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PERCEPTIONS OF GEOGRAPHY AMONG GHANAIAN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Foster OPOKU¹

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed at exploring the perceptions of geography among Ghanaian senior high school students. A total of 48 students comprising 24 males and 24 females were selected from two different public senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana to participate in the study. Data were obtained using in-depth interview and results were processed and presented using the thematic analysis approach with reference to the research objectives. Results from the study revealed that more than half of the students interviewed had positive perception of geography in terms of its relevance to people in the society. Regarding the definition and scope of geography, the overwhelming majority of the student respondents perceived geography as a description of the physical environment such as rivers, rocks, the universe, weather and climates, formation of landforms, among others. Others also perceived geography as the drawing of maps to show earth's features. Interestingly, more than half of the students expressed keener interest in physical geography with reasons being that physical geography lessons are more interesting and practical. More so, the majority of the students viewed geography lessons to be very interesting but difficult as compared to other social science disciplines. Significantly too, most of the students ranked geography as either second or third choice in considering programmes for higher education. The study recommends a further research into how students' perception of employment prospects in geography influence their attitudes towards geography.

Keywords: Geography, Senior High School Students, Perception, Phenomenological Study, Ghana

¹MPhil. Student., Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Department of Geography and Rural Development, 03220, Kumasi, GHANA., <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2522-8154>, fossfoss04@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Across the broad spectrum of life, geographical knowledge plays vital role as it enables people to face questions of what it means to live sustainably in an interdependent world (Thrift 2002; CCGE, 2005; Murphy 2007; Al-Nofli 2010; Gaité 2011; Balasubramanian 2014; Butt and Lambert 2014; Alam 2016). As an academic discipline, geography is regarded by many scholars as crucial to the success in other disciplines through its role as springboard to every other subject in the sciences and humanities (Baerwald 2010; Mukesh and Sarita 2015). In the views of Gaité (2011), geography unearths the innate potentials of man and offers people a lot of opportunities to learn useful life skills and to understand the world and the processes that occur in it at different spatial and social scales. Gaité (2011) reiterates that geography teaches man to discern and evaluate the result of the interaction of humans and society with nature, and reveals the process through which mankind has been adapting, living and mastering the natural forces to spread their habitat to most places on earth, to create the current global village. Geography thus provides knowledge about the world, reinforces basic geographic concepts and themes, examines values and dispositions about environments, and develops intellectual and practical skills (Joint Committee on Geographic Education 1984, as cited in Al-Nofli 2010).

In spite of the numerous prospects, Murphy (2006) believes that the impact of geographical scholarship on public debate is, for the most part, small. Research works have shown that geography is saddled with the problem of identity and recognition as a useful academic discipline across the globe (Harvey and Forster 2004; Helen 2007; Smith 2009; Gaité 2011; Thomas-Brown 2011; Mukesh and Sarita 2015; Fatima 2016). Harvey and Forster (2004) and Smith (2009) point out that the declining status of geography poses a great danger and is likely to affect the attitudes of students and their parents when making choices about university courses in terms of their relevance, employability and currency for the modern world. Fatima (2016) on the one hand opines that students in Pakistan, for instance, perceive Geography as a less important subject in comparison with other subjects, for adopting as a professional career.

