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Inclusion and Agency in Ghanaian Schools: The Case of West African Child Migrants

Abstract

This article examines the factors affecting the inclusion of migrant students and how they exercise agency in response to the challenges that impede their inclusion within the Ghanaian education system. We draw on agency and inclusion theories in the analysis of interviews and observation data from sixty-eight migrant students across thirty schools. The findings show the negative impact of language, exploitation, labelling and teasing on migrant students in the absence of inclusive structures. This article brings to the fore the lack of inclusion for migrant students at the basic school level in Ghana and its negative ramifications on the academic achievement of not just migrant students but all students. The study highlights how migrant students demonstrate relational agency in their preference for friendships with people from similar backgrounds in overcoming challenges in school. Our findings add to studies on migration and education fronting some of the challenges and possibilities of comparative and international education in the 'post-colonial' Africa.

Keywords: Agency; inclusion; migrant students; classroom; language of instruction; friendships; Ghana; West Africa.

1. Introduction

This article discusses the factors affecting the inclusion of migrant students and how they enacted agency within the school system in Ghana. Firstly, the study delves into the critical issue of migrant education and explores the challenges encountered by migrants in accessing education in their new countries of residence. While previous research (for example Vitoroulis et al. 2016; Welpy 2017; Schneider and Arnot 2018) has shed light on this issue, most studies have focused on migrant education in countries located in the global North. The dearth of research on migrant education from South-South migration is particularly striking, with a limited focus on sub-Saharan Africa, where much of the existing work (Dahya and Dryden-Peterson 2017; Kimari and Giles 2000; Russell and Quaynor 2017; Thompson et al. 2019) has centered on refugee education and education in post-conflict societies such as Rwanda. In contrast, this study focuses on economic migrants within a non-conflictual context. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to highlight the factors that impact the inclusion of migrants in education. Secondly, this study focuses on how migrants enact agency in response to the challenges in a new school environment. Scholars have started to contest the notion that child migrants who relocate for economic reasons are passive victims. Rather, they argue that these children exert agency in a multitude of ways. However, scant attention has been paid to how these children exercise agency, particularly in the context of their new educational settings. Given that schools constitute a significant component of the daily lives of child migrants, the issue of exclusion assumes paramount importance. To address this gap, the current study employs nuanced ideas of agency and inclusion to investigate whether, when, and how child economic migrants in Ghana exercise agency at school, despite being excluded. By exploring their experiences, the study aims to elucidate the ways in which child migrants can assert their agency and participate actively in their new communities. Overall, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and possibilities for migrant children in accessing education and fully participating in their new societies.

Intra African migration is considered a way of life that 'plays a critical role in securing some people's lives and livelihoods and governance measures that make it more difficult, dangerous or expensive to invest in such strategies may act against development' (Bakewell 2020, 74). There are about 21 million African migrants living in other African countries (IOM

2019). Intra West African migration constitutes the largest regional migration in Africa with around 84% of all migration involving migrants moving from one neighboring country to another within the sub region (Awumbila 2017). This figure, according to Agadjanian (2016, 409), is underestimated as 'the actual foreign populations in African countries, especially in settings where hostile official reception forces foreigners into clandestine existence'. Migration in West African is largely influenced by economic and social cultural factors, historical ties and geographical proximity with no single country dominating migration within the region (Agadjanian 2016; IOM 2019; Rodrigues and Bjarnesen 2020; Schapendonk et al. 2020).

Ghana draws largely labor and seasonal migrants from a range of neighboring West African countries including Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. Many of these labor migrants are low skilled doing mostly domestic and agricultural work. Despite intra West African migration to Ghana being facilitated by the visa-free Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) protocols, irregular migration is also quite prevalent. Irregular migration can be explained by the 'extremely porous borders, enabling unauthorized movements between countries, with several ECOWAS borders cutting across politically unstable and sparsely populated areas, which are also characterized by security deficiencies' (IOM 2019, 64). West African migrants constitute 2.4% of Ghana's population. Nigerian migrants account for 20.1% of all international migrants in Ghana. The legal status of migrants in Ghana is guaranteed by the ECOWAS protocol on free movement that allows nationals from member states to migrate to other countries within the sub-region (IOM 2019).

Existing research on voluntary migration and education in non-Sub-Saharan African regions reveals prominent recurring themes, centered on discrimination and language. Language proficiency is a crucial factor affecting the success of migrant education, as a lack of proficiency in the host country's language of instruction poses a significant hurdle. The integration of migrant pupils into the educational system is often thwarted by language and cultural disparities, and the correlation between home language and academic performance has been extensively discussed. Migrant students tend to underachieve owing to language obstacles, necessitating a thorough grasp of the types of linguistic issues that may arise, as well as how such students respond to the challenge (Kyereko 2018; Schneider and Arnot 2018;

Dusi and Steinbach 2016). Our study will be guided by the existing literature, delving into the ways migrant students exercise agency in addressing language barriers.

