

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Addressing Achievement Gaps of Students at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School in Zambia

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Abstract

Persistent academic achievement gaps among students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds continue to challenge educators. Teachers, positioned at the forefront of efforts to promote educational equity, often encounter numerous obstacles in addressing these disparities and meeting the diverse needs of their students. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing targeted interventions and policy reforms to help narrow achievement gaps. This study aims to explore the primary challenges teachers face in addressing academic disparities and to identify strategies and support systems that could empower them in their efforts to bridge these gaps. Guided by social justice education and culturally responsive teaching frameworks, this study emphasizes addressing systemic inequities, incorporating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and recognizing teachers as agents of change. Employing a qualitative approach, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with teachers to gain insight into their experiences and perceptions and to understand the prevalence and nature of these challenges. The findings reveal complex challenges related to classroom diversity, resource limitations, professional development, systemic barriers, and emotional factors. The study also highlights strategies and support systems that teachers view as crucial for empowering them to reduce achievement gaps and promote educational equity, such as culturally responsive teaching, educational equity, and social justice education.

Keywords: *Achievement gaps, classroom diversity, professional development, systemic barriers, teacher empowerment*

1. Introduction

Persistent academic achievement gaps among students from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds continue to be a significant challenge for educators (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Teachers, who are often at the forefront of efforts to promote educational equity, frequently encounter numerous obstacles in addressing these disparities and meeting the diverse needs of their students (Sleeter, 2012). Understanding the challenges teachers face is essential for developing targeted interventions and policy reforms to help narrow achievement gaps (Gay, 2010).

This study, conducted at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School, aimed to explore the primary challenges teachers face in addressing academic disparities and to identify strategies and support systems that could empower teachers in their efforts to bridge these gaps (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Guided by social justice education and culturally responsive teaching frameworks, this study emphasized addressing systemic inequities, incorporating students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and recognizing teachers as agents of change (Sleeter & Owuor, 2011).

By employing a qualitative approach and conducting semi-structured interviews with teachers, this study aimed to gain insight into their experiences and perceptions and to understand the prevalence and nature of the challenges they face (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The findings from this study will contribute to the existing literature on educational equity and provide valuable insights for developing

effective interventions and support systems to empower teachers in their efforts to reduce achievement gaps and promote educational equity.

2. Literature Review

Darling-Hammond's (2020) research, "Systemic Inequities in Education: Addressing Barriers to Teacher Effectiveness," explores the systemic injustices in education that make it more difficult for teachers to close achievement gaps. Grounded in an equity and social justice framework, which stresses the redistribution of resources and opportunities to address the historical and systemic marginalization of disadvantaged communities, the study focuses on professional development, policy reforms, and resource allocation as crucial areas for addressing disparities.

Darling-Hammond employs a mixed-methods approach, combining case studies of under-resourced schools with analysis of national education data to comprehend the systemic issues teachers encounter and their impact on student performance. The study finds that systemic injustices, including unequal funding, large class sizes, and limited access to high-quality teaching resources, exacerbate achievement discrepancies. Teachers at impoverished schools report feeling unprepared to meet the diverse needs of their students due to a lack of professional development opportunities and classroom resources.

Although the study highlights systemic obstacles to educational equity, it does not explore how educators perceive and deal with these issues in diverse classroom environments. The current study addresses this gap by examining teachers' actual experiences and methods for overcoming these obstacles.

Gay's (2018) study, "Culturally Responsive Teaching: A Framework for Bridging Achievement Gaps," examines the role of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in improving educational outcomes for students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Grounded in the CRT framework, the study emphasizes the need for teachers to integrate students' cultural identities into classroom practices, acknowledging that students' cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and unique perspectives should serve as assets in the learning process.

The study employs qualitative research methods, including classroom observations and teacher interviews, to analyze the implementation and impact of CRT practices in diverse school settings. The findings suggest that CRT fosters student engagement, enhances motivation, and improves academic outcomes by affirming students' cultural identities. However, many teachers lack adequate training in CRT, leading to inconsistent implementation and a limited impact on achievement gaps.

Although the study underscores the importance of CRT, it primarily focuses on its theoretical and practical applications without addressing broader systemic challenges or teachers' emotional resilience in implementing CRT. The current study addresses this gap by examining how CRT intersects with systemic barriers and teacher empowerment.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) explore the role of teachers' social and emotional competence in fostering positive classroom environments and student outcomes. Grounded in the social and emotional learning (SEL) framework, the study emphasizes the importance of developing teachers' emotional resilience to effectively address the challenges they face. The SEL framework suggests that developing teachers' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making can enhance their ability to create supportive and inclusive classrooms. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines teacher self-report measures, classroom observations, and student achievement data to understand the relationship between teachers' social and emotional competence and their effectiveness. The findings indicate that teachers with higher levels of social and emotional competence are better equipped to manage classroom challenges, foster positive relationships with students, and promote academic success. However, many teachers lack access to professional development and support systems that could enhance their emotional resilience.

While the study highlights the significance of teachers' social and emotional competence, it does not explicitly examine how these factors intersect with the challenges of addressing achievement gaps in diverse classroom settings. The current study addresses this gap by exploring the emotional and psychological dimensions of teachers' experiences in bridging these disparities.

