

Tales of African scholarship: experiences, curriculum, and policies for equitable higher
education in Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States
by

Ernestina Wiafe

B.Ed., University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, 2010
M.S., Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas, 2021

AN ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
College of Education

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Abstract

The overall objective of the three-manuscript dissertation, “Tales of African Scholarship: Experiences, Curriculum, and Policies for Equitable Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States,” is to document and analyze the academic journeys of African scholars across various contexts. Specifically, the dissertation explores and critically examines their lived experiences, focusing on their journey toward pursuing scholarship and on how curriculum and institutional policies shape their educational paths in Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States. By reviewing these experiences, the study aims to identify systemic challenges, highlight resilience strategies, and provide insights that support more just and transformative approaches to higher education curriculum and policy across the two regions.

In addition to the overall dissertation objective. Each of the three manuscripts centers on a specific purpose that addresses components of the dissertation.

Manuscript 1 is titled: “Tales of an African Woman in Pursuit of Scholarship: A Critical Educational Autobiography.” This qualitative, critical, educational, autobiographical research explores the researcher’s journey toward becoming a scholar as a first-generation African female immigrant who has navigated educational systems across two continents. Given the growing focus on autobiography in educational research, this study emphasizes the vital importance of individuals sharing their lived experiences to foster both personal and community growth. Using snail-sense African feminism and the Intersectionality theoretical framework, the research reflexively engaged with her scholarly journey, examining the broader sociocultural contexts that shaped her transnational educational experiences in Ghana, West Africa, and Manhattan, Kansas, in the United States. This critical educational autobiography study contributes to the literature on African women’s scholarship both at home and abroad, enhances the research methodology for

replication, and provides theoretical insights that can inform curriculum development and educational policy reforms. Ultimately, this research serves as both a personal reflection and an inspiration for other women navigating similar academic paths, highlighting the essential role of critical autobiographical research in understanding, and transforming educational landscapes.

Manuscript 2 of the dissertation is titled: “Curriculum Experiences of African Female Graduate Students in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa.” Africa contributes to over half of the world’s population growth, projected to reach 3.9 billion by 2100. Empowering women through education is essential for sustainable development. Yet, African women, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), face persistent barriers in accessing quality education, especially in underrepresented fields like STEM. This study examined the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students in the U.S. and sub-Saharan Africa, analyzing challenges and opportunities through the frameworks of Critical Postcolonial Curriculum Theory (CPCT), Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), and transnationalism. Using a qualitative comparative-case study design, it employed semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled participants from diverse sub-Saharan African nations and disciplines to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural environments, gender dynamics, identity negotiation, socioeconomic factors, and academic support systems influence the academic successes and challenges faced by female scholars from this demographic within two distinct educational contexts: the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa. This article also contributes to decolonizing education by shifting the conversation about female educational intersectionality beyond a Western or Eurocentric perspective, thereby enriching the theoretical framework in academic research.

Manuscript 3: Toward Equitable Education—An Analysis of Policies in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) critically explores how gender equity or related policies,

mainly aimed at promoting women's access and opportunities in higher education, are conceptualized, the priorities they set, and the specific strategies implemented to ensure fair treatment for female students. This study explores the University of Ghana, Makerere University, the University of Yaoundé I, and the University of Cape Town, SSA's leading institutions across West, East, Central, and Southern Africa. It fills an essential gap in the literature by exploring the concepts, priorities, and strategies embedded in gender equity policies within higher education in SSA, using Fairclough's (1995, 2010) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, which conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice, highlighting institutional and policy efforts to increase women's access to higher education in the region. Findings from the study contribute to an expanding body of research on social justice education, gender equity, and policy reform in African higher education, helping institutional leaders, policymakers, and advocacy groups strengthen gender equity initiatives and develop more transformative and actionable policies. The terms "female" and "women" are used interchangeably in this research.

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Approved by:

Co-Major Professor
Dr. F. Todd Goodson

Approved by:

Co-Major Professor (primary)
Dr. Kay Ann Taylor

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We are going

Heaven knows where we are going

We will know we're there

We will get there

Heaven knows how we will get there

We know we will

It will be hard, we know

And the road will be muddy and rough

But we'll get there

Heaven knows how we will get there

We know we will

We are going

Heaven knows where we are going

We will know we're there

Osibisa. (1971). Woyaya. MCA Records.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Juliana Ntiamoah, who believed deeply in me; my siblings, Melody, Aaron, Rita, and Deborah, for their prayers and continuous check-up calls. My daughters, Anaya, Adriel, and Ariana Idan, who have been part of this journey and have shown unwavering support and understanding; to my husband, Frank Idan, for his encouragement; and to everyone who has contributed to my growth and scholarly becoming, in ways both great and small.

Preface

My motivation for this research stems from both personal and intellectual sources, which include my lived experiences as an African woman who has navigated transnational academic environments and my scholarly dedication to equity, curriculum, policy, and decolonizing education. Having moved through higher education systems across different contexts, I have encountered the tensions, silences, exclusions, and possibilities embedded within them. These experiences compelled me to recognize the urgency of centering the global south educational experiences and African women's voices as legitimate and powerful sources of knowledge. For me, this research is not merely an academic exercise; it is very personal. As it is rooted in my desire to transform vulnerability into epistemic strength, to shift from the margins to intellectual authority, and to contribute meaningfully to curriculum and policy reforms in global higher education discourse.

This dissertation is three-independent-manuscript-style research with an interconnected central theme. My decision to undertake this dissertation style is motivated by both intentionality and innovation. After completing a traditional six-chapter thesis as a partial fulfillment of a Master of Science degree in Curriculum and Instruction and successfully publishing two peer-reviewed articles from that work, I witnessed how research could move beyond a bound document online in a K-State Research Exchange (K-REX) repository or pages sitting on a shelf in a library to expand scholarly conversations when disseminated in parts as journal articles. That experience reshaped my thought of what my doctoral dissertation could be. So, I asked myself, what can I do a little differently but scholarly? I wanted to gain new ways of doing a dissertation from what I have known and have become acquainted with. Then I decided to nudge myself a little more. Instead of repeating a six-chapter dissertation research which I feel I have had a good

grasp of, I sought to pioneer these three independent manuscript dissertations with a central theme approach within the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. These manuscripts will also provide me publication pathways while maintaining strong intellectual coherence across the dissertation.

The central theme of this research is advancing educational equity for African women through the interconnection of critical autobiography, curriculum experience, and institutional policy analysis across transnational contexts, specifically, both in the United States and sub-Saharan Africa, and how their lived experiences explain broader questions of curriculum, power, gender equity, and institutional support to their scholarly becoming. The first manuscript grounds the research in critical self-reflection, positioning personal experiences as a legitimate site of knowledge production. The second manuscript expands the lens to collective experiences, examining how African female graduate students interpret and experience curriculum across contexts. The third manuscript moves to the structural level, analyzing higher education policies in Sub-Saharan Africa to assess how gender equity is conceptualized and operationalized.

I hope this work inspires meaningful discussions about broadening dissertation options for doctoral students in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the College of Education, both at my university and worldwide. Specifically, I aim to promote the three-manuscript dissertation as a practical and impactful alternative to the traditional format. Additionally, I hope it provides a useful template for education scholars interested in this approach, while fostering ongoing conversations about how more models of this dissertation style can be thoughtfully incorporated into doctoral programs in the field of education.

Once again, I am thankful to my co-academic chairs and dissertation committee members who approved my pursuit of this dissertation path and provided support throughout the structuring and writing process.

We did it!

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Chapter 1 - General Introduction

Amid Africa's rapid population growth, empowering women through education is widely recognized as a key factor in advancing sustainable development (Liesel et al., 2016). Despite numerous programs, funding initiatives, collaborations, and advocacy efforts, such as those from the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship Program (CADFP), Fulbright Program, Ford Foundation, Andrew Mellon Foundation, Erasmus Mundus Program of the European Commission, and Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leadership, African females in higher education continue to face significant barriers to accessing quality education, particularly in underrepresented fields like STEM (Founou et al., 2023). Leading critics of gender inequality in higher education have consistently highlighted the historical disadvantages faced by African women, stemming from cultural norms, religious practices, and colonial legacies (Aina, 2010). Discussions on reforming higher education in Africa often emphasize gender as a critical focus for system-wide transformations. Yet, there remains limited literature that amplifies the voices and lived experiences of African women in higher education. As key stakeholders with firsthand insight, our absence in scholarly discourse underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address ongoing structural and systemic inequities affecting African female graduate students and our scholarly becoming.

In response to this gap, the dissertation, "Tales of African Scholarship: Experiences, Curriculum, and Policies for Equitable Higher Education in sub-Saharan Africa and the United States," is both timely and essential. The dissertation explored and critically examined the lived experiences of African female graduate students, focusing on their journey toward pursuing scholarship, engagement with curricula across universities in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa, and institutional gender-equity policies in first-ranked universities in the West, East,

South, and Sub-Saharan Africa. This review of experiences revealed systemic challenges, emphasized resilience strategies, and offered insights to promote more equitable and transformative higher education policies in both regions. Focusing on African women's voices, the study aimed to highlight their perspectives, identify similarities and differences across educational settings, and put forward practical recommendations to support culturally responsive and equitable higher education practices.

The dissertation is organized into three manuscripts following a three-independent-studies format linked by a central theme. Chapter 2, the first manuscript, is a critical educational autobiography titled "Tales of an African Woman in Pursuit of Scholarship: A Critical Educational Autobiography." Building on the autobiographical insights, the second manuscript, presented in Chapter 3, is a comparative case study examining the "Curriculum Experiences of African Female Graduate Students in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa." This study examines how African female students experience and interpret curriculum in both contexts, highlighting patterns that may extend beyond individual narratives. Finally, Chapter 4, the third manuscript, titled "Toward Equitable Education—An Analysis of Policies in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)," investigated how gender equity or related policies, mainly aimed at promoting women's access and opportunities in higher education, are conceptualized, the priorities they set, and the specific strategies implemented to ensure fair treatment for female students aimed at equity. Collectively, the dissertation is guided by three overarching research questions:

1. How do my educational experiences as an African female influence scholarship and help decolonize higher education in Ghana and the United States?

