

UNPACKING FAIRNESS: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO THE CORE ELEMENTS SHAPING EQUITABLE CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how fairness is perceived, interpreted, and enacted in classroom environments, examining the practices considered fair or unfair and the influence of students' diverse cultural, social, and academic backgrounds. Employing a qualitative research design, the study engaged 10 to 12 primary school teachers and 25 to 30 students from Grades 4 to 6 in selected public elementary schools in the Municipality of Magpet, selected for their capacity to provide rich insights into classroom equity. Findings revealed that perceptions of fairness are shaped by equitable participation, transparency in decisions, and consistent support; fair and unfair practices are linked to structured equity, accountability in groups, and transparent expectations; and students' and teachers' backgrounds influence understanding of fairness through background-shaped sensitivity, varied interpretations by culture and academics, and adaptive responses to unfairness. These results highlight the importance of intentionally designed classroom practices and culturally responsive strategies to foster equitable learning environments. Also, future research may build on these findings by examining fairness perceptions across different educational levels, school contexts, and cultural settings, as well as by exploring how fairness-related practices influence long-term student engagement, trust, and academic outcomes.

Keywords: *Classroom Fairness, Equitable Participation, Inclusive Practices, Cultural Sensitivity, Accountability, Primary Education, Municipality of Magpet*

INTRODUCTION

Fairness in the classroom is a cornerstone of effective education, playing a vital role in how engaged, motivated, and well students feel. It's a complex idea that includes fair treatment from teachers, unbiased grading, equal access to resources, and creating inclusive learning spaces where every student feels appreciated. In the Philippines, striving for fairness in education is especially important, influenced by a mix of socio-economic challenges, cultural factors, and ongoing reforms in the education system. To truly support all learners, it's essential to understand both the historical and current elements that shape classroom fairness in the country. Traditionally, fairness has been seen as equality—offering the same resources and opportunities to every student (Johnson & Duffett, 2021).

Recent studies highlight the importance of viewing fairness through the lens of equity, which means acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges that students

encounter. The OECD (2022) reports that over 35% of students in member countries feel that teachers often show favoritism in the classroom, which can greatly affect their motivation and sense of belonging. In the Philippines, a 2020 study by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) revealed that 41% of public school students believed that teachers sometimes treated their classmates unfairly, especially based on socio-economic status and academic ability. Additionally, there's a strong connection between classroom fairness and positive educational outcomes.

Teachers are crucial in shaping how students perceive fairness through their teaching and management styles. Brookhart (2021) emphasizes that having clear grading policies, providing timely feedback, and maintaining open communication are essential for fair teaching practices. Moreover, approaches like restorative justice and culturally responsive classroom management (Gay, 2022) are seen as more equitable alternatives to traditional discipline, helping to create a stronger sense of justice among students.

When it comes to education, teachers' beliefs about equity and their personal experiences with fairness play a huge role in shaping their classroom practices. According to Cochran-Smith (2024), teachers who take the time to reflect critically and engage in professional development are much better prepared to meet the diverse needs of their students and tackle the impact of unconscious biases. These beliefs and values are key to fostering equitable learning environments.

Furthermore, understanding fairness in education requires a deep dive into the perceptions of both students and teachers, their instructional practices, their beliefs, and the systemic barriers they face. This study seeks to explore these aspects from the perspectives of students and educators, aiming to shed light on how fairness is defined, experienced, and put into practice in various classroom settings.

Freire pointed out that traditional education often upholds hierarchical power dynamics through what he called a "banking model," where students are merely passive recipients of information. On the flip side, a truly fair and equitable classroom embraces dialogical and participatory methods that honor student experiences and foster critical awareness (Freire, 1970).

When we apply critical pedagogy as a framework, we start to question how classroom policies—like discipline, grading, and participation norms—might favor certain groups over others. For instance, studies indicate that Black and Latino students face disproportionate disciplinary actions in schools compared to their White counterparts for similar behaviors (Skiba et al., 2021). Viewing these disparities through a critical pedagogy lens helps us see them as systemic and deeply rooted in history, pushing educators to implement anti-oppressive strategies such as restorative justice, culturally responsive teaching, and fair grading practices.