Research on Sub-Saharan Africa's obstacles to high-quality education highlights significant issues that impede the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), including limited access for underprivileged populations (such as girls and students with disabilities), insufficient funding, and poor teacher training. The research notes notable differences in education quality across regions due to unequal and frequently opaque resource allocation. Deeper systemic problems, such as cultural biases and infrastructure constraints, are reflected in the restricted inclusion of underprivileged communities. The findings demonstrate how these elements work together to thwart initiatives guaranteeing inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education, underscoring the necessity of a multifaceted strategy to overcome these obstacles.

Inadequate teacher training is a major concern, as underprepared or under-supported instructors struggle to satisfy the diverse demands of their classrooms. The study emphasizes the need for continual professional development specific to the difficulties teachers face in resource-limited settings. Instructors in these environments frequently contend with large classes, a lack of resources, and restricted access to modern teaching techniques. These factors exacerbate achievement discrepancies, especially for pupils from underprivileged families. Furthermore, inadequate curriculum design, which often ignores the diverse cultural and linguistic contexts in SSA, deprives many children of the resources they need to thrive academically and socially, widening the gap in educational achievements.

Although the research provides a thorough overview of the systemic issues affecting education in SSA, it overlooks the specific role teachers might play in closing achievement gaps within particular regions or schools. This omission creates a significant knowledge gap regarding how teachers can develop localized approaches to address these discrepancies effectively. For instance, while the study notes general funding and access problems, it does not explore how teacher-led interventions could mitigate these difficulties in Zambian urban schools like Nyumba Yanga. The current study intends to build on these findings by emphasizing teacher autonomy and locally relevant solutions, offering practical insights for enhancing student performance in specific educational contexts.

A South African study on teacher professional development and student outcomes offers important insights into the connection between teacher capacity-building initiatives and improved educational attainment in underfunded schools. Applying social constructivist theory highlights the value of teacher-student interactions in creating meaningful learning experiences. The study used a mixed-methods approach, gathering survey data from educators about their professional development experiences and examining related student performance indicators. Improved student outcomes were directly correlated with focused professional development programs, especially those addressing the particular difficulties educators face in resource-limited settings.

One of the key conclusions was the urgent need for context-specific training programs that prepare teachers to deal with large class sizes, a lack of instructional resources, and students' varied learning requirements. Many educators reported feeling unprepared to handle the complex problems of teaching in underfunded schools, which led to reduced student involvement and lower academic success. The study also showed that professional development initiatives were frequently generic and failed to account for the unique circumstances of South African classrooms, where socioeconomic inequality, linguistic diversity, and cultural quirks significantly impact student learning.

Although the study finds a substantial correlation between student accomplishment and teacher professional development, it does not explore specific tactics teachers might use to close achievement gaps in diverse classrooms. This gap is particularly relevant to the current study at Nyumba Yanga

School, which aims to understand how educators in urban Zambian schools can effectively address these disparities. The current research attempts to build on these findings by focusing on localized interventions, providing workable answers appropriate for schools facing comparable issues.

Research on educational equity in Kenya offers a thorough examination of how socioeconomic and gender differences impact access to high-quality education in both urban and rural areas. Applying equity theory, the study highlights the value of equitable resource distribution in resolving systemic injustices. Through qualitative case studies and interviews with teachers, parents, and students, the study showed how structural and cultural variables disproportionately affect low-income pupils and girls. For these groups, early marriage, a lack of financial support, and deeply ingrained cultural biases were major obstacles to full participation in the educational system.

The results highlight the challenges educators face in addressing these disparities in the classroom. Many educators expressed feeling overburdened by heavy workloads and insufficient preparation to interact effectively with pupils from underrepresented backgrounds. Furthermore, their ability to maintain equitable learning environments was hampered by a lack of institutional support. Educators emphasized the difficulty of establishing inclusive classrooms in light of systemic problems such as overcrowded schools, a lack of specialized interventions for at-risk pupils, and limited learning resources. These difficulties exacerbated existing achievement gaps and impeded student engagement.

Although the report effectively highlights systemic injustices and their impact on education, it does not explore how teachers might help address these achievement gaps. This absence is particularly pertinent to the ongoing research at Nyumba Yanga School, which aims to determine how educators can actively address these differences through creative and localized approaches. The current study intends to supplement the Kenyan findings by concentrating on teacher-driven interventions, providing practical strategies for closing achievement gaps in similarly challenging educational environments.

Studies in Zambia explore important issues influencing student outcomes, particularly in urban contexts like Nyumba Yanga Secondary School, focusing on how teacher preparation and resource allocation can address educational disparities. Grounded in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the study highlights the value of teacher assistance in helping pupils realize their potential. The ZPD framework emphasizes that successful learning occurs when teachers offer focused assistance, enabling students to advance beyond their present capacities. This idea aligns with the noted need for qualified teachers who can modify their methods to accommodate pupils' various learning requirements in resource-limited settings. The study provides both quantitative and qualitative insights through teacher interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of standardized test results.

The results show that overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and poor instructional resources are enduring obstacles that seriously impede academic progress. These issues are especially noticeable in urban Zambian schools like Nyumba Yanga Secondary, where high student-teacher ratios hinder individualized instruction. Teachers frequently lack the time to adequately attend to each student's requirements, particularly those who need extra assistance to bridge the achievement gap. Furthermore, a lack of infrastructure, teaching aids, and textbooks exacerbates these inequities, making learning difficult for both teachers and students. The study emphasizes the interaction between systemic problems and classroom realities, showing how a lack of resources hampers instructors' capacity to employ successful teaching strategies.

