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Inclusive Education and Social Development in an African Context[1]

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Abstract

This paper is based on focus group discussions of African and Ghanaian university students as they reflect on their university experiences on the subject of how questions of difference and diversity are broached in the teaching, learning, and administration of education in their schools and universities. The paper seeks to reveal ways in which the schooling experiences of the study participants inform their shared, competing and contested understandings of the challenges of inclusive schooling in pluralistic contexts. The use of focus group interview methodology has enabled us to obtain several interactive perspectives about the topics of our investigation in this paper, which include sites and categories such as class, ethnicity, gender, language, religion, and place of birth. Our respondents have used their personal knowledge and lived experiences to reflect on the question of how inclusivity and diversity implicate schooling in Africa, and particularly in Ghana. The focus group interviews have allowed for production of transparent information and insights emerging from interactions, discussions and debates among the group members. Findings in this study reveal the existence of significant relations between notions of difference and diversity with issues of power, status, authority and influence.

Introduction

Today there is a renewed interest among critical educators in questions of equity in education that moves beyond the traditional emphasis on race, class and gender to address other forms of difference

such as the ones emanating from ethnicity, culture, disability, sexuality, language, age, and religion (Aronowitz, 1992; Sandercock, 1998; Rizvi, 2000; Thompson, 2000; Appelbaum, 2002; Campbell, 2002; Nieto, 2002; Sánchez-Casal & MacDonald, 2002; Iram, 2003; Schecter & Cummins, 2003; Swiniarski & Breitborde, 2003). This is mainly due to the realization that schooling outcomes refract on bodies differently. The social climate of learning that exists in schools coupled with the interactions among students, teachers, peers and the school curriculum in general point to the ways that difference plays out in social relations of schooling. What this means is that in the contemporary school environment we are dealing with multidimensional and multi-layered relations of power and authority. The paper is anchored in a longitudinal field research on inclusive schooling that was done in Ghana. The study seeks to address some of the ongoing debates about 'inclusive schooling' as a starting base to interrogate current Ghanaian and African education systems. The findings of this research as a whole will be presented in its entirety in a forthcoming book. For the purpose of this article, however, we will be using a number of focus group interviews conducted in the Ghanaian universities in August 2001. While benefiting from conclusions and general patterns emerging from the whole project, it will be the data and material in the focus group interviews that will serve as our primary sources here.

We define 'inclusive education' as the education that responds to the concerns, aspirations and interests of a diverse body politic by drawing on the accumulated knowledges, creativity and resourcefulness of local peoples. A school is inclusive to the extent that students are able to identify and connect with their school's social environment, culture, population and history. Inclusive schooling means that each and every student feels truly and indiscriminately a part and parcel of the school environment; that all students truly and comfortably belong in that environment; and that that environment is doing its utmost to provide them with a voice equal to each and every student; with facilities to account for their spiritual, religious, linguistic, cultural and other needs in proportion to those provided to the dominant groups.

While a series of educational reforms have been initiated in Ghana in the 1980s and 1990s to allocate more resources for the purpose of improving both 'access to' and 'the quality of' education at the basic level; it can be safely said that throughout Ghana's history educational reforms have not targeted questions of difference in ways that work powerfully with the implications of social difference for schooling. A differential allocation of resources exists among social groups and

economic sectors just as they exist in different regions of the country. Yet the cost of schooling has always served as a barrier for educational attainment. The disproportionality in the area of ethnic and socio-economic background of the students in 'high and low status secondary schools' appears to have been widening over the last four decades. What is needed now is a more in-depth investigation to address the intricacies and implications of social difference for Ghanaian schooling. (see Dei et al., 2005).

In articulating concerns about the schooling of minoritized youth in pluralistic contexts, some critical educational researchers and practitioners view schools as 'contested public spheres' (see for example, Dei, 2003a; Fine, 1994, p. 682). Yet others continue to see them as political sites for the reproduction of power and social inequality (Giroux, 1983; Apple, 1993; McCarthy, 1998). These authors also see structural poverty, racism, sexism, and social and cultural differences as consequential to schooling outcomes--particularly those of the minority youth. This is a significant departure from conventional views that focused on family-school relations, conceptualizing homes and families as sites and sources of student educational problems and pathologies. It also marks a shift in the conventional false separation between homes and schools in accounting for educational successes and failures. While these theoretical positions primarily speak and/or operate relative to Euro-American contexts, it is arguable that such formulations have significant insights for understandings of schooling in Africa. Equally importantly, while questions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion and language are articulated differently, they nevertheless draw on significant points of convergence in pluralistic communities.

In North America, the debate on school inclusivity may be conceptualized in two broad categories: 'diversity as a variety perspective' and 'diversity as a critical perspective' (see also Goldstein, 2002). The first approach to inclusion is exemplified as viewing diversity in terms of teaching and sharing knowledge about the contributions of diverse cultures to enrich pluralistic communities. This approach appeals to a liberal humanism wherein diversity is seen to be a safe, multicultural expression of difference, not a critical one. The second approach views schooling as a racially, culturally and politically mediated experience. The focus here is to deal directly with marginalization and exclusion in school contexts by centring all human experiences in the student's learning process. Furthermore, there is also a calculated focus on the twin notions of power and domination as

a way of understanding and interpreting social relations and structures. While the issue of North American schooling may be conceptualized differently from the African context, there are still broad parallels to be drawn relative to issues of inclusivity. It should also be noted that North America is not a homogenous society, there are differences and especially when it comes to dealing with inclusion debates.