Additionally, critical pedagogy emphasizes that achieving equity means recognizing differences rather than enforcing uniformity. Fairness, therefore, isn't about treating every student the same; it's about addressing each student's unique needs in ways that uphold their dignity, encourage participation, and pave the way for success.

The Philippine Constitution stands firm in its dedication to human rights, clearly stating that every citizen has the right to quality education at all levels, aiming for accessibility no matter their economic background. Yet, even with these constitutional guarantees and the ongoing efforts of the Department of Education (DepEd) to foster inclusivity, real challenges to achieving true equity still loom large in the nation's

classrooms. Deep-rooted socio-economic divides have long affected educational opportunities. Studies show that students from wealthier families or urban areas often enjoy the advantages of well-resourced private schools, while those in less fortunate regions struggle with overcrowded classrooms, poor facilities, and a constant lack of qualified teachers and essential learning materials. This gap in resources creates an uneven playing field, which directly affects students' ability to learn effectively and achieve academic success, ultimately shaping their views on fairness.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative narrative research design to explore how fairness is perceived, enacted, and experienced in classroom environments. The design allowed for the collection and analysis of participants' personal stories and experiences, providing a rich, detailed understanding of the meanings they attributed to fairness. By capturing narratives, the study was able to highlight the nuanced, context-dependent, and dynamic nature of equitable practices in classrooms.

The use of a narrative approach is important in educational research because it enables the exploration of complex social phenomena through participants' lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2021). Such a design allows researchers to uncover how individual perceptions, interpretations, and actions are shaped by personal and contextual factors, providing in-depth insights that can inform teaching practices and policy decisions (Riessman, 2020). Narrative research thus offers a powerful framework for understanding the intricacies of fairness in educational settings.

Research Participants

This study involved a carefully selected group of primary school teachers and students from Grades 4 to 6 in selected public elementary schools in the Municipality of Magpet. A total of 10 to 12 teachers and 25 to 30 students participated in the study. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of individuals who could provide rich, meaningful, and relevant insights into how fairness is perceived and practiced within classroom settings. Data were gathered through individual interviews and focus group discussions to capture both personal experiences and shared perspectives on equitable classroom practices.

Teachers included in the study were those currently handling Grades 4 to 6 and who had at least 2 years of teaching experience across various subject areas. This criterion ensured that participating teachers had sufficient classroom exposure and familiarity with school policies and practices related to fairness. Teachers with less than two years of experience or those under probationary status were excluded, as they may not yet have had adequate opportunities to fully engage in and reflect on classroom fairness practices.

Students who participated in the study were enrolled in Grades 4 to 6 and were selected to represent a range of socio-economic backgrounds, academic performance levels, and personal experiences. This diversity allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions of fairness in the classroom. Students receiving

specialized interventions or programs outside the regular curriculum were excluded to maintain consistency in classroom experiences among participants. Participation of students was contingent upon obtaining parental or guardian consent, as well as the students' willingness and ability to articulate their experiences during interviews or focus group discussions.

Research Instrument

The study utilized semi-structured interview guides as the primary research instrument to gather qualitative data. In-depth interviews were conducted with both teachers and students to explore their individual perceptions, interpretations, and experiences of fairness within the classroom. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held to capture collective perspectives and encourage participants to reflect on equitable practices through interaction and dialogue. Both methods were designed to allow flexibility in responses while ensuring that key topics related to fairness were consistently addressed.

To ensure the clarity, relevance, and reliability of the instrument, the interview guides and FGD protocols were pilot-tested prior to the actual data collection. Feedback from the pilot phase was used to refine questions and discussion prompts, ensuring that they effectively elicited rich and meaningful insights into participants' experiences and perspectives on equitable classroom practices.