Like many other institutions of learning across the globe, geography is studied as a formal discipline both at the second cycle and tertiary levels of education in Ghana. Thus, geography is offered in combination with other core and elective subjects including government, elective mathematics, history, economics and others in the senior high schools in Ghana. The rationale for teaching geography stems from the fact that issues of the environment are becoming increasingly important and geography, which studies the environment as a system has a vital contribution to make towards solving societal problems and further providing the critical foundation knowledge in the development of Ghana (CRDD, 2010). Given the need for geography education in Ghana, it is only imperative that perceptions of students studying geography are investigated into in order to help the Curriculum and Research Development Division (CRDD) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) formulate pragmatic policies in enhancing geography education and also instituting measures to whip up students' interest. Beyond the international context, students' perception of geography have been least explored among Ghanaian senior high school students. As reckoned by Kubiato et al. (2012), identification of perception of school subject is critical part of educational research. Hence, this study sought to fill this research gap. Specifically, the views of students as regards the meaning of geography, importance of geography, preferred aspect of geography, the choice of geography for higher education, challenges of studying geography, ways of addressing challenges in geography, among others are explored.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In placing the study in a scholarly perspective, the study sought to review works done on students' perception of geography in different international contexts. A review of the relevant literature revealed varied findings of empirical research on students' perception of geography across the globe though very little. Al-Nofli (2010) conducted a study with two groups of sixth and tenth grade students in Oman to explore their perceptions of certain aspects in geography. A total of 48 male and female students were sampled for the study. Findings of his study indicated that students were positive about geography. They found geography enjoyable and helpful to learn about countries, weather, maps, natural disasters, the world, and life styles. As regards the definition of geography, Al-Nofli's study revealed that the traditional aspects of geography dominated students' responses including but not limited to geography as the study of countries, weather, landforms, and maps.

Tomal (2010) also in his study focused on the general attitudes of high school students towards geography and the questions they wonder about. He sampled 405 students from seven different high schools in Samsun in Turkey to investigate the extent of students' interest in geography lessons in comparison with other courses they take, and to search for the reasons why students demonstrated both positive and negative attitudes towards geography lessons. Major finding of Tomal's study was that geography was ranked fourth by students among the most favourable courses.

In Czech Republic, Kubiato, Mzrakova and Janko (2012) explored the differences in certain dimensions of geography

perception between gender and grade level of lower secondary school pupils. 540 school pupils from six Czech lower secondary schools were sampled for the study. The study revealed that boys expressed more positive perception of geography lessons resulting in boys achieving higher scores in geography than the girls. The study further revealed that boys viewed geography as easy subject than for girls with the boys desiring to have geography lessons more often than girls.

[Akinuoye et al. \(2015\)](#) surveyed 200 national secondary school students from Hulu Langat District of Selangor State education ministry in Malaysia to explore their perceptions of geography education. Results of the study showed that 82.5 percent of the respondents preferred to take other subjects of choice in place of Geography.

[Mukesh and Sarita \(2015\)](#) examined the perceptions of 72 year one student teachers in Fiji National University on geography as a discipline. The findings of their study revealed that 45.83 percent of the respondent viewed geography as interesting while 48.61 percent also said they did not enjoy geography lessons. As regards the perception of students on employability of geography, 55.55 percent of the respondents strongly said it is difficult to get a job with a degree in geography. They viewed geography as a subject with limited employment opportunities.

[Fatima \(2016\)](#) surveyed 106 students of different academic levels in Pakistan to examine their perceptions about the concepts, themes, nature and scope of geography, choice of geography as an academic discipline, major problems they are facing while studying geography and possible career opportunities. Her research revealed that students had clear perceptions about the concept, themes, and nature of geography. As regards its significance, geography was viewed by intermediate students as a third or the least ranked subject while graduate, master and PhD Students considered it as a first or second ranked subject. Geography was perceived to be very informative and equally important for both girls and boys. Research, teaching and cartography were considered as major job opportunities by students. As a whole, geography was perceived as an interesting, multidisciplinary, and useful subject. Beyond the international context of students' perception of geography, a study relating to students' perceptions of geography in the Ghanaian context is important for teaching, learning and curriculum practices in Ghana and also to contribute to geographical knowledge for both local and international comparison.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a phenomenological research design in order to better understand the meanings students attribute to their experiences, perceptions and attitudes in geography education. As a research methodology, phenomenology is used to study the evolving patterns of meaning making that people develop as they experience a phenomenon over time ([Schreiber et al., 2011](#)). With this approach, the researcher assumes that there is an essence of a shared experience which is present. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon ([Patton, 1990](#) cited in [Khaled and Chiodo, 2004](#)). For the purposes of this study, a phenomenological research approach was employed with the view to gaining deeper understanding of the shared perceptions and experiences of two groups of senior high school students in Ghana as regards geography as a discipline. A total of 48 students comprising 24 males and 24 females were randomly selected from two different public senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana to participate in the study. The first group comprised 24 second year students (12 males and 12 females) and the second group consisted of 24 third year students (12 males and 12 females). Second and third year students were chosen for the study taking into consideration of their exposure to formal geography lessons for a minimum of one academic year. Data were collected by using semi-structured interview guide which was designed based on the themes identified during the extensive review of the related literature. The interview guide consisted of 10 questions (see Appendix A).