In addition to language difficulties, migrant students in schools are frequently exposed to discrimination, which can have detrimental effects on their academic and personal growth. Discrimination can take many forms, including limited learning opportunities, devaluation of migrant mother tongues, and negative engagements. Stereotyping of migrant pupils by educators and peers can lead to discrimination, fostering enduring mistrust of the educational system. Language barriers and preconceptions about migrant skills and ability contribute to discrimination, impacting the academic achievements of students and resulting in reduced academic expectations (Spiteri and Sang 2019; Adair 2015). It is crucial to institute measures to counteract stereotyping and prejudice in schools, and this study will investigate issues of discrimination among migrant students, exploring their agency in responding to such challenges.

Research on children and migration in Ghana has focused primarily on trafficked child migrants smuggled into the country through irregular migration from other West African countries (see for example Lawrance 2010; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Dottridge 2014; Carrion et al. 2018). Additionally, the available literature focuses on internal migrant children moving primarily from the relatively underdeveloped northern part of Ghana to the more developed city center in the South (Kees 2011; Awumbila et al. 2014; Pickbourn 2018; Bermudez et al. 2020). These children usually work in the largely informal Ghanaian economy doing menial jobs like hawking or pottery (Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Cebatori and Mazzacuto 2016).

The literature on children and migration often grapples with the question of whether children caught in migration are passive or active agents. While some studies (Carrion 2018; Thorsen 2011; Punch 2015) have examined the voluntary migration of children and their exercise of agency in managing their migration and making choices, most of the research literature (Thompson et al. 2019; Whitehead and Hashim 2007) portrays children as either victims or criminals coerced or forced into migration. This portrayal of migrant children denies them agency and positions them as powerless actors at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control. Thompson et al. (2019; 237) describe how children are depicted as "helpless pawns at the mercy of circumstances beyond their control," while Whitehead and Hashim (2007) argue that the idea of a "passive child" is rooted in Western conceptualizations of

childhood that emphasize childhood as a period of dependence. By contrast, studies that focus on children's agency and voluntary migration challenge this portrayal and offer a more nuanced understanding of children's experiences and choices. Improving clarity around the agency and experiences of migrant children is crucial to better support their needs and rights. Ghana's migration policy posits that the inflow of migrants from other countries could be a source of conflict between host communities and the migrant population. This may lead to strained relations, human rights abuse, and xenophobia among others. Nomads and pastoralists from other West African countries have been at the center of such conflict in Ghana (Migration Policy 2016). However, there is no policy aimed at the inclusion of migrants in Ghana. There is also little information on the schooling of migrant children in Ghanaian schools. In the absence of a policy on migrants and education in Ghana, there appear to be a lacuna on the inclusion and access to the rights of education of migrant students. Our study thus interrogates the inclusion of migrant students and how they exercise agency in taking advantage of opportunities as well as overcome challenges.

This article is divided into four main parts. The introduction is followed by a section that discusses the key concepts of agency and inclusion. The third section outlines the research design and methodology. Then the main findings are presented thematically.

2. Conceptual framework

This article is framed by Tran and Vu's (2018) notion of agency and UNESCO's (2005, 12) definition of inclusion. We combine the concepts of agency and inclusion in giving voice to migrant children and their experiences in Ghanaian schools. It is within the context of inclusivity that learners can exercise whatever agency they have.

2.1. Agency

Agency is essential to this paper in the way in which it explores how migrant students as social actors actively respond to things relating to their formal learning settings considering the contextual and structural factors within which they operate. Using agency, we explain the many ways in which migrants in Ghanaian schools respond to emerging challenges and

opportunities within the school system. The paper discusses how migrant students co-construct and resist structures in school. We conceptualize agency based on Tran and Vu (2018) ideas, outline two main agencies in explaining the actions and inactions of migrant students in Ghanaian schools: (1) collective agency for contestation or relational agency, and (2) agency as struggle and resistance.

Our argument follows the strategic use of agency from migrant students and their pursuance of negotiated safe spaces within schools, their power to resist dominant norms in the classroom as well as usage of wit and mischief in attaining targets. In this way agency takes into consideration the dangers, strengths and weakness underpinning migrant student's decision making (Jeffery 2012).