Despite its important contributions, the study overlooks other critical topics, such as overcoming linguistic and cultural barriers in urban schools. Like many other Lusaka schools, Nyumba Yanga Secondary serves a diverse student body with a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which may impact learning outcomes. The lack of a thorough focus on these factors creates a research gap.

The findings' relevance and applicability could be greatly increased by investigating creative, context-specific treatments to deal with these issues, especially in metropolitan settings where ethnic diversity is a defining feature of the educational landscape.

Zambia's free education policy, intended to increase school access, has substantially impacted teacher workloads and overall teaching effectiveness. The policy led to a sharp increase in student enrollment as families previously unable to afford education seized the opportunity. However, this increase was not accompanied by infrastructure expansion or adequate hiring of more teachers. Classrooms in many urban schools, including those in Lusaka, now frequently have more than 70 pupils per teacher, making classroom management, individualized attention, and effective instruction difficult (Kalaule, 2006). Teachers are overworked as they strive to fulfill the diverse needs of their pupils while upholding curriculum requirements. Inadequate infrastructure, such as cramped classrooms, a shortage of desks, and instructional supplies, further strains teaching quality.

Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, these difficulties have consequences for psychological and professional well-being in addition to practical ones. Teachers who are unable to meet their basic needs for sustainable workloads and a supportive learning environment are less likely to have their higher-order needs for self-actualization and professional satisfaction met. The unmet demand for institutional assistance, particularly in overcrowded classes, weakens their ability to provide focused interventions for struggling students. This circumstance impacts both student outcomes and educational effectiveness, as many students cannot obtain the individualized instruction required to close achievement gaps. Additionally, the discrepancy between the policy's objectives and its actual execution points to a gap that affects student equity and teacher morale.

Although this policy has successfully expanded educational opportunities, it has left schools with specific difficulties, particularly in urban areas like Nyumba Yanga. These problems are highlighted in existing literature, such as the study by Kalaule (2006), but it does not provide specific solutions suited for schools with diverse urban populations. It overlooks scalable solutions dealing with teacher assistance and resource allocation. For instance, strategies like using technology to teach large classes or hiring teaching assistants are not well studied in Zambia. These research gaps highlight the necessity for targeted investigations that align policy execution with the realities of urban educational settings.

The achievement gap in rural Zambian schools, especially at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School, significantly impacts the academic performance of pupils from underprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds, making it an urgent problem. The school's teachers employ a range of tactics to close these gaps, emphasizing pedagogical modifications to accommodate diverse student needs. These tactics include differentiated instruction, where teachers adapt lessons to various learning styles, and peer tutoring, which encourages more capable students to help their peers. Teachers also collaborate with the local community to foster a supportive atmosphere, recognizing that poverty and a lack of resources can significantly impede academic progress. However, despite their best efforts, teachers still struggle to maintain the effectiveness of these strategies.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a foundation for understanding how different environmental elements interact to affect learning outcomes. This theory posits that a child's development is influenced by various factors, including family, school, and larger social structures. Teachers at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School operate within this framework, understanding that they need to comprehend the larger sociocultural and economic issues their pupils face in addition to meeting individual student requirements. Factors such as poverty, poor infrastructure, and restricted access to educational materials significantly impact intellectual development. Teachers are seen as playing a significant role in shaping the immediate school environment and can mitigate the negative consequences of these broader systemic problems to some degree. By modifying their instructional methods, educators aim to lessen the influence of these external variables on student performance.

The study's results demonstrate the value of tactics like peer tutoring and differentiated instruction, but they also highlight the challenges teachers encounter in implementation due to a lack of funding, crowded classrooms, and inadequate infrastructure. Instructors at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School report difficulties in keeping students motivated, particularly when they are dealing with external stressors like hunger or a lack of transportation. Furthermore, although community involvement is a valuable support technique, its influence is sometimes limited due to a lack of adequate resources. While these tactics can help close achievement gaps, teachers recognize that they are frequently insufficient to address the serious structural issues rural schools face. The study highlights the need for additional research to examine how these tactics might be successfully scaled up and supported by local governments and the community to develop a more sustainable strategy for tackling achievement inequalities.

3. Theoretical Framework

Social justice education and culturally responsive teaching are complementary frameworks that address systemic injustices and leverage diversity in educational systems to promote fairness and inclusion. Social justice education aims to dismantle the structural barriers that sustain disparities by supporting equitable resource distribution, inclusive pedagogy, and incorporating students' lived experiences into the learning process to promote critical consciousness and transformative action (Adams et al., 2016; Bell, 2020; García & Guerra, 2022). Teachers play a crucial role in opposing discriminatory behaviors and encouraging cooperation between communities, families, and schools to encourage holistic development (Learning for Justice, 2022). Culturally responsive teaching, developed by Geneva Gay, is based on the notion that students' cultural backgrounds significantly impact their learning. It emphasizes incorporating cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and unique performance styles into teaching to create engaging and effective learning environments (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2020). While social justice education focuses on larger societal disparities, CRT focuses on classroom activities to reinforce cultural identities and enhance teacher-student interactions. Both frameworks prioritize removing systemic barriers and embracing student diversity. Combined, these strategies offer a strong foundation for creating engaging educational opportunities that advance inclusion and equity.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and Social Justice Education (SJE) have emerged as foundational theoretical frameworks for addressing educational inequities and fostering inclusive learning environments. CRT was first conceptualized by Geneva Gay (2000), emphasizing the importance of integrating students' cultural backgrounds into teaching to enhance engagement and academic achievement. This approach acknowledges that cultural identity profoundly influences learning processes and aims to validate and affirm students' diverse experiences (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2020). Similarly, SJE evolved as a response to systemic inequities in education, advocating for equitable learning opportunities by dismantling discriminatory practices and fostering critical consciousness among educators and students (Bell, 2020; García & Guerra, 2022).

