goodfellow, 2007; Zine, 2001). The Coleman Report of 1968 is a groundbreaking milestone in understanding educational inequality (Gamoran & Long, 2007). It prompts reflection on a global perspective, which encouraged stakeholders in African education systems to address structural inequities (Darling-Hammond, 2004). As noted, however, in Ghana, systemic problems in terms of inadequate funding, early tracking of students and resource shortages pose challenges to the implementation of full equity (Takyi et al., 2021).

Equity is based on fairness and inclusion (Ainscow, 2016). Fairness implies that personal characteristics including gender, socio-economic status and ethnicity should not restrict educational potential (OECD, 2008). Inclusion provides a minimum level of educational quality for all students and must be flexible to accommodate diverse learning levels (Kumpulainen & Lankinen, 2012). In Ghana, this entails the extent of teacher training provided, the judicious use of limited resources, and a readily accessible infrastructure that can help bridge the gap between areas where

various education systems can work toward achieving learning equity.

More than a policy objective, educational equity is a critical instrument to foster social justice and national cohesion. This is the principle on which the Ghanaian National Development Plan rests: to move away from an undetermined, structuralist educational system, Ghana is committed to equitable and quality education. Ghana's education system can bridge opportunity deficits and promote inclusive development by meeting the needs of diverse learners. With this study we built on this insight by synthesising literature on the implementation of Ghana's inclusive education policies and identifying the successes and challenges they face.

Inclusive Education in Ghana – Teachers' Attitudes and Challenges

Inclusive education aims to provide high-quality learning opportunities for all students, regardless of ability or disability, by removing barriers to participation. In Ghana, some positive policies are now in place, but their implementation is limited by teachers' attitudes, insufficient infrastructure, and inadequate institutional capacity (Ametepee & Anastasiou, 2015). Teachers are key actors in the implementation of classroom policies.

Many educators in Ghana hold negative views toward teaching students with disabilities in general education (Khaleel, 2020). Often due to a lack of training, inadequate resources, a lack of social understanding and outdated norms of the day-to-day work environment (Al-Ahmadi, 2009; Talafha, 2022). This creates barriers to the effectiveness of policies and practices in inclusive education.

The above is mainly exposed by research in Ghana, which shows that teachers frequently feel ill-prepared to accommodate the range of learners' needs owing to a lack of professional training for inclusive approaches to teaching (Samson & Collins, 2012). Research in Ghana has also shown that special education integrated with mainstream education is presented in only a few teacher education programmes. For this reason, graduates lack the tools to integrate inclusiveness in the classroom (Agbenyega, 2007). Furthermore, without assistive technology, educators struggle to adequately involve students with sensory or cognitive needs, including Braille, tactile, and sign language interpreter services (Ahmad, 2014; Silvestri & Hartman, 2022).

Teachers' attitudes are rooted in broader social beliefs, and disability is viewed through cultural or superstitious categories (Stone-MacDonald, 2012). According to some, inclusion affects class functioning (Amjad, Tabbasam & Habib, 2023), which may manifest as exclusionary practices in the classroom. This result echoes findings from

similar worldwide studies emphasising the importance of teachers' mindsets for the success of inclusive reforms (Adeniyi, Al Hamad, Adewusi, Unachukwu, Osawaru, Onyebuchi, Omolawal, Aliu & David, 2024).

Physical facilities can also be obstacles. Many schools lack ramps, accessible restrooms, and mobility aids (Addo, 2019; Ador, 2019). Furthermore, these infrastructure challenges are particularly pronounced in rural communities, thereby compounding educational inequalities. According to Special Education Division's (SPED) findings in Ghana, more than 70% of basic schools lack fundamental accessibility systems (Gomda, Sulemana & Zakaria, 2022), indicating that inclusive education is often treated as an abstract construct across contexts. Socio-cultural barriers impede the delivery of inclusion.

Negative community perceptions about disability as a source of stigma or bad luck deter parents from enrolling their children in schools (Ngeno, 2020). Girls with disabilities are also marginalised, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics ([STEM], Miller & Downey, 2020). Such attitudes mirror findings in other developing settings where disability and gender intersect in the context of increasing experiences of exclusion (Moodley & Graham, 2015).

Policy implementation remains fragmented. Although the SPED of the GES conducts school-based inclusion, a strong policy framework is not in place, and the budget is poorly allocated, which amounts to less than 1% of the total education budget (Salifu, 2024). Scholars such as Senadza et al. (2019) contend that this resource gap is at odds with the pursuit of Goal 4 of the United Nations SDGs, which seeks an inclusive and equitable quality education system in Ghana.