Children are situated within institutions - such as schools - at the bottom of the hierarchy of decision-making and are seen as passive recipients of structural forces (Wyness 2015). Through the curriculum, children adopt norms, beliefs and values regarding their broader social standing (Wyness 2015). However, particularly with regards to children's capacities for agency, the structural perspective is at odds with contemporary conceptions of childhood which suggest that children are co-creators of knowledge and reality and play an active role in negotiating and renegotiating meaning (Kumpulainen et al. 2013).

Valentine (2011) contends this point by suggesting that a debate remains around the extent to which children possess agency, particularly in relation to their ability to inform change. Furthermore, Valentine (2011) flags that children are incapable of acting upon wider social processes. Indeed, the extent to which children can contribute to meaningful change has been questioned. Whilst children have been given more of a voice in recent pedagogical movements, authors such as Valentine (2011) argue that these are often tokenistic gestures.

Abebe (2019) makes an important distinction between the advocacy of children's agency in research and law and the practicality of such children having the competence to exercise their agency in their best of interest. Research on agency should pay attention to the larger structural arrangements in society that may modify, limit or guide agency. This article thus examines how migrant students negotiate and interact with the pedagogical and

institutional practices in the Ghanaian school system and how they shape, enable or constrain agency.

2.2. Inclusion

Another key concept in our study is inclusion which we use as a conceptual tool to augment agency theory. Our study thus focuses on inclusive education from the broader perspective of groups who are vulnerable to the pressures of marginalization. We conceptualize educational inclusion in such broad context to uncover the potential and limits of students' agencies and agential power.

We focus on overcoming barriers to some of the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups within society. We avoid the usage of the term in the narrow context of education for those with disability and special needs. In conceptualizing inclusion, this paper highlights issues of power, identity, social difference, and representation and, particularly how these implicate the structures and processes of educational delivery in Ghana (including the content of inclusive curricular, classroom instruction, texts and pedagogies as well as the culture, climate, environment, and socio-organization lives of schools and educational environments). It is in this context of inclusivity that learners can exercise whatever agency they have.

We agree with Culhum and Nind (2003) that inclusion is about everyone, and with Pasha et al.'s (2017, 7) conceptualization of inclusive education as incorporating "multiple learning methods and experiences". They further argue that 'contemporary educators must find a way to make that critical link of culture, identity, history, pedagogy, instruction, and education'.

Moberg (2003) believes the terminological ambiguity of the concept of inclusion is centered on the rationale (using inclusion to correct societal injustice) and the efficacy of the term (inclusion as being more pragmatic than segregated schools with focus on access and quality learning). Armstrong et al. (2011) argue that the contention or elusiveness of defining inclusive education is even manifested in the way countries in the South and the North differently define the term. Countries in the South situate inclusion by post-colonial social identities and policies for economic development that are frequently generated and financed

by international organizations. Beyond the differences in terms of how inclusion is defined in the global South and North, there are even differences between the nature of hindrances that face both divides. In the North, inheritance of some conventional policies and practices, that plays itself in the form of class, wealth, race, and religion affects the thinking of people who are often not willing to change. The global South, however, has problems with the lack of resources to expand education for all. This normally results in the lack of quality teachers, learning materials, and textbooks (see Peters 2004; Dei 2005; Akyeampong 2009; Pather 2019).

Within the African context, 'inclusive education affirms the role and power of local cultural knowledge to subvert such internalized colonial hierarchies of schooling by centering values such as social justice, equity, fairness, resistance and collective responsibility in the education of the learner' (Pasha et al. 2017, 9).

In Ghana, inclusion has been narrowly defined in policy documents covering education. This definition has been largely limited to persons with disability and special needs. Other groups beyond persons with disability and special are thus not recognized as a vulnerable group who need extra support within schools. In cases where other groups are even identified there is hardly any support for them in schools. Inclusion of migrant children in education does not appear to be a priority policy area for Ghanaians (Kyereko 2018).

3. Methodology

Data was collected in two educational districts with very high populations of West African migrants: Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA) and the La-Nkwantanang Madina Municipality. Migrants from West African countries make up 73.8% of the migrant population in the AMA and 81.2% of the migrant population in La-Nkwantanang Madina (Ghana Statistical Service 2013). These two educational areas were selected due both having very large migrant communities. Migrant dominated settlements in Ghana are described as Zongos meaning strangers quarters (Pellow, 2002). They are neighborhoods that are classified as low-class areas with inadequate social amenities. OECD/ILO (2018, p.43) describe these Zongos as 'remnants of Ghana's pre-colonial and colonial West African migrants'.

To gain access to the schools, the research team had to write a letter to the Ghana Education Service (GES). The GES represents the body that handles issues of basic education at the national level. After the letter was approved, the team had to take the letter to the two education areas that managed the schools the research engaged with. It was only after the approval at the metropolitan and municipal levels respectively that the research team gained access to the schools.