2. How do African female graduate students interpret their curriculum experiences in sub-Saharan African and United States higher education institutions?
3. How do institutional policies support gender-equitable education for African female graduate students in sub-Saharan Africa?

A critical reflection that emerged from narrating my educational journey in the first manuscript was whether my story is singular or reflective of broader structural patterns shaping the experiences of African female students. This reflection guided the subsequent inquiry into the experiences of other African female graduate students, particularly in examining how they navigate curriculum and academic spaces across transnational contexts. Building on any patterned and recurring themes identified in Manuscripts 1 and 2, the third manuscript turns to an analysis of what institutions are formally doing at the policy level to address these issues.

Each of these manuscripts is explicitly written for an intended journal for publication consideration. Therefore, each chapter followed the guidelines and format specific to the intended journal. Hence, their structure varies according to the journal's requirements. "Tales of an African Woman in Pursuit of Scholarship: A Critical Educational Autobiography" follows Taylor and Francis Publishers, *Life Writings* <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rlwr20> journal structure: Title page, abstract, keywords, main text introduction, material, and methods, results, discussion, acknowledgment, declaration of Interest statement, references, appendices (as appropriate); table(s) with caption(s) (on individual pages); figures; figure captions (as a list) is geared towards journal's aims, scope, and formatting guidelines

<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rlwr20/about-this-journal#aims-and-scope>

Curriculum Experiences of African Female Graduate Students in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa, manuscript structure and formatting guidelines followed the *Journal of*

Curriculum and Pedagogy <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ujcp20/about-this-journal#aims-and-scope>

Hence, the manuscript structure followed the formatting guidelines of <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=ujcp20#article-types>

Toward Equitable Education-An Analysis of Policies in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study will be submitted to the *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy* <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/znst20/about-this-journal>

Hence, the manuscript will follow the journal guidelines outlined at <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=znst20>

Researcher Positionality Statement

My scholarly journey is shaped by over fourteen years of lived, professional, and transnational engagement with education across Ghana in West Africa and Manhattan, Kansas in United States. I began my formal academic training at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), enrolling as a high school entrant in 2006, when the institution primarily served in-service teachers pursuing further studies through study leave, sandwich, or top-up programs. As part of one of the early cohorts of direct-entry high school graduates at UEW, I earned a Bachelor of Education degree in Social Sciences, with a major in Geography and a minor in Political Science. This early immersion in teacher education grounded my understanding of schooling in the interconnected realities of classrooms, communities, and national education systems.

I worked for seven years as a professional secondary school teacher in Ghana, teaching Geography primarily to first-year students, supporting Social Studies instruction, and teaching

Government when needed. During this period, I advanced to the rank of Assistant Director II and a boarding house mistress within Ghana Education Service. These professional experiences positioned me at the intersection of classroom practice and policy enactment, where I observed firsthand the effects of frequent curriculum reforms and the politicization of education, often driven by technocrats and bureaucrats who have lost touch of everyday classroom realities.

I was motivated by these observations to pursue graduate studies in Curriculum and Instruction in the United States to deepen my engagement with curriculum theory, policy, and practice. Since enrolling in a master's program in 2019, I have served as a graduate assistant in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education at Kansas State University, contributing to teaching, research, and service. I began my Ph.D. studies in 2021, marking seven years of sustained transnational scholarly engagement at the time of this dissertation.

As an African woman scholar whose academic and lived experiences span K–12 and undergraduate education in Ghana and postgraduate education in the Midwestern United States, I occupy both insider and outsider positions in this research. These transnational and cross-cultural experiences informed the conceptualization of this three-article dissertation and shaped the interpretive lens used to analyze African women's experiences in higher education, both on the continent and in the diaspora. My positionality as a former secondary school teacher, curriculum scholar, and African woman navigating academic spaces across borders informs my research commitments and methodological orientations. I center classroom-grounded knowledge, value practitioner insight, and foreground equity-oriented, context-responsive approaches to curriculum, policy, and educational reform. I approach this scholarship with critical attention to power, place, and voice, particularly in relation to African education systems and the global knowledge systems.

While my positionality informs my perspective, I addressed potential bias through continuous reflexivity, systematic coding procedures, and transparent documentation of analytic decisions to ensure that the findings remained grounded in the data sources of each study rather than my personal assumptions.

Qualitative Data Analysis Using MAXQDA

Given the dissertation design, data were organized, coded, and analyzed using MAXQDA, qualitative and mixed-methods data analysis software developed by VERBI GmbH. The software facilitated systematic coding, memo writing, retrieval of coded segments, pattern analysis, and data visualization across all three studies.

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Chapter 2 - Tales of an African Woman in Pursuit of Scholarship: A Critical Educational Autobiography

This work will be submitted to: Life Writing <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/rlwr20>

Ernestina Wiafe

Abstract

This qualitative, critical educational autobiographical research explores the researcher's journey toward becoming a scholar as a first-generation African female immigrant who has navigated educational systems across two continents. Given the growing focus on autobiography in educational research, this study emphasizes the vital importance of individuals sharing their lived experiences to foster both personal and community growth. Using snail-sense African feminism and the Intersectionality theoretical framework, the research reflexively engaged with her scholarly journey, examining the broader sociocultural contexts that shaped her transnational educational experiences in Ghana, West Africa, and Manhattan, Kansas, in the United States. This critical educational autobiography study contributes to the literature on African women's scholarship both at home and abroad, enhances the research methodology for replication, and provides theoretical insights that can inform curriculum development and educational policy reforms. Ultimately, this research serves as both a personal reflection and an inspiration for other women navigating similar academic paths, highlighting the essential role of critical autobiographical research in understanding, and transforming educational landscapes.

Keywords: critical educational autobiography, decolonizing, Intersectionality, snail sense African feminism, and scholarship

Introduction

People, by nature, lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives.¹ It is undeniable that humans need the freedom to tell their stories, as it enables us to achieve personal and community liberation.² Critical autobiographical writing is grounded in two foundational concepts: auto, meaning “of the self,” and biography. Before 1800, the term autobiography was used to refer to a single method of study about a variety of author-presented narratives.³ Over the past 30 years, autobiographical writings have developed into a significant body of work that examines a person’s entire life or parts of it through reflection, current events, and future goals. These works may be arranged chronologically or presented non-linearly, exploring human life through the lens of personal experience.⁴ Critical autobiographical research goes beyond personal narratives to serve as a research tool that systematically analyzes the writer’s own biography or life history within social, cultural, and political contexts.⁵

Over the years, numerous autobiographies have been published across various subgenres, e.g., travel memoirs, childhood narratives, educational experiences, teaching explorations, and culinary memoirs, authored by a diverse group of African women writers like Ama Atta Aidoo, Ken Bugul, Buchi Emecheta, Wangari Maathai, and Nawal El Saadawi, which highlight autobiography’s significant position in African women’s writing, serving as a foundational genre through which they contribute to representing African experiences and shaping African literature.⁶ African female writers have faced criticism, especially from male authors who dismiss their work as simply a reproduction of their life story.⁷ What critics failed to recognize is that the very act of writing about oneself, often dismissed as mere personal narrative, has in fact paved the way for a vital literary genre that amplifies African women’s voices and lays the

foundation for African women's writing. Hence, an autobiography not only highlights thematic concerns but also reflects the growing body of texts authored by African women.⁸

Statement of Research Problem

Although there is growing interest in the autobiographical writings of African women, a notable gap persists in the critical analysis of these narratives.⁹ Most existing writings take the form of memoirs, such as those by Maya Angelou, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Ken Bugul, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. While these works offer powerful personal narratives, they often do not provide an in-depth critical analysis of how these self-stories are embedded within broader social and cultural contexts or how they intersect with theoretical perspectives and existing literature. This gap points to a wider absence of literature, theoretical engagement, and methodological approaches that foreground the reflexive, critically informed, and culturally situated voices of African women within the broader body of knowledge.

Purpose

The study aims to present a critical educational autobiography that provides an introspective, theoretically grounded analysis of my pursuit of scholarship. It goes beyond simply recounting twenty-five years of my educational journey to critically examining the meanings, tensions, and cultural negotiations involved in my transition to being a first-generation college student and now a Ph.D. graduate, as well as my experience as a first-generation immigrant, and educated across continents: Ghana in West Africa and Manhattan in the U.S. It emphasizes how identity, positionality, and sociocultural factors influence the educational experiences of African women.

Significance

This study is a reflective and critically engaged voice of an African woman navigating systemic, structural, and personal challenges in pursuit of scholarship, a perspective often absent in traditional academic research. By recognizing personal narrative such as this as a legitimate source of knowledge, the study bridges a methodological and theoretical gap in the literature and offers insights that quantitative methods rarely capture. The findings enhance understanding of African women's academic experiences within broader sociocultural contexts and provide valuable insights to inform curriculum design, instructional materials, and educational policies and reforms. Ultimately, this research offers knowledge that can strengthen support systems and promote educational equity both across Africa and in international academic environments.

Research Questions

Two questions guide this critical educational autobiography:

1. How did intersecting factors influence my educational journey to scholarship across Ghana and the United States?
2. In what ways do my lived experiences as an African female scholar contribute to the decolonization of curriculum content and pedagogical practices in higher education?

Material and Methods

This qualitative study adopted a critical autobiography approach as both its methodology and an emancipatory praxis to analyze my educational journey from nursery school to Ph.D.¹⁰ The analysis is framed through the critical lenses of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense African feminism and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality.¹¹ In this research, critical autobiography is defined as a reflective and analytical examination of personal narrative, whether partial or complete, that situates individual experiences within broader social, cultural,

historical, and institutional contexts. Unlike traditional autobiography, this method extends beyond recollection to interrogate identity, power dynamics, and systemic influences.¹² As a qualitative method, critical autobiography gains credibility by amplifying underrepresented voices and challenging dominant narratives,¹³ aligning with Freire's view of writing as a means of liberation.¹⁴ This research approach positions me as both the subject and the primary research instrument, creating a direct, intrinsic connection between the self and the scholarly inquiry, which is why it's appropriate for the study.¹⁵

The research used the terms “education” and “academic” interchangeably and defined scholarship through three interconnected dimensions: academic excellence, merit-based awards, recognition, and giving back to society through community engagement.