Nevertheless, the value that inclusive education provides is significant in socio-economic terms. Studies show that educational attainment in persons with disabilities reduces poverty risk and leads to better employment opportunities (Schur, 2002). So, we need more good teachers, positive attitudes and more resource distribution to make any progress.

Inclusive education in Ghana is riddled with systemic, attitudinal and infrastructural challenges. Addressing the problem through thorough teacher training, adequate funding, community engagement, and clear policies can make schools fair places to learn. In this study we drew on literature by integrating teacher attitudes and systems-based research, yielding evidence-based ideas for guiding inclusive education reform in Ghana.

The Ghanaian Government's Initiatives to Promote Equity in Education

Educational equity entails ensuring that all learners attain critical skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving. Such knowledge is essential for personal development and national advancement. Education is considered one of the most impactful instruments to the MoE's disposal to break the cycle of poverty and enhance social mobility, particularly in underprivileged communities in Ghana (Mensah, 2020; Nkansah, 2021; Sennuga, Bamidele, Chinwuba, Abdulahi & Ameh, 2023).

In the fight against educational disparities, the Ghanaian government has implemented a range of measures to improve access to education and ensure an inclusive educational environment. One such large-scale programme is the Free Senior High School (SHS) Policy, which has been implemented since September 2017. This policy eliminated tuition charges to promote equal access to secondary education (Adarkwah, 2022; Asante & Agbee, 2021). It contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030 (Elfert, 2019; Wulff, 2020). The policy is heavily informed by the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, which requires the government to provide free secondary education and demonstrates significant policy commitment to eliminating financial disparities in access to educational opportunities (Chanimbe & Prah, 2020; Kyei-Nuamah & Larbi, 2022).

However, large division persists in educational attainment. Students in boarding schools generally fare better than students in day schools (Amponsah & Stonier, 2021) because some factors, such as access to teaching aids, learning conditions, and teacher support, vary by school type. Moreover, rural schools face significant teacher shortages and a paucity of resources, which contribute to the achievement gap between rural and urban students (Cobbold, 2015; Monk, 2007).

In addition to the Free SHS Policy, the Capitation Grant Policy was introduced in 2004 to address equity in basic education. This programme awarded grants to schools based on student enrolment and has also significantly mitigated financial constraints on student participation (Ahmed, 2018; Osei, Owusu, Asem & Afutu-Kotey, 2009). When launched in 40 impoverished districts, the impact was a 14% boost in primary school enrolment (Akyeampong, 2011; Ampratwum & Armah-Attoh, 2010). However, inconsistent funding and weak monitoring, particularly in poorly served and rural areas, limited the effectiveness of the policy (Abagi, 2021; Inoue & Oketch, 2008).

Although these developments have assisted in enhancing educational equity in Ghana, such

efforts are far from satisfactory and many systemic inequalities persist, primarily regarding the distribution of teachers, infrastructure, and resources. It is essential to create targeted resources, such as fair funding models, teacher incentives, and differentiated professional development activities for the most disadvantaged communities.

Yet a gap remains in compiling evidence on the relationship between national initiatives to promote equity and inclusion at the Ghanaian state and federal levels. While many studies have also been conducted on individual policies, few have undertaken a comprehensive meta-synthesis to evaluate their combined effects and identify potential challenges. Filling this gap will ultimately not only enhance the feasibility of policy implementation but it will inform evidence-based planning towards achieving SDG 4.

Theoretical Framework: Social Justice Theory

First developed by John Rawls in 1971, the social justice theory regards education as an important social service. Education is regarded as a central moral and civic right necessary to fairness and equal opportunity. Based on this theory, justice is seen as an important social value. The theory proposes that both social and economic systems should be of assistance to all, especially the most disadvantaged. In this view, education emerges as one of the primary processes through which equity becomes a primary goal, which ultimately helps people contribute to complete engagement in social and economic matters. Rawls' idea of "justice as fairness" is especially pertinent to this study. It is a moral and philosophical basis for discussing the way in which any educational system, as that in Ghana, can guarantee equal access to high-quality learning opportunities, irrespective of students' personal circumstances.