The larger study involved sixty-eight in-school migrant children (38 males and 30 females), forty out-of-school migrant children (30 males and 10 females), forty headteachers and teachers (20 males and 20 females) and forty-two migrant parents (28 males and 14 females). In answering the research question of this article, only data pertaining to the in-school migrant children was used. The views of teachers and principals and how these affect the integration of migrant students as well as how educators adapt their teaching methods in culturally diverse Ghanaian classrooms was discussed elsewhere (see Kyereko and Faas 2023).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixty-eight in-school migrant students, aged seven to seventeen, from eleven of the fifteen ECOWAS countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo). There were no migrant students from Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde and Gambia in the thirty (21 public and 9 private) schools visited. Schools were chosen based on their readiness to grant access to the lead author. Our study focuses on low-fee paying private schools rather than high-fee paying private schools (Pesando et al. 2020) due to their larger number of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds including migrant children. Additionally, migrant students were selected based on their willingness to be interviewed in the thirty schools that had earlier granted access to the lead researcher. We sought permission from school principals, migrant parents and guardians as well as migrants themselves in all the interviews involving migrant students. Interviews lasted 45 minutes on average.

The interview guide probed around issues of teaching, integration, friendship networks and language. These themes were largely influenced by the available literature. All migrant students interviewed were in either primary school or junior high school (first three years after primary school). All interviews with migrant students were recorded with permission from students and school authorities. Migrant students interviewed came from

relatively low socio-economic backgrounds with parents or guardians either in low-paying manual jobs or unemployed.

As the lead author had migrant student experience of having studied in England and Germany, there were instances during the fieldwork where his personal experience, especially of the challenges faced by in-school migrants, created some temporary platform where commonality was achieved. When it came to linguistic challenges within the classroom, the experiences in Germany gave the lead researcher an opportunity to better understand the messages they wanted to send and ask further questions. In these cases, the lead researcher was mindful of his own experiences and had to allow the interviewee not to be influenced by his bias.

Inability of research informants to effectively communicate in English by some of the interviewees created some power asymmetry considering the hierarchies of language. The prestige surrounding English as a global language during this research reinforced long-held cross-cultural relationships. In negotiating these power dynamics, the work did not impose English as the language for the interviews but allowed migrants to choose the language they were most comfortable in communicating in.

The research was thus conducted with the lead author as the primary researcher supported by four research assistants and translators (two males and two females) who lived within one of the two education areas where the work was undertaken. Each research assistant specialized in at least one of the languages that the lead researcher could not communicate in effectively. Most of the interviews were held in English. There were however some cases where the interviewees preferred to communicate in French, Hausa, Ewe and Kotokoli.

During the interviews - especially the ones that involved the use of a translator - the interviewees were given a highlight of the major points captured at the end of each interview. This was done as a way of ensuring the interviewees' points were not lost in translation. Informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians as well head teachers for all migrant students interviewed.

Interviewing in schools located in migrant and non-migrant dominated settlements, private and public schools as well as migrants from different nationalities was key in ensuring that there were people with different characteristics and contrasting narratives. In the end, different perspectives were well reflected in this research.

— Table 1 about here please —

The semi-structured interviews were triangulated with non-participant observational data. During the observation period, the researcher could acquire information the very moment it was taking place. As suggested by Messiou (2012), observations allow the researcher the chance to reflect on the reactions and interactions of migrant students in their natural setting. All observations took place within the classroom. Thus, the lead researcher positioned himself in the classroom in a way that the observation did not actively distract the classroom engagement. All observations were sanctioned by the various headteachers in addition to the teachers that oversaw the classroom.

The aim of the classroom observations was to monitor classroom interaction of migrant students, teaching methods and friendship networks. It was also in some cases an opportunity to ascertain the veracity of some claims made during the interviews. Fieldnotes were kept during the observation. Observations were written immediately as allowing time to elapse only lead to problems with reconstruction difficulties. Additionally, it would have been difficult to ‘retain conscious awareness of one’s original thinking’ (Hopkins 2008, 104).

Data was analyzed through reading and re-reading of the interview transcripts and observational notes. It was then reduced into simple texts and categories as a way of making meaning of the data. Themes were subsequently identified. Themes and codes were mapped to help visualize the synthesis between the two. The next step was connecting the conceptual framework (agency and inclusion) and the codes developed (language, stereotyping and prejudice of migrant children in schools, teaching and reactions from migrant students) and linking it to current literature and other themes emerging from the fieldwork. Themes were reviewed, indicating consensus and patterning. All names of schools and migrant students have been anonymized as a way of protecting all informants.