In ensuring validity and reliability of the research instrument, copies of the interview guide were given to two academics for review. Moreso, prior to the actual data collection, the researcher conducted a pilot study with a group of geography students from St. Jerome senior high school in the Offinso Municipal to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the questions. The actual data collection of the study was done at the beginning of the 2017/2018 academic year (i.e. September, 2017). Throughout the interview, the researcher took careful notes of students' responses, audio taped individuals as they answered questions and later transcribed the responses for analysis. Data collected were presented qualitatively using the thematic analysis approach with reference to the research objectives.

THE STUDY AREA

The geographical coverage of the study was confined to two public senior high schools in the Kumasi metropolis of Ghana. Kumasi is the second largest city in Ghana and its geographical location is latitude 6.35°–6.40° N and longitude 1.30°–1.35° W and is elevated 250 to 300m above sea level and covers a land area of 254 km² ([Adarkwa, 2011](#) cited in [Forkour](#)

and Agyemang, 2018). The Kumasi metropolis offers wide range of services spanning health, education, banking, communication, among others to its inhabitants and many satellite communities. The population of Kumasi is about 1,170,270 residents (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). There are 19 Public senior high schools within the Kumasi Metropolis and are required to offer geography as part of the school curriculum designed by the Ghana Education Service. The schools are classified into grades A, B, C and D. The categorization is based on the availability of facilities, geographical location, subjects offered and performance. At the time of the study, approximately 18,050 students offered geography in combination with other core and elective subjects. The students who participated in the study were selected from two of the 19 public senior high schools in the metropolis. The first school chosen for the study had 457 second year students while the second school had 512 third year students all enrolled in the General Arts Programme. The first school had a total of 2352 students while the second school had a population of 1955 students.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The focus of the study was to explore the shared perceptions and experiences of two groups of senior high school students in Ghana as regards geography as a discipline. The main themes, differences, and similarities as drawn from students’ responses throughout the interviews are analysed as follows:

The Meaning of Geography

In analysing students’ responses to what the subject matter of geography is all about, it was found that the students were fairly positive about the definition and scope of geography (see Table 1). While lower percent of the students, mainly third year students, perceived geography as the drawing and interpretation of maps to show earth’s features, the majority of the students viewed geography as an academic discipline that is concerned with the description of the physical environment such as rivers, rocks, the universe, weather and climates, formation of landforms, among others. The students’ view of what geography is all about to a large extent confirmed observations by Al-Nofli (2010) in Oman that students’ understanding of geography reflected relevant topics taught and learnt in school curriculum. Quite surprisingly, the human or cultural elements of geography did not reflect much in students’ responses. This finding is perhaps due to factors such as students’ preference, interest, like etc. in the physical component of the earth.

A careful analyses of students’ responses revealed two groups of geographers – *the interactionists* and *the placeists* (Walford, 1996). While year two students perceived geography as the study of the earth and formation of landforms, *inter alia*, the interactions between man and his environment, year three students viewed geography primarily as a discipline that is concerned with the knowledge and character of individual places, regions and countries.