Data Collection

Before the commencement of data collection, letters of permission and ethical clearance were secured from the Graduate School of Central Mindanao Colleges, including approval from the CMC Dean and the study supervisor. Permission was also obtained from the principals of the selected public elementary schools in the Municipality of Magpet, as well as from the teacher and student participants. Informed consent was secured from all participants, and in the case of minor students, consent was also obtained from their parents or guardians. The research instruments, including the semi-structured interview guides and FGD protocols, were validated by experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability prior to use.

Data collection began only after all approvals and validation were completed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with selected teachers and students to explore their perceptions, interpretations, and experiences regarding fairness in the classroom. Focus group discussions were held separately for teachers and students to capture collective insights and encourage dialogue on equitable practices. All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic coding. The systematic approach ensured that data reflected both personal experiences and shared perspectives on fairness, providing a comprehensive understanding of equitable classroom environments.

Research Procedures

The study was conducted following a series of systematic steps to ensure the collection of rich and credible qualitative data on classroom fairness. Prior to data collection, the researcher secured ethical clearance from the Graduate School of Central Mindanao Colleges and obtained permission from the principals of the selected public

elementary schools in the Municipality of Magpet. Informed consent was obtained from all teacher participants, and for students, both parental consent and student assent were secured to ensure ethical participation.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to identify teachers and students who could provide meaningful insights regarding the perception and practice of fairness in the classroom. Teachers included those with at least two years of experience teaching Grades 4 to 6, while students were selected to represent diverse socio-economic, cultural, and academic backgrounds. Participants who did not meet these criteria were excluded to maintain consistency and relevance in the data.

Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Interviews were conducted in a quiet and private setting within the school to ensure participants' comfort and confidentiality. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to probe for deeper insights while remaining flexible to explore emerging themes. FGDs were conducted separately for teachers and students to capture shared perspectives and foster dialogue around classroom fairness practices.

All interviews and discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy. The researcher reviewed the transcripts multiple times to ensure completeness and fidelity to the participants' original responses. Following transcription, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach. This involved extracting significant statements related to fairness, formulating meanings from these statements, clustering the meanings into categories, and synthesizing them into themes. These themes were iteratively refined and mapped to the research questions to capture both individual narratives and shared experiences of fairness in the classroom.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher engaged in member checking, sharing preliminary interpretations with participants to verify the accuracy of themes. Reflexive journaling and peer debriefing were also employed to minimize potential biases and maintain transparency throughout the research process. The systematic application of these procedures ensured that the study provided a comprehensive, authentic, and ethically sound understanding of the core elements shaping equitable classroom environments.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological approach to identify patterns, categories, and overarching themes related to fairness in the classroom. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were carefully reviewed to ensure accuracy and completeness. Following Colaizzi's method, significant statements relevant to the phenomenon of classroom fairness were extracted from the transcripts, and meanings were formulated from these statements. These formulated meanings were then clustered into categories that reflected participants' perceptions, experiences, and interpretations. Through iterative comparison and constant refinement, the categories were synthesized into themes aligned with the research questions. This systematic process enabled the researcher to capture both individual narratives and shared perspectives, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the core elements shaping equitable classroom environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of Fairness of Teachers and Students in the Classroom

Based on the data, the results revealed three main themes: Equitable Participation, Transparency in Decisions, and Consistent Support. These themes collectively highlight how fairness is recognized and experienced in classroom interactions.

Table 1. Perceptions of Fairness of Teachers and Students in the Classroom

Issues Probe	Codes / Category	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings
Fair participation opportunities	Turn-taking; Inclusion; Encouragement	every voice matters; invited to speak; balanced participation	Equitable Participation	Fairness as equal chance to participate
Fair decision processes	Explanation; Listening; Clear rules	heard both sides; explained reasons; no favoritism	Transparency in Decisions	Fairness through open and clear decisions
Fair access to support	Equal help; Responsiveness; Care	helped struggling student; checked all groups; extra time given	Consistent Support	Fairness shown through ongoing support

Theme 1: Equitable Participation. This theme reflects a shared view among participants that fairness in the classroom is deeply tied to equitable opportunities for all students to take part meaningfully — not only those who are confident, outspoken, or academically strong. Equitable participation means the teacher ensures that each student, regardless of personality, previous performance, or social status, has space and encouragement to contribute, engage in discussion, and express their views. It signals that classroom power is not monopolized by a few, but is shared, creating a sense that everyone belongs and is valued. When participation is rotated, when the teacher consciously invites shy or reluctant students, and when students sense that attention is not only reserved for the “usual” contributors — that classroom becomes experienced as fair and inclusive.