The sensitive nature of distinguishing migrants from non-migrants in some quarters, especially in settlements located in migrant dominant enclaves, created access problems for the researchers and to a limited extent affected some interviews. Some migrants turned down the interview. Interviews with these migrants would have probably enhanced the quality of the work and provided some further nuances.

4. Findings

4.1. Labelling, teasing and exploitation of migrant students

This section discusses the main findings of our study. We acknowledge and are aware that in a non-Ghanaian context young students would 'other' those who are unlike them (see for example Faas 2016). We are not saying therefore that Ghanaian youths are problematic. The problem stems from the colonial hierarchies the educational system is founded on. Thus, the problems are not personal but structural.

Migrant students complained about how labels like 'silly Nigerian girl', 'lazy foreigner', 'foreigner' and other derogatory remarks had been attached to their names anytime they were considered to have done something wrong in school. According to the migrant student interviewees, non-migrant students and teachers were all culpable of engaging in such negative acts. Migrant students also shared several painful experiences of being teased. Teasing was mostly linked with the older age at which some of these migrant students enrolled into schools, bearing non-Ghanaian names, and the accent that came with speaking the English language. Some migrant students reacted to teasing by refusing to contribute in class for fear of being ridiculed by classmates. This was because teasing affected the confidence of migrants. Gloria, a Nigerian migrant student, felt that 'some of the students make fun of me when I speak English. They often say I am speaking Nigerian English'. Hawa, a Togolese migrant student, thought that

Some students too like laughing at you when you are reading in class and you make a mistake. They normally say, as for Togo people they are not good. If you ask some of the students to help you, they will tell you to go to Togo and it makes me feel bad.

The migrants' age played a role in teaching, since on average migrant students in our sample were three years older than Ghanaian students. Several reasons could account for this age gap. First, many migrant children entered school at an older age due to the loss of schooling time because of migration. Second, challenges surrounding the language of instruction also had an effect on migrant students either being placed in lower than age-appropriate grades

or suffering from grade retention. Jones and Waguespack (2011, 708) define grade retention as 'the practice in which children are required to repeat a grade level in school because they failed to meet required benchmarks or grade level standards'. However, there were many cases where migrant interviewees were more than five years older than the class average. This was also a major source of teasing. This was because older students in the schools were perceived as people who were weak academically. Based on such stereotypes, younger Ghanaian students made fun of the older migrants in their class. This often led to strained relationships between the younger students and the older migrants in class. It is not unusual for older migrant students in Ghanaian schools to be in lower grades due to their migration trajectories, lack of focus on education, as well as language barriers resulting at times in repeating school years (see Kyereko and Faas 2023). Issiah, a seventeen-year-old Nigerian migrant in grade 4, said that

I try to always stay away from playing with the Ghanaians during the break periods because I am a target of teasing. I sometimes have to fight back before they will stop calling me names. I have been warned several times by school authorities to stop fighting other students in school, but sometimes that's the only option available to me. That is what stops many of them from teasing me.

In terms of agencies, students resorted to violence and silences in class participation, as responses to dominant discourses in school. Migrant students who were also vulnerable, used their way to protect themselves, and showed some kind of agency. This agency exercised by Issiah is what Tran and Vu (2018) describe as agency as struggle and resistance. In this agency, migrant students show resilience when faced with problematic situations in school. In their struggle with teasing in Ghanaian classrooms, migrants resort to fighting back as a way of resisting the problematic situation.

Dawson and Williams (2008) explain the physical reaction from older migrants in class as a function of language. The inability of migrants to reply to students who abuse them verbally often leaves them to resort to physical responses. Visibility as a minority is a key ingredient that makes an individual susceptible to bullying (Vitoroulis, Brittain and Vaillancourt 2016). Thus, several migrants in Ghanaian schools never suffered any form of bullying because they were not visibly different from the dominant population in class and in

school. Migrants who had acquired the Ghanaian accent when speaking both English and the local languages had Ghanaian names and were hardly the subject of any form of bullying and abuse in schools.

This explains why some migrants preferred to use Ghanaian names during their school life. For fear of being marginalized, migrant students in our sample felt they had to be assimilated into the Ghanaian way of doing things as that had become the standard on which their actions were measured within the school setting. Adewomi, a Nigerian migrant student, said that

I bear a Nigerian name. My classmates always struggle with the right pronunciation of my name. Sometimes I feel it's intentional as they just want to make fun of me. Recently, I have added Akosua to my name. I complained to my parents at home about the abuse I receive in school due to my name. I told them I wanted a Ghanaian name. I like Akosua because it's a very popular name for Ghanaians.