Based on Rawls' premise, scholars have adopted social justice theory for education. Bell (2016) and Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) illustrate how this theory can assist in breaking down institutional obstacles and combating long-standing inequities impacting marginalised students. This example links Rawls' philosophical issues with practical educational questions. It shows that justice could be manifested, not only in lofty aspirations, but at the level of the mundane practices, policy and school systems that shape inclusion and opportunity.

The social justice theory provides a useful lens for considering processes through which educational policies and practices would treat issues of inequality in Ghana. The education system in Ghana is still based on historical and structural inequalities shaped by socio-economic, cultural, and gender factors. For example, girls' education is frequently threatened by patriarchal

norms, early marriage of children and absence of sanitation facilities. Children with disabilities endure further problems like inaccessible school buildings, social stigma, and unqualified educators. Students from low-income families face numerous financial barriers, especially in terms of materials and uniforms and time commuting to and from school (Chikoko & Mthembu, 2020). These hurdles, from a social justice perspective, highlight the pressing need for policy that highlights the needs of the most vulnerable. Policies of this kind should ensure that fairness, not privilege, permeates all the resources for education.

A theoretical social justice perspective of education in Ghana provides a window into how specific policies can amplify or minimise inequality. This approach allows us to analyse whether initiatives like free SHS and the capitation grant advance equity or simply provide opportunity without changing how disadvantaged students experience it. We employed Rawls' principles in this study to compare the merits of these policies – not only in terms of policy outcomes but whether they are fair in protecting and enabling the most disadvantaged students.

The social justice theory has three guiding principles regarding education: equity, access and participation, and empowerment. The equity principle emphasises fair distribution of educational resources based on the requirements of learners of different backgrounds by varying degrees. In Ghana, this looks like investing in rural schools, assisting girls' education and addressing access of students with disabilities. These efforts adhere to Rawls' difference principle, which holds that inequalities are only permissible if they promote the welfare of the least advantaged. From this ethical standpoint, our study's focus on equity is strengthened and firmly situated within an ethics paradigm that requires consideration and ethical decision-making regarding the use of resources.

The second principle, access and participation, extends beyond the inclusion of people. It requires active participation and deep learning experiences. Many schools, especially in rural areas, have yet to address teacher shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of resources. These struggles reduce participation and exacerbate inequality in educational success. From a social justice perspective, addressing these issues requires actionable strategies to ensure that all students, regardless of geographic location or socio-economic status, can access quality education. This perspective is in line with our assertion that inclusion is an ethical imperative and a policy obligation.

Empowerment is the third key, with the aim of helping students to do good for the communities where they live. According to Yusuf and Shugaba (2024), empowerment is about developing critical

consciousness, self-esteem, and courage to oppose and address social and institutional challenges. Education is meant to assist learners to form their own point of view and strive for a more just society. For authentic inclusion in Ghana, the education of marginalised students (i.e. girls) and students with disabilities must be empowering.

Based on Rawls' framework, empowerment illustrates the transformative effects of education, which allows people to become agents of an improved situation. There is solid evidence that social justice theory is relevant to fostering a just education system. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) show how social justice ideas have shaped inclusive educational reforms in developing countries. In Ghana, scholars such as Nketsia (2018) and Opoku (2022) have used this model for an analysis of policy implementation in inclusive education. They note persisting issues, such as inadequate resources, inadequate teacher training and cultural resistance to diversity. These studies show that pursuing social justice in education will require far-reaching change: redesigning schools, reallocating resources, and changes in attitudes, not simply policies making statements.

The social justice theory offers a powerful framework for understanding how educational systems can address entrenched inequalities through equitable allocation, participative participation, and the engagement of marginalised learners. Its application to the Ghanaian educational system demonstrates the necessity of continuous change that transcends mere policy talk toward genuine reform. A broader moral and civic vision is thus established by locating this study in Rawls' idea of justice as fairness, in which inclusivity and equity in general are tied at the centre of the analysis. This vision implies not only education for everyone but also one that promotes fairness, dignity, and social change.

Methodology

In this study we conducted a meta-synthesis to review and synthesise existing qualitative studies on inclusivity and equity in the Ghanaian education system. The purpose was to explore how inclusive and equitable practices are conceptualised, enacted and experienced in the educational system in the country. The meta-synthesis process was used because it does not simply summarise, but re-conceives the evidence of multiple qualitative research on a theoretical and practical basis. As noted by Finfgeld-Connett (2018), Hoon (2013), and Nye, Melendez-Torres and Bonell (2016), meta-synthesis offers an opportunity to synthesise alternative perspectives that provide insight into meanings, contexts, and relationships that are not readily captured by many quantitative approaches. In this study it assisted us to collect fragmented information about inclusivity in education in Ghana

to produce an evidence-based, clear and informed understanding of the problems and opportunities that challenge equitable education for all pupils.