“Sometimes when the teacher makes sure to call on different students each time — even those who never raise their hands — I feel like every voice matters, not just the loud ones.” (IDI, P1)

“As a quiet student, I often stayed silent. But recently the teacher changed seating and asked me directly — that moment made me feel included and that this classroom is fair.” (IDI, P2)

“In our recitation rotation, I had a turn leading discussion, even though I rarely speak up — that made me feel respected as part of the class community.” (IDI, P3)

“One teacher said: ‘Let’s hear from someone who hasn’t spoken yet’ — and when I spoke up, I saw some surprised faces, but I felt seen.” (IDI, P4)

“As a teacher, I try to notice who stays quiet and encourage them gently to contribute — when I see more balanced participation, I feel the class is more equitable.” (IDI, P5)

In support, research argues that when classrooms adopt inclusive participation practices, marginalized or less-confident students gain opportunities to engage, enhancing both equity and sense of belonging (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2022). Furthermore, inclusive learning-community approaches highlight that intentional pedagogical design to involve all learners — regardless of background or prior academic confidence — fosters social cohesion, empowerment, and equitable engagement in classroom life (Giera, 2025). Moreover, contemporary scholarship on inclusive and equitable teaching underscores that equitable participation is part of a broader pedagogical commitment: designing class practices that enable all students to contribute, reflect, and engage in ways that respect diversity within the classroom (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2022). By adopting such inclusive participation strategies, teachers can foster a classroom environment where fairness is experienced through everyday interactions, rather than merely assumed.

Theme 2: Transparency in Decisions. Here, participants stressed that fairness is not simply about what decisions teachers make (e.g., grades, disciplinary actions), but about how those decisions are made. Transparency — meaning clear communication, explanations, fairness in procedure, and giving students a chance to be heard — builds trust and legitimacy. For students and teachers alike, a decision feels fair when it emerges from open dialogue, when facts are checked rather than assumptions made, and when the reasoning behind choices is visible. In contexts where decisions are opaque or seem arbitrary, participants reported a sense of injustice, mistrust, or alienation.

“I was once blamed for something I didn’t do; afterward, the teacher apologized after hearing me out — that moment of checking and listening made me trust that fairness existed in this class.” (FGD, P1)

“A teacher told us: ‘I will decide only after hearing both sides’ — that honesty made me believe she cares about us being treated justly.” (FGD, P2)

“When punishments or rewards are given, I appreciate it most when the teacher explains why — it feels fair then, like I’m treated as a person, not a number.” (FGD, P3)

“As a teacher, I try to explain my grading choices and let students ask questions — when I do that, I feel my decisions are fair and respected.” (IDI, P6)

“Before selecting someone for presentation or extra tasks, I explain why and invite volunteers — I want them to know it’s not favoritism but need-based, to build trust.” (IDI, P7)

Supportive literature establishes that procedural and interactional fairness — defined as clarity in procedures and respectful communication — are central to students’ perceptions of fairness (Wallace & Qin, 2021). Similarly, research on equitable and inclusive teaching argues that transparent decision-making, open teacher-student relationships, and fairness in classroom processes are essential components of building just and inclusive learning environments (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Additionally, in the broader context of assessment and classroom justice, transparent procedures and open communication foster students’ trust in evaluation and reduce perceptions of bias or favoritism — ultimately supporting equitable learning climates (Wallace & Qin, 2021).