Theorizing equity and inclusive education requires that we pay attention to the cultural and social background of the community. It requires a critical understanding of cultural differences in terms of the embeddedness of power and history in the construction of difference. It also demands that we find ways to capture, explore and understand how schools respond to the multiple faiths in their environments and how the needs of students with physical disabilities get taken up or addressed. Cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious plurality is a fact of life in the increasingly globalizing contemporary world. By the same token, current local schools and learning spaces are extremely heterogeneous and in fact cosmopolitan. It is only through the realization and celebration of difference and diversity that we may be able to reach a collective consensus above and beyond singular boundaries and identities.

Situating Ourselves

It is an integral component of any solid research methodological approach that researchers be aware of their own position and situation within the research processes, in the field, and among the subjects of their study. Researchers should know and acknowledge who they are, where they come from, and what brings them to a particular research project. As Antonio Gramsci had astutely observed, "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (1971, p. 324). It is left to the individual researchers, then, to reconstruct such an 'inventory' through reference to one's lived experiences, beliefs and desires whose influence on intellectual/scientific endeavors are unquestionable, regardless of whether one acknowledges them or not. Researchers, historians, authors and writers are individuals with our own personal and collective histories, identities, and lived experiences. As such, we ought to be transparent and open about our own identity, our situationality and positionality within the research process. In effect, our activities in data-gathering, data analysis, in fact our very acts of writing and

producing of texts are inherently hierarchical and heavily characterized by relations of power and domination. And it makes the following observation ever more relevant that 'who we are is important in what we do and how we do it' (see also Church, 1995; Chamberlayne et al., 2000).

George Dei grew up and was initially educated in the local school system in Ghana. He later moved to Canada to continue his educational endeavors. The work that he has undertaken since the early 1990s on minority education and inclusive schooling in Canadian and Ontario contexts led him to conclude that there are significant points of convergence and divergence in North American and African schooling systems. Issues of difference and diversity can and must be critically investigated in African educational discourse and practice. In an exploratory research in Ghana he examined the views of students, teachers, parents and school administrators on the impact of ongoing educational reform, specifically the changes to the national educational system endorsed by the international financial community, noting the significance of struggles over minority concerns and advocacy for inclusive education (see Dei, 2003b). Many Ghanaian educators essentially espouse the view that students go to school as disembodied youth. Moreover, prevailing discourses on nationhood and citizenship work to deny rather than affirm the strengths of difference and diversity.

George Dei's status as a racial minority faculty in the Euro-American academy and his lived experiences in the Canadian school system have enabled him to sharply reflect on how schooling in his birthplace, Ghana, was not just 'colonial and colonized,' but also systematically promoted exclusionary ends by failing to pay due attention to difference and diversity among the schooling population. Today, alongside others, he continues to struggle with the search for viable answers to this and other similar questions.

Alireza Asgharzadeh completed his primary and secondary education in Iran, where he was not allowed to read, write, and even speak his own mother tongue. The education system in Iran promoted and enforced a superficial sense of nationalism based on Persian language and culture. The richly multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual character of Iranian society was forcefully denied. The school environment, textbooks, curricula, extracurricular activities, teachers and school administrative personnel all subscribed to and served the view that saw Iran as one nation with one language and one

culture. In essence, monoculturalism and monolingualism were the official doctrine of nation-building processes in the country where the education system itself had become a huge engine for linguicide, deculturation and assimilation.

Thus, achievement of an inclusive education in his birthplace remained an ideal for him and millions of other students, teachers and educators. It was in Canada that he came to know what it really meant to live in a multicultural society and to study in a multicultural learning environment. In the summer of 2002, he traveled to Ghana on a field trip. This trip provided him with an ample opportunity to view the Ghanaian schooling system closely and to get a firsthand idea about the project that is partly manifested through this article. Working with a team of local researchers and activists served to eliminate any limitations that may have resulted from taking the 'insider' position by the authors in this project.

Methodology and Research

This paper is a reflection of the findings of a three-year longitudinal study conducted on African education with a research focus on the Ghanaian school system. The original research study was funded under Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) grant awarded. The study had three learning objectives. First, to obtain in-depth, site-specific ethnographic information on exemplary practices that promote educational equity and academic excellence for all students from the vantage points of the students themselves as well as their parents, educators and school administrators. Second, to conduct a critical examination of innovative practices of inclusive education that specifically address the educational needs of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, sexual, and working-class minorities, women, and otherwise disempowered, disabled, and disadvantaged bodies and groups. The research would explore how educational institutions (primary/basic, secondary/college and university) deal with questions of difference in the context of ongoing educational reforms in Ghana. And, thirdly, the study would make relevant connections between patterns in African educational reform and the implications for educating particularly (but not exclusively) African and minority youth in North American contexts.

In each of the three-year phases field research involved conducting intensive field ethnographic research in Ghana from early May each year to the end of August. Returning to Canada, the subsequent eight-month period, from September to April, was devoted to further interviews with Ghanaian-born nationals resident in Canada, as well as with preparation of interview transcriptions, data analysis, documentation, and report on the findings. In year One (2000-01) a total of 62 interviews were conducted including 20 Ghanaian-born educators now residing in Canada (some of whom currently work as school and college teachers and social workers), 32 individual interviews with Ghanaian educationists at the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service, college teachers at two Senior secondary Schools (SSS), as well as prominent Ghanaian educators noted for their contributions to the field of education. In Phase Two (2001-02) a total of 66 individual in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. The interviews were supplemented with ethnographic observations of summer classes held at Winneba. In the third and final phase of the field research activity (2002-03), a total of 35 individual in-depth interviews and a number of focus group discussions were held, focussing on the junior and senior secondary schools (JSS and SSS) as well as university college levels. Schools were selected based on regional and sectoral differences. Amongst the urban schools, the emphasis was placed on those that had a very diverse student population. The selection of interview participants reflected differences in ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, gender, and class backgrounds.