Data Sourcing and Collection

I drew on a multi-modal self-archive spanning 25 years of crucial moments of my education. My journey from nursery school to Ph.D. is the data for this critical educational autobiography research. The self-data was collected from personal memory (which referred to specific individuals using their real names or assigned names), textual artifacts like scholarly outputs (publications, conference acceptance), personal journals (selected handwritten and digital), and academic records (e.g., admission letters, transcripts, projects, and assignments). Visual data, such as photographs and travel itineraries, were also referenced, as were institutional communications, including email correspondence with mentors/advisors, nominations, award letters, and other related documents.

During this critical educational autobiographical research, I expected specific memories to trigger feelings like excitement, annoyance, discomfort, restlessness, sadness, or triumph. I

kept a reflective memo¹⁶ to facilitate reflexivity. These feelings signaled meaningful moments during critical autobiographical writing; thus, the recordings also served as data.

Data Analysis Process

Polkinghorne emphasizes that the autobiographic researcher, as the data interpreter, is responsible for analyzing information and constructing meaning through personal understanding and narrative connections.¹⁷ My own life experiences, from nursery school to my Ph.D., form the core dataset for this study. I applied a critical lens to this self-data to construct meaning.¹⁸ Intellectually, physically, and emotionally, I engaged deeply with an Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI) analysis to uncover valuable insights.¹⁹ ITI is a qualitative data analysis method that begins developing themes from the outset of a study, rather than being a final reporting step.²⁰

Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI) Process of Inductive and Deductive Analysis

In applying ITI for analysis, my process involved constant negotiation between inductively constructed themes based on my self-data and deductively by applying critical theoretical lenses, as well as related literature, in ways that created a dialogue between my positionality, beliefs/ preconceptions from lived experience, and scholarly frameworks. Based on this, I constructed my themes for discussion with the research questions in mind while following the four phases of ITI recommended by Morgan and Nica (2020).

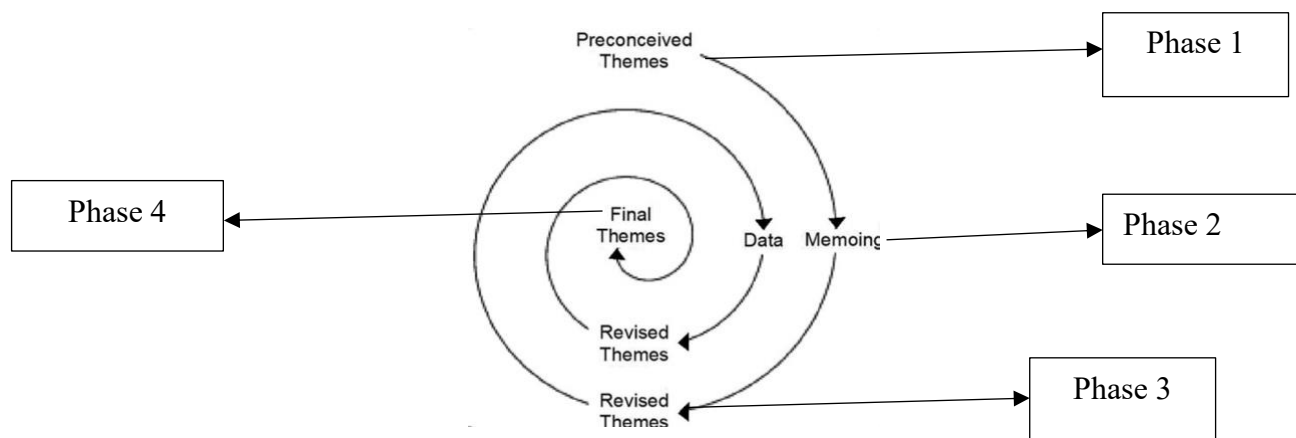


Figure 1: The process of revising the initial pre-conceived theme. Adapted from: Morgan and Nica 2020, p. 3.

Phase one: Accessing initial belief or preconceived themes

I began by outlining my pre-existing beliefs and preconceived themes. As an African female scholar, I drew from my personal experiences, previous research, and theoretical frameworks. I initially identified themes, such as intersectionality, as explored by Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. Within this, gender and cultural expectations arose (mirroring Snail sense African Feminism theory by Adimora-Ezeigbo), class and financial barriers (as related to Wangari Maathai in her autobiography *Unbowed* and Aidoo critiques in *Our Sister Killjoy*), immigration & institutional access (related to Freire's critique of the banking model), and resistant capital through navigating patriarchal norms, negotiations, and persistence considering for example how my gender, culture, and class shaped my education,²¹ and decolonial praxis, how my story challenges Eurocentric knowledge systems by centering African ways of knowing.²²

Phase two: Building new beliefs through encounter with the data

Here, I engaged directly with my data to develop and refine these initial beliefs. I consistently practiced writing reflective, methodological, and theoretical memos. This process helped me clarify my themes; for example, I strengthened my "decolonial praxis" theme by including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call to decolonize the mind. I also revised my theme of spiritual resistance into a more specific concept of "faith as epistemic resistance." This change helped distinguish between being spiritual and walking in faith as a Christian. To provide a biblical context, I drew on the theory of pneumagogy, which offers insight into the Holy Spirit's influence on Christians through teaching, guidance, and empowerment.²³

Phase three: Listing tentative themes

This Phase was a straightforward step in which I listed all the revised and tentative themes developed in Phase Two. This list of themes was then applied in the fourth phase to evaluate my final themes through coding of the self-data.

Phase four: Evaluating themes through coding, ensuring the themes are appropriate

Finally, I evaluated these themes by coding my entire dataset. Using MAXQDA,²⁴ I applied codes such as “Mentorship,” “Resistance,” and “Decolonizing” to assess whether my themes accurately reflected my journey. This process of meaning reconstruction, reinforcement, refinement, or rejection ensured my final themes were firmly grounded in my data. This helped develop the discussion section of my study.

Positionality Statement

My Christian faith, spirituality, and the place of the church in my pursuit of scholarship inform both the questions I ask and the way I interpret them. I acknowledge that the relationship between Christianity and decolonization is complicated, as the church has played two very different roles simultaneously. On the one hand, the Church has been used by colonial powers to control people, where they used a “tamed” version of the Gospel to make colonized communities obedient, submissive, and accepting of foreign rule, and it often dismissed Indigenous cultures and justified exploitation in the name of spreading Christianity.²⁵

On the other hand, Christianity was also transformed by the very people it tried to control. In African and African American communities, especially within the Black Church, faith became a source of resistance and hope. People connected with stories like the Exodus of the Israelites to the Land of Canaan and saw Jesus as someone who stood with the oppressed. As Howard Thurman explains in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, the message of Jesus speaks

to those “with their backs against the wall.”²⁶ Because of this, it is important to separate the institutional church from personal faith as they serve as a means of survival, resistance, and liberation. Which is evident in how leaders such as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Desmond Tutu drew upon Christian teachings and the church to advance the struggle for justice during the civil rights movement and against apartheid.

In this manuscript, I recognize the Church’s role in the painful histories of colonization and slavery. At the same time, I choose to critically examine, engage, and redefine Christian faith, spirituality, and the role of the Church on my own terms and experiences. This reflects my commitment to epistemic justice in decolonizing research, in which I claim my Christian faith and spirituality as legitimate ways of knowing, rather than being defined solely through colonial perspectives.

Results

This section recounts my journey from nursery to Ph.D. in pursuit of scholarship as an African woman who exercised her right to education across two continents. It is a journey driven by faith, grounded in purpose, and shaped by my cultural heritage. Long before this journey began, it was written: before He formed me in the womb, He knew me. Before I took my first breath in Ghana, the land of my birth, He had already set me apart for a purpose (Jeremiah 1:5 personalized).

Family Background

I was born on August 10, 1986, in Ghana to my Ghanaian parents, the late Lawrence Wiafe Twum, and my surviving mother, Madam Juliana Ntiamoah. I am the second of four siblings, my eldest brother is the firstborn, and I am the oldest of three sisters. Both my parents are Kwahu, part of the Akan ethnic group in Ghana, so their cultures share many similarities that

are helpful for a successful marriage. While my father hailed from the *etene ne bretuo*²⁷ *abusua* (family/clan) of Oboo-Kwahu, my mother, Juliana, is from the Asona²⁸ clan of Obomeng-Kwahu, but her ancestors settled at Akyeam-Sekyere, where they live to date. Oboo-Kwahu, Obomeng-Kwahu, and Akyeam-Sekyere are all located in the Eastern Region of Ghana.

I am a devoted and practicing Christian, a faith instilled in me by my parents, who were also devout Christians. Although I don't have many fun childhood stories to share, I vividly remember the excitement of Christmas festivities in our home before my father's passing. My father was a middle-class, self-employed businessman who owned a car spare parts shop in Kokompe, Darkuman, and a home in Santa Maria, both in Accra, Ghana's capital city. It was in Accra that I was born, raised, grew up, and eventually married to start my own family. Today, I am raising three daughters with my husband, Dr. Frank Idan.

Educational Foundations to High School Education

1990-1992: Nursery 1 & 2 (Pre-school to Kindergarten)

I began my early education at Santa Maria School Complex, a private elementary school located in the Santa Maria suburb of Accra, Ghana, where I attended Pre-K to grade one from 1991 to 1992. The community in which I grew up was closely-knit, where everyone knew each other. Old residents made a point of being the first to welcome and introduce themselves to their new neighbors, and vice versa. This warm and welcoming environment fostered a sense of belonging and collective responsibility, especially among the adults, who looked out for each other's children. This care extended to the children, who were considered the responsibility of every adult in the area.²⁹

1993-1997: Primary 1-5 Education (Grade 1 to 5) at Anchor of Hope School

When a new school opened two blocks from my house, I couldn't resist the temptation to join the other children in the neighborhood who had transferred from Santa Maria School Complex to Anchor of Hope Academy because of its convenient location. At Anchor of Hope School, where I was educated until my father's death, I worked hard to establish a strong foundation for future academic opportunities. I took on leadership roles as the school compound overseer, an assistant to a male head prefect, and one of a three-member team that represented my class in inter-class quizzes.