Reference	Definition
(Year two male student)	“Geography is the study of the earth and its structure. It is the study of features of the earth and how they are formed.”
(Year two female student)	“Geography is the study of rocks, mountains, water and maps.”
(Year three female student)	“Geography is a subject that tells us about the things we see in other countries and it teaches us about maps.”
(Year three male student)	“Geography is the study of the earth and its description.”
(Year two male student)	“Geography is the study of the earth and its description and the interactions between humans and the physical environment.”
(Year three female student)	“Geography is the description of the earth.”
(Year three female student)	“Geography is the description of the earth and drawing of maps.”
(Year two female student)	“Geography is an academic field of study that studies the earth, environment, the space, solar system and the universe as a whole.”
(Year two male student)	“Geography is the study of where things are located on the earth and the reasons and significance of their location.”
(Year three male student)	“Geography is the study of maps.”
(Year three female student)	“Geography is the study of weather conditions and the location of places on maps.”

Source: Field Survey, 2018

Preferred Aspect of Geography

The study sought to find out students’ preferred aspect of geography and the reasons for their preferences. Analysis of data obtained through interviews with the students revealed that the overwhelming majority of both year two and year three students expressed keener interest in physical geography. This is congruent to findings from other studies where high school students expressed great interest in topics which were mainly centred on physical geography (Al-Nofli, 2010; Tomal, 2010; Fatima, 2016). When asked to give reasons for their chosen or preferred aspect of geography, the students

expressed that physical geography is easy to understand, very practical and interesting too. A second year male student for instance expressed, "I like physical geography because it is easy to understand and I perform well in it. It will also help me in my future career." Another third year female student also said, "I prefer physical geography to human geography because it is interesting, easy to understand and has more employment opportunities." Interestingly, about two-thirds of the students interviewed preferred physical geography to human, regional and practical geography because their teacher made physical geography lessons more interesting. It is worth-noting that the preference for physical geography could be attributed to students' fore knowledge of geography as the study of man and his physical environment. More so, the ability of teachers to relate discussions of certain topics to the physical environment could be a contributory factor regarding students' preference for physical geography. A second year female student, for instance, indicated that she likes geography much because her teacher is able to relate the topics to the environment and this enhances her understanding much. In spite of the majority opting for physical geography, some of the students indicated their preference for human and regional geography with the reasons not too far from those who opted for physical geography. Interestingly, only one student in year two indicated his preference for practical geography. He recounted, "I like practical geography because it is practical and easy to understand."

Relevance of Geography

All through the interview, the students were positive about the relevance of geography. All the students indicated that the study of geography is very important. Both second and third year students attributed the relevance of geography to the employment opportunities the discipline offers. More than half of the students emphasized that geography is important because it gives employment to people. For instance, a second year male student said, "Through geography, I can become a pilot in future." Another student also commented, "Geography is important because it offers job opportunities to people." Significantly too, students were able to point to the fact that studying geography helps to explain the lifestyle and activities of people from other countries. For instance, a third year female student said, "Geography is important because it helps to know other parts of the world." Contrary to [Al-Nofli's \(2010\)](#) findings in his study, most of the students interviewed were able to relate the relevance of geography to everyday life experiences. A second year female student for instance recounted, "Geography helps us to know whether it will rain or not so that people can plan their daily activities." Another male second year student said, "Geography helps farmers know when to farm and what to produce at what time." Essentially, most of the students were able to link the relevance of geography to everyday issues.

General Perceptions of Geography

Among other objectives, the study also sought to explore students' view of geography lessons whether interesting, easy or boring. All through the interview, the overwhelming majority viewed geography lessons to be very interesting. Significantly, none of the students interviewed viewed geography as boring or irrelevant subject. However, students' interest in geography were found to be more biased towards physical geography as already indicated. On why geography was perceived as interesting subject, a second year male student commented, "Geography helps me to appreciate the environment and the various earth's features." Another second year female student also said, "For me geography is an interesting and informative subject because it helps me to know many things around the world which are not taught in other subjects." Interestingly, one third year male student commented, "Through geography, I get to know and enjoy how nature works, for example, how eclipse occurs." Students were made to compare geography lessons to other subjects and determine whether geography lessons were difficult or not. The study revealed that about two-thirds of the students agreed to the fact that geography lessons are more difficult than the other social science disciplines including but not limited to political science (government), history, religious studies, French and economics. Both second and third year students found certain topics in physical geography including arid landforms, glaciation and coastal landforms too difficult to study. For instance, a third year female student lamented, "Some of the topics in geography like desert and coastal landforms and processes are too abstract to understand."