As literature review for the study, major academic platforms such as the Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Journal Storage (JSTOR), Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate were used to access high-quality scholarly databases. Boolean operators "AND" and "OR" were used for further searching and to join search terms. Search terms included "inclusive education in Ghana", "educational equity in Ghana", "inclusive schooling and teacher attitudes in Ghana", "educational access and quality in Ghana", and "barriers to inclusive education in Ghana." These keywords incorporated general themes and context while maintaining the focus on Ghana's education sector.

To ensure methodological soundness and relevance, explicit inclusion criteria were defined. Studies published between January 2008 and December 2023 were included, as this 15-year period spans significant policy and educational reforms in Ghana. The goal was to focus on research that reflects those changes as documented in the literature. Eligible studies were empirically sound or policy-oriented and applied inclusivity or equity in Ghana's basic, secondary, or tertiary education systems. A qualitative and mixed-methods research approach was favoured, as it enables in-depth, interpretive study of students', teachers', and policymakers' experiences. Peer-reviewed journal articles and credible institutional reports were included; those conducted outside Ghana, those that were purely quantitative and lacked interpretative depth, and non-empirical papers, such as commentaries or editorials, were excluded.

The selection procedure was standard for systematic reviews. In the first stage, titles and abstracts were screened to identify studies eligible for inclusion. Subsequent full-text reviews were conducted to assess the methodological quality, conceptual coherence, and alignment with the scope of the study. Two independent reviewers conducted this process to ensure reliability and reproducibility, with any disagreements resolved through discussion or referral to a third reviewer. A Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram was used to document the entire process, including the number of studies identified, screened, included, and excluded at each stage. This methodological process bolstered the credibility of the review and reduced selection bias.

A data extraction table was created based on a structured tool to record key points from studies included in an annotated dataset. The collected information encompassed author and year of publication, study title, geographical setting,

participant characteristics, study methodology, data collection procedures, key findings, and thematic areas related to inclusivity and equity. Such organisation of documentation helped maintain consistency in how data were managed and enabled comparability across studies.

A thematic inductive analysis was used to find patterns and relationships in the codes, and commonality and relationships among study findings were identified and analysed thematically. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, we repeatedly read the studies to develop a full understanding thereof. Key themes were generated while codes were developed to obtain descriptive language grouped into higher-order categories. These categories were distilled into more general themes which opened relations and insight about inclusivity and equity in the Ghanaian educational contexts.

To ensure reliability and validity, we employed several quality assurance strategies. Triangulation was employed to confirm the themes emerging from the research. Two reviewers independently coded for agreement among coders, and discrepancies were resolved. An audit trail was

created for coding decisions, analytical processes, and theme development to ensure transparency and reproducibility. A parallel form of peer debriefing with two education researchers, added further external validation, as this served to polish the thematic synthesis and concept fidelity.

Ethical standards were maintained in the review. Because the study was based on published literature, no direct interaction with human participants took place. However, academic ethics were preserved through adequate attribution of authors' scholarly work, proper citation of references, and integrity of authors' original meaning and context. The overall methodological approach used served to ensure transparency, rigour, and academic ethics. The structured search strategy defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and supported analytic procedures ensured a rigorous base for valid conclusions. This meta-synthesis serves as a context for contextualising the dynamics of inclusiveness and equity in Ghana's educational system and provides direction for educational governance, educational policy, teacher development and future directions of research.

Table 1 Data extraction summary of Ghanaian studies on inclusivity and equity in education