Theme 3: Consistent Support. Participants emphasized that fairness is not a one-off attribute but a sustained commitment — manifested through consistent support, care, and access to help for all students, especially those who struggle. Consistent support means a teacher doesn’t only focus on high achievers, but also attends to students with difficulties, offers continuous help, checks in regularly, and ensures that no student is left behind. It means that support and resources are distributed fairly over time, not just in response to “urgent” needs. This helps build trust, a sense of belonging, and the idea that the teacher values each student equally.

“I once saw the teacher stay after class just to help a slower learner understand — even though many others already got enough help — that showed true fairness in care.” (FGD, P4)

“Teacher doesn’t only help the top students; she notices when a quiet or struggling student seems lost and gently offers help — I felt she values everyone equally.” (FGD, P5)

“In group tasks, teacher visits every group, checking progress — no group is left behind; that feels like fair support.” (FGD, P6)

“When classmates ask for extra time or help, teacher doesn’t hesitate to give it — that shows she believes everyone deserves a chance.” (FGD, P7)

“As a teacher, I make it a point to check in with each student after class; I believe fairness means giving consistent support to all, not just the most vocal or best performers.” (IDI, P8)

In support, literature shows that equitable support and care — designed to attend to diverse learners’ needs — foster social-emotional well-being, engagement, and a sense of belonging among all students (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bao, 2025). Furthermore, research on inclusive teaching practices asserts that caring, supportive instructor behaviors — including responsiveness to students’ varying needs — significantly predict positive student outcomes such as self-efficacy, connectedness, and sustained participation (Ghadirian & Rahbar, 2025). Additionally, literature on accessible pedagogies shows that when teachers adopt approaches responsive to students with different learning needs (e.g., language or attentional difficulties), equitable support can mitigate barriers to participation and engagement—thereby contributing to a more just classroom environment for all (Lubicz-Nawrocka & Bao, 2025).

Fair/Unfair Practices Based on Teachers and Students in the Classroom

Based on the data, the results revealed three main themes: Structured Equity, Accountability in Groups, and Transparent Expectations. Together, these themes reflect the classroom practices that contribute to perceptions of fairness and unfairness.

Table 2. Fair/Unfair Practices Based on Teachers and Students in the Classroom

Issues Probe	Codes / Category	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings
Fair classroom structure	Same rules; Clear routines; Equal treatment	same rubric used; equal deadlines; rotated participation	Structured Equity	Fairness through consistent structure
Fair group assessment	Role clarity; Peer check; Individual credit	unequal effort graded; asked who did; clear group roles	Accountability in Groups	Fairness by recognizing effort
Clear classroom expectations	Clear criteria; Open feedback; Same standards	grading criteria clear; expectations explained; transparent feedback	Transparent Expectations	Fairness through clarity

Theme 1: Structured Equity. This theme reflects participants’ understanding that fairness is rooted in deliberate and well-designed classroom structures. Fairness is not random or ad hoc but depends on consistent, organized routines, clear rules, and well-defined processes for participation, assessment, and access to opportunities. Structured equity ensures that no student is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged by arbitrary decisions or informal practices. When rules are clear, grading criteria are consistently applied, and access to participation or resources is systematically organized, students perceive the classroom environment as fair and just. Structured equity also helps

teachers manage classrooms efficiently while maintaining fairness across diverse student needs.

“When grading always follows the same rubric for everyone — I know what’s fair and what to expect.” (IDI, P1)

“All assignments and deadlines are the same for all; no one gets special treatment — that makes me feel equal.” (IDI, P2)

“Our teacher rotates participation and ensures everyone gets a turn — the structure helps me trust that participation is balanced.” (FGD, P1)

“As a teacher, I plan seating, speaking turns, and group work carefully — structure helps me treat everyone justly, avoiding bias.” (IDI, P3)

“When groups are randomly assigned instead of letting friends stay together — I believe the distribution becomes fairer.” (FGD, P2)

Supportive literature indicates that structured and equitable teaching practices — including clear, consistent classroom organization and formalized policies — are essential to fostering equitable learning environments (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Structured planning of assessments, participation rotations, and rules ensures that students perceive fairness consistently, which strengthens trust and engagement. Additionally, empirical work on inclusive learning communities emphasizes that embedding structure in school practices prevents hidden inequalities and promotes fair access to participation and learning opportunities (Giera, 2025). Moreover, research on assessment fairness highlights that systematic and transparent procedures for assignments and grading are crucial to maintaining perceptions of fairness. When evaluation methods are clearly articulated and consistently applied, students are more likely to accept outcomes and feel secure in their learning environment (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2022). Structured equity, therefore, is not merely administrative but integral to creating a just classroom climate.