The historical evolution of these frameworks reflects their grounding in broader societal struggles. CRT, rooted in multicultural education, expanded the discourse on inclusivity by emphasizing the need for culturally relevant pedagogy that celebrates diversity as a strength (Hammond, 2020). Meanwhile, SJE traces its roots to critical pedagogy movements championed by scholars such as Paulo Freire, whose work underscored education's role in empowering students to question and address societal injustices (Freire, 2018). Civil rights and equity movements, highlighting the need for systemic reform to close opportunity gaps, further influenced these frameworks.

In practice, CRT emphasizes developing teachers' cultural competence, enabling them to use students' cultural contexts and knowledge to inform teaching strategies (Hammond, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021). This involves adopting instructional methods that reflect students' lived experiences and building trusting, respectful classroom relationships. SJE, on the other hand, focuses on equipping

teachers with tools to foster equity-focused classrooms by addressing biases, promoting critical reflection, and integrating students' identities into the curriculum (Gorski, 2019). Both frameworks converge in their aim to prepare educators to act as change agents who challenge systemic inequities. The contemporary application of CRT and SJE demonstrates their relevance in educational reform. For instance, initiatives like those at UCLA's Center X have showcased how integrating these frameworks into teacher training can transform educational practices, particularly in underserved communities (McDonald, 2021). Research has highlighted the importance of combining culturally responsive pedagogy with social justice principles, enabling students to thrive academically while fostering their roles as active participants in societal change (García & Guerra, 2022). Together, these frameworks advocate for inclusive, transformative educational practices that promote equity and empower marginalized communities.

SJE concentrates on developing fair educational settings that recognize and address structural injustices. Teachers are urged to oppose policies that maintain inequalities, particularly for underprivileged populations, and to endeavor to advance equity in educational opportunities, outcomes, and access (Adams et al., 2016).

A fundamental idea is to develop critical consciousness in both pupils and teachers. This involves motivating individuals to identify and confront prejudices, power dynamics, and societal injustices. By encouraging critical thinking, SJE enables students to take significant steps toward social transformation (Freire, 2018). Teachers are also given the confidence to confront their prejudices and advocate for justice.

SJE encourages the creation of curricula that represent the diverse cultural backgrounds of pupils. According to García and Guerra (2022), this concept emphasizes the importance of inclusive teaching materials and methods that connect with students' identities, lived experiences, and cultural contexts. SJE urges schools to work closely with families and communities to promote comprehensive student development. This cooperative approach makes education relevant and reflective of the cultural and social requirements of the students and their communities (Gorski, 2019).

On the other hand, CRT underlines the need to confirm and validate pupils' cultural identities. By acknowledging and embracing students' cultural knowledge, values, and experiences, teachers create a classroom atmosphere where students feel valued and involved. This validation enhances student involvement and results (Gay, 2018).

CRT promotes teaching strategies appropriate for the students' cultural backgrounds. This involves recognizing the cultural assets students bring to the classroom, modifying educational tactics, and utilizing diverse teaching resources. A culturally responsive pedagogy ensures that students' cultural backgrounds are not only recognized but also incorporated into the learning process (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2020).

CRT promotes pedagogical approaches adapted to the cultural contexts of the students, such as utilizing diverse teaching materials, modifying instructional strategies, and identifying the cultural strengths students bring to the classroom. This ensures that students' cultural backgrounds are incorporated into the learning process (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2020).

CRT emphasizes building solid, healthy relationships between instructors and students. Mutual respect and trust are essential components of CRT, fostering a safe space where students can participate in their education and express their cultural identities (Hammond, 2020).

By raising awareness of societal challenges and encouraging dialogue that questions injustices, CRT urges educators to incorporate social justice concepts into the classroom. This principle aims to enable students to become change agents by interacting with real-world problems and fighting for justice (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

The main objective of both SJE and CRT is to promote inclusive and equitable learning environments. While SJE addresses systemic societal injustices and empowers students to confront them, CRT

focuses on incorporating students' cultural identities into teaching methods to improve learning outcomes. When combined, these frameworks offer a thorough strategy for advancing educational fairness that addresses both the personal and systemic causes of disparity.

In the study on the challenges faced by teachers in addressing achievement gaps at Nyumba Yanga School in Zambia, the principles of Social Justice Education (SJE) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) were effectively applied to address student disparities. These frameworks guided the study by providing a lens through which to analyze and understand the challenges teachers encountered, emphasizing equity, cultural validation, and the importance of addressing systemic barriers. Through applying SJE and CRT, the study explored strategies that promote inclusive teaching practices and equitable learning opportunities, ultimately aiming to reduce achievement gaps.