Author(s)	Year	Region / Context	Participants	Methodology / Focus	Key findings	Themes identified
Roy & Swargiary	2024	Ghana (national focus)	Secondary data (national indicators)	Conceptual discussion on education and socio-economic development	Education is vital for a country's progress. However, unequal access creates barriers to fairness.	Inequality in education, progress in socio-economic conditions, and access to high-quality education.
Abubakari & Al-Hassan; Agbeme; Ministry of Education	2008–2018	Ghana	Policymakers and MOE documents	Policy review	National policies emphasise the importance of quality education; however, they often lack consistent implementation and fail to allocate sufficient resources.	Discrepancy between policy and practice, restricted financial resources, insufficient administrative capability.
Akyeampong et al.; Senadza et al.	2012–2019	Ghana (urban-rural)	Teachers and students	Empirical case study	Ongoing disparities between rural and urban areas, combined with socio-economic elements, restrict equitable access.	Geographical disparities, social and economic obstacles, and difficulties with inclusivity.
Mantey	2014	Ghana (national education policy)	Policymakers, teachers	Policy analysis	An inclusive education policy is in place. Nevertheless, there is a lack of enforcement and involvement from stakeholders.	The gap between policy and practice, fostering inclusiveness, and governance.
Ministry of Education; Nketsia; Opoku	2013–2022	Ghana (Special and Basic Education)	Policymakers, teachers	Policy evaluation	The Education Strategic Plan advocates inclusion; however, it is deficient in funding and lacks a definitive strategy.	Policy for inclusive education, inadequate execution, and limitations in funding.
Adams; Nketsia; Oppong; Sarpong	2016–2022	Central, Greater Accra, Eastern Regions	Teachers, administrators	Field evaluation / case study	Inclusive pilot initiatives experienced some success; however, they were constrained by inadequate planning and insufficient training.	Teacher preparedness, insufficient resources, backing from organisations.
Khaleel	2020	Ghana	Teachers	Qualitative interviews	Teachers' attitudes toward inclusion influenced by limited training and cultural perception.	Educators' perspectives on inclusion are shaped by insufficient training and cultural beliefs.
Addo & Ador	2019	Ghana (urban and rural schools)	School administrators	Field observation	Access to school infrastructure remains challenging for students with disabilities, especially in rural regions.	Obstacles in infrastructure, accessibility in physical environments.
Senadza et al.	2019	Ghana (GES policy environment)	Policymakers	Policy analysis	The Ghana Education Service does not have a well-defined policy framework for inclusive education. There exists a deficiency in policy, constraints within the organization, and challenges related to governance.	Absence of policy, constraints in institutions, and a gap in governance.
Ametepee & Anastasiou	2015	Ghana	Education finance experts	Secondary data review	Merely 0.4% of the national education budget is designated for	Insufficient funding, neglect of policy issues, and inadequate budgets.

Author(s)	Year	Region / Context	Participants	Methodology / Focus	Key findings	Themes identified
Mensah & Nkansah	2020–2021	Ghana (national education sector)	Students, policymakers	Policy evaluation	special education initiatives. The Ministry prioritises enhancing accessibility for underprivileged groups by providing inclusion initiatives.	Knowledge is strength. It fuels social equity and facilitates changes in policies.
Adarkwah; Asante & Agbee	2021–2022	Ghana (national Free SHS policy)	Students, policymakers	Policy assessment	The Free Senior High School policy enhances equity and accessibility; however, disparities in resources among regions remain.	Effects of free SHS, equality of access, variations by region.
Ahmed; Akeampong; Osei et al.	2009–2018	Ghana	School administrators	Policy impact study	The capitation grant led to an increase in enrolment. Nevertheless, insufficient funding makes it difficult to maintain sustainability.	Increase in enrolment, lack of funding, availability of educational opportunities.
Cobbold & Monk	2007–2015	Ghana (urban-rural comparison)	Teachers	Comparative study	An unequal allocation of teachers limits educational access and impacts the quality of instruction in rural regions.	Teacher allocation, disparities in rural education, distribution of resources.
Baffoe; Evans; Singal, Spencer & Mitchell	2013–2021	Ghana	Learners with disabilities	Mixed methods / case study	Education enhances employment prospects for learners with disabilities; however, accessibility remains a challenge.	Inclusion, empowerment, and equitable outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Results and Findings

In this section, we provide a summary of the results of a meta-synthesis on inclusive education and equity in Ghana. We aggregate data from various studies, reports, and assessments to provide an overview of the current state of inclusive education for educational equity.

A study of inclusive and equity education in Ghana highlights the intricate relationship between teacher readiness, policy implementation, institutional support, and community participation. Those factors influence how inclusion is enacted across different educational levels. While the national policy framework strongly advocates inclusive education, the application of these commitments in classrooms is patchy and inconsistent.