In terms of agency, migrant students acted together with others to respond to challenges within the school system. Affected by discrimination in school, these migrant students exercised agency together with parents by taking on more traditional Ghanaian names that helped blur the lines between them and non-migrants in school. Migrant students showed awareness of their environment and what they needed to do to overcome the challenges associated with non-traditional Ghanaian names and bullying. The lack of inclusion forced migrants to adapt to the dominant culture within the classroom and school in order to belong and feel accepted. The result is a loss of their name and identity. In the end the adoption of a Ghanaian accent and mastery of English or of local languages by migrants represented additional examples of the exercise of agencies.

Some migrant interviewees were subject of exploitative schemes by school authorities. This was usually the case in their early years in school when they were still in the process of adjusting to their new environment. Students disclosed how some school authorities either took advantage or attempted taking advantage of their status as migrants. This exploitation was usually in the form of financial exploitation - in other words, making them pay more for services that ordinarily they should have paid less for. This was the case

for some migrant interviewees in the lower fee-paying private schools. There were no standard fees for migrants in these schools. There was arbitrariness in the fee structure and migrants were the target of this exploitative scheme. There were often attempts at making migrants pay for more for other services (feeding fees, sports fees) even beyond the school fees. Any time there was a need for students to be levied, migrants were always the prime targets tasked to pay more. The reasons given for the higher payment of fees and other costs for migrants ranged from the fact that they were 'foreigners' to the notion that the extra charge was to be used for cost incurred in handling immigration issues amongst others. Ezekwe, a Nigerian migrant student, maintained that

Anytime there is something to be paid for I am told to pay more than the other students. They usually give the excuse that I am not a Ghanaian. When I asked Sir (Headteacher) the reason behind the hike in fees, he said it was because I am a foreigner. I asked him after I realized some of the other foreigners were paying less.

According to our interviewees, there were hardly any arrangements made for migrant students who paid more fees to receive extra tuition. The fees were clearly a profit-making venture where vulnerable migrant students and their parents were exploited. The lack of regulation on issues of migrant education in Ghana created a leeway for some school authorities to exploit. Migrants questioning things they considered as exploitation points to some form of agency. The exploitation also shows the lack of policy on inclusion making marginalized people vulnerable to the schemes of profit-making school authorities.

The observations and interviews confirmed that many migrant students felt less welcome in schools as the school environment had no adequate plans in place for their inclusion. The school for migrants represented the culture of the dominant group within society. Migrants were expected to comply with little consideration to their own beliefs and experiences. Migrant students' inability to comply with the dominant norms within the school often exposed them. Unlike outside the school where they were free to engage in what was comfortable for them (language), within the school they had no option than for them to comply.

4.2. Friendships and interaction of migrant students

Some migrant students interviewed spoke about the difficulty they had in making friends during the early weeks of school. This was further exacerbated when there were language barriers. Outside the classroom, there existed the language of communication different from the language of instruction in most of the schools. In general, migrants who had acquired the local Ghanaian languages integrated better in schools. Yakubu, from Burkina Faso, added that

I have a friend from Togo. He is always around the Ghanaians in school. They even think he is a Ghanaian. He has been able to do that because he is able to speak Ewe. As you know, Ewe is spoken in Togo and Ghana. They do treat him differently from how I am treated. Although we are all francophone, the local language has played to his advantage. When I do complain about the way I am being treated by Ghanaians he always does not understand what I am complaining about.

In schools located in the migrant dominated settlements, the language of communication outside the classroom was Hausa. Although Hausa is not a local language it remains the dominant language used as a lingua franca in migrant dominated settlements in Ghana. Hausa is widely spoken across the West African subregion. Thus, although most migrants in schools located in migrant dominated settlements had low proficiency in the language of instruction, they could communicate well outside the classroom with the Hausa language. In schools outside the migrant dominated settlements, the Ga or Akan language was mostly used as the language of socialization. Many migrants struggled communicating with peers outside the classroom. Fredels, a Nigerian migrant student, explained that

In Niger we used to speak Hausa. When I moved to Ghana, it was easy to communicate because everyone speaks Hausa in this town. I am yet to become an expert in the English language. Outside the class I am comfortable because all my friends speak Hausa too. It is easy to interact and make new friends.

Our interviews also showed that it was even more difficult for older migrants to make friends even after being in the school for much longer periods. This was because migrant student had been placed in lower than age-appropriate grades that denied them the opportunity of important friendship networks with peers. The younger the migrant at the time of migration, the better the adaptation to learning new languages and access to key peer networks. Migrants who arrived at a later age were slow at learning new languages. This affected them and their ability in accessing friendship networks in school.