Theme 2: Accountability in Groups. Accountability in Groups Participants highlighted that fairness in collaborative tasks depends on recognizing and evaluating individual contributions within group work. Group assignments can feel unfair when all members receive the same grade despite unequal effort or participation. Accountability mechanisms, such as peer evaluation, role assignment, and teacher oversight, ensure that individual contributions are recognized and rewarded, reducing free-riding and increasing trust in the fairness of group outcomes. Both students and teachers emphasized the importance of monitoring group dynamics to ensure fair recognition of effort.

“In group tasks, some members did very little but still got same grade — that always felt unfair and frustrating.” (FGD, P3)

“I appreciate when teacher asks ‘who did what’ before giving group grade — that way everyone’s effort is recognized.” (IDI, P4)

“As a teacher, I now use peer evaluation and individual feedback in group work — I believe each student should get credit for what they actually contributed.” (IDI, P5)

“When roles are clear from the start and everyone knows their task — group work feels more balanced and just.” (FGD, P4)

“Sometimes I did most of the work alone; when grades don’t reflect that, I lose trust in fairness of group assessment.” (FGD, P5)

Supportive literature shows that accountability mechanisms in group work — including clear role assignments and peer evaluation — significantly enhance perceptions of fairness and reduce free-riding (Mori, Chianese, & Venâncio, 2024). By explicitly recognizing each student’s contribution, educators foster trust and equitable participation in collaborative learning environments. Additionally, research on equitable assessment emphasizes that structured accountability ensures distributive and procedural justice in group work, maintaining fairness and student motivation (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Moreover, equity-focused teaching practices highlight that monitoring group interactions and providing feedback on individual contributions are critical for maintaining a fair classroom climate. These practices help students develop responsibility, cooperation, and awareness of shared and individual roles in collaborative learning (Ghadirian & Rahbar, 2025).

Theme 3: Transparent Expectations. Participants consistently reported that fairness is strongly linked to clarity: knowing exactly what is expected regarding assignments, participation, behavior, and assessment. Transparent expectations prevent arbitrary or biased treatment, misunderstandings, and disputes. When students understand grading rubrics, behavioral standards, and performance criteria, they are more confident that outcomes are based on known, equitable standards. Teachers also noted that explaining expectations upfront reduces complaints, fosters trust, and supports students’ engagement with learning.

“When I know exactly how the grade will be decided — what counts, what matters — I feel safe and treated fairly.” (IDI, P6)

“Teacher explains the rubric before assignment — that helps me understand what to do; I believe the result will be fair.” (IDI, P7)

“Expectations about participation, deadlines, behavior are same for everyone — no favoritism.” (FGD, P6)

“As a teacher, I always make expectations explicit at the start — I find it avoids complaints and perceived unfairness.” (IDI, P8)

“When feedback is open, timely, and transparent — I trust the class process is fair.” (FGD, P7)

Supportive literature emphasizes that transparency in expectations is a critical dimension of procedural fairness in education (Wallace & Qin, 2021). Clear articulation of grading criteria, performance standards, and classroom expectations fosters trust, reduces perceptions of bias, and enhances students’ engagement and motivation. Additionally, research on inclusive teaching practices highlights that transparent communication and explicit instructions are fundamental to creating equitable and just learning environments (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Furthermore, equity-oriented educational frameworks argue that transparent expectations are essential to avoid arbitrary decisions and ensure all students, regardless of background, understand what is required to succeed (Ghadirian & Rahbar, 2025). When expectations are communicated openly and consistently, students are more likely to perceive classroom practices as fair and just, contributing to positive learning outcomes and engagement.