The findings from the studies reviewed suggest that logistical barriers to inclusion are not the only ones; they also stem from structural, institutional, and social attitudes. Rather than providing additional piecemeal measures to prevent this situation, one should pursue a comprehensive, unified reform programme. One prevalent theme that emerged from the analysis is the need for teacher education that is both comprehensive and continuous. These are vital but often neglected factors in the agenda for inclusive education in Ghana. Naami and Mort (2023) conducted research with student teachers at a college of education in southern Ghana, which revealed a dire shortage of training to teach students with disabilities in teacher education programmes. These prospective teachers, however, as they were more aware of diversity and social inclusion, weren't equipped with the practical tools to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities. This is consistent with the social model of disability, in which exclusion originates from societal obstacles rather than personal incapacity. This implies a call for teacher training materials that integrate inclusive principles across both theoretical and practical content areas. If this changed, teachers could become proactive advocates for inclusion policies rather than simply recipients thereof.

A further theme from various studies (Mantey, 2014; Nketsia, 2018; Oppong, 2022) is that policy formulation should be accompanied by implementation in schools. National initiatives, such as the Education Strategic Plan (2010–2020), pledge to mainstream learners with special educational needs. Yet the gap between government policies and practice in daily school life continues to impede progress. These implementation issues have been attributed to a lack of resources, fragmented leadership structures, and the absence of teacher support. The differences between policy and practice might be understood as a rhetorical inclusion gap, in which inclusion is promoted as a

principle in official statements yet does not translate into ongoing classroom practice.

In the review we also identified significant gaps in the infrastructure and materials needed to implement inclusive education. Some schools, particularly in rural or peri-urban areas, did not have adequately equipped facilities, adaptive pedagogical materials, or assistive technologies that are vital for students with disabilities (Addo, 2019; Ador, 2019). These shortcomings are not limited to physical obstacles; they signal deeper socio-structural inequalities within Ghana's education system. Inclusion is often regarded as a secondary issue rather than an essential right. And, in this context, the physical barriers of educational settings further entrench existing privileges and exclusions, fundamentally undermining the tenets of equity and social justice that inclusive education encompasses.

Teachers' attitudes and societal views on disability also influence inclusive practice. Khaleel (2020) found that many educators considered students with disabilities to be a burden in inclusive teaching. This point of view is shaped by a lack of training, limited resources, and continuing discrimination against persons with disabilities. This attitudinal adversity, exacerbated by poor institutional support, becomes a concealed but great impediment to inclusion. These findings underscore the need to reconceptualise inclusion as a social and institutional obligation, not a burden assigned solely to individual classrooms or teachers.

Initiatives that seek to advance equity in education, such as the free SHS policy and the capitation grant scheme, demonstrate Ghana's commitment to expanding access to education and mitigating financial barriers (Adarkwah, 2022; Ahmed, 2018). These programmes have resulted in substantial increases in school enrolment, including among students from underrepresented groups. But research demonstrates that access does not guarantee equity. Current disparities in resource allocation, teacher assignments, and the quality of educational services between urban and rural schools persist and hinder the success of these reforms (Amponsah & Stonier, 2021; Cobbold, 2015). Ghana is leading the way toward universal access, but the biggest challenge is to ensure that all students receive quality, relevant education, as they have in the past.

Of the three themes identified from the evidence gathered, we can better understand inclusivity and equity in Ghanaian education. Theme 1, pedagogical preparedness and professional agency, highlights the significance of teachers' beliefs, training, and efficacy for successful inclusive practices. The second theme, policy implementation alignment, highlights continuing gaps between policy formation and practice in the classroom, while showing a call to

decentralised and participatory efforts in pedagogical oversight. The third key issue that contributes to structural equity and social justice emphasises that inclusion can be achieved only through more access to physical places, so that educational resources are distributed fairly and cultural attitudes that exclude contribute to that fairness.

These linked themes expand our understanding of inclusion by revealing it as a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in diverse educational, institutional, and social factors. The synthesis proposes a model of inclusive fairness which emphasises teacher capacity, policy consistency and structural justice as the three key building blocks needed for sustained inclusion in Ghana. Drawing on studies by Adarkwah (2022), Addo (2019), Mantey (2014), Naami and Mort (2023), Nketsia (2018), and Oppong (2022), we adopted a broad perspective, reflecting achievements and current challenges.

The findings from this review indicate that the success of inclusive education in Ghana involves more than expanding access to and opportunities for inclusion; it also entails addressing inequalities created by the structures, attitudes, and practices of teaching. Achieving this vision requires a coordinated, evidence-based, and socially responsive approach that couples educational praxis with the core values of social justice and national development.