Our migrant interviewees were in many cases friends with mostly other migrants in school. They were usually drawn together by the similar challenges they faced in school. When migrants could have their own seating preference, they ended up crowding around the same space. This finding of migrant students crowding around same spaces within the classroom was confirmed during the observations. Furthermore, the migrant student friendships with migrants from their country of origin were closer than those from other countries. Alpha, a migrant student from Guinea, complained that

People in school always pass comments that will always remind you of your status as a foreigner. It is something I really do not like. In school, I have many friends, but I am closer to this Nigerian boy. He is my best friend. He also complains about being always reminded about his status of being a foreigner. We avoid reading or answering questions in class to avoid being teased in class.

This is similar to conclusions drawn by Faas et al. (2018) as well as Goodreau et al. (2009) who indicate that children and youth are inclined to prefer friends of similar race and ethnicity, across cultures, discourses and environments. There was intentionality in the way migrant students mobilized other migrant students from similar migrant backgrounds through friendship for a common goal. Commonality in interests and challenges provokes a sense of agency that brought migrant students together. These strategic friendships by migrant students exemplify Edwards's (2011,34) notion of relational agency where there is a 'capacity for working with others to strengthen purposeful responses to complex problems' in schools.

4.3. Language issues

Our findings highlighted that the use of English as the language of instruction had forced migrant students to exercise different forms of agency, while also acting as a barrier to the inclusion of migrant students in Ghanaian schools. English was the language of instruction used in all schools, whether public or private, at all levels. Unfortunately, most schools did not provide any support services for the language needs of migrant students. Thus, any migrant student who was not proficient in English was at a disadvantage in school. The challenges surrounding the language of instruction accentuate the findings of previous research (see Norton and De Costa 2018; Schneider and Arnot 2018; Welply 2017; Holmes, Fay and Andrews 2017; Dusi and Steinbach 2016) that identifies low proficiency in language of instruction as a major obstacle in migrant education.

Interviews with migrant students revealed how the language of instruction adversely affected them. For example, Salifou, a Togolese migrant student, argued that:

the language has always been my problem. I am used to teachers teaching with the French Language. Since I came to Ghana, I have only been taught with the English Language. It has been a struggle till date. Understanding what the teacher teaches has been an everyday challenge for me.

The effect of the language of instruction on the migrant student differed according to the number of years spent in Ghana, the country of origin (francophone or anglophone), previous educational experience and age of entry. The number of years a migrant student had spent in Ghana had a direct impact on their language proficiency. Migrant students improved on their language proficiency as the time they spent in Ghana increased. Thus, children of migrants who were born in Ghana had the least challenge when it came to the language of instruction. Migrant children who moved to Ghana at a much younger age adapted earlier to the language of instruction than those who arrived at a much older age.

Migrants coming from French-speaking countries also faced more challenges than those from Anglophone countries. Migrants coming from Anglophone countries were already exposed to English as a language of instruction and thus took little or no time to adapt to its usage in class. On the other hand, migrants from francophone countries suffered the negative

effect of English as the language of instruction as they had low proficiency in English due to the low exposure to the language. They therefore needed more time in learning the language. The findings that migrants from English-speaking countries from West Africa as well as children born in Ghana to migrant parents faced the least challenges with regards to English in class further support Suarez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco's (2016) assertion that the longer the migrants are exposed to English, the more likely the person will be proficient in the language.

The challenges that migrants faced with the language of instruction was further complicated by the background and socioeconomic status they came from. Interviews with migrant students also confirmed how the background of migrants compromised the pace at which they learnt the English language. The interviews revealed how migrants' only chance at learning the English language was in school. The findings highlighted how most of the migrants came from backgrounds that had parents or guardians being semi or uneducated - hence languages other than English are used after school hours. This supports the argument that being a migrant does not necessarily lead to disadvantages, but it is the socioeconomic background that affects their academic potential (Fargues 2017; Miera 2007). In Spain, Zinovyeva et al. (2014) attributed about half of the educational disadvantages that created gaps between immigrants and natives to socioeconomic and family factors. This is similar to our observations in the Ghanaian case.

In response to the language challenges they encountered, migrant students exercised agency by seeking out various forms of support. Some students took proactive measures by seeking assistance from other migrant students who had better language skills and had been living in Ghana for a longer time. By tapping into their social networks, these students were able to access resources that were not available through formal channels, thus demonstrating their agency in seeking out their own solutions to overcome challenges.

Other students exercised agency by seeking private supplementary teachers who could provide additional language lessons outside of regular school hours. Although this kind of support was not accessible to all students due to financial constraints, those who were able to access it found it to be very helpful in addressing their language challenges. By taking the initiative to seek out resources beyond the school system, migrant students demonstrated their agency in taking ownership of their learning process and actively seeking solutions to their educational challenges.