The study has used participants' words to describe the situation and to bring forth the tensions, struggles, contradictions and ambiguities in subject(ive) accounts on the challenges of dealing with difference and diversity. As noted elsewhere (Dei, 2003a), the importance of "voice" in educational research cannot be overemphasized. Voices convey personal feelings, thoughts, desires and politics. Voices allow readers to bring their own interpretations to the data. By infusing the actual voices of participants the text moves beyond an abstract, theoretical discussion of inclusive schooling. In fact, the voices of different subjects (students, teachers and community educators) reveal a nuanced interpretation of what inclusive education means. For a critical researcher the careful analysis of voices can offer detailed insights into specific situations, including the past and present historical contexts that have contributed to the standpoint knowledge of participants.

Along with in-depth individual and group interviews, a number of important focus group interviews were also conducted at various stages of our research activities in Africa. The focus group interviews included youths and students from diverse ethnic, religious, economic, gender, class, and linguistic backgrounds. These interviews proved to

be important for a variety of reasons. To begin with, they served to complement the other qualitative interviews through triangulation and validity checking purposes (see also Morgan, 1988; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1992; Rosaline & Kitzinger, 1999; Fern, 2001). Positioned within a group environment, the respondents were better able to interact with one another and express themselves in a way that may not have been so transparent in a one-on-one or a simple group interview. Interaction with other group members and with the researchers helped to bring out the respondents' understandings about and evaluations of the already planned and designed research questions and topics. It also helped to place the respondents in a situation where they had to explain themselves and even re-evaluate their views vis-à-vis those of other group members. As a result, an environment of self-evaluation, self-examination, and critical debate was created that was extremely helpful for our research objectives (see also Morgan, 1988; Lankshear, 1993; Kitzinger, 1995).

In addition to mentioned qualities, focus group interview methodology can be used as an independent method in its own right and independently of other research methods and techniques (see also Kreuger, 1988; Race et al., 1994). As a matter of fact, focus group interviews are even more effective research tools in situations where we need to draw upon the respondents' beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and lived experiences (Hoppe et al., 1995; Goss & Leinbach, 1996). Given the sensitive and emotionally-charged nature of our research (discussing difference and diversity), this particular research method indeed proved to be very effective. Focus group participants were recruited from different Ghanaian universities and represented a cross-section of socio-economic, class, ethnic, regional, and gender backgrounds. The focus group interview sessions were conducted in the natural location on a university campus and each lasted for about two hours. Three moderators were involved in each interview. While one moderator facilitated the discussions and initiated debates, the two others took notes and checked the recording equipment.

The Narratives

The research revealed interesting views about perceptions of difference and diversity from the vantage point of the respondent's ethnic, cultural, gender, and class background. Factors such as social position, age, authority, status, occupation, and place of birth were also taken into account for the purpose of painting a larger picture of what difference and diversity meant in an African context. In general terms,

concepts of difference and diversity were used to refer to different characteristics such as ethnic, racial, class, gender, linguistic, religious, and regional background of students. Additionally, factors such as dis/ability, age, place of birth, sexual orientation, accent and so on were identified as important markers of difference and diversity among student populations and general public. The discussions supported the position that the respondents' understanding of issues of difference and diversity differed based on their socio-economic background, gender, ethnicity, place of birth, age, sexuality, (dis)ability, and so forth.

The student narratives that we present here are the perceptions of difference and diversity in schooling as narrated in the respondents' own voices. It should be pointed out that we attempted to the best of our ability to clearly identify the interviewees participating in focus group discussions. Although we succeeded in most cases, in some cases it was not possible to know the name behind the voice in the tapes when the respondents were interacting among themselves. So some of the respondents will appear here without a name, to whom we refer only as 'a male' or 'a female' student. Nonetheless, for purposes of anonymity we used pseudonyms to reference the participants.

When asked to speak to the question of diversity, Arbina, a female student from the University of Science and Technology, views the diversity of student population at her university through the following statement:

> At the university, the student population is made up of whites, Africans, and Ghanaians who are from various parts of the country. At every course, at every lecture, you'll get all regions of the country represented in the class. I'd say that it is quite a number, quite a match, the student population. In fact I would say that, my university has a highly diverse population. We are talking about foreign students who've come here... As for Ghanaians, we have people coming from all over the country. (008, 2001).

Diversity reflects differences in students' identity and cultural backgrounds. In fact, most students agree with Arbina that all Ghanaian universities and schools have indeed very diverse student populations. Not only the local (Ghanaian) students come from diverse backgrounds, but there are also other African and 'foreign students' who significantly add to the already existing rich diversity. The foreign

students are the white students coming from the US and Europe. There are also Asian students coming from such countries as China, the Koreas, and Japan. More interestingly, however, the 'foreign students' category usually also includes the students coming from other African countries. In a number of interviews that we had with African students they confirmed that the Ghanaian students usually referred to them as 'foreigners.' Be it as it may, the existence of such a rich and complex diversity raises some interesting questions to ponder over: Does diversity bring strength to the learning centers or is it a cause of tension, weakness, and conflict? What and how can we learn from our differences? How does diversity affect the learning processes? What roles can the authorities, governing bodies, and education systems play to effectively and positively manage diversity?

Gago is a female university student and she looks at diversity in terms of its rich potential as a source of learning and understanding:

> I'll learn more from the diversity of students. ...In a diverse class you will learn many things. You will see how different people answer questions. You ask whether that was the best way. So it gives you different perspectives on different issues. (008, 2001).

When difference is not acknowledged, it brings about many negative results particularly for the excluded and marginalized. 'Keeping to oneself' and not socializing with others is one of them. Dano, a male student of Akan background, explains this particular situation:

> Certain groups tend to hang out among themselves and that happens once they realize that their ways are different than the others. So they tend to stick together. Because I had an Ewe friend and there was always some Ewes coming to him and talking to him. But we the Akans, we have this problem of individualistic behaviour. So we are not united. (008, 2001).