In fifth grade, I encountered a challenging situation that taught me a valuable life lesson. During a math lesson, I noticed an answer my teacher had written on the blackboard that I believed was wrong. Teachers often used a strategic approach: intentionally including incorrect information to assess students' understanding or attentiveness. This subtle method helped them see who was actively engaged and thinking critically about the lesson. I felt proud when I recognized and pointed out what I thought was a deliberate mistake. I hoped this would show my attentiveness, demonstrate that I was fully engaged in the lesson, and give me the confidence to share my observations. Regrettably, the teacher was upset by this, feeling his authority was being challenged,³⁰ and responded harshly towards me. His reaction included wanting to curse me, which attracted the attention of the school owner, other teachers, and the broader school community. Later, this was also reported to my mother as misconduct on my part, leading me to apologize to calm the offended teacher. Afterwards, I learned to avoid responding to such issues openly, handle them privately, or let them pass. Despite this challenging experience, my achievements at Anchor of Hope Academy continued to influence my academic development greatly.

1997-2001: Primary Six to Junior High School Education (Grade 6 to Middle School) at Santa Maria School Complex

A few weeks after my father's burial on January 25, 1997, my mother moved me back to Santa Maria School Complex, where my older brother was still a student. When I arrived, I was warmly welcomed by the school's proprietress who offered me a half-tuition scholarship to help ease my mother's financial burden of paying for both my brother and me to attend the school. At Santa Maria School Complex, I navigated the competitive environment of my new class while also facing increasing challenges at home. These issues arose from disputes over my late father's property (he passed away without a will), which led my mother to hand over the property documents for the boys' quarters where we lived, and his room, which we moved into after his death. The constant quarrels, frequent disruptive visits to our once peaceful home, and the eventual takeover of my father's room, followed by some family members living in the boys' quarters, along with ongoing conflicts between my mother and them, had an extreme negative impact on me and severely affected my academic performance.

It was in church that we found solace and, at times, ran to safety and peace of mind from the quarrels and verbally abusive remarks of paternal relatives, both in the house and those who "visited" from time to time. Although this background was difficult and often depressing, it taught me how to persevere through challenges at a young age. It also prepared me to lead my course as a first daughter, which translated to taking on leadership roles, such as serving as the assistant Scripture Union (SU) girls' vice president.

Despite the tuition support, paying the remaining fees was still a challenge. Most of the time, I was among those told to go home for school fees.³¹ I couldn't attend extra classes during school vacations or on Saturdays because I needed to pay for additional tuition that my mother

couldn't afford. During those times, I accompanied my mother to town to hawk whatever she was selling as a petty trader.³² We walked long distances, selling on foot, with the goods carried on our heads. Other times, we went to major business areas like Kaneshi, Kantamanto, Makola, and Aboloshi to sell our goods,³³ which led to me being slapped by a police woman for selling at the wrong spot. Despite all these hurdles, I successfully passed my Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E) with distinction.³⁴ But while waiting for my high school placement, I found myself in a stalemate, which made me believe I might not be able to continue my education.

One day, while standing at the pipe stand in my father's compound, one of my paternal uncles, let's call him Nii, approached me and said, "given the current situation, (which I inferred from my mother's financial struggles and her circumstances), I think the best option will be to give you some amount of money to start selling laundry items like key soap and washing powder on credit to neighbors, then you go around to collect your money at the agreed schedule."³⁵ This suggestion didn't sit well with me, so I waited on edge, feeling utterly confused, waiting for my mother to return from hawking. As soon as she arrived home, I tearfully shared the suggestion my uncle relayed to me, not even thinking to help her unload the goods she carried on her head. After hearing what I had to say, my mother calmly asked, "Is that why you're crying?" Once settled, she spoke these powerful and thoughtful words to me: "Tina, I will ensure that you receive an education to the highest level your abilities can take you. Even if I am left with nothing but my underwear, I will wash them, dry them, and sell them to make sure you get the education your abilities afford you." Her words became my source of strength and motivation to date. Fast forward, I got placed at Okuapemman School in Akropong-Akwapim, Eastern Region of Ghana, to study General Arts for my senior secondary school education.³⁶

2001-2004: Senior Secondary (now High School) Education at Okuapemman

School

I arrived at Okuapemman School as a boarder on a rainy day in August 2001, which was typical for the region during that time of year. Accompanied by my maternal aunt, Nakuma Ama, I was greeted by returning students who helped me to my dormitory and became my place of stay until I was appointed Head Girls' Chapel Prefect and moved to the prefect room at Dokua House. I remained committed to academic excellence and deepened my faith in Christ.

Connecting with groups like Scripture Union and PENSA, and becoming Head Girls' Chapel Prefect, strengthened my spiritual journey. These experiences helped me understand 2 Timothy 2:15, realizing that academic success requires committing to studies and seeking wisdom from God, who gives generously to all success. As James 1:5-8 reminds me, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God,..." This understanding became a cornerstone of my journey throughout my stay at Okuapemman School from 2001 to 2004.

Despite my persistent prayers for God's provision and unwavering faith, I continued to face significant financial challenges and limited resources, which greatly affected my academic success and overall well-being. To cover my fees, my mother often sold her clothes and fabrics, but that wasn't always enough. There were times when I had to borrow feminine hygiene products from my roommates and friends, repaying them only when my mother could send money or items during visiting days. I diligently repaid everything I borrowed, which earned me my roommates' trust and kindness. When I had no footwear for school, I used my late father's oversized opanka sandals, which had been lying around years after his passing. I was once questioned about the gender-specific nature of my footwear by a roommate who intended to heckle me. However, a senior stepped in to clarify that the footwear was unisex. I embraced that

term and promptly used it whenever anyone tried to bother me about my footwear choice. These experiences taught me valuable lessons in navigating challenges, practicing honesty, building resilience, expressing gratitude, and appreciating the importance of community. At the same time, I clung tightly to the promise in Jeremiah 29:11 NIW: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you an expected end.” This verse became my anchor, reminding me that despite the hardships, there would be success at the end.

In early 2004, during my final year of high school, I faced a significant setback. While my school registered final-year students for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE),³⁷ my mother couldn’t afford the fee. As the payment due date approached, I was informed that I might be sent home for the registration fees. I began to wonder about Jeremiah 29:11. What happened to the “expected end” that I have been promised in scriptures, after enduring all these sufferings for years, through to this final stage?

I waited on the Lord in prayer and fasting, trusting that “He who begins a good work will complete it” (Philippians 1:6). But no miracle happened, so I had to go home to get money to pay the WASSCE registration fees. After careful thought, we saw the church as the best option. My mother and I approached the head pastor and the church board to request a repayable loan to cover my exam registration fees. To our great disappointment, the church board initially refused. They asked, “What would happen to the funds if my mother couldn’t repay the money as promised, considering her current hardships?” until Elder Y., one of the board members, interjected and questioned the core mandate of the church if it cannot assist this young girl at such a critical moment, especially after her mother, a widow, has sacrificed so much to educate her up to now. A consensus was finally reached that the funds would be disbursed only if Elder

Y. agreed to repay the amount should my mother be unable to do so. Fortunately, he trusted that my mother would honor the agreement and gave his word to cover the amount if otherwise

This is how I received the cheque for my WASSCE registration fees. True to her word, my mother quickly repaid the church after receiving the lease payment. To cap it all, I also passed the WASSCE exam in 2004, which enabled me to secure a pupil-teaching job at Mt. Pleasant International School and later gain admission to pursue undergraduate studies.

Road to Undergraduate Education

I was admitted to the University of Education, Winneba (UEW), to pursue a Bachelor of Education in Social Science with majors in Geography and Political Science, making me a first-generation college student. Using savings from pupil teaching at Mt. Pleasant International School, I paid my admission fees, dues, and expenses. When my students' parents learned that I was leaving to study further, they gave me groceries, provisions, and fabrics to sew outfits. All I was left to do was cover the remaining part of the campus accommodation cost.

My uncle Akwetey, whom I told about my university admission, advised me to seek financial help from his siblings, noting the high cost of education and their past support from my late father. I contacted five uncles; two responded positively, one offering financial support and the other transportation to my hall of residence. Though I didn't expect much since they hadn't been involved in my education, Akwetey's mention of my father's past support gave me hope for more assistance. I was left with 1.5 million, now only 150 Ghana cedis (about \$9.85) for my on-campus Hall of residence fees. Uncle Oko, my father's older brother, gave me five hundred Cedis, which is now worth fifty Ghana Cedis (approximately \$4.45). However, I used this money to settle a financial dispute involving my sibling when I arrived home, as there was a threat of arrest if the amount, which totaled what I had, wasn't paid.

My mother turned to the church again, hoping for assistance to cover the remaining cost, just as we had during WASSCE registration. However, this time, the church board, which included some new members, declined, stating that the church funds were not meant for such purposes. Our last hope was to turn to Nii, whom I called my “favorite uncle.” I believed he could help, but it turned out he couldn’t. As my mom told me, he said that the money he had at the time came from leasing my father’s boys’ quarters and was meant for caring for my paternal grandmother. He agreed to lend us the money only if my mother would repay it.

My mother was distraught by this lending condition. She questioned how the daughter of the man who built the house they were leasing could be asked to repay money borrowed for her education, especially since the property belonged to her father. To her, it was unreasonable to accept support under such terms from someone who was a direct paternal uncle and beneficiary of her late husband’s kindness and support. This also defied Akan wisdom of paternity, *Agya bi wu a, agya bi te ase*, literally meaning: When one father dies, another father lives. So, she declined the offer, feeling it was the wrong thing for him to do, and that we should move on without their help. Despite the challenges and my disappointment with these results, my mother remained committed to seeking assistance from community members who were aware of our struggles. This time, she came with me to see and hear for myself, as I was still in disbelief of the condition outlined by my favorite uncle. We finally received assistance from a female neighbor. Her kindness and trust in my mother to repay the loan brought immense relief and encouragement during a challenging yet joyful time.

2006-2010: Undergraduate Education (First Degree)

Upon arriving on campus on August 12, 2006, to start my four-year studies, I immediately faced the challenge of figuring out how to survive once my initial supplies ran out. I

needed to plan for food, next year's tuition fees, transportation to classes, books, handouts, clothing, and other essentials. To address these challenges, I quickly attended an information session about the restructured Student Loan Scheme introduced by former President John Agyekum Kufuor in 2006 and secured a student loan sufficient to cover tuition fees for the remaining academic years.³⁸ Although my tuition was covered, I still had to find ways to meet other expenses. I took on tasks like running errands, washing clothes, cleaning, and cooking for lecturers and colleagues. I earned tips for some chores, which I used to buy groceries. I also took some of the food I prepared or bought to supplement my meals. I offered tutorial sessions to older colleagues who missed classes due to their schedules. Though voluntary, I was appreciated in return, sometimes with cash or in kind. I diligently carried out these tasks, especially taking lecture notes, knowing others depended on me and feeling proud to be reliable.