The Choice of Geography for Higher Education

Students were asked whether or not they would choose geography for higher education. Less than half of the students indicated they would choose geography for higher education with most of the students also opting for other disciplines. 11 students ranked geography as their first choice subject, 17 second choice, 14 third choice and 6 fourth choice. The implication of students choices is that geography plays second fiddle to other subjects mainly political science, economics and law. This is consistent with previous studies by [Akinuoye et al. \(2015\)](#) and [Fatima \(2016\)](#) where most students preferred to take other subjects in place of Geography. On why they would choose geography for higher education, both levels of students gave reasons such as, "The subject is relevant to my future career", "I enjoy studying geography so

much and would love to continue with it to the tertiary”, “The subject is very useful to the society”, “I perform well in geography”, “My teacher inspires me a lot and I want to be like him in future”, “There is prestige in geography” and “There are more job opportunities in geography.” In identifying the foundations of the psychological process by which students select their academic majors, particularly undergraduates, [Beggs, Bantham and Taylor \(2008\)](#) noted that students make choices capable of helping them achieve their educational and post-education goals. Hence, the match between the students’ abilities and interests and the abilities required by the major could largely influence their choice of a discipline for higher education.

Challenges of Teaching and Learning Geography

The study sought to identify challenges students face in the study of geography. From students’ responses, the majority of both levels of students emphasized inadequate field trips as the major challenge which makes geography lessons sometimes difficult as observed by [Fatima \(2016\)](#) and [Al-Nofli \(2010\)](#). The students expressed worry that they mostly study geography in the classroom even though some of the topics require field trips. A third year male student lamented, “Topics like coastal landforms, actions of rivers and erosion are too difficult to understand if not studied on the field.” Another female third year student recounted, “As geographers, we want to feel what we learn in class by going to the field but we are always in the classroom.” Apart from the challenge of inadequate field trips, higher percent of both second and third year students indicated that topics in geography are too loaded and very broad. One second year male student said, “Geography has so many aspects and we have to study all in order to pass our exams.” Another third year female student commented, “Geography is divided into physical, human and regional as well as practical geography and this is too much for me to study.” Significantly too, the students cited inadequate teaching aids and limited instructional hours as some of the challenges the face in the study of geography. Contrary to findings from previous research by [Akinuoye et al. \(2015\)](#), most of the students were satisfied with the teaching methods of their teachers with only two second year students who expressed worry with the methodology employed in geography lessons.

Suggested Ways of Addressing Geography Challenges

Having identified the challenges confronting them in geography lessons, students were asked to suggest ways of addressing the stated challenges. Students’ responses revolved around three main themes which included teaching methods, materials and content of the geography curriculum. With regard to the teaching method, the majority of both levels of students emphasized the need to send students on field trips so as to help them acquire first-hand experience of certain geographical concepts and ideas. A female student in third year said, “Topics like rocks, coastal features and mountains should be studied on the field in order to get better understanding of the concepts.” Similarly, another male student in second year indicated that, “If possible, students should be taken to field trips at least twice a term so as to help us see what we actually learn in the classroom.” This corroborates findings of [Al-Nofli \(2010\)](#) where majority of both sixth and tenth grade students placed heavy emphasis on field trips to make geography more interesting. Quite apart from field trips, students called for more instructional hours as well as active involvement of students in learning activities than the usual lecture method.

On the teaching materials for geography, students suggested that teaching aids should be made available to all schools so as to help effective teaching and learning. Most of the students especially third years suggested that laptops and projectors should be used more often to help students see for themselves how landforms are formed. As remarked by a third year male student, “My teacher keeps mentioning magma but I have no idea how it looks like so I think our teachers should come to class with laptops and projectors and show us some of these things.”