Ensuring that every student, regardless of background, has an equal chance to succeed was a primary obstacle in closing achievement gaps. The Social Justice Education concept of equity required schools to investigate how systemic inequities, including socioeconomic differences, restricted access to resources, and the impact of rural-urban divides, impacted student results. Teachers at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School faced challenges in addressing these differences. By incorporating equity-focused pedagogical techniques, as suggested by Adams et al. (2016), teachers created practices intended to close these inequalities, ensuring that all students, especially those from marginalized communities, had the assistance they required to succeed. This included access to essential learning resources, targeted interventions, and customized instruction.

Social justice education emphasized the significance of cultivating critical consciousness in both instructors and students. This meant giving educators the tools they needed to help students identify and combat the systemic injustices that fueled achievement gaps at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School. This required training instructors to create a classroom atmosphere that inspired students to critically engage with the world and reflect on their social reality (Freire, 2018). Giving students insight into how social structures influenced their education inspired them to take charge of their learning and act as change agents.

Culturally responsive teaching underlined the significance of confirming and validating students' cultural identities. Given the diverse rural and urban origins of the children at Nyumba Yanga, educators needed to acknowledge and integrate these cultural contexts into their instructional strategies. Teachers improved engagement and motivation by fostering an atmosphere where students felt their experiences were respected through culturally relevant materials and instructional practices (Gay, 2018). For example, teachers incorporated folklore, local languages, and community-based knowledge into the curriculum to link students' learning experiences to their own cultures.

Teachers needed to become culturally competent to narrow achievement gaps. This entailed understanding students' histories, values, and learning preferences to modify instruction appropriately (Hammond, 2020). At Nyumba Yanga Secondary School, this involved adapting teaching methods to accommodate students' varied learning requirements and cultural backgrounds. For instance, teachers addressed particular obstacles, including a lack of resources, varying language proficiency levels, and access to technology, while considering the rural setting in which many children resided. Responsive pedagogy, a key component of CRT, entails modifying instructional strategies to account for the cultural reality of the pupils. It was challenging for teachers at Nyumba Yanga School to use teaching methods that considered their students' sociocultural backgrounds. For example, traditional teaching methods were less successful in classrooms with a large percentage of pupils from rural areas due to varying learning styles. Teachers responded by incorporating interactive, experiential, and community-based learning methods that more closely matched their students' real-world experiences (Gay, 2018). This strategy improved student involvement and academic achievement.

Collaborating with families and communities was another tenet of social justice education. To close the gap between home and school, Nyumba Yanga School teachers worked with parents and community members. This partnership helped develop a more unified support network for students and ensured that teaching methods were culturally appropriate and aligned with community values (Gorski, 2019). For instance, incorporating parents in school events or offering resources tailored to individual student needs improved academic results.

Building solid, trusting relationships between educators and learners was crucial to both social justice education and culturally responsive teaching. Teachers at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School developed deep relationships with their students based on mutual respect, promoting increased academic engagement. These connections gave children a sense of support and worth, helping them overcome obstacles to learning (Hammond, 2020). By fostering an atmosphere of trust and empathy in the classroom, teachers created a secure space where students felt comfortable sharing their worries and difficulties regarding their academic achievement.

The study investigated how instructors at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School addressed the difficulties brought on by achievement discrepancies by implementing the ideas of social justice education and culturally responsive teaching. These frameworks, which prioritized fairness, cultural validation, critical consciousness, and teacher-student connections, offered a thorough method for resolving educational discrepancies. At Nyumba Yanga Secondary School, putting these ideas into practice not only reduced achievement gaps but also promoted a welcoming, encouraging, and empowering learning environment for all children.

4. Methodology

The study used a qualitative methodology to investigate how teachers perceive and experience closing achievement gaps. This methodology aimed to offer a nuanced understanding of the systemic, professional, and emotional issues educators face by concentrating on their lived experiences. The study's focus on thoroughly examining subjective viewpoints was consistent with a qualitative design (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study is based on the interpretivist paradigm, which stresses using people's subjective interpretations and meanings of their experiences to understand human behavior (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018). The study's objective of identifying the complex difficulties and tactics teachers use in diverse classrooms aligns with this paradigm. By concentrating on teachers' distinct contexts and perspectives, the interpretivist paradigm enabled the researcher to examine their difficulties and methods for closing achievement gaps.

A qualitative research methodology was used to record rich, in-depth accounts of teachers' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This method emphasizes comprehending participants' lived experiences and investigating phenomena in their natural environments. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to investigate intricate, situation-specific problems like resource constraints, gaps in professional development, and emotional impacts.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary technique for gathering data. According to Kvale & Brinkmann (2015), semi-structured interviews are useful for obtaining in-depth answers while providing flexibility to explore participants' experiences further. Through semi-structured interviews, teachers could discuss their difficulties, opinions, and methods for closing achievement gaps in their classes.

Teachers at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School in Zambia were the study's target population. Teachers were chosen because they have firsthand experience with the difficulties and tactics involved in closing achievement gaps and are actively engaged in the process. By concentrating on teachers, the data gathered was pertinent to the study's goal of understanding the difficulties in advancing educational equity.