Compared to the dominant Akan group, the Ewes constitute a minority group in Ghanaian universities. As a minority group, they tend to maintain a stronger group cohesion. They keep closer together and show a sense of solidarity among their group members. However, it is

interesting to see how Dano sees this sense of group cohesion and solidarity as a somewhat problematic issue. Now is it the problem of just the Ewe group, or does it apply to all minoritized groups? Do other minority groups also hang around by themselves? This is how Rosa, a female student from Arbina's university responds:

> The Northerners also stick together. Yes, they do. Let's say if they all come in the same bus, to the same school, they come together. But the Ewes, they are so different. (008, 2001).

The Northerners are another minority group in Ghana. So, like Ewes, they too tend to stick together and maintain a group cohesion and solidarity. It seems that maintenance of such a status is practiced by the minoritized communities as a defence mechanism as well as for other purposes. When the minoritized bodies constantly and ceaselessly become the object of abuse, insult, and injury inflicted by the dominant group, it would only be natural for them to 'stick together' and thereby effectively resist abuse and injury.

As for the dominant Akan and Ashanti groups, Arbina is very informative in her responding:

> I would say that, the Akans are business oriented. I would say the Ashantis are similar. Because of the changes that were made so many problems came to the university. You see, some of the people don't do well economically, then go and say 'the Ashantis love money! That's why they are rich.' But some people say there is favouritism and all that. And maybe there is that aspect too. (008, 2001).

Abrina belongs to the dominant group, Akan. (The Akans and Ashanti constitute the dominant majority in Ghana). According to Abrina, these two dominant groups are 'business oriented.' Because of this orientation towards business, they are wealthy and richer compared to other groups. In other words, if the minoritized Northerners, for instance, are not wealthy and rich, it is their own problem, because they are not 'business oriented,' like the Akans and the Ashanti are. However, other people claim that there is favouritism. They do not agree with the view that sees the Akan and Ashanti groups' relatively higher socio-economic status to be as a result of their being 'business oriented.' On the contrary, they point out to the existence of

"favouritism and all that" in society to explain the economic affluence of certain individuals and groups along the ethnic lines. Favouritism may be practiced by the dominant group because they have control over both the governing bodies as well as the essential economic structures in society. In many African countries favouritism usually manifests itself in getting prestigious employment opportunities, influential positions and well-paying jobs by the individuals affiliated in one way or another with the dominant group.

So, how can we make the best use out of our diversity? How should we deal with issues of difference and diversity? According to Dano, we have to be able to respect our differences and try to work together in order to overcome a variety of obstacles blocking the path to a peaceful living:

> I would also emphasize on facilities. Also, we have come to a level that we have to direct ourselves to be ethnic-conscious. Because, day-in and day-out the world is advancing. Now as we see, the world has become a village. So we should be able to come together as one people. We can't live on other planet. This is where we are living and we have to be able to live together. We should be able to work together. We should be able to respect ourselves. Let us come together so no one would be left out and we become one people. Then we will be able to find the world a peaceful place to live in. (008, 2001)

Emphasizing on facilities, being ethnic-conscious, leaving no one out, being able to live together and to work together, these are the key phrases in Dano's statement. In order to have a peaceful, democratic country, facilities and infrastructure should be built in the country and it must be seen to it that everyone has equal access to these facilities, regardless of ethnicity, gender, class, language, religion, age, disability, and place of birth. These are very important preconditions for peaceful and productive living conditions in a pluralistic context. The other precondition is the necessity of becoming ethnic-conscious. What this means is that people have to be aware of their differences and respect those differences. By respecting and accepting our differences we would be able to work together and to live together in peace. Here, Dano is looking at difference not as a source of tension and problem but as a source of strength, sharing and mutual respect.

Articulations of 'minority' and 'majority' concepts were very central to the conceptions of difference and diversity among our respondents. We proceeded with a view that notions of minority and majority may have different meanings for different individuals, depending on their ethnic background, culture, class, gender, religion, language, etc. The respondents explored such issues and concepts as power, influence, authority, voice, access, size and quantity to reach a clear understanding about majority/minority categories and their inter/intra-relationships.

Let us explore some respondent narratives regarding majority/minority relations. For instance, this is how one female student defines the term majority:

> There is more of them... and they sometimes have more power and influence. (008, 2001)

A male student from another university offers a somewhat different but related definition of the term minority:

> In terms of number, they have less population. And in terms of contribution, their contribution is lesser than the others. ...I mean, their contribution is so little that you won't see it, because there are only a few of them. (003, 2000)

So, does a concept of numerical minority/majority translate into power and power relations? In elaborating on this question, the respondent continues:

> I think so. Because they have very little influence. They don't have much of an influence. Let me give you an example. There is one guy who is very good. He is very, very good, very, very influential. But because he is a Northerner, when he starts to talk, we start laughing. Let me give you another example that happened last semester. In the middle of a lecture, this same guy, he raised his hand and wanted to make some comments. So the lecturer motioned that he should make his point. They did not let him speak that day. So the next lecture which was the next Monday, he still wanted to make that point. So the lecturer said it was ok. And when he completed,

everyone was silent. We saw that he had so much to say in that particular course. (003, 2001)

What we see here may be characterized as an extreme case of abuse of power by the majority to discriminate against a student coming from a minority community. The student even is not allowed to make a point just because he does not happen to be 'one of us.' Since this particular student is a Northerner, the minute he raises his hand to make a comment, he is ridiculed, made fun of and laughed at. His minoritized Northerner status has stigmatized him among his peers and classmates. The dominant majority has come to believe that as a Northerner, he is not capable of making a comment. So he is easily silenced and pushed aside. It is also interesting to note that even the lecturer's authority does not seem to help the minoritized student from the North. Although the lecturer permits the student to speak, other students still do not allow him to make a comment until the next class.