In 2007, I received a full scholarship from a private organization that supported 231 university students nationwide. The funds covered my tuition, residence hall expenses, books, printing, and stationery, which I saw as God's provision to see me through school. In 2008, I was elected Secretary of Simpa Hall and served as Hall Council Secretary, representing students' welfare issues on the Junior Common Room Council, with added honorarium and administrative benefits.

I completed my internship, defended my portfolio, submitted my thesis, and graduated with a Bachelor of Education in Social Science in July 2010. Despite these achievements, my struggles lowered my GPA, resulting in a second-class lower honors degree. After graduation, my mother said, "I know you would have done far better if everything were fine," reflecting her faith in me. We agreed to be thankful and look forward to what's next. In August 2010, I was posted to Kibi Senior High Technical School as a national service personnel,³⁹ where I taught

Geography for one year. After that, in October 2011, I secured a teaching position at Suhum Senior High Technical School (SUTESCO), where I taught Geography and Social Studies.

Frank and I married in December 2012. Our daughters, Anaya and Adriel, were born in 2013 and 2015. While teaching at SUTESCO (2012-2018), I authored two GES-approved Geography textbooks (Appendix C), which sold over 3,000 copies, and served as a class teacher and housemistress, mentoring over 700 students. I left SUTESCO on May 25, 2018. I arrived in the United States on May 31, on an F2 visa, with my children to join Dr. Frank Idan, who was then pursuing his Ph.D. in Grain Science with a focus on Food Processing and Technology at Kansas State University. Frank had been studying abroad since 2016.

Road to Postgraduate Education

On July 31, 2018, I received an email from Dr. Kay Ann Taylor (Dr. T), the graduate program director of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University, stating that “my request has been referred to her.” This request was an earlier email to the Department Chair, Dr. Todd Goodson (Dr. G), to inquire about the department’s program. After a few emails, on August 22, 2018, at 2:00 p.m., I met with Dr. T., who became my academic advisor and mentor through my graduate studies. After interactions and reviewing my certificates, Dr. T. confirmed I qualified for the (C&I) program based on the last 60 credit hours. She encouraged me to submit my application before the Spring 2019 admission deadline. Excited, I asked about assistantship opportunities. In what I later came to know as an impressive conversation and an ambition of mine, Dr. T. led me to the Department Chair to further discuss my inquiry about an assistantship, as I could not afford my education without it. All indications were positive, and the kind words “I will figure something out,” which I have heard from Dr. G. over the years, have been a reassuring phrase of continuous support and guidance. My

assignment after the fruitful meeting was to send an email if I successfully secured admission to the program as a graduate student.

On September 14, 2018, I received a decision on my graduate school application, granting me probationary admission on the condition that I complete 12 credit hours with a grade of “B” or higher; if I fail to do so, my admission would be revoked. With excitement, I promptly informed Dr. G., who then awarded me a nine-month departmental Graduate Teaching Assistantship (GTA) position and later extended it to 12 months. This assistantship qualified me for an international health insurance adjustment, faculty/employee fee waiver, and a monthly stipend. This meant I was responsible only for my student service fee, international student fee, and the remaining portion of health insurance after adjustment.

I returned to Ghana to interview for and secure an F1 visa from the United States Embassy, which allowed me to study as a non-immigrant student at a U.S. institution, and thus became a first-generation immigrant.

Spring 2019 - Fall 2021: Master’s Degree (Second Degree)

After securing my visa and returning to the U.S., I began my master’s program. I joined the Office of Field Experiences, where I worked as a Graduate Teaching Assistant under the mentorship of Dr. Eileen Wertzberger (Dr. W), its director. As classes started, my mother’s words upon arriving home after my first-degree graduation echoed vividly in my mind: her quiet assurance that I would have achieved even more if circumstances had been different. Now, with every resource I had, a fire to succeed ignited: I knew this was a second chance to bring out the best in me and to make the most of this opportunity. This moment became the catalyst for my relentless drive to exceed expectations, not just for myself but for everyone who believed in me

and opened doors to this opportunity. I realized it was my task to keep that door open for many others like me.

My first class in a U.S. Classroom

I walked into my first class on January 23, 2019, bright-eyed, notebook open, and pen poised for notetaking. Coming from an educational experience where learning followed a predictable pattern, with teachers and professors lecturing, students copying notes verbatim, memorizing content, and reproducing it in exams, I expected more of the same. The rhythm was familiar: teach, memorize, pass exams, forget, and the cycle repeats. Then came the pedagogical plot twist. This EDCI 803 Curriculum Development course wasn't about passive note-taking at all. Instead, our professor facilitated a vibrant, respectful dialogue where we explored diverse perspectives on the readings and course materials. For two hours, the class engaged in collaborative discourse rather than taking down lecture notes. I kept waiting for the familiar cues, bullet points on a slide, key terms on the board, anything to copy down. But none came.

When the professor finally said, "See you next week!" I sat stunned. Did class end? Where were the notes? How do I effectively memorize material for exams as proof of learning? After the second week of class, to the best of my recollection, my professor asked, "Why have you been quiet in class and seem lost?" To which I responded, "I am observing to understand the pattern of how things are done." By the third week, it dawned on me that, in this learner-centered environment, the real "notes" weren't pre-packaged; they were the insights we constructed together through dialogue and the critical thoughts we developed while engaging with the class's weekly material. This teaching approach was a pedagogical cultural shock.

Along the way, I constantly wondered how I would manage everything such as keeping up with the demanding readings for my two 6-credit-hour courses, fulfilling my assistantship

duties at the Office of Field Experiences to maintain my funding⁴⁰ submitting course assignments by the 11:59 PM deadlines (even though I could ask for extension during extenuating circumstances...I didn't want to abuse those) all while upholding my roles as a wife within African cultural context and being a present, intentional mother to our two daughters. To do this, I required careful balancing, yet through it all, one thing remained certain: quitting was never an option.

Being an Expectant Graduate Parent

By the end of the Spring 2019 semester, I discovered I was pregnant with our third daughter. The news terrified me. I wasn't sure what to do; I feared losing my assistantship and failing to meet the graduate school probationary admission requirements. Most of all, I didn't know how to break this news to Drs. G, T, and W just a couple of months into the program and my assistantship role. When I finally told Dr. Goodson his response calmed me. Instead of worrying about how the news might affect my effectiveness in my assistantship, he congratulated me, asked me to keep him updated on my medical progress, and wished me well. In that moment, I reaffirmed that I was in a safe, supportive space. I received the same warmth and support from Drs. T and W.

First U.S. College Teaching Assistant Experience

In Fall 2019, I served as a teaching assistant for two courses: EDCI 310, Foundations of Education, and EDCI 720, Teaching Culture and Diversity Learning, where I collaborated closely with a faculty member in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction. This role gave me my first direct experience in a U.S. classroom dynamic and working with about 120 college students. In this role, my major tasks were assisting with the preparation of teaching and learning resources, grading, and providing feedback for assignments and projects based on rubrics, as

well as facilitating specific topics. As someone coming from a homogenous classroom environment, this opportunity offered me insight into navigating cross-cultural dynamics in a U.S. higher education undergraduate classroom. The regular interactions with students in the classroom and via email also improved my oral and written communication skills, while providing me with insight into culturally responsive teaching practices, student assessments, and learning support strategies. I continued in this position until the delivery of our third daughter, Ariana, on October 29, 2019.

COVID-19's Impact and Frank's Return to Ghana

In December 2019, Frank completed his Ph.D. We were going through a transition, hopeful his Employment Authorization Document (EAD) would lead to an Optional Practical Training (OPT) job after initial interviews in early 2020. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the subsequent lockdown halted hiring and job opportunities, causing him to accumulate days of unemployment. Frank left the U.S. as soon as airport travel bans were lifted to avoid accumulating illegal presence. This was a difficult decision for our family, as balancing my responsibilities as a single parent with everything else seemed daunting. At the time, we took comfort in the hope he would return soon. However, five years have now passed, and he hasn't acquired the visa due to unsuccessful attempts.

A Perfect G.P.A., Robust Thesis, Peer-Reviewed Publications, and Award

While juggling being a nearly single mother of three, family's sole provider, graduate student, teaching assistant, and supportive partner, I achieved several milestones during my Master's. I graduated with a perfect 4.0 GPA and defended a robust thesis: *Western Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An Overview of Colonial Educational Policies and Curriculum 1919-1927*,⁴¹ while my first research article (which informed the thesis) awaited publication.⁴² I

was also involved in a co-authored book chapter titled: *Place-based Literacies for a Multicultural World: A Framework for Literacy and Language Arts Curriculum Transformation in Rural Communities*.⁴³

My efforts were recognized with multiple honors: first, as a Spring 2021 College of Education Graduate Student and Faculty Awardee during a virtual ceremony—my first departmental and Graduate School recognition. Second, as the AAUW 2020 Outstanding Non-Traditional Female Graduate Student, earning a \$1,500 award for 2020-2021 after a competitive process. Finally, I was nominated for the College of Education’s Outstanding Graduate Student Award in the Master of Science category. As a non-traditional student balancing multiple responsibilities, this nomination reassured me that faculty and the college valued my efforts, even though I didn’t win.

Graduation on December 17, 2021, marked completing an MS in Curriculum and Instruction. Thanks to Ghanaian colleagues Adelaide, Wilhelmina, and Francisca, who cared for my daughters during the ceremony, I could walk the stage. Next, I started a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, upon recommendation of Dr. T and supported by a departmental graduate teaching assistantship.