Five teachers purposefully selected from Nyumba Yanga Secondary School made up the sample. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants most likely to contribute rich, pertinent data (Patton, 2015). The sample size was sufficiently large to capture a range of viewpoints from different grade levels and subjects, yet small enough to allow for in-depth analysis.

A semi-structured interview guide served as the main tool for gathering data. The guide contained open-ended questions intended to elicit in-depth answers regarding teachers' difficulties, approaches, and perceived support networks. The instrument was modified to fit the study's goals, ensuring that all pertinent issues, including systemic impediments and culturally responsive teaching, were examined.

Data was gathered through in-person interviews at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School. With the participants' permission, each interview lasted 20 to 30 minutes. Interviewing participants in their natural surroundings created a relaxed atmosphere that improved the caliber and comprehensiveness of their answers.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Thematic analysis allowed for identifying and interpreting patterns in the data related to challenges, strategies, and support systems, providing a comprehensive understanding of teachers' experiences.

The researchers obtained consent from the school administration at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School to conduct research, and all ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and provided signed consent before participation. To ensure confidentiality, their identities were anonymized to protect their privacy. Participation was entirely voluntary, with participants assured they could withdraw at any time without consequences. Data security was maintained by securely storing audio recordings and transcripts, accessible only to the researcher.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents a detailed analysis of the findings from the study exploring the challenges teachers face in addressing achievement gaps among students at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School in Zambia. Secondary school teachers at Nyumba Yanga reported teaching experience ranging from 7 to 15 years, often balancing multiple roles such as mentoring and administrative duties. Their extensive experience has been central to developing strategies to address academic achievement gaps, especially in subjects like English, where language proficiency varies. These narratives underline the importance of teacher experience in navigating the complexities of diverse classrooms.

5.1 Challenges in Mixed-Ability and Large Classes

The table below shows the challenges faced by teachers at Nyumba Yanga:

Table 5.1: Challenges Teachers Face in Teaching Mixed-Ability Classes

Challenges in Teaching Math and Science Mixed-Ability Classes	Description
Wide Range of Student Readiness Levels	Students vary greatly in prior knowledge; some require remedial support for foundational concepts while others are ready for advanced topics, making it difficult to pace lessons effectively.

Challenges in Teaching Math and Science Mixed-Ability Classes

Description

Pressure to Cover Full Curriculum

Teachers feel pressured to complete the curriculum within a limited time, restricting their ability to reteach or differentiate adequately for mixed abilities.

Curriculum Differentiation Demand

The need to create multiple versions of activities and tasks to cater to varied capabilities increases teacher workload and the complexity of lesson planning.

Student Engagement and Behavioral Issues

Mixed-ability groups may lead to boredom or frustration among lower-level learners and disengagement for advanced learners, resulting in class management challenges.

Difficulty Balancing Grouping Strategies

Fixed grouping or streaming in Math often negatively impacts lower-achieving students; flexible, needs-based grouping is more effective but challenging to implement consistently.

Large Class Sizes Limit Individualized Support

Overcrowded classes, often exceeding 50:1, severely limit teachers' ability to provide personalized instruction needed to address diverse learning gaps in Math and Science.

Lack of Resources and Support

Insufficient teaching aids, materials, and professional development constrain effective delivery of differentiated and culturally responsive instruction in mixed-ability science and math classes.

The discussion on challenges teachers face in mixed-ability classes, particularly in Mathematics and Science, aligns closely with the research findings summarized in the table. Teachers consistently report foundational knowledge gaps among students that hinder progression to advanced content and necessitate remedial instruction, confirming observations of wide readiness level disparities requiring multiple lesson adaptations. Darling-Hammond (2020) further highlights systemic barriers such as large class sizes (often with ratios above 50:1) and unequal funding, which severely limit personalized attention and teachers' capacity to deliver differentiated instruction tailored to student needs, reinforcing the findings on difficulty managing large, diverse groups and resource scarcity documented across studies.

Moreover, the integration of culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018) and social justice education (Bell, 2020; García & Guerra, 2022) frameworks underscores the need to value students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds within these challenging settings. The literature indicates that while CRT holds promise for increasing motivation and engagement, its effectiveness is compromised when teachers lack training or face systemic constraints like overcrowding and limited resources. This mirrors research findings showing emotional burdens on teachers and engagement challenges in mixed-ability STEM classes. In contexts like Nyumba Yanga Secondary School, these interlinked challenges suggest that bridging achievement gaps requires not just enhanced pedagogical skills but systemic reforms to redistribute resources, reduce class sizes, and provide targeted professional

development, supporting teachers as agents of change empowered to foster equity and inclusion within complex learning environments.

Thus, referencing Table 1, the documented challenges in mixed-ability and large classes validate the literature's call for comprehensive approaches combining pedagogical skill enhancement with systemic change to overcome barriers and promote equitable education (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Gay, 2018; Bell, 2020).

5.2 Socioeconomic and Cultural Diversity Impact

The table below illustrates the socioeconomic and cultural diversity impact on academic performance:

Table 5.2: Factors that Impact Academic Achievement

Factor	Description	Impact on Academic Achievement
Low Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Students from low-income households with limited access to resources such as textbooks, nutritious food, and stable home environments	Higher absenteeism, lower test scores, and reduced academic progress
Resource Inequities	Unequal distribution of funding, infrastructure, qualified teachers, and instructional materials	Larger class sizes, overcrowded classrooms, and less individualized attention
Language and Cultural Diversity	Instruction often takes place in non-native languages; cultural backgrounds are diverse.	Language barriers affect comprehension; culturally responsive teaching (CRT) improves engagement.
Professional Development Access	Limited training for teachers in CRT and equity-focused instructional strategies	Inconsistent implementation of inclusive teaching, reduced effectiveness in bridging achievement gaps.