One's socio-economic background significantly affects not only how one views the world but also how and to what extent one can actually achieve educationally and occupationally. Alongside other categories and sites of difference, class and socio-economic issues have been recognized as being consequential for schooling outcomes to a considerable degree. Over the years in local African communities increasing material poverty has exacerbated class distinctions. We note for example that in Ghana the introduction of educational reforms in the 1980s exacerbated the hardships of local parents as they accessed education for their wards. Part of the situation was the result of the state's attempts at cost recovery that pushed much of the cost of education onto parents and local communities. While it may be said that the state continues to shoulder a greater portion of the cost of education, it should also be conceded that increasingly Ghanaians from low socio-economic background have found it harder to provide education beyond the basic level to their children.

In fact, parents would argue that they are paying more for public education at the primary/basic level despite the fact that such education is 'free.' The rise in private schooling has further intensified existing socio-economic divisions in society with private schools charging very exorbitant fees and becoming extremely restrictive. This in turn has created tensions between public and private schooling. The rise in education cost is not confined to private schools. Even within the public school system free tuition at the basic level has been accompanied by steep rise in incidental fees. Even more

problematically, among public schools there is no uniformity in school fees. This lack of uniformity also significantly adds to the already existing confusions, competitions, and feelings of desperation and helplessness particularly among the have-nots and the poorer segments of the population.

So, does the rich have it easier in terms of educational attainment and achievement?

Amoako, a female student, sheds some light on this issue:

> The way I see it, nowadays amid all the corruption, in order to get something you have to pay your way, specially if you don't meet the standard. ...But in a situation where you need money to go along with it, even after getting admission, you'll do much better if you are rich. I remember I had a friend who had admission. His name was on the list but he hadn't got his admission letter. So he had to go to school and see why his name was there but hadn't received a letter. He went to the college and found out that somebody's name had been substituted for his name. Just because that person came with money. Yes, I think it is very important, the financial background. (008, 2000)

The point that Amoako is making is very clear: the wealth not only does translate into doing well in school but more importantly, it has a determining effect in terms of being able to get into school in the first place. If you cannot afford to pay the tuition fee, you will not be able to get into university. Paying the fees is a very necessary requirement for entrance to the university. Once you have paid the fee and entered, then you'll find a host of other problems such as the cost of accommodation, books, computers, transportation, food, and other expenses that you have to grapple with in order to survive in the university.

Another male student noted:

> I can say that if you come from a rich family, that means that you are a person who could focus on learning without being interrupted by other factors. That gives you a chance to get the most out of school. But for excellency in academic fields, I think there is

> no telling. If you don't have what it takes, I mean in terms of your brain, your determination to study, and so on, then you can't be excellent. But those who are rich, they have much more opportunities, they have more resources. But you also see some students coming from poorer homes and doing very well. (008, 2001)

In fact, this student explains the situation very eloquently. Although social class background may have less to do with excellence and ability, it nonetheless greatly facilitates the level of educational attainment and achievement. In effect, it would be very unreasonable to expect 'excellence' from an otherwise bright and determined student who does not know where the next meal is coming from or whether there will be a next meal at all.

Kofi is a male student from a poorer socio-economic background. This is how he copes with the problem:

> ...So now personally I am from a poor background. I don't have it. Now I associate with another student who can buy books, who can get information. Now I live with him, so he brings books. We learn together and both of us do well. So that is how it works out for me. (008, 2001)

As it happens, Kofi must be among a few lucky students who has managed to make friends with someone who can buy books and help him out financially. The question is, Is this an ideal situation for all the students from poorer families? Is such a condition feasible and possible for everyone? Does it work out for everybody? It is of course not possible for the majority of poorer students to befriend rich students and benefit from their resources. In a country like Ghana, not only the have-nots constitute the majority in society but more importantly, as our research indicates, the affluent students generally prefer to hang around among themselves and associate with members of their own class. So, Kofi's case is a unique individual case and cannot be generalized; nor can it be applicable to other cases and situations. There is no denying that poverty does impact negatively on the processes of learning and educational aspiration of students. Aside from its detrimental impact on students' performance, poverty does have negative effect on the teachers as well. If teachers are not sufficiently paid, they won't have time for their students and the student ends up loosing again. This is even more evident in the case of female teachers who in addition to long hours of work in the school and university, end up shouldering the housework as well. This is an important factor that must be taken into account in economics of schooling, and it brings us to the subject of gender and gender relations in Ghana and in Africa.

How do female students and teachers view gender relations in Ghanaian society and within the Ghanaian education system? In Ghana, much like the rest of Africa, unequal gender relations have continued to favour the success of male students throughout the school system. This success is manifested through the sustained higher number of male students in the classrooms, particularly in universities and institutions of higher learning. It is also evident in the makeup of teaching and administrative personnel, the overwhelming majority of whom are male. Although there has been a considerable increase in the number of female students of late, the overall male/female ratio is still heavily skewed towards the male population. In recent years, various governing bodies, the media, and the education system have started important awareness-raising campaigns against the exclusion of females from the learning centres. Positive steps have been taken to encourage and facilitate female students' enrolment in both primary and higher levels of schooling. There are, nevertheless, major gaps that need to be filled in terms of equal access, equal opportunity, and equal representation.