Discussion and Conclusion

Ghana has made significant strides in inclusive education, but key challenges continue to impede the full implementation of inclusive initiatives. In the absence of awareness of disability, inclusive teaching and learning methods in teacher training programmes remain a significant challenge. Schlessinger (2018) argues that teachers feel competent to teach students with disabilities only if they are trained in the actual implementation of such instruction.

Inclusive education involves more than teacher training. Inclusion is not simply about having a well-placed teacher but having access to facilities and conducive environments. Yet, having the right infrastructure alone, is insufficient. Inclusion should be supported by transparent policies with quantifiable targets, developed in collaboration with stakeholders, including teachers, families, community members, and students with disabilities. Swargiary (2024) contends that policymaking should be linked to practice in the classroom in terms of the implementation of actionable strategies.

A common approach in the literature is to examine the disparity between policy objectives and teacher practice. When they do work, equity-oriented policies are frequently hindered by

teacher preparedness and structural barriers. Smith, Frey, Pumpian and Fisher (2017) demonstrate the necessity of developing teachers' understanding of equity to identify and effectively mitigate systemic disparities.

By empowering schools to direct resource allocation in line with Addai and Adzahlie-Mensah's (2024) recommendations, schools can formulate solutions that are meaningful and local. This change increases response to the diverse demographic and cultural contexts. Elements such as engaging with local knowledge and historical contexts (e.g., Takyi et al., 2021), could help make the curriculum more applicable and compatible with Ghanaian values.

But to make change permanent, accountability systems need to improve. Herrera, Rodriguez, Cabral and Holmes (2023) advocate for a collective perspective among decision-makers, educators, and communities to assume responsibility for commitment to inclusive education in the education system.

The results present a detailed interplay between obstacles and opportunities for enhanced inclusivity and equity in Ghana's education system. The studies surveyed reveal the necessity for systemic changes in teacher training, policy implementation, and resource allocation to cultivate meaningful inclusive and equitable educational environments. There is high concern about teachers' preparedness and understanding of inclusive instruction. This highlights the need to include disability considerations and equity strategies in teacher education programmes. The provision of information and tools to meet the needs of their students will facilitate more inclusive education among teachers and for all students.

The analysis demonstrates that systemic inequalities, especially with respect to gender, geography, and socio-economic status are further hindering educational equity in Ghana. Policies have come about to correct this inequity, but there is a mismatch between the statement of intent and how those policies manifest in schools. Girls, children with disabilities, and students from low-income backgrounds are impacted disproportionately. Therefore, an integrated approach is essential – one that encompasses tailored interventions, more school freedom to manage resources and a stronger system of accountability. By doing so, local stakeholders are enabled to adapt specific responses to the issues they face, while national imperatives regarding equity and inclusion are met.

Training in inclusive education and equity principles should be incorporated into formal teacher education if the educational sector is to effectively address these challenges. This must include differentiated teaching strategies, the social model of disability, and practical classroom

methods for inclusion. Additionally, all participants must focus on enacting equity-focused policies that continue to develop in response to teachers' and learners' feedback, and on implementing those policies on an ongoing basis. Strengthening the partnership between schools and universities will further support research-informed teaching, sustained by ongoing professional development to keep school personnel informed about best practices in inclusive education. A collective effort from policymakers, educators, parents in the schools, and the public is necessary to develop an education system that is just and inclusive. Open dialogue and collective action can close gaps and achieve higher standards in education.

However, important feedback was obtained from this meta-analysis. By focusing on literature from the last 15 years, these findings are meaningful, although they may gloss over historical perspectives that are central to today's problems. Additionally, the interpretative nature of meta-synthesis introduces a degree of subjectivity into the process – identification of themes and synthesis can be influenced by the researchers' perspectives. These reasons also might restrict generalisability of the results.

Future research should investigate the extent to which specific teacher-training paradigms and professional development initiatives are effective in enhancing inclusive and equitable education. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs would provide a clearer indication of the effect of interventions, such as implementing indigenous knowledge systems or adapting equity training into existing curricula. Including grey literature (dissertations, unpublished reports) and local organisational documents for inclusion would improve the investigation into how to do so in a culturally sensitive manner where they could be inclusively shared with Ghana's education system.

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Authors' Contribution

AAB wrote the manuscript and provided the literature data for the meta-synthesis. MWL conducted the meta-synthesis analysis and wrote the results, findings, discussion and conclusions.

Notes

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