The profound influence of students' socioeconomic backgrounds on academic outcomes is extensively supported by global research. Students from low-income households encounter barriers like limited access to educational resources, higher absenteeism, and less supportive home environments, which collectively impede their academic progress (Darling-Hammond, 2020). These challenges are compounded by systemic inequities manifested in uneven funding, inadequate infrastructure, overcrowded classrooms, and disparities in teacher qualifications, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged schools (Darling-Hammond, 2020; 2000). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that these inequalities translate into achievement gaps that emerge early and persist throughout students' educational trajectories due to unequal resource distribution and unsupportive school environments. Teachers working in such contexts face the dual challenge of addressing diverse student needs within limited instructional resources. To mitigate these gaps, multilingual teaching strategies and culturally responsive pedagogy are employed to create inclusive settings that validate students' cultural identities and improve engagement (Gay, 2018). These approaches contribute to equitable classroom climates by leveraging cultural diversity as an asset rather than a deficit.

Cultural diversity further complicates teaching and learning, especially when instruction is delivered in languages differing from students' home languages, as seen in many postcolonial settings where English is often the medium of instruction (Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2020). Language barriers impact comprehension and participation, necessitating adaptive pedagogical methods that integrate students' cultural and linguistic experiences. Culturally responsive teaching (CRT) aims to affirm students' identities and knowledge, fostering inclusive environments that actively incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into teaching strategies (Gay, 2018). Despite its demonstrated benefits, CRT's effectiveness is often limited by systemic barriers restricting teacher preparedness and access to equity-focused professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2020; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Therefore, combining social justice education and CRT frameworks is critical to empower teachers to navigate socioeconomic and cultural complexities effectively, advocate for equitable resource distribution, and drive systemic reforms. This dual approach advances educational equity by recognizing systemic inequities while leveraging cultural diversity to improve academic outcomes and foster inclusion (Bell, 2020; García & Guerra, 2022).

These insights align with the research findings summarized in the table, which highlight the significant and multifaceted challenges that teachers face in contexts characterized by socioeconomic disparity and cultural heterogeneity. Addressing these issues requires both targeted pedagogical strategies and systemic interventions to foster equitable and inclusive educational environments.

5.3 Systemic and Resource Barriers

The table below shows the systemic and resource barriers:

Table 5.3: Systemic and Resource Barriers

Systemic and Resource Barriers	Description	Impact on Teaching and Learning
Inadequate Funding	Unequal distribution of financial resources across schools, with under-resourced schools receiving less funding	Limited access to teaching materials, outdated textbooks, and insufficient infrastructure
Large Class Sizes	Overcrowded classrooms, often with student-teacher ratios exceeding 50:1	Reduced individualized attention, difficulty in classroom management, and limited student engagement
Lack of Teaching Resources	Shortage of textbooks, teaching aids, and technology	Hindered lesson delivery, reduced interactive learning opportunities, and reliance on outdated methods
Insufficient Professional Development	Limited access to training on culturally responsive teaching, equity-focused strategies, and modern pedagogy	Teachers feel unprepared to address diverse student needs, leading to inconsistent instructional quality.

Systemic and Resource Barriers	Description	Impact on Teaching and Learning
Socioeconomic Disparities	Students from low-income backgrounds face challenges such as hunger, lack of study space, and limited resources.	Higher absenteeism, lower motivation, and reduced academic performance
Policy Implementation Gaps	Mismatch between educational policies (e.g., free education) and on-ground realities (e.g., infrastructure)	Increased teacher workload, overcrowded classrooms, and strained resource allocation

Systemic and resource barriers significantly hinder efforts to bridge achievement gaps, particularly in under-resourced schools like Nyumba Yanga Secondary. Inadequate funding leads to shortages of essential teaching materials, outdated textbooks, and poor infrastructure, directly impacting the quality of education (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Overcrowded classrooms, often with student-teacher ratios exceeding 50:1, limit teachers' ability to provide individualized support, manage classrooms effectively, and engage students meaningfully (Kalaule, 2006). These conditions are exacerbated by socioeconomic disparities, where students from low-income backgrounds face challenges such as hunger, lack of study space, and limited access to educational resources outside school, contributing to higher absenteeism and lower academic performance (Darling-Hammond, 2020).

Policy implementation gaps further compound these challenges. For instance, Zambia's free education policy, while increasing access, has not been matched with proportional infrastructure expansion or teacher recruitment, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and overstretched resources (Kalaule, 2006). This misalignment between policy goals and on-ground realities increases teacher workload and reduces instructional effectiveness. Additionally, insufficient professional development leaves teachers ill-equipped to address diverse student needs through culturally responsive or equity-focused strategies, limiting their ability to foster inclusive learning environments (Gay, 2018; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Addressing these systemic and resource barriers requires targeted interventions, including equitable funding, infrastructure improvements, reduced class sizes, and comprehensive teacher training, to create conditions conducive to closing achievement gaps and promoting educational equity.