In our discussions with respondents, interesting perspectives emerged regarding gender issues, including issues of gender-based inequality, representation, access, role modeling, and so on. The respondents explored a number of important questions such as: Is it important to have female teachers and lecturers in schools and universities? Is the issue of female representation important? And if so, to what extent? One female student commented:

> Yes, [having female lecturers] makes a lot of difference. I would say that, OK, female students don't relate to male teachers that much. They easily identify with the female lecturers. The way she talks, the friendship, it's all there. But for a male lecturer, he just comes to the lecture hall, talks and goes away. He doesn't mind what you are doing or whatever. (008, 2001)

How do the male students respond to the question of representation? Evidently, there are different and at times conflicting responses from male students to the question of female representation. Kindoh is a male student and he views the female representation under somewhat a negative light:

> What women lecturers do is to sit back and do their work in the class. They don't give office hours or outside time. They don't have time to do that. Of course, there are a few that you can find they do that. But they normally push the work to teaching assistants. They think that they have a lot of housework and all that. They have to go to other places and that. (008, 2001)

Of course here Kindoh is talking about another social problem, which is the issue of females shouldering all the housework and household responsibilities in addition to the work they do in schools and universities. If females are to be responsible for all the housework, of course this may impact on the quality of their school performance, both as students and teachers. Lack of female representation impacts the learning experience in other ways as well. Jiya, a female student points to the differential and even preferential teaching methods when it comes to comparing male and female teachers:

> I like to say that also partly the problem has to do with teachers. Like, when I was in JSS [Junior Secondary School], my science teacher, I was seeing that he was teaching to the guys. He would ask questions from the guys and he would encourage them a lot. So I think part of the problem comes from teachers. (008, 2001)

Like always, economic conditions are also major factors in determining who should and who shouldn't study. As a male student puts it:

> I think it can also be attributed to the financial background of the Ghanaians. You see, with all the biases in today's culture and mentality, like if two pupils, a girl and a boy, complete JSS, and one goes to secondary school. If there is still money in the house, or if there is only money to keep up for one, it

> is going to the guy. So you see there are a lot of drawbacks on the way. So I think the financial background is also very important. (003, 2001)

There is indeed a strong connection between the socio-economic factors and such variables as gender, number of siblings, birth order, and so forth. If the parents can only afford sending one child to the school, it is normally the firstborn male child who gets lucky. And the solution? More resources, more facilities, more investments. Here is Jiya again:

> I think we should have more facilities. Because if we have more facilities, everybody is catered for. And because if you compare now to older days, all you had to do in those days was to study and pass. And that was it. But if we have more facilities, we can address religious, gender, and ethnic differences comfortably. (003, 2001)

As we discussed earlier, Ghana is one of the most diversely populated multiethnic and multinational countries in Africa. Our research also explored the perceptions that various ethnic groups have about each other, about themselves, and about multiethnic student populations. The respondents also talked about minority/majority relations vis-à-vis ethnicity and various ethnic groups. Further, they looked into complex ethnic relations in terms of power relations and power configurations.

Does it make any difference for students if lecturers came from different ethnic backgrounds? Kwaku, a male student, believes that it does make a difference.

> It makes a difference because, for example, I had a lecturer who was an Ewe. And when he came to the class, he seemed to know all Ewe students in my class. He always talked to students and took them sometimes to his office. So I got a sense that he knew them. So I thought that they could easily associate with him. (008, 2001)

So the ethnic identification helps particular students to identify with their lecturers and teachers and such an identification, in turn, makes it easier for them to associate with one another. Now let's look

at this from the viewpoint of a student from the Northern part of the country:

> First of all, I am a Northerner. When I started university, I attended my first lecture and I saw this man who was also a Northerner. Then we met. And we talked and we became friends. So that is how it begins. If you are a Northerner you easily associate with a Northerner, if you are an Ewe, with other Ewe, Akans with other Akans, and so forth. There is also religious factor. If you have same religion, that also helps you to become closer together. (008, 2001)

Most students coming from the majority community — the Akan — believed that there was no discrimination or unfair treatment. To these individuals all students were equal. For example, this is how a male student of Akan background sees it:

> About the Akans I do not want to make a statement. Everybody is equal. I mean, it doesn't matter who you are. (008, 2001)

However, this student of majority background wouldn't mind to tease students of different ethnic backgrounds and make fun of them:

> Sometimes, like, 'I laugh!' You see, when you are an Ewe, because of your race, people are going to make some comments and it makes you laugh. You expect people to say that as a joke; but they are affecting the Ewes. These jokes affect people. You see, they are working together; they are eating together and living together. And these things affect them. (008, 2001)

So the use of racial/ethnic slurs and stereotypes about 'the Other' seems to be a common practice. In order to escape these kinds of injurious and abusive practices, the minority groups tend to come closer together. In a sense, their closeness serves as a defence mechanism against the discrimination and abuse that they receive from the dominant groups. It also strengthens the political awareness and solidarity among them.

> And also there is this thing that the other Southerners look down on the Ewes. I don't know why, but this happens. Maybe it is culture. But because of this, they are very united, the Ewes. .... Yes, discrimination is a factor that unites them. You see, when they see we are not closely associating with them, they think that we might not like them. So they don't have anybody else but each other. They have to come closer. (A female student, 003, 2001)

Of course, regional disparity and economics of schooling are always major factors that interconnect with ethnic issues and ethnic-based differences. As Abra puts it,

> You see, the structure is different in southern and northern parts of Ghana. The schools, the universities in North, they are not in a good shape. The living condition there is not as good as here in South. They even have problem obtaining books and that. So, people keep coming to the south and settle here... You see, we have a university whose system is based on centralization. They are trying to fit everybody, to measure everybody based on a single centralized format. And this creates problems. (008, 2001)

Similar to the rest of Africa, the decision-making process in Ghana follows a very centralized system where all decisions are made in the capital city and applied in all diverse regions as standard guidelines from the center. Much like all the other affairs, the curriculum is also thought up and designed in the center. And centralized systems are often criticized for being insensitive to the needs and issues of peripheral regions and sectors. Picking up the conversation after Abra's statement, another male student also confirms that centralization is a problem:

> Yes. I also want to say that, now at the end of the day, there is this council or committee who draws the curriculum. The system is not decentralized so that the councils would mark on the basis of the regions, geographically. The base is here in the South. And they design the curriculum and all that here. The teacher in the North has to follow the instructions, the curriculum given to him from the South. And this is

> how students learn. And at the end of the day, they are going to write a standard examination. And they must pass through the system. So if a teacher, as sensitive as he is, uses his own methods, he goes against the student. (008, 2001)

The existence of disparities and inequalities between schools, between regions and sectors gives rise to questions and demands of equitable access and fairness in admission.