Spring 2022 – Spring 2026: Ph.D. Education (Third Degree)

My transition into Ph.D. studies began smoothly. At this point, I developed an effective system for balancing academic work with personal responsibilities. However, this was disrupted by the reinstatement of pre-pandemic enrollment requirements, which ended the flexible online learning options (both synchronous and asynchronous) available during COVID-19. As the university resumed full operations, I faced the challenge of securing childcare for my two-year-old daughter, Ariana, essential for attending classes, research, and my assistantship. I couldn’t

afford full daycare while on the waitlist at Kansas State University Child Development Center, where I hoped to qualify for a 15% graduate subsidy and other scholarships. I prayed and asked for divine help. I then found a half-day childcare service twice a week, typically on Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday. However, this was insufficient, especially since I needed to meet the 20-hour weekly work requirement of my assistantship. So, I went to God in prayer again, specifically thanking Him for how far He brought me and asking for His favor and help in securing four days of childcare for Ariana and a subsidy to help with the cost, since \$360 would stretch my budget thin.

Childcare Support and Student-Parent Success

I made the courageous decision to approach the Director of Weekday Early Education at First United Methodist Church to explain my unique circumstances. She received me warmly and expressed admiration for my determination to pursue my studies despite the challenges I described. Immediately, she committed to presenting my case to the Weekday Early Education Board, which resulted in a positive outcome. Ariana continued to receive fully subsidized weekday early education until 08/23, when she transitioned to the K-State Center for Child Development (CCD) following a notification of a full-day slot, Raising Riley scholarship, and a other K-State Scholarships for graduate parents. With these childcare supports and arrangements, I was able to participate in K-State's Graduate Student Council (GSC) professional development sessions, present my research at local, regional, and international conferences within my field. These opportunities fostered significant professional growth that would have otherwise been unattainable.

Academic Visibility and Securing Funding for Research Presentations

From January to December 2023, I presented my research at ten different venues, serving as session chairs at a couple of them, and engaging both academic and non-academic audiences through competitions, conferences, panel discussions, and invited speaking engagements. My first off-campus academic conference opportunity came at the Critical Issues in Education conference on February 27, 2023, in San Diego, California, where I delivered an oral presentation titled “Educational Policy Formulation and Curriculum Development: A Teacher’s Place for Successful Implementation.” Yet, stepping out of my comfort zone to attend this three-day conference in another state, away from my 9, 7, and 3-year-old children, and without a family member home to assist with care, was a tough decision. In whose care do I leave them? As they needed personal transportation to and from school due to its proximity, and someone had to be home with them after school closed for the day.

Planning this first trip required extensive preparation. Ultimately, Francisca, Madin, and Kingsley became the support system I relied on whenever I had to attend a conference to present my research. While all these conference travels came at a high cost, I am thankful for the funding provided by the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, the College of Education Travel Grant, the Graduate Student Council Travel Grant, and the Diversity for Community Committee, each of which required me to submit all necessary documents and detailed records for auditing disbursement. The Canadian African Studies Association 2023 marked my debut at an academic research conference outside the United States.⁴⁴ I owe this opportunity to my colleague and co-author,⁴⁵ now Dr. C. M. Azubuike, who informed me about the call for abstracts along with other conferences, including the International Engagement Consortium at Michigan State University, in October 2023.

Awards, Honors, and Recognitions

This moment honors all the hard work behind the scenes—the late nights, the never-give-up attitude, and the quiet determination that kept me. Thankfully, those efforts were finally seen and celebrated both tangibly and symbolically. One of the earliest validations of this journey came in 2021, when I received an exclusive invitation to join Phi Kappa Phi, one of the most prestigious honor societies in the United States. Membership is extended to only the top 10% of graduate students across nearly 300 select institutions in North America and the Philippines, making it a rare distinction that reflects my academic excellence.

The recognition continued in April 2024, when I was humbled to receive the Kansas State University Division of Academic Success and Student Affairs Extraordinary Student Award and the Social Justice Advocacy Award for Spring 2024. These awards and recognitions are particularly special because they reflect something deeper than grades or publications: they demonstrate that the K-State community sees the whole student, recognizes their struggles, growth, and unwavering commitment to making an impact beyond the classroom.

Leading from the Sideline

Over these years, I found great excitement in supporting leaders behind the scenes. My efforts earned recognition from organizations such as the African Students' Union and the International Coordinating Council. In 2023, I seized an opportunity to be a graduate student representative on the College of Education committees, particularly through the Diversity for Community Committee (DCC), which met monthly. This allowed me to connect with professionals, contribute to professional development initiatives, and engage in respectful discussions. In 2024, I was honored to serve on both the Curriculum & Instruction Graduate Faculty Committee and its Executive Committee, while remain an active member of the Education Graduate Student Organization.

Community Engagement

Over the years, I have found ways to give back to the community and formally expand my engagement. I founded Ernestina Wiafe EduCare Consult in 2023, a self-funded, Ghana-registered initiative. It offers educational consultancy, mentorship, and collaborative programs. Notable initiatives include a Career Pathway Mentorship Cohort linking U.S.-based African scholars with 50 mentees, and a Virtual STEAM Academy in partnership with the Suhum Municipal Education Office and Kansas State University. The Academy included hands-on sessions led by experts, reaching 40 pupils through activities such as Math of Games, Block Coding Bootcamp, and Stop Motion Animation. I have spoken at events such as the Mandela Washington Affinity Panels on civic engagement and educational advocacy. I aim to expand these efforts through stronger partnerships and greater reach.

Selected Exceptional Circumstances Handling

One significant moment was when I wrongly assumed all professors would welcome papers written from an African perspective. Having consistently framed my work through this lens throughout my academic journey, I naturally applied it to my final projects, believing these papers were setting me up for my dissertation research. This assumption proved wrong when I felt penalized in one course for centering my papers within the African context. To address this challenge, I proactively consulted with professors about incorporating my African perspective before enrolling in the class. In most cases, I received positive responses (Appendix O). Other times, they were, “if you fully addressed the required rubrics.” When the professor disagreed because alignment wasn’t possible, I skillfully redirected my focus to other relevant aspects of my research agenda. This adaptive approach allowed me to maintain my scholarly identity while

respecting varying academic and course requirements. This is how I achieved a 3.909 GPA upon completing my Ph.D. coursework.

I am grateful to God for His guidance and for connecting my journey in pursuit of scholarship across continents to extraordinary men and women. Everyone's guidance, support, and prayers are acts of selflessness, especially considering the cultural context and my past experiences of limited masculine support.

Discussion

An important part of this research is how theory helps interpret my self-data. Data is never separate from theory; my choice to write about my tales towards the pursuit of scholarship, along with my research questions and methods, is influenced by my identity as an African female scholar educated across continents. My analysis is rooted in the theories of snail sense African feminism, and Intersectionality, which guide this critical educational autobiography research.⁴⁶ To open new possible meanings and learning, I included literature from African women's autobiographies (like Ama Atta Aidoo and Wangari Maathai), decolonial literatures by Achille Mbembe,⁴⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o,⁴⁸ and Intersectional pedagogy by bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins,⁴⁹ etc., to enrich the interpretation and discussion of my tales toward scholarship. Direct quotations were used throughout this section to support meaning-making and contextualization.

RQ1: How did intersecting factors influence my educational journey to scholarship across Ghana and the United States?

Intersecting factors that shaped my educational journey

My educational journey across Ghana and the U.S. was deeply influenced by a complex mix of factors: a household led by a widow, gender, financial limitations, immigration status, institutional challenges, Christian faith, and cultural expectations. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's

intersectionality, which illustrates how social identities like race, gender, and class overlap to create privilege and oppression, my intersectional identities both posed barriers. They offered unique opportunities that shaped my path to scholarship.

Financial constraint

Following my father's interstate demise, financial instability became a constant disruption to my education. The available boys' quarters that could have been rented immediately to support my siblings and me through school and livelihood were taken from us shortly after. This made my mother carry goods to trade, borrow, and rely on every available resource to keep us going. I joined her on the streets to sell and helped raise money whenever I could. I have recounted being slapped by police while hawking goods to pay school fees, a painful moment that still lingers and stings. Yet, like Wangari Maathai in *Unbowed*,⁵⁰ where lack of funds nearly derailed her education until community interventions, my entangled widowed mother and I relied on our social network and community to access church loans, borrow from a neighbor, and secure a student loan. These social relationships also represent what Bourdieu⁵¹ and later scholars, such as Lareau⁵² and Yosso,⁵³ framed as alternative forms of capital that marginalized individuals mobilize to gain access to and succeed within formal educational systems. This challenges traditional, Eurocentric notions of cultural capital by emphasizing the strengths and resilience found in underprivileged communities.

Cultural expectations

Similarly, I encountered cultural pressures that positioned education as secondary for girls. My uncle Nii's advice that the best way to move forward after my B.E.C.E. was to find money to start selling soap and washing powder on credit reflects the same limiting expectations for women that Ama Atta Aidoo critiques in *Our Sister Killjoy*,⁵⁴ where African women's

ambitions are stifled by condescending patriarchy. In contrast, my mother's defiant response, even if she was left with nothing but her underwear, she would wash them, dry them, and sell them to make sure she gives me the education my abilities afford me, exemplifies Molar Ogundipe-Leslie's *Stiwanist* African feminist theory⁵⁵, which centers African women's agency in challenging and redefining oppressive structures in reshaping society. As well as in Adichie's *We Should All Be Feminists*,⁵⁶ where African women reclaim agency through economic self-sacrifice. In the same way, my mother's refusal to yield to patriarchal demands to cede our care to paternal siblings further mirrors the resistance Adimora-Ezeigbo theorizes in Snail-Sense Feminism, a framework in which African women subvert oppression through deliberate, strategic persistence.⁵⁷

Immigration status

Moving to the U.S. brought new challenges, including obtaining an F1 visa for studies, adapting to academic and cultural shocks, managing assistantship responsibilities, and parenting while in graduate school. My F-1 visa status, for instance, limited employment options, which made assistantships crucial for survival, while the reinstatement of in-person classes post-COVID for international students further complicated childcare, requiring institutional subsidies after Frank's return to Ghana because I became a single household earner. Childcare became a hurdle, so I had to plead for subsidies from the Weekday Early Education Board, which graciously granted. Lorde in *Sister Outsider* was right that academia isn't built for Black immigrant mothers.⁵⁸ Lorde powerfully articulates how institutional structures like academia systematically exclude marginalized voices, particularly those of Black immigrant mothers. Her book exposes academia's Eurocentric foundations that demand conformity to white, patriarchal norms and a system where she notes, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's

house.”⁵⁹ This resonates with my experiences as a African immigrant mother, who navigated intersecting barriers in scholarly spaces not designed to accommodate my cultural knowledge, such as having to proactively seek professors’ permission to write my term papers and assignments from an African perspective after feeling penalized in one course. In addition to caregiving responsibilities and modes of knowledge production, such as survival strategies, transnational parenting, and language brokering are often overlooked as intellectual contributions, further reinforcing Lorde’s assertion that “survival is not an academic skill.”⁶⁰

Institutional barriers

My first classroom and course in the U.S. were a pedagogical shock, signaling no rote memorization, but rather respectful dialogue. When I “inquired Where are the notes?” I learned after three weeks of class that in this learner-centered environment, the real notes weren’t pre-packaged; they were the insights we constructed together through dialogues and the critical thoughts we developed while engaging with the weekly class material. This reminds me of Freire’s critique⁶¹ of the “banking model” of education which provided a foundational argument against traditional, authoritarian teaching methods where teachers are “depositors” of pre-packaged knowledge and students are passive “receptacles” of the knowledge, and are expected to uncritically absorb and regurgitate the information just as I experienced for my nursery to undergraduate education where teachers and professors lectured, students copied notes verbatim, memorized content, and reproduced it in exams. By reducing education to a one-way transactional process in which knowledge is transferred from teachers to students, the banking model reinforces hierarchical power dynamics in which teachers are seen as knowledge-holders or walking encyclopedias, while students are silenced as empty vessels.