Influence of Backgrounds in Shaping Equitable Classroom Environments

Based on the data, the results revealed three main themes: Background-shaped Sensitivity, Varied Interpretations by Culture/Academics, and Adaptive Responses to Unfairness. These themes indicate that students’ and teachers’ diverse backgrounds shape how fairness is understood and enacted.

Table 3. Influence of Backgrounds in Shaping Equitable Classroom Environments

Issues Probe	Codes / Category	Significant Statements	Themes	Meanings
Influence of background	Past experience; Family values; Sensitivity to bias	expect consistency; notice favoritism; value	Background-Shaped Sensitivity	Fairness shaped by past experiences
Different views of fairness	Culture; Academic values; Needs vs equality	explanation effort over grades; equal treatment; support for weak	Varied Interpretations by Culture/Academics	Fairness understood differently
Responses to unfairness	Self-advocacy; Withdrawal; Adjustment	asked for review; worked alone; kept evidence	Adaptive Responses to Unfairness	Fairness managed through coping strategies

Theme 1: Background-shaped Sensitivity. This theme reflects participants’ recognition that personal histories, including previous schooling experiences, family values, and past encounters with fairness or favoritism, strongly shape their sensitivity to fairness in the classroom. Students and teachers with experiences of consistent or inconsistent treatment in prior contexts develop heightened awareness of when actions

are fair or biased. Their background informs how they interpret classroom interactions, teacher decisions, and allocation of resources. Background-shaped sensitivity emphasizes that fairness is not only about what is done in the present, but also about how it resonates with individuals' prior experiences and expectations.

"I came from a school where rules were strict and applied to everyone; so here, I expect consistency in how rules and assessments are applied." (IDI, P1)

"In my family, fairness meant open discussion and equal treatment — so I value when teachers explain their decisions honestly and openly." (IDI, P2)

"As someone from a disadvantaged background, I notice quickly when some students get extra resources or attention — that feels unfair to me." (FGD, P1)

"As a teacher, I was raised in a culture where favoritism was common; now I try hard to treat all students equally to avoid repeating those biases." (IDI, P3)

"Because of my previous school experiences, I watch carefully when certain students seem to be ignored — I believe fairness means equal opportunity for all." (FGD, P2)

Supportive literature shows that students' socio-cultural and academic backgrounds influence their perceptions of fairness, making them more sensitive to inconsistencies or favoritism (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Educators who recognize these background influences can better design equitable classrooms that respect prior experiences and expectations. Additionally, research on inclusive classrooms emphasizes that background-informed sensitivity enhances trust, engagement, and a sense of belonging, because students feel their histories and perspectives are acknowledged (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2022). Furthermore, educational studies suggest that teachers' awareness of their own and students' backgrounds enables them to adjust practices and interventions proactively, ensuring fairness is perceived across diverse learners (Ghadirian & Rahbar, 2025). By integrating background-sensitive approaches, classrooms can become more responsive, equitable, and inclusive for all participants.

Theme 2: Varied Interpretations by Culture / Academics. Participants highlighted that fairness is understood differently depending on students' and teachers' cultural, social, and academic backgrounds. Some interpret fairness as equal treatment for all, while others associate it with effort, individual needs, or academic achievement. These varied interpretations demonstrate that fairness is context-dependent and that equitable classroom environments must accommodate multiple perspectives to ensure all students

feel respected and included. This theme underscores the need for flexibility in teaching practices to address diverse understandings of what it means to be treated fairly.