Again, the problem is believed to be rooted in unequal distribution of resources, facilities and infrastructure. Here is how Bona, a male student, explains it:

> It is the inequality, the unequal distribution of educational structure that is the problem. The North has been neglected for a very long time. That is why many people criticize the old government. You see, someone like me, I attended this public school, Sayto. I came from Sykodia. You see, we learned in our school the hard way, compared to someone who studies in Madonna. So because of that, our brains arrange things differently. When you go to senior secondary school, you have to compete with those who come from these big time schools. Because they had best facilities at their disposal we can't compete with them. (003, 2001)

Religion, religious practices and religion-based affiliations also play a major role in the processes of identification, identity formation, and development of a sense of belonging. They also serve as powerful markers in the processes of 'otherization,' inclusion, and exclusion. Religion also strongly impacts on individual notions of minority and majority, on who is a minority and who belongs to the majority. Erik, a male student from the University of Science and Technology, talks about some of his experiences:

> In my university there was a post to be contested. There was a Moslem guy and an Akan for the job. So, because of the fact that I could see the Moslem to be fit for that position, but on the basis of the fact that he was a Moslem, he was voted against. The Akan guy was voted for. (008, 2001)

Religion-based discrimination takes place not only on the campus and in the classrooms, but also in terms of access and admission:

> When you apply to the university, you are asked to state your religion. And I think they provide the students with churches and places that they can worship. I have noted that for Moslem religion, for Islam religion, they haven't made any provisions. ... And for the other traditional religions there is nothing. (A male student, 014, 2001)

And why are the traditionalists restricted from openly practicing their religions and belief systems? To this another male student responds:

> ... because the Moslems and Christians don't like them, and people, the university students, most of them criticize the traditional religions, so the traditionalists don't really want to come out with their religion. ... You see, most of their customs and traditions are outdated. And having been to university and being enlightened, they [the students] think that those customs and traditions should not be encouraged in the university, specially on the university campus. (016, 2001)

In multilingual countries of Africa, it is a real challenge to develop a fair and equitable language policy. Language issues are very important not only in the processes of identity formation, but also in the learning, psychological, spiritual, mental, and cognitive processes. Language is also central when it comes to notions of exclusion, othering, and stigmatization. The participating students, parents and teachers in our study viewed the language question with varying tensions. Adoh, a male student, looks at language in terms of feelings of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' that it engenders:

> You see, most of the Akans, we think our language is superior. When I want to learn Ewe, because I am in love with them, and someone who tries to learn Ewe, we tend to laugh at him. Because we think our

> language is the best. Even the Ashantis, they think of themselves as the best... I have seen one thing: that the other groups find it easy to learn our language, I mean the Akan. So it seems most of us tend to like them. But the Ewes, they are not so good in speaking our language. They seem to lack that desire. (003, 2001)

But do they seem to be interested in learning a dominant language? Darko, a male student, sees the problem in the fact that the dominant Akan group shows no interest in learning any other minority language:

> It is possible that maybe we don't like to learn their language; and so they also don't like to learn our language. That is why. I believe because we don't want to learn about them. They also, most of them don't like to learn about us. (003, 2001)

What Darko is alluding to is a most common prejudice that speakers of a dominant language have against the minoritized linguistic groups. Usually the dominant groups assume that it is only the minorities who have to be bilingual--i.e., to speak the dominant group's language in addition to one's own mother tongue. However, a just and equitable way of looking at this would be to realize that in a multilingual society everybody has to be bilingual, not just the minorities. The Ghanaian situation is somewhat different in that the colonial English language is used as the 'common' and 'standard' language. So everyone has to know English in addition to their own first languages. However, this kind of bilinguality obscures the problems and challenges of a dominant national language seeking to supplant other national/local/regional languages.

Discussion

The education system is a major socializing institution in every society. It is also a formidable structure through which the dominant ideas, knowledge forms, social organizations, norms, values, social practices and societal relations are maintained and reproduced (Bourdieu Passeron, 1977; Bernstein, 1996). Difference and diversity in each society are also reflected in its schools and learning centres. Social issues, problems and concerns in the larger society are closely mirrored in schools and universities. Education has the potential to maintain and reproduce the status quo that exists in the larger society. It also has the potential to challenge the dominant order, to upset the status quo and help bring about more equitable and just living conditions for all.

Our study of inclusive schooling in Africa and Ghana revealed interesting insights and views regarding notions of difference and diversity, relations of power, and minority/majority issues along the lines of ethnicity, gender, class, language, religion, and so forth. In most cases, in terms of ethnic, racial and tribal affiliations, the dominant Akan group was identified as the majority. The Akan language was also seen as a majority language, positioned in second place vis-à-vis English in terms of number of speakers, prestige, status, size of speech area and speech communities. Religion wise, the Christians were identified as the majority, followed by the Moslems and the Traditionalists who were regarded as the religious minority. Gender-wise it was almost universally consented that the males constituted the majority. This was a clear case where being a numerical majority did not play a major role in reversing a minoritized status. On the other hand, having power, authority and influence were singled out as the defining features of a majority group.