As regards the geography content, the overwhelming majority called for a reduction of topics since the topics are too loaded. Given the multidisciplinary nature of geography, almost all the students suggested that the topics should be reduced to help reduce the workload of students. Another key suggestion concerning the complexity of geography was the need to adopt “aspect specialisation” as practised at the tertiary level. Most of the students were of the view that students should be made to choose an aspect he or she likes in the last two years of study and concentrate on it. That is to say, students should be made to study all aspects of geography in first year and later select either physical or human and regional or practical geography for specialisation in their second and third years of study. A notable suggestion by one third year female student was that, “Since geography is broad, if possible students who read geography should be made to read three elective subjects rather than the usual four elective subjects in addition to the four core or compulsory subjects.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored senior high school students' perception of geography as a discipline in the Ghanaian context. The study focused on key areas such as students' understanding of the subject matter of geography, the relevance of geography, preferred aspect of geography, the choice of geography for higher education, challenges faced in studying geography, suggested ways of addressing challenges in geography, among others. Analysis of data obtained through interviews with the students revealed that the overwhelming majority of both year two and year three students were positive about geography as regards its definition and scope. Students' responses indicated that they all had a fair understanding of what geography means and the areas that geography is concerned with. However, students' responses to what geography is all about largely centred on the physical environment. On students' preferred aspect of geography, the study found that most of the students expressed keener interest in physical geography with reasons being that physical geography lessons are more interesting and practical.

With regard to students' view on the relevance of geography, the students commented that geography offers a wide range of employment opportunities and is useful for day-to-day activities of man. Interestingly, less than half of the students indicated they would choose geography for higher education with most of the students also opting for other disciplines. Significantly too, the study revealed that students perceived geography as interesting discipline though difficult to study as compared to the other social science disciplines. As regards the challenges that confront students while studying of geography, inadequate field trips, broader scope of coverage, inadequate teaching aids or materials and inadequate instructional hours were the major challenges identified from students' responses.

In the light of the above perceptions or findings, the following recommendations are advanced to improve geography education in Ghana and other institutions of learning. First, field trips should be integrated into the geography curriculum to enable students acquire first-hand experience. Field trips on relevant topics should be made compulsory with funding from the government. Second, schools should be supplied with the needed teaching aids or resources which would make geography lessons more practical than theoretical. Teachers should be supplied with technological tools such as laptops, projectors and videos of relevant topics to stimulate the interest of students during geography lessons. Teachers are also encouraged to resort to more innovative ways of teaching geography to make certain topics easy to understand. Third, topics learnt in geography lessons should be reviewed to address the issue of the voluminous nature of geography content. As reckoned by Al-Nolfi (2010), there is the need to review the geography curriculum in order to identify topics that receive a considerable emphasis at the expense of other important topics and also avoid trivial topics that hinder enjoyment of learning geography. Fourth, while admitting that the scope of geography is broad, splitting it into three different elective subjects or adopting aspect specialisation as suggested by the students will make it harder for them to understand and appreciate the human-environment connections or the role geographic techniques play in the study of human and environmental systems. It is therefore recommended that students who read geography should not be loaded with too many other elective subjects so as to allow them have adequate time and greater mastery of geography concepts. Thus, students who read geography should be given at most two other elective subjects in addition to the four compulsory or core subjects. Finally, while this study focused on the general perceptions of geography, the study recommends that further research be made into how students perceive employability prospects in geography and how those perceptions influence their attitudes towards geography.

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Appendix A

Interview protocol for students

1. What do you think geography as a discipline is all about?
2. Is the study of geography important? Please provide reasons to your answer.
3. How do you rate geography as a discipline? Is it interesting, difficult, easy or boring subject? Please provide reasons to your answer.
4. Geography lessons are more difficult than other subjects? Do you agree?
5. Which aspect of geography do you like studying and why?
6. Would you choose geography for your higher education at the university? Provide reasons for your answer.
7. If no, which subject would you prefer to study at the university and why?
8. Which rank would you give geography when considering a subject for higher education?
9. What challenges do you face in the study of geography?
10. What do you think should be done to address those challenges?