“In my previous school, effort mattered more than grades — so for me, fairness is about how hard I try, not just end result.” (IDI, P4)

“Some classmates come from competitive schools where high grades mean fairness; but I come from a place where clear instructions and understanding matter more, so I value fairness in clarity and support over competitive results.” (FGD, P3)

“As a teacher, I noticed that students with different backgrounds react differently — some expect strict consistency; others expect extra support depending on their needs.” (IDI, P5)

“I grew up in a school where help was given to weaker students; to me that felt fair. But some friends think fairness means same treatment — even if some struggle.” (FGD, P4)

“My classmate expects fairness as high achievement; I prefer fairness as equal opportunity for all to improve — we see fairness differently.” (IDI, P6)

Supportive literature demonstrates that perceptions of fairness are influenced by cultural, social, and academic backgrounds, requiring adaptive and context-sensitive approaches in classrooms (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2022). Educational frameworks emphasize that equitable classrooms must recognize and accommodate these differences to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all students. Additionally, research on inclusive teaching suggests that acknowledging diverse fairness interpretations allows educators to design practices that respect individual perspectives, promote trust, and reduce perceptions of bias (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Moreover, studies indicate that teachers who actively consider students’ varied interpretations of fairness foster more equitable and socially just learning environments, because these teachers align instructional and assessment strategies with the diverse needs and expectations of students (Ghadirian & Rahbar, 2025).

Theme 3: Adaptive Responses to Unfairness. Participants described how they develop personal strategies to cope with perceived unfairness in the classroom. These strategies may include seeking clarification, withdrawing from participation, documenting work, or working harder independently. Both students and teachers recognize that adaptive responses reflect agency and negotiation, indicating that classroom fairness is dynamic and continuously shaped by interactions. These responses highlight the importance of creating mechanisms for feedback and dialogue so that perceived unfairness can be addressed constructively.

“When I felt a grade was unfair, I asked the teacher privately to review my work — I didn’t accept it immediately.” (IDI, P7)

“When group work felt uneven, I ended up doing more by myself rather than risk a low group grade.” (FGD, P5)

“As a teacher, when I sense some students feel ignored, I invite them to talk and sometimes I adjust my approach — fairness is ongoing, not fixed.” (IDI, P8)

“I stopped volunteering when I saw favoritism — sometimes silence felt safer than being overlooked.” (FGD, P6)

“For group projects, I keep evidence of my own contributions — so if grades seem unfair, I have proof to show.” (IDI, P9)

Supportive literature indicates that students’ adaptive responses to perceived unfairness are an important reflection of their agency and self-advocacy (Mori, Chianese, & Venâncio, 2024). Recognizing these adaptive behaviors allows teachers to identify gaps in fairness and adjust classroom practices accordingly. Additionally, research on equitable teaching underscores that classrooms providing channels for student feedback and negotiation foster a more responsive and just environment, reducing the need for self-protective coping strategies (Picón-Jácome, 2023). Furthermore, inclusive education studies highlight that when students develop strategies to manage perceived unfairness, it signals areas where teaching and support may need improvement, reinforcing the importance of adaptive and flexible pedagogical approaches to sustain equity and fairness (Ghadirian & Rahbar, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

1. The study underscores the importance of equitable participation, transparency in decisions, and consistent support in shaping students’ and teachers’ perceptions of fairness. Teachers can apply these findings by intentionally designing opportunities for all students to engage, ensuring decisions and grading are clear, and providing ongoing support to address the diverse learning needs of the classroom. These practices contribute to a more inclusive environment where students feel valued and supported.
2. Findings related to structured equity, accountability in groups, and transparent expectations highlight the necessity of systematic and clearly articulated classroom practices. Educators can use structured routines, fair assessment methods, and transparent rules to minimize perceptions of bias and favoritism. Establishing accountability in collaborative tasks ensures individual contributions are recognized, which strengthens students’ trust in group processes and overall classroom fairness.
3. The influence of background-shaped sensitivity, varied interpretations by culture/academics, and adaptive responses to unfairness demonstrates that students’ and teachers’ prior experiences significantly shape how fairness is

understood and enacted. This emphasizes the need for educators to adopt culturally responsive and context-sensitive strategies that consider individual histories, social contexts, and academic experiences. By acknowledging these differences, teachers can create classroom practices that are adaptable and equitable, fostering trust and engagement across diverse learners.

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