Despite the difficulties of communicating in a language that was not their own, migrant students also exercised agency by building relationships with Ghanaian students. By developing closer connections with their Ghanaian peers, migrant students were able to improve their proficiency in the local language and feel more included in the school community. This also enabled them to establish a sense of belonging in the school environment, which is crucial for academic success. This exemplifies of how migrant students exercise agency by taking steps to actively integrate themselves into their new environment.

However, it is important to note that the linguistic barriers encountered by migrant students had a major impact on their integration and their ability to exercise agency in their education. Despite their efforts, many students faced obstacles to inclusion due to their limited English language proficiency. This highlights the importance of recognizing the agency of migrant students in seeking support and resources to overcome language barriers, while also acknowledging the systemic challenges that they face in their educational journey.

5. Conclusions

Our data highlights the marginalization of migrants within Ghanaian schools. There are several practices including exploitation, name calling, teaching methods, stereotyping leading to the exclusion of migrants within schools. The disadvantage suffered by migrants in schools is worse for some groups than for others. For example, the difficulties associated with language mostly affected migrants from French-speaking countries. Migrants who arrived in Ghana at an older age also faced more difficulties adjusting to the language used in school. There is little effort to address the specific needs of migrant students in Ghanaian schools. In most cases, they are expected to adapt to the Ghanaian way of life.

Normality within schools has been constructed in a way that makes some characteristics of migrants fall outside the boundaries set. They are therefore seen as deviants within the school setting. To escape this tag, migrants had to alter their names, accents, learn local languages (e.g. Ga the language of the natives of Accra and Akan the most widely spoken Ghanaian language) to be accepted as 'normal' within schools. The lack of inclusive school structures led to migrants neglecting their culture to fit in. Schools have thus become the primary vehicle that drive non-inclusion of migrants.

Our study has brought to the forefront the significant ways in which child migrants exercise their agency and actively participate in their new school environments. Our findings have highlighted the various ways in which migrant students exercise their agency, such as standing up to students who bully them, embracing a Ghanaian name, adopting a Ghanaian accent, and developing proficiency in both English and local languages. Despite the obstacles they face in schools, migrant students exhibited different forms of agency, showing great intentionality in how they responded to the challenges and opportunities that the Ghanaian education system presents. It is evident that migrant students possess a strong sense of agency, which they draw upon to navigate the complexities of their new school environments, thereby highlighting their resilience and adaptability.

Our study has implications for the definition of inclusion within the Ghanaian educational system. Inclusive education has been narrowly defined in policy documents with reference to persons with disabilities but not minority ethnic communities. Migrant education is not a priority policy area for Ghanaians. Migrant students are not recognized as a vulnerable group who need extra support within the schools. The definition of inclusion should be expanded to reflect the realities of what exists in the actual school settings. Inclusive policy must address this anomaly by expanding the definition and providing the needed solution to assuage the plight of the many migrants in Ghanaian schools.

The appropriateness of theories and frameworks advanced in countries in the global North has often been attributed to the variation in the social and cultural context. An example of such critique is the argument by Guo and Dalli (2016) that research on the pedagogy of migrant children has been based on western white approaches and concepts that stress vulnerability and passivity that may not fit in all contexts. The successful application of concepts such as inclusion and agency in this article adds to furnishing examples of the interpretation of case studies from countries in the South, such as Ghana.

Our study highlights the exclusionary nature of education in Ghanaian and African schools, which is entrenched in colonial power structures and educational practices. Migrant learners are particularly affected by this exclusionary system, further perpetuating the colonial legacy of education. To counteract this, we propose a decolonial approach to African education that is rooted in indigenous knowledge systems. To develop such an approach, we need to draw on pedagogical conceptualizations of relationality, sharing, reciprocity, connections, mutual interdependence, social responsibility, and accountability. These

concepts emphasize the importance of building communities and relationships within schools, fostering a sense of communal learning and promoting "communities of learners" and "schooling as community". This approach challenges colonial hierarchies that have privileged certain bodies, visualities, knowledges, and experiences, and instead creates space for diverse perspectives and voices to be heard and valued (Dei 2022; p. 9; see also, Simpson 2011; Styres 2019). The issue of language accent in schools is an example of how colonial relations are embedded in education in Ghana and across Africa. It is important for policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders to consider how to address this issue inclusively, recognizing the value of local African languages as an anti-colonial approach to educational inclusion. Our findings also emphasize the need for inclusive structures and practices within education in Ghana and Africa. A decolonial approach to education, grounded in indigenous knowledge systems and pedagogical conceptualizations of relationality and accountability, is essential for promoting equitable access and success in education for all learners. We call on all stakeholders to engage with these ideas and work towards a more inclusive and equitable education system for Ghana and Africa as a whole.

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