This, to a larger extent, not only dehumanizes learners by denying their capacity for critical thinking but also perpetuates social oppression by conditioning students to accept existing power structures without question, thereby continuing the Western formal education in colonial Africans.⁶² Freire's critique of traditional education highlights how rote memorization, rather than meaningful dialogue, stifles creativity, collaboration, and the development of critical thinking skills. I agree that this pedagogical approach fails to cultivate the transformative consciousness needed to address real-world challenges. Consequently, scholars like George Sefa Dei⁶³ and Njoki Wane⁶⁴ have asserted that many African education systems, still shaped by colonial legacies, continue to produce graduates whose knowledge remains theoretical mainly and disconnected from the practical needs of national development, continental progress, or global competitiveness. Further, it seamlessly aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of colonial education in *Decolonizing the Mind*,⁶⁵ where he argues that Eurocentric curricula produce "intellectual dependency," hindering local problem-solving. Confirming this, the African Union's Agenda 2063⁶⁶ is campaigning for education systems on the continent to shift from "colonial mimicry" to "innovation ecosystems" that will achieve African and global developmental goals.

Like Freire, hooks reject the banking model, emphasizing that education should honor students' emotional and lived experiences, fostering learning rooted in realities. Her framework challenges the white male canon, advocates for inclusion of diverse voices, and introduces "eros" in teaching to replace hierarchical authority with mutual passion and respect, as seen in the first U.S. class, EDCI 803. For hooks, critical pedagogy makes the classroom "the most radical space of possibility."⁶⁷

Christian Faith as Epistemic Resistance

Central to my life and educational journey as a scholar-practitioner is the theory of Pneumagogy, which emphasizes self-emptying and complete dependence on the Holy Spirit for understanding and guidance.⁶⁸ My Christian faith is not just a private strength but a spiritual lens through which I interpret my experience and knowledge. In moments marked by scarcity, such as struggling to afford WASSCE examination registration fees, or by uncertainty, like moving my family to join Frank in the U.S. to pursue a master's and Ph.D., my reliance on the Holy Spirit became a tangible resource. The dependence on scriptures, such as "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13), goes beyond affirmation; this Bible verse has become my living truth. It epitomizes what Dillard⁶⁹ describes as endarkened feminist epistemology, where the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual coexist as valid and powerful ways of knowing. The interplay of faith, gender, financial constraint, and migration in my journey reflects Romans 8:28, "All things work together for good...". My path was not linear providence but a collision of divine grace and barriers, where faith intersected with my identity as an African woman, immigrant, and scholar. Just as Hagar's encounter with God in the wilderness (Genesis 21:17-19) reveals divine attention to the marginalized, my pursuit for scholarship highlights how faith can subvert oppressive systems.

RQ2. In what ways do my lived experiences as an African female scholar contribute to the decolonization of curriculum content and pedagogical practices in higher education?

Embodying Decolonizing Praxis

I've experienced firsthand how education systems push Western knowledge as the only 'real' learning while ignoring other ways of knowing. Achille Mbembe calls this the 'colonial

library,’ a system that treats some ideas as essential and others as worthless.⁷⁰ My critical educational autobiography demonstrates that African women’s narratives are vital knowledge sources, not just ‘feel-good’ additions, and that they challenge dominant literature while offering strategies to transform teaching, analysis, and inclusion in scholarship.

Centering African Women’s Voices

This critical educational autobiography shows an African woman’s agency.⁷¹ My research on colonial education in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) reveals how colonial schooling was not merely an imposition of foreign content on colonies but a systematic erasure of indigenous knowledge systems, including those that demonstrate African women’s intellectual independence, the power to think, and the ability to act for themselves.⁷² African feminist theorists like Amina Mama and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí help us see how colonial education hurt women’s knowledge. Oyěwùmí shows how Western ideas imposed male-female divisions in the form of roles and professions on African societies, which didn’t initially work that way.⁷³ In my own research findings, colonial schools didn’t just teach Christianity, reading, arithmetic, and grammar; they also taught African students to see and measure their world through a foreign lens, which was the standard of civilization and superiority.⁷⁴ Similarly, Mama highlights how African women’s knowledge has been devalued under both patriarchal and colonial structures, noting that “the academy has historically treated African women’s intellectual labor as invisible, even as it extracts from our lived realities.”⁷⁵ These insights demand a curriculum that does not merely include African content but actively honors African women’s epistemologies rooted in values of deep connections, oral traditions, and a strong sense of community and faith. My critical, educational, autobiographical research contributes to the reclaiming of African women’s

voices, showing that our lived experiences are not supplementary but foundational to decolonial education.

Critical Autobiography as Resistance

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of the colonization of the mind aptly describes the rote, exam-driven education I experienced in Ghana, a system designed to produce compliance rather than critical thought.⁷⁶ My story shows how colonial education pushes students from their roots, enforcing rote learning and Western achievement standards while erasing local knowledge. By sharing my journey and situating my lived experiences within critical theoretical frameworks and decolonizing literature, I resist this cultural erasure. Documenting my journey from a Ghanaian classroom shaped by colonial pedagogy to my current role as a scholar in the U.S., I have engaged in what Pumla Gqola calls "narrative insurgency."⁷⁷ Gqola, argues that "stories are not just accounts; they are acts of defiance against erasure."⁷⁸ My work embodies this defiance, challenging the colonial logic that positions African knowledge as inferior. This isn't about theory or literature as in critical or decolonizing frameworks; it's a new way to teach, with an understanding that when teachers allow learners to share authentic experiences, they demonstrate how classrooms can transform into spaces that honor every student's voice. Then we can celebrate the richness of all languages, center indigenous storytelling as valid knowledge, and recognize the wisdom held within communities. This shift turns education from something that limits into something that truly liberates.

Decolonial Praxis in the Classroom

As a graduate teaching assistant in the U.S. classroom, I navigated the intersections of motherhood, immigration, and academic work within a predominantly white institution. My currer aligns with bell hooks' vision of teaching as a practice of freedom,⁷⁹ where education is

not passive absorption but an active, critical engagement with power. I did not merely assist in teaching EDCI 720—: Teaching Culture and Diversity Learning; I embodied it in ways that challenge students to interrogate dominant narratives while reflecting on their own positionalities. When I include African decolonizing or epistemic resources in my presentations, I challenge colonial ways of thinking. When I use my native language and apply community wisdom through proverbs, the classroom turns into a space of decolonization. Even my presence as a Black African woman scholar disrupts expectations, showing what it means to teach not just from theory, but from lived experience and resistance. As hooks reminds us, “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.”⁸⁰ My work realizes this possibility in transforming curriculum and pedagogy into strategies of liberation.

Conclusion

My pursuit toward scholarship has been a dialogue between divine guidance, personal perseverance, and the unwavering support of family, mentors, community, and generous strangers, some of whom have become family and friends. All affirm that my scholarship is as much a spiritual calling as it is an intellectual pursuit. By centering African feminist epistemologies, intersectionality, and decolonial literatures, this study challenges dominant narratives of knowledge production and exposes systemic inequities embedded within educational systems. My lived experiences demonstrate how marginalized individuals navigate and resist institutional barriers while drawing strength from community, faith, and alternative forms of capital.

¹ Kakali Bhattacharya, *Fundamentals of Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide* (Routledge, 2017).