5.4 Emotional and Psychological Impact on Teachers

The table below shows the emotional and psychological impact on teachers:

Table 5.4: Emotional and Psychological Impact on Teachers

Emotional and Psychological Impact	Description	Consequences for Teachers and Students
Stress and Burnout	High workload, large class sizes, and systemic challenges contribute to chronic stress and emotional exhaustion.	Reduced teacher effectiveness, lower job satisfaction, and increased absenteeism

Emotional and Psychological Impact	Description	Consequences for Teachers and Students
Frustration and Helplessness	Inability to address all student needs due to resource constraints and systemic barriers.	Diminished motivation, feelings of inadequacy, and reduced innovation in teaching practices
Compassion Fatigue	Emotional drain from consistently supporting students facing socioeconomic and academic challenges	Decreased empathy, emotional withdrawal, and reduced capacity to provide individualized support
Lack of Institutional Support	Insufficient access to counseling, mentorship, or professional development focused on emotional resilience.	Heightened isolation, unresolved emotional challenges, and limited coping strategies
Impact on Student-Teacher Relationships	Teachers' emotional strain affects their ability to build strong, supportive connections with students.	Weakened trust, reduced student engagement, and hindered academic and emotional development.

The emotional and psychological toll on teachers working to address achievement gaps is profound and multifaceted. Chronic stress and burnout arise from overwhelming workloads, large class sizes, and systemic challenges such as inadequate resources and policy implementation gaps (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These conditions lead to emotional exhaustion, reducing teachers' effectiveness and job satisfaction while increasing absenteeism. Feelings of frustration and helplessness emerge when teachers cannot meet all students' needs due to constraints beyond their control, diminishing their motivation and innovation in teaching practices (Darling-Hammond, 2020). Compassion fatigue, resulting from continuously supporting students facing socioeconomic and academic hardships, further drains teachers emotionally, reducing their empathy and capacity to provide individualized support (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

The lack of institutional support exacerbates these challenges, leaving teachers without access to counseling, mentorship, or professional development focused on emotional resilience. This isolation hinders their ability to develop effective coping strategies and maintain their well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Consequently, the emotional strain impacts student-teacher relationships, weakening trust and reducing student engagement, which is critical for academic and emotional development (Hammond, 2020). Addressing these emotional and psychological impacts requires systemic changes, including providing emotional support resources, fostering collaborative professional communities, and integrating social-emotional learning into teacher training to enhance resilience and sustain their efforts in promoting educational equity (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the multifaceted challenges teachers face in addressing achievement gaps at Nyumba Yanga Secondary School in Zambia. Key findings reveal that teachers grapple with significant obstacles, including large class sizes, mixed-ability classrooms, socioeconomic disparities, systemic resource constraints, and the emotional toll of their work. These challenges are

interconnected and exacerbated by inadequate funding, insufficient professional development, and policy implementation gaps, which collectively hinder efforts to promote educational equity.

The study underscores the importance of culturally responsive teaching and social justice education frameworks in guiding teachers' efforts to bridge these gaps. By validating students' cultural identities, fostering critical consciousness, and advocating for systemic change, teachers can create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. However, their effectiveness is often limited by external constraints, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems and structural reforms. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, such as reducing class sizes, equitable resource distribution, and providing ongoing professional development focused on equity and inclusivity. Additionally, emotional and psychological support for teachers is crucial to sustain their well-being and effectiveness. By empowering teachers as agents of change and addressing systemic barriers, stakeholders can work collaboratively to narrow achievement gaps and ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity by emphasizing the critical role of teachers and the need for holistic approaches that combine pedagogical innovation with systemic reform. Future research should explore scalable strategies and policy adjustments tailored to the specific contexts of under-resourced schools to advance this goal further.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following recommendations:

7.1 Policy and Systemic Level:

- **Urgent Infrastructure Investment:** The government and development partners must prioritize funding to build more classrooms and hire more teachers to reduce class sizes to a manageable level (e.g., below 40:1).
- **Resource Allocation:** Implement an equitable and transparent formula to ensure schools in low-income areas receive adequate and timely allocations for textbooks, laboratory equipment, and basic teaching aids.
- **Curriculum Review:** Revise the national curriculum to make it more flexible, allowing teachers time for remediation and to incorporate local cultural and linguistic content.

7.2 Professional Development

- **Shift to Context-Specific PD:** Move away from one-off workshops. Implement ongoing, school-based professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers can collaboratively develop strategies for differentiated instruction, CRT, and large-class management using available resources.
- **Integrate Social-Emotional Learning:** Provide training for teachers on self-care, emotional resilience, and trauma-informed practices to help them manage their own well-being and better support students.

7.3 School Administration Level

- **Foster Supportive Leadership:** School administrators should advocate for their teachers and students, creating a supportive environment and distributing resources as fairly as possible.
- **Promote Community Engagement:** Develop stronger partnerships with parents and the local community to create a support network for students, perhaps through feeding programs or homework clubs.

Finally, empowering teachers to be effective agents of change requires a fundamental shift from holding them solely accountable for student achievement to holding the system accountable for providing them with the conditions necessary to succeed. This includes manageable workloads, adequate resources, relevant training, and emotional support. Without this systemic commitment, the achievement gap at Nyumba Yanga and similar schools will persist.

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