In terms of class position, socio-economic background and social status it was generally agreed that one could not draw a clear line between the individual students based on class divisions, for it was not very visible who came from what class. However, numerous allusions were made to the dominant Akan group as enjoying a higher socio-economic status and privilege. More precisely, class issues were looked into in terms of regional disparities and inequalities rather than clear-cut general class divisions. While the majority of those residing in the southern region were seen as enjoying a relatively privileged life style which included, among other things, having access to accommodating infrastructure, "facilities", as well as means of education, income and wealth, the people living in the North, or the Northerners (as they are called), were seen as economically deprived and less fortunate. In a sense, based on the findings of our study, it may be safely argued that the Northerners constituted the minority in terms of class, language, religion, and ethnicity. Correspondingly, in terms of gender, the Ghanaian schools and universities were far less representative of the Northern females as opposed to females from other parts of the country.

There is much to be learned from the examination of how students understand difference and diversity and their relevance for schooling

and education in an African context. In terms of advancement of knowledge our research has pointed to a number of important directions. In general, the following four objectives have emerged as key themes throughout the study. First, 'difference' implicates educational change and schooling in African contexts. Second, the specific educational practices pertaining to pedagogy, instruction, curriculum, texts and discourse that address difference and the intersections of gender, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious and class minority issues enhance the learning environment for all students. Third, identity must be linked with schooling and knowledge production. Fourth, difference and diversity have serious implications for schooling and for peace education and democratic citizenship participation in Ghana and by extension in Africa.

Arguably, critical educational research on inclusive schooling in Africa has two challenges. First, research must interrogate existing approaches and practices that alienate minorities. At the same time, it should suggest specific creative ways for transforming conventional schooling so that it better serves the needs of diverse student bodies. Second, educational research must ensure a sustained contribution to social development, by demonstrating the possibilities through which the educational knowledge obtained in individual schools, colleges and universities can be used effectively to contribute to the formulation of comprehensive strategies for genuine and fundamental structural changes. The present study contributes to addressing these challenges by providing significant lessons on how knowledge about these innovative practices can inform debates on educational change and guide broader policy initiatives in national and transnational settings. The appropriateness and timeliness of work such as this one is clearly evident, particularly in the light of the ever-increasing support of the international financial community for educational reforms in Africa and elsewhere.

In order to have an effective schooling and education system that addresses local problems, through critical education in Africa today, there is a need to interrogate the power of ideas in bringing about social change. Educators and learners have different and yet overlapping responsibilities. Educators must create spaces for critical questions to be asked about the absences, negations and omissions of bodies and experiences. Learners also have the responsibility to constantly pose critical questions and raise challenging issues. Educators will also need to develop indigenous, non-Western concepts and categories for understanding and acknowledging students' different ways of knowing.

This requires that we pay particular attention to the production and social organization of knowledge, as well as to cultures, languages, religions and socio-political dimensions of schooling, education and development.

Education can acknowledge difference and diversity while at the same time highlighting commonalities, even among peoples with conflicting interests. Ultimately, it can contribute to both national integration and social reconstruction. To do so, however, it must meet the challenge of minority education. More specifically, since transformative change encompasses more than the reform of existing curricular and pedagogical practices, it, therefore, ought to respond to problems of discrimination, prejudice, and alienation within schools. In our contemporary world, a kind of education that focuses on the social and cultural values, that addresses conflict and encourages reciprocity and peace is most likely to succeed.

Educators need to address any gaps between educational theory and ideals about shared belonging, values and destinies. They should critique and interrogate the actual schooling practices that discriminate among groups of students by providing advantages for some and disadvantages for others. For example how does privileging gender, religion, language, ethnicity, etc. impact on students' learning? There is a need to look critically at the actual schoolyard and classroom practices. Educators must promote peaceful approaches to political and social expression of difference and issues of democracy and diversity. They ought to be both conscious of and sensitive to the equity aspects of democracy. A fair representation of all groups can be revealed in the visual culture, knowledge representation and staff representation in schools. The offering of courses in life skills, vocational and technical skills, technical drawing, social studies and cultural studies has been viewed as holding the possibilities of transforming the social realm at the beginning life stage of the learner. Nevertheless, the efficacy of curricula in promoting the values of equity will have to be supported with concrete educational responses that target the questions and challenges of difference.

Conclusion

Anchored in a multi-year field research in Africa, this paper has explored various perceptions and issues related to difference and diversity in an African context. Using the content of focus group interviews, the paper has explored ways Ghanaian university students

respond to, analyze, and interrogate issues and problems emerging from diversely populated schooling environments. Included in the discussion is an examination of such areas and sites of difference as ethnicity, gender, class, language, culture, religion, region/place of birth and their intersection as they emerge from the lived experiences of the students and implicate their processes of identity formation.

By and large, the paper has highlighted a number of significant areas for the advancement of knowledge in our research. From diverse vantage points in comparative contexts, it has pointed to local conceptions of what it means to acknowledge social difference in schooling initiatives. The paper has also provided critical information on how educators, learners and policy-makers in diverse settings link identity (ethnic, gender, class, linguistic, cultural and religious identities) with schooling and knowledge production. The relational aspects of difference and diversity have been explored to show the way in which these relationships implicate the pursuit of educational reform in African contexts, as many aspects of the educational reforms are largely neglected in official policies. In sum, the paper has pointed to the complexities of minority education in multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual societies of Africa. Schooling systems ought to appreciate and acknowledge difference.

Note

1. A shorter version of this paper will appear in Abdi, A. (2005). (Ed.). *Issues in African Education: Sociological Perspectives*. London: Palgrave Macmillan .

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