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- ² Derrick James, "Determined to Make a Difference: A Critical Autobiography of an African American Male Principal in the Deep South" (Ph.D. Diss., Stephen F. Austin State University 2019). 2-4, SFA Scholar Works (258).
- ³ Charles Berryman, "Critical Mirrors: Theories of Autobiography," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 32, no. 1 (1999): 71-84.
- ⁴ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom* (Taylor & Francis, 2001).
- ⁵ Jens Brockmeier, "Localizing Oneself: Autobiographical Remembering, Cultural Memory, and the Asian American Experience," *International Social Science Journal* 62, no. 203/204 (2012): 121-133.
- ⁶ Folasade Hunsu, "The Future of African Women's Autobiography," *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32, no. 2 (2017), 319-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2017.1288962>.
- ⁷ Mary-Kay Miller, "My Mothers/My Selves: (Re) Reading a Tradition of West African Women's Autobiography," *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 2 (1997): 5-15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3820440>
- ⁸ Hunsu, "The Future of African Women's Autobiography," 2017.
- ⁹ Cagulada, E., and M. DeWelles. "The Sounds of Memory: Troubling the Professionalization of Knowledge through Black Women's Memoir and Interpretive Disability Studies." *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 23, no. 4 (2022): 376-91; Haner, Sezgi. "The Double Otherness of Black Woman: Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*." *Journal of International Social Research* 10 (2017): 151-56; Nfah-Abbenyi, Julia Makuchi. *Gender in African Women's Writing*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- ¹⁰ Anthony Walker, "Critical Autobiography as Research," *The Qualitative Report* 22, no. 7 (2017): 1896-1908. <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss7/10>.
- ¹¹ Adaobi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense Feminism*; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1241-1299.
- ¹² Walker, "Critical Autobiography as Research," 1900.
- ¹³ Norman K. Denzin, "On Hearing the Voices of Educational Research," Review of *Qualitative Voices in Educational Research*, by M. Shratz. *Curriculum Inquiry* 25, no. 3 (1995): 313-329.
- ¹⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000).
- ¹⁵ L. R. Gay, G. E. Mills, and P. Airasian, *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Applications*, 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2009), 113.
- ¹⁶ Nona Lyons, ed. *Handbook of Reflection and Reflective Inquiry: Mapping a Way of Knowing for Professional Reflective Inquiry*. New York: Springer Science + Business Media, LLC, 2010. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-85744-2_1
- ¹⁷ D. E. Polkinghorne, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences* (State University of New York Press, 1988).
- ¹⁸ Adler and Adler (1987) argued that traditional research has been limited because it prioritizes studying others rather than the researchers themselves. P. A. Adler and P. Adler, *Membership Roles in Research* (Sage Publications, Inc., 1987). In contrast, critical autobiographical method broadens the scope and, as Creswell (2007) noted, enables data to be gathered directly from the sole participant in the study. By employing reflexivity and reflection in autobiographical narratives, researchers can pose questions that explore life experiences, allowing for a critical self-analysis. J. W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 2nd ed. (Sage Publications, Inc., 2007).

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- ¹⁹ Christine Tenni, Ali Smith, and Carl Boucher, “The Researcher as Autobiographer: Analyzing Data Written About Oneself,” *The Qualitative Report* 8, no. 1 (2003): 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2003.1895>.
- ²⁰ David L. Morgan and Anișoara Nica, “Iterative Thematic Inquiry: A New Method for Analyzing Qualitative Data,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (2020): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920955118>.
- ²¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Wangari Maathai, *Unbowed: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006); Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* (New York: Longman, 1977); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970); Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J.G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).
- ²² Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
- ²³ Dele A. Ilesanmi, *Pneumagogy in Christian Education: Beyond the Theory of Pedagogy, Andragogy, or Heutagogy* (Place: Publisher, 2022).
- ²⁴ MAXQDA. Software for qualitative data analysis. Developed by VERBI Software. Berlin, Germany, 1989-2025. <https://www.maxqda.com>.
- ²⁵ George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
- ²⁶ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996; originally published 1949).
- ²⁷ The *Etene ne Bretuo*, or the *Bretuo* clan, is one of the major lineages of the Akan people, with a rich oral history tracing their descent from the skies. According to an ethnographer R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), the *Bretuo* are said to have descended from the heavens and first settled at Ahensan in Adanse. Tradition holds that a turkey buzzard guided them from Adanse to their new home at Behenase.
- ²⁸ According to oral tradition, the *Asona* people are the largest group among Akan clans. It is said they were guided out of a cave by a snake and safeguarded by an elephant as they journeyed. The *Asona* people are also celebrated for their striking beauty, reflected in the proverb: “*Asonafuo a ahoofe adware won, won atiko tese obi anim.*” Literal meaning: the *Asona* family is so beautiful that even the back of their head is as lovely. When greeting an *Asonaba*, the traditional response is: “*Yaa Oforina!*” or “*Yaa Asonaa!*” Adams Bodomo, “On Language and Development in Africa: The Case of Ghana,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 5, no. 2 (1996); Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB), The *Asona* Clan, Including Languages, Geographical Locations and Whether Men Are Forced to Marry Their Uncle’s Daughter, Age of Marriage, Reasons for Marriage, Consequences of Refusal and State Protection Available (2003-2005), GHA100109.E, 27 May 2005, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1117333/198155_en.html
- ²⁹ This communal relation speaks to the African Philosophy *Ubuntu* that describes the value systems that emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals within their community, fundamentally conveying the idea that “I exist because we exist.” It emphasizes an individual’s

identity and sense of humanity are intrinsically connected to the collective well-being of their community.

³⁰ The authority of a teacher in a classroom situation like this discourages or prohibits students from questioning. I came to understand this as often rooted in a traditional, hierarchical model of education, where the teacher is positioned as the sole source of knowledge and expertise, serving as the sole purveyor of information. At the same time, students are expected to receive it passively. This dynamic establishes the teacher as an unquestionable figure, whose authority is maintained through control over the learning process and the suppression of inquiry. While this approach created an orderly and disciplined classroom, it stifled my critical thinking, creativity, and intellectual curiosity. By punishing me for showing my understanding of the lesson, the teacher effectively limited my opportunities for dialogue and exploration in future classrooms. Even though I didn't feel my perspectives were undervalued, I was afraid of being intimidated for voicing them because of the consequences I was warned about.

³¹ Knowing my mum wasn't home and there would likely be petty bickering from paternal family members about her inability to pay our tuition bills, I joined my friends heading to Kaneshi by sitting on their laps because I had no transport fare. I then alighted at Darkuman Junction, walked to my father's shop, and saw if the caretaker, bro Kabena, could provide some money for a part payment or for the remaining fees. Most times, I managed to gather a little from him and my father's friends, who worried about the situation, to reduce the cost of returning to school; other times, the caretaker told me that sales were bad, and I received only enough for return transport. These days, often after lingering around the school gate for a while, the security guard lets me in. I mentioned that I was popular and favored because of my spirituality and demeanor. Everyone who knew my late father and his generosity didn't hesitate to assist me. I continued this until I completed and graduated from Santa Maria School Complex.

³² Before becoming a petty trader, my mother owned a business in the heart of Accra business area, Kantamanto. Before my father's demise, she operated two retail shops at home. One likened to Target and the other for food stuff. Printed in front of these stores was *Yesu Mo!!*

³³ One might wonder, what happened to the Kokompe shop? My mother gave up her space at Kantamanto due to low patronage, as customers were continuously unable to find the items they needed. She then decided to join the caretaker my father worked with at his shop. Unfortunately, sales were poor. Everyone knew Mr. Wiafe, my father, wasn't in charge anymore, so they didn't trust the kind of services they received from a widowed wife and a caretaker. In addition, the space was a male-dominated one that required special insight to operate and survive.

³⁴ The Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) is an annual exam that allows students in Ghana to qualify for secondary and vocational schools. The exam is administered by the Ghana Education Service and is taken after three years of junior secondary education

³⁵ Kindly note that my change in demeanor was not because I looked down on the laundry detergent business. Who knows? I might have become one of the industry's business tycoons by now. Instead, it was because my ambitions extended far beyond the scope suggested, and I had firsthand experience of what it meant to sell on credit within the community. Also, my mum's struggles as a petty trader were so evident that I didn't want to pursue that course.

³⁶ This school and program to study were selected by my Scripture Union patron, 2001-2004 academic years at Santa Maria School Complex, who was also my mathematics teacher. When the school asked parents to make school and course choices, my mum instructed me to ask my

favorite teacher for help choosing a school and program based on my academic performance, as she honestly admitted she was unfamiliar with how the education system worked. I am deeply grateful and indebted to him for his guidance and sound judgment in making choices tailored to my abilities and aspirations.

Okuapemman School was founded in 1957 by Barrister Charles Opoku Acheampong. It is situated in a traditional and royal area under the paramountcy (Omanhene) of the Akwapim Traditional Area, within the Akwapim North Municipal Assembly of Ghana.

³⁷ The West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is a standardized test administered by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) for students in Anglophone West African countries. It serves as a critical assessment for high school students, and those who pass receive the West African Senior School Certificate, which officially certifies completion of secondary education. This qualification is a significant academic achievement in the region. This exam is a key requirement for students transitioning to higher education or other career paths.

³⁸ In 2012, I successfully repaid my Student Trust loan with compound interest. The scheme sent Mr. A., who was my guarantor, a copy of the payment receipt and the loan guarantor release letter. He expressed deep gratitude for my timely repayment, as he hadn't expected it to happen so soon. He also encouraged me to maintain this level of integrity moving forward. It's worth noting that, at the time, the Ghana Student Loan Trust had not yet established a loan repayment portal for beneficiaries from 2006 to 2010.

³⁹ According to Ghana's constitution, students who graduate from accredited tertiary institutions are obligated to complete a one-year national service for the country. The National Service Secretariat (NSS), a government agency in Ghana, is responsible for developing policies and frameworks to oversee and implement this national service program.

⁴⁰ Graduate Teaching Assistantship is renewable based on job performance satisfaction, maintaining at least a 3.0 GPA., and upon availability of funding.

⁴¹ Ernestina Wiafe, "Western Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An Overview of British Colonial Educational Policies and Curriculum from 1919 to 1927" (master's thesis, Kansas State University, 2021), <https://hdl.handle.net/2097/41715>. I chose to pursue a thesis based on the strong recommendation of my academic advisor and mentor, Dr. T. During one of our advising sessions, she noted: "Ernestina, given your future ambitions, I strongly advise completing a thesis rather than a report or portfolio which are the other available options." I gladly agreed, as I was already considering this path myself.

⁴² Ernestina Wiafe, "Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An Overview of Colonial Policies and Curriculum from 1919 to 1927," *Educational Considerations* 47, no. 2 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.2252>.

⁴³ Vicki Sherbet, Eileen Wertzberger, and Ernestina Wiafe, "Place-based Literacies for a Multicultural World: A Framework for Literacy and Language Arts Curriculum Transformation in Rural Communities," in *Multicultural Curriculum Transformation in Literacy and Language Arts*, ed. Amanda V. Hei-Carter and Nayelee Villanueva (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020), 59-78.

⁴⁴ I was able to take a week off from home and parenting responsibilities to travel and attend the three-day CAAS conference, because of the child-care support I received from Aunt Linde, the owner of Linde Beauty Salon in Manhattan, KS. Aunt Linde, a South African-American entrepreneur, has been like a big sister to me since I arrived in Manhattan. Through her, I've

connected with members of the African diaspora in the State of Kansas, including Aunty Chi, a Nigerian American who continues to offer her guidance and support.

⁴⁵ Ernestina Wiafe & Chibuzor Mariam Azubuike, “Juggling commitments and family responsibilