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Peer support in sub-Saharan Africa: A critical interpretive synthesis of school-based research

Rafael Mitchell

School of Education, University of Bristol, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns an aspect of schooling in sub-Saharan Africa which receives limited attention in official education discourse – namely, that students themselves often bear educational responsibilities for the access and learning of their peers. Informed by postcolonial and decolonial scholarship, this critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) of school-based research from the region provides a taxonomy of students' roles and responsibilities with respect to the education of their peers. The study reveals positive and negative aspects of such support. The expectation of mutual support amongst students reflects a collectivist orientation in the region, and the material realities of teaching and learning in historically under-resourced environments. Where peer support focuses on improving learning then evidence is largely positive, both for those giving and receiving support; however, where students' access to education is reliant on peers (which is the case for many disadvantaged learners, including children with disabilities and those from linguistic minorities) then the adequacy of these arrangements is questionable. Peer support cannot compensate for exclusionary policies and underinvestment in necessary professional support and infrastructure. This study finds that peer support is a key and neglected aspect of education quality in the region. The implications of this for progress towards global and regional policy priorities are considered, alongside lessons for research and practice.

1. Introduction

This paper argues that peer support is a key aspect of schooling in sub-Saharan Africa which has received limited attention in official education discourse, including in high-level policy documents, consultancy reports and teacher education programmes. One explanation for this oversight relates to the dominance of research from the Global North in knowledge production on education (Tabulawa, 2013; Read, 2019), which has had the effect of establishing European and North American countries as “reference societies” or models for emulation (Crossley, 2019). This is problematic where there are fundamental divergences in worldviews and assumptions about the nature and purposes of schooling, and the responsibilities of different actors for achieving this.

For Komatsu et al. (2021), a salient characteristic of Western European and North American cultures is “ontological individualism”, or the assumption that *the individual precedes society*, with the latter resulting from individuals acting to maximise their self-interest. Conversely, much scholarship from sub-Saharan Africa points to a more collectivist orientation (Nsamenang and Tchombé, 2012; Phasha et al., 2017;

Tamale, 2020). An example of this is “Ubuntu”, a traditional Southern African belief system based on communitarian principles which emphasises interdependence within the community and humanity towards others (Takyi-Amoako and Assié-Lumumba, 2018, p9–10). Ugandan theorist Sylvia Tamale (2020) asserts the continued relevance of a collectivist orientation in the region, despite the influence of colonial and neoliberal globalisations:

“The shared values of communal life and group solidarity, embedded in the philosophical concept of Ubuntu...differentiate African people from modern Euro-American societies...[E]ven as individualism has penetrated the market-driven societies of neoliberal Africa, many fundamental aspects of African lives remain anchored in collective relationships and efficacy...where individuals are part of a unity that is interdependent and mutually beneficial.” (ibid., p.12).

While we should be wary of essentialising narratives, and acknowledge limitations to the kinds of generalisations which can be made across a socio-culturally diverse region such as “sub-Saharan Africa” (ibid., p19), the basic distinction between more individualistically-oriented Euro-American societies and more collectively-oriented African ones has been widely observed, and is supported by research in the

E-mail address: rafael.mitchell@bristol.ac.uk.

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field of cultural psychology (Markus and Kitayama, 2010; Serpell and Adamson-Holley, 2017).

What is the significance of a collectivist orientation for schooling in the region? One implication, as I illustrate in this paper, is a common expectation of mutual support amongst students, which results from social norms that highlight “interconnectedness in the needs, rights [and] obligations” of all members of the school community (Assié-Lumumba, 2017, p.12). An aspect of schooling in the region which is understandably *missing* from policy instruments developed in the North is that students themselves tend to share responsibilities for the education of their peers. As we will see in this paper, this has particular significance for the access and learning of disadvantaged groups, and it is important to consider whether current peer support arrangements are fulfilling young people’s right to education (UN, 1948), or global aspirations for an “inclusive and equitable quality education” for all (SDG4, UN, 2015). Scrutiny of peer support practices is important for understanding their adequacy, both for those *giving* and those *receiving* support. Because in addition to the potential benefits, there are also risks that such support fails to meet the educational entitlements of disadvantaged learners (UNICEF, 1989), or places unreasonable demands on those providing support in lieu of the necessary state investment in teachers, infrastructure, and other resources necessary for a good quality education. One finding which emerges from this synthesis of evidence from the region is the significance of peer support practices for progress towards continental (African Union, 2016) and global policy priorities (SDGs). However, before further details of the design and findings of the study, I will consider the place of peer support in learning theory, and its status in influential education quality frameworks intended to inform policy and practice in the region.

1.1. The status of peer support in learning theory

While different research traditions give variable attention to the cognitive or social dimensions of learning (Bruner, 2009), a comprehensive understanding of learning must account for both the internal psychological processes of knowledge and skill acquisition which take place inside a learner; and processes of external interaction between the learner and their social, cultural and material environment (Illeris, 2009). As such, learning is always socially situated (Lave, 2009) and peers are a key aspect of the external conditions for learning (Illeris, 2009). One means through which learning occurs in young people is through *talk*, with Vygotsky (1978) likening speech to the senses, as a tool for coming to know the world (p26). Through action, communication and cooperation with others, learners not only acquire knowledge and understanding in particular areas (including the school curriculum), but also experience emotions and motivations which affect their engagement with different learning domains or activities (Illeris, 2009). The potential for peer interactions to advance an individual’s learning is reflected in the notion of the “zone of proximal development”, which refers to tasks that a learner may only achieve with adult guidance or “in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86).

The ideas above provide a basis for empirical studies of learning and the environmental conditions which support it for different types of learner in different settings (Tikly, 2011). Nevertheless, quite limited research has been undertaken which is both grounded in the sociocultural and material realities of school life in the region, and which explores the relationships between classroom practices, learning experiences and outcomes for different groups (Ngware et al., 2014; Frost and Little, 2014; Rose et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of pedagogical research from across low- and middle-income countries (i.e. not limited to the region), broadly supports the notion of “interactive pedagogy” (Westbrook et al., 2013), involving the “flexible use of whole-class, group and pair work where students discuss a shared task” (p2). The pedagogical value of pair and group work is consistent with sociocultural learning theory (discussed above) and research from elsewhere in the world. For example, based on the synthesis of evidence from

Anglo-American contexts, the UK’s Education Endowment Fund (EEF, 2021) finds that peer work can have a high positive impact on learning, where students collaborate on a shared task “in a group small enough to ensure that everyone participates” (np).

Before continuing, it is worth clarifying that the work on learning theory referred to in this section does not derive from African contexts (Hountondji, 1997) and that the value of peer interactions have been seen in terms of supporting or enhancing learning, rather than enabling access to formal education, a point we return to later.

1.2. The place of peer support in education quality frameworks

Having established the rationale for peer support, this section considers the place of peer support within influential education quality frameworks which have sought to inform teaching practice in sub-Saharan Africa. In doing so, I consider frameworks developed by international actors and agencies – the World Bank, UN agencies, and academic researchers – with the intention of providing an indicative view of peer support in such instruments.

The first framework I consider is the World Bank (2019) *Teach* lesson observation instrument, which has been used in Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania and elsewhere in the region. *Teach* is presented as an evidence-informed means of evaluating the quality of teaching in low- and middle-income countries. As a human capital theory (HCT-) oriented institution, the World Bank values education in terms of its *outcomes*. In African countries historically the World Bank’s outcomes of concern have included school enrolment and completion rates, attainment in literacy and numeracy, and more recently socioemotional learning. Evidence for the World Bank, and other HCT-oriented institutions, principally derives from effectiveness research, whereby input-process-output models and quantitative datasets are used to calculate the effects of educational inputs and processes on specific outcomes. As such, peer support is not of *intrinsic* value, but of interest insofar as certain types of statistical evidence¹ have demonstrated its efficacy for achieving outcomes of concern. *Teach* identifies 28 characteristics of effective teaching, two of which relate to peer support: “The teacher promotes students’ collaboration through peer interaction” and “The teacher provides students with opportunities to take on roles in the classroom” (ibid., p14). The World Bank team explain the benefits of such forms of participation as follows:

“classroom roles and responsibilities...such as cleaning up after an activity or leading students in some aspect of a lesson [...can promote] self-management skills (e.g., emotional processes, cognitive self-regulation)...” (Molina et al., 2018, p30).

Within this framework, then, the value of peer support is conceived in terms of learning gains for those providing support, rather than peers who may benefit from it. Furthermore, in focusing principally on the actions of the teacher, and limiting attention to *the lesson* as the unit of analysis, *Teach* overlooks other important aspects of education quality in the region (Guthrie, 2019). A possible explanation for these omissions is the lack of engagement with research evidence from classrooms in the region. Despite claiming to have given a “special focus [to] evidence from low- and middle-income countries” (Molina et al., 2018, p1), *Teach*’s statements about effective teaching derive primarily from Anglo-American contexts (Mitchell, 2019a, p2–3), including all evidence relating to peer support.

In contrast to the World Bank, UN agencies tend to take a rights-based perspective on education quality, which considers young people’s rights *to*, *in* and *through* education (Tawil et al., 2012). As such, the modalities of student participation in school are important for judgments of quality, independent of their effects on academic or other

¹ Studies which do not include statistical measurement of educational outcomes are typically excluded from HCT-oriented analyses (e.g. Evans and Acosta, 2021, p21).

outcomes. For example, the Child-Friendly Schools (CFS) framework (UNICEF, 2009), which is grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), stresses the importance of learner-centred pedagogy and young people's active participation in decision-making processes (p.5) as intrinsic goods in themselves – necessary for the fulfilment of rights, aside from their instrumental functions. The CFS framework is intentionally circumspect about how children's rights are enacted in different national or regional contexts: the manual states that peer learning and child-to-child initiatives *may* be appropriate (p.149), including peer counselling and other forms of psychosocial support for vulnerable learners (p135). However, limited details are provided, and peer support is treated as an uncomplicated and axiomatic good – an aspect of child-friendly practice, without reference to students' agency or the demands such activities may place on learners.

UNICEF's more recent Structured Pedagogy Framework (Chakera et al., 2020), which targets education decision-makers in Eastern and Southern Africa, focuses on an issue which has been repeatedly cited as a characteristic of quality provision in the region (e.g. Tikly, 2011; Evans and Acosta, 2021) but which remains poorly specified to date. Drawing on evidence from the region, it recognises the contribution of factors beyond individual teachers and lessons to the quality of education, including the one-to-one provision of learning resources, and support for learning outside the school. It highlights the importance of mobilising parents and caregivers as "co-educators" in young people's learning (Chakera et al., 2020, p12), but makes no reference to the role that students themselves play in supporting the access and learning of peers.

The EdQual framework (Tikly and Barrett, 2011) was developed as a means of evaluating education quality in low-income countries based on Nancy Fraser's social justice theory and Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach. Education quality is evaluated according to principles of *inclusion, relevance and democracy* – or, the extent to which all learners have opportunities to achieve educational outcomes of relevance to themselves and their communities, identified through processes of public dialogue and decision-making. EdQual locates "a good quality education" at the intersection of enabling conditions at the school, home/community, and policy level (Tikly, 2011, p17). Using the EdQual framework, school-based research in African contexts identifies key enabling inputs and processes, including structured pedagogy (discussed above), school self-evaluation, and school-based professional development. Again, no reference is made to peer support as an aspect of education quality, but EdQual does not claim to provide a comprehensive model, but "starting points for debate and suggestions for ongoing research around education quality and social justice" (Tikly and Barrett, 2013, p201). This paper will demonstrate that peer support is an overlooked facet of education quality in African schools which warrants additional policy, practice and research attention to better understand the adequacy of existing approaches for fulfilling young people's entitlements (UNICEF, 1989), and making progress on international educational targets (SDG 4; African Union, 2016).

2. Study design

This study reviews existing research to develop fresh theoretical insights on the nature of peer support in schools in sub-Saharan Africa, identifying the different forms and functions of peer support reported in the literature, and their implications for understandings of education quality in the region. It is concerned with the range of peer support practices in basic education, whether formal or informal, inside or outside lessons, the result of national- or school-level policies, or initiated by students themselves. It addresses the following questions:

What range of school-based peer support practices are reported in the education research literature from sub-Saharan Africa? And, with what implications for education quality in the region?

There are several distinct types of review with established procedures for the systematic and transparent identification, evaluation and synthesis of evidence from empirical studies (Gough et al., 2012). The

most familiar types of systematic review in the field of education are *aggregative*, in the sense that they synthesise evidence from multiple observations of the same phenomena (Noblit & Hare, 1999). A requirement of such work is that "the concepts (or variables) under which those data are to be summarised are largely secure and well specified" (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006, p.2). This is not the case for a neglected topic such as this: despite references to peer support practices across a range of classroom and school-based studies, the topic itself has not been the focus of systematic investigation in empirical research, and no previous studies have comprehensively examined this issue in any particular national or cross-national context. The need for conceptual groundwork in this area informed the decision to undertake a review which is interpretive rather than aggregative in nature. Critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) emerged in the field of health research (ibid.) as a means of theoretical development through the synthesis of diverse forms of evidence. It involves strategies for assembling and analysing evidence which are familiar in qualitative research, including the iterative development of guiding research questions, a dynamic and mutually informative process of evidence collection and inductive analysis, and the development of a synthesising argument (ibid. p10). While eligibility for inclusion in an aggregative review is based on formal assessments of research quality, the principal consideration for inclusion in a CIS is *relevance*, with material purposefully selected based on its anticipated pertinence to the research focus (Depraetere et al., 2020). Since its introduction in 2006, recommendations have been made for increasing the transparency of this approach (ibid.) which have been followed in reporting this study.

With CIS, as with other forms of interpretive research, the researcher's own positionality and hermeneutic resources shape the study itself (Fricker, 2007). In this sense it is significant that I am a white British researcher and did not receive my own schooling in the region, but have been involved in African education since 2007, initially as an in-service education coordinator for primary teachers in Tigray, Ethiopia, and later as a researcher and consultant working across the region. My relationship with the continent has always been one of privilege – for example, as an early career teacher I was appointed to a senior position at an Ethiopian college for which I would not have been qualified in my own country (Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020); and over the last decade I have worked at elite UK universities with greater access to research and funding opportunities than most researchers in the region. I try to use this privileged position to amplify the experiences of disadvantaged groups in the region, which in many cases includes teachers themselves (e.g. Fekede & Tynjälä 2015; Tikly et al., 2022), while also maintaining a reflexive awareness of the potential harm that may result from a white foreign national occupying this space (Cole, 2012; Reid, 2021).

The process of assembling materials for this CIS began with my ethnographic study of the participation and influence of school-level actors at a primary school in Tigray, Ethiopia (Mitchell, 2017a, 2017b), an unanticipated focus of which was the "one-to-five" student network system, an endogenous peer support strategy (Mitchell, 2019b). My familiarity with research from the region was enriched through work on the African Education Research Database (AERD), a systematic index of education publications by researchers based in 48 countries in sub-Saharan Africa since 2010 (Mitchell & Rose 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020). For this study, I searched titles and abstracts of 3044 AERD publications using the search terms "peer" (83 studies), and browsed the database to identify additional school- and classroom-based studies likely to report interactions between students. Since South Africa was not included in the original AERD protocol, I conducted a Scopus search using the string: "peer support" AND "education", with outputs limited to publications from that country. In addition to studies identified through these means, I considered publications by researchers based outside the region which I was aware of through extended engagement with the field; however, I did not undertake structured searches of databases to identify such work, in order to foreground publications by

African-based researchers. As such, the review involved “purposive selection with flexible inclusion criteria (not necessarily aiming to identify and include all relevant literature)” (Depraetere et al., 2020, p4).

In reviewing the literature particular attention was paid to school and classroom-based studies which included rich accounts of life in school, with doctoral theses reporting sustained fieldwork proving to be a useful source (e.g. Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013 [Ghana], Milligan, 2014 [Kenya], Ewa, 2016 [Nigeria]). The point of departure for conceptualising the different forms and functions of peer support was my own previous work on the modalities of student participation in Ethiopia (Mitchell, 2019b), which continued to evolve as evidence was incorporated from other studies. NVivo was used to support inductive analysis of the evidence and the development of a synthesising argument (presented in the following section). In total 30 studies were included in the synthesis from the following countries: Botswana 2, Cameroon 1, Eritrea 1, Ethiopia 5, Ghana 1, Kenya 3, Lesotho 1, Malawi 3, Nigeria 2, South Africa 3, Tanzania 3, Uganda 2, Zambia 2, Zimbabwe 1 (see Appendix A). While geographically broad, coverage is biased towards publications from Anglophone countries, which reflects the dominance of English in academic knowledge production globally and my inability to read in other languages.

Beyond serving accountability purposes (Depraetere et al., 2020), the details provided in this section may be of use to others seeking to mobilise evidence from schooling in the region to address different substantive issues of concern. As I demonstrate in this paper, using the AERD (alongside other resources) to develop a critical interpretive synthesis is a viable means of mobilising African education research to inform ongoing policy, practice and research agendas.

3. Findings

Based on a critical interpretive synthesis of peer support practices reported in publications on schooling in sub-Saharan Africa, my synthesising argument is as follows: Peer support practices in the region reflect a view of students as a resource or asset of the school with educational responsibilities towards their peers. This is consistent with social norms that highlight interdependence and social responsibility (Phasha et al., 2017; Takyi-Amoako and Assié-Lumumba, 2018; Tamale, 2020), which are valued educational outcomes (Serpell, 2011; Jukes et al., 2018). Students’ responsibilities towards their peers include facilitating access to education for disadvantaged groups such as children with disabilities and those from linguistic minorities; teaching and regulating the conduct of classmates; and in some cases providing psychosocial support for vulnerable learners. There are positive and negative aspects of this support. Where peer support is academically oriented, with a focus on teaching and learning, the evidence is largely positive for those giving and receiving support. However, where young people’s access to education is reliant on peers (in terms of physical access to buildings, or linguistic access to instruction or curricula), then the adequacy of these arrangements is questionable. The evidence shows that peer support can involve the delegation of extremely challenging tasks to young people ill-equipped to discharge them, and is often insufficient to fulfil young people’s entitlement to an inclusive, good quality education.

In the following sections peer support practices identified in the literature are discussed according to their function:

- i) Facilitating access to education for disadvantaged learners
- ii) Peer teaching
- iii) Regulating the conduct of peers
- iv) Psychosocial support

i) Facilitating access to education for disadvantaged learners.

Where one-size-fits-all provision does not meet young people’s access needs they are often dependent on peers in order to access education. Peer support in this area tends to take the form of “invisible work”

(Hatton, 2017) – informal, voluntary, ad hoc arrangements which are overlooked in policy and official education discourse. Such support reflects social norms of interdependency and collective responsibility; however, in many cases it is also doubtful whether these practices fulfil students’ right to an inclusive, good quality education. This is illustrated with reference to educational access for young people with mobility and sensory impairments, and those facing linguistic barriers.

Students with mobility impairments are often reliant on peers carrying them into school buildings (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013; Bannink et al., 2016). Where there is commitment from local communities and school authorities, classrooms can be constructed with step-free access or ramps installed (Smith et al., 2017); as such, it is important to recognise that the physical inaccessibility of buildings reflects exclusionary norms, while also reinforcing the view that children with disabilities do not belong in school. While peer support can help with physical access, it does not overcome this rejection which students can find humiliating. For example, in an ethnographic study of a basic school in rural Ghana, one student explains that his classmate stopped coming to school:

“because he cannot climb these things (pointing to the stairs). Every day we carry him and we do that during break time too... Sometimes he will not go to break because he feels ashamed when we always carry him. One day he said he will not come to school again and he stopped.” (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013, p.182).

A student with physical disabilities tells the researcher:

“School is not good at all... All my friends [disabled students] have stopped school... If my parents don’t force me I will stop school, I swear!” (ibid., p183–184).

Students with sensory impairments can be reliant on peers to access the taught curriculum. Evidence from mainstream schools in Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia and elsewhere shows teachers using pairing techniques to provide assistance for students with visual and auditory impairments (Kangwa et al., 2003; McConkey & Mariga, 2011; Mukhopadhyay et al., 2012; Elder et al., 2016). In the words of one teacher:

“The classroom is organised so that each blind child is helped by another child to read numbers and so on.” (McConkey & Mariga, 2011, p.11).

Such arrangements have been advocated by disabled people’s organisations in the region and are often received positively by researchers. For example, one team describes these practices as “a culturally responsive approach to implementing inclusive learning... [and] meeting the needs of diverse primary school students in western Kenya” (Elder et al., 2016, p.413). Such practices promote social integration and friendships between students and reinforce norms of social responsibility (Kangwa et al., 2003). From the perspective of social integration, pairing arrangements are preferable to physically grouping students according to perceived abilities, for example the “traffic light” system reported in South Africa, which serves to “spatially contain, regulate and reinforce difference” (Ngcobo & Muthukrishna, 2011, p.363).

Nevertheless, we might also question the adequacy of these arrangements. At times it appears to involve the delegation of responsibilities to students which teachers themselves find too challenging to discharge. For example, at school in Botswana, researchers observe:

In one of the classes visited, learners without disabilities explained concepts in “home-signs” to a student with hearing impairment, to help their friend understand. The class teacher for that particular class confirmed, “Since I am not trained in sign language I am depending on these kids to explain the concepts to her.” (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2012, p.6).

“Home signs” refers to an improvised system of communication through gestures, and we can question whether this form of peer support fulfils the right of students to an inclusive, good quality education.

Students from linguistic minorities may also be reliant on peer support to access education. For example, in ethnolinguistically diverse parts of Botswana, there are schools where teachers do not share a common

language with their students (Mokibelo, 2016). In the absence of national guidelines on this issue, informal communication strategies are used, such as students translating for their peers. As Mokibelo notes,

“what students say to each other is not readily available for the teacher to use and build on. The teacher cannot emphasise, explain or elaborate on what the learner has interpreted because the teacher does not understand what the learner has said.” (ibid., p.188).

The researcher questions young people’s capacity to sufficiently understand the language and content of instruction in order to adequately translate it for their peers: this is “a sophisticated linguistic act...at a very young age based on material that they may not have mastered” (ibid.). In common with the other evidence considered in this theme, a recurrent concern is the adequacy of peer support arrangements to meet students’ access needs.

ii) Peer teaching.

Peer teaching has a long history within African educational institutions, from the “age grade” system to formal religious instruction (Girma, 1967; Omolewa, 2007; Nsamenang & Tchombé 2012; Ng’asike, 2014). In modern schooling, there is evidence of students taking on responsibilities for teaching their peers, either as a result of national policies (e.g. Ethiopia [Nigusse & Tsegay 2015]), interventions by civil society organisations or researchers (e.g. Malawi [Jere, 2014], Rwanda [Malik, 2018]), teacher or school instigated practices (e.g. Eritrea [Yonas & Kroon 2011], Kenya [Milligan, 2014]), or the initiative of students themselves (Nigeria [Ewa, 2016]). Sociocultural learning theory affirms the value of such support, as previously discussed (e.g. Vygotsky, 1978).

The one-to-five student network system in Ethiopia is a sophisticated example of an endogenous peer support system (Nigusse & Tsegay, 2015; Mitchell, 2019b). Within the network system, top-performing students (“network leaders”) are distributed around the classroom to support the learning of their peers as academic authorities, group work facilitators and behavioural models. The network system was something of an outlier in the sense of being an official government-mandated peer teaching policy for primary to tertiary level education institutions. More common are arrangements in individual schools and classrooms, such as the peer maths programme described by Milligan (2014) at a rural secondary school in Kenya. This compulsory lunchtime programme, introduced by the headteacher, was viewed positively by students. In an illustrative comment, a female student favourably compares the quality of peers’ explanations to those of teachers:

“There are some topics that I didn’t get it clear [in earlier grades but] now when the students explain it, they explain better than the teachers did before. Somehow when they are explaining, this makes me to get more clear and into deeper.” (Milligan, 2014, p233).

Despite widespread reference to peer teaching practices across the region, whether as a student-initiated practice, or a formal school-level policy, there has been no systematic study of the nature, prevalence or outcomes of peer teaching practices in the region.

iii) Regulating the conduct of peers: Behavioural models and enforcers.

A few studies report what might be described as “positive” behavioural management strategies involving peer support. For example, a Cameroonian teacher describes distributing “the most active students” around the class to supervise collaborative activities (Kuchah and Smith, 2011, p125–126). The one-to-five network in Ethiopia applies similar principles to ensure that every student has a pro-school behavioural model at their desk:

“Even before the teacher enters the class, network leaders take out their textbooks and turn to the correct page: they stand to greet the teacher; copy the date and title from the board; reinforce calls for silence; and act quickly upon instructions.” (Mitchell, 2019b, p104).

Nevertheless, more prevalent in the literature are accounts of peer regulation mechanisms involving coercion, as is the case where school cultures reflect authoritarian power structures (Harber, 2017). Coercion is often reported in relation to formal student positions, such as monitor

and prefect, which carry delegated authority and responsibility for maintaining conditions in line with teachers’ expectations. Studies report monitors using fear and violence to regulate peers’ conduct, for example, beating their classmates with their hands or with sticks (Poluha, 2004; Ewa, 2016) or recording the names of miscreants for teachers to follow up (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013; Mitchell, 2017a).

The monitoring role is demanding, as the following extract from Ketema School demonstrates:

“In the absence of a teacher, the pair [of monitors] worked cooperatively to maintain working conditions – she at the teacher’s desk, he at the back, or vice versa. Each carried a slip of paper on which they wrote the names of...classmates who were being noisy, fighting, or moving between desks...[Both] occasionally used light physical force, hitting or pushing...students back to their seats...Requests to use the toilet or the blackboard were directed to the monitors...[They] did not personally benefit from the working time made available to their peers, and...[they] sometimes attempted to continue with their own work until rising noise levels compelled them to put down their pens and intervene.” (Mitchell, 2017a, p165–166).

At another school in rural Ghana a female prefect explains:

“I must always write names because I don’t want to be caned. I tell my friends to help me write the names so that I can always get someone... because the teachers will not understand if you say ‘no one made noise’. Hmmm, he will beat you yourself. So you have to write names whether you like it or not!” (Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013, p168).

As these extracts indicate, the monitoring role can require post-holders to negotiate a number of tensions – between individual and collective interests; allegiance to peers and to teachers; and resistance or acquiescence to authoritarian systems. What is largely absent from the literature is discussion of the educational function of monitors’ work, in terms of maintaining conditions of learning in the absence of a teacher. For example, the monitoring system at Ketema School enabled students to continue with their schoolwork independently or engage in peer teaching activities when the teacher was absent (Mitchell, 2017a, p.166). In a region where teacher absence is commonplace (Tao, 2013) we might question whether a good quality education necessarily involves some form of system for maintaining learning conditions in the absence of a supervising adult.

iv) Psychosocial support.

Peer support has been a feature of school-based psychosocial provision for vulnerable learners in various countries, including Lesotho (Nyabanyaba, 2010), Malawi (Jere, 2014), South Africa (Visser, 2005) and Zimbabwe (Chitiyo et al., 2008). The evidence cited here pertains to evaluations of formal interventions resulting from partnerships between schools, government agencies, universities and other external actors, where in each case, student volunteers were recruited and trained to provide emotional, motivational and other forms of support for learners whose educational participation and outcomes were considered to be at risk, generally due to the loss of parents.

Primary schools have made use of “buddy systems”, whereby vulnerable students are paired with mentors (generally described as “active students”) who work alongside their peers, following-up on their attendance and progress in school. As “buddy” suggests, fostering friendships in school is a key element of these strategies. Where the perspectives of programme beneficiaries are reported, they tend to make positive assessments of such support. For example, two male students in Malawi were quoted:

“I have a class buddy. he is very helpful because he assists me in school work. We do homework together and we usually chat about me being an orphan, though he has both parents alive, and he comforts me when my granny has shouted at me.”

“I am closest to [named buddy]. He encourages me not to lose heart, but to be hoping for a better future.” (Jere, 2014, p.162).

A more demanding programme in secondary schools serving disadvantaged communities in South Africa, involved training students to

serve as peers counsellors with the aim of reducing “high-risk behaviour related to HIV/AIDS, substance abuse, and various forms of crime” (Visser, 2005, p.148). Peer counsellors provided drop-in services in their own schools and could refer their classmates to external agencies. Echoing the point about friendship above, these students coined the term “befrienders” to describe their role (ibid., p.153).

As noted earlier, these forms of peer support capitalise on students as an asset of the school. Some researchers have explicitly commented on the acceptability of these forms of cooperative support with reference to Ubuntu or collectivist social norms in the region (e.g. Jere, 2011; Jukes et al., 2014). Nevertheless, some students are evidently unwilling to take on such responsibilities, as indicated by the withdrawal of some students (a minority) from the psychosocial interventions in Malawi and South Africa mentioned above. Furthermore, psychosocial provision can be challenging and require advanced skills, suggesting a need for greater investment in professional support from teachers and social workers (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015).

4. Discussion and conclusion

This critical interpretive synthesis (CIS) explored peer support practices reported in the education research literature from sub-Saharan Africa, and their implications for education quality in the region. I identified four main functions of peer support: peer teaching; regulating peers' conduct; psychosocial support for vulnerable learners; and facilitating educational access for disadvantaged learners, such as those experiencing physical, sensory or linguistic barriers in mainstream provision. As noted, the responsabilisation of students in these ways reflects a collectivist orientation in the region and the material realities of teaching and learning in historically under-resourced environments.

The different modalities of peer support raise specific quality issues. Where students take on responsibilities to facilitate educational access for students disadvantaged in and by one-size-fits-all provision, the adequacy of peer support arrangements warrants particular scrutiny. While such support may foster friendships, social integration (Kangwa et al., 2003) and promote social responsibility as a valued educational outcome in the region (Serpell, 2011; Tamale, 2020), it can also be inadequate to fulfil the educational entitlements of recipients. Evidence considered above shows students stepping in to compensate for inaccessible and exclusionary language policies, instruction and curricular materials, and building design practices, (e.g. Mukhopadhyay et al., 2012; Adzahlie-Mensah, 2013; Mokibelo, 2016). While this is laudable, it also prompts questions as to whether receiving instruction through home signs or ad hoc translations from peers is sufficient for progress towards educational policy goals. Similarly, we can question whether peer-based psychosocial support is best conceived as a supplement to, rather than a substitute for, state-funded professional provision. In this and in other examples, the responsabilisation of students poorly compensates for inadequate state investment in education. This echoes critiques of extractive cost-sharing and community participation policies in the region (e.g. Rose, 2003; Taylor, 2009), and the effects of neoliberalism on schooling elsewhere in the world (Done and Murphy, 2016).

The evidence synthesised here suggests that peer support is a school-level enabling condition (Tikly and Barrett, 2013) for a good quality education in sub-Saharan Africa, and should be recognised as such in education quality frameworks. That said, strong lessons for practice call for additional research attention. While this paper provides conceptual groundwork for such efforts, it is very much the start rather than the end of this process; additional studies are needed to explore the nature, prevalence and efficacy of peer support practices in the region. A related point is the necessity of looking beyond the teacher and the lesson as units of analysis for evaluations of education quality in the region – with implications for teacher-focused lesson observation instruments, such as the *Teach* (World Bank, 2019). This has long been recognised in the field of inclusive education, which has developed more holistic instruments for evaluating the quality of provision, such as the *Index for Inclusion*

which has been used in South Africa and Tanzania (Engelbrecht et al., 2006; Polat, 2011), and the *Inclusive Education Matrix* in Uganda (Smith et al., 2017).

That this crucial aspect of African schooling has so far received scant attention in education quality debates and instruments is symptomatic of the ways in which scholarship from the region is too often “overlooked and undervalued” (Maclure, 2006). While in the past African scholarship may have had limited circulation, it is now readily accessible through online journals and platforms such as the African Education Research Database, African Journals Online and OpenDOAR. Disregarding this work is not only an epistemic injustice (Walker and Martinez-Vargas, 2020), but also self-defeating, given the importance of African education research for equitable and inclusive progress towards national, regional and global policy goals.

As this paper has illustrated, CIS is a viable means of mobilising the African education research evidence base to inform ongoing policy, practice and research agendas. A particular strength of CIS is that it enables the integration of evidence from diverse studies, including those typically discounted by effectiveness research and other traditions with narrow eligibility requirements. Beyond this study of peer support, I hope the CIS approach outlined here may prove useful for other substantive areas of inquiry.

Data availability statement

There are no new data associated with this article. No new data were generated or analysed in support of this research.

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Appendix A – Publications included in the CIS

Adzahlie-Mensah, V. (2013) *Being ‘nobodies’: school regimes and student identities in Ghana*. PhD thesis. University of Sussex. Available at: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/48419/>

Girma Amare (1967) ‘Aims and purposes of Church education in Ethiopia’, *Ethiopian Journal of Education* X(X), 1–11.

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Ewa, M. (2016). *A study of the inclusion of primary school children in a rural district in Nigeria*. Ph.D., University of Manchester.

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rural Malawi: A flexible approach to learning [Thesis, University College London]. <https://doi.org/10.35648/20.500.12413/11781/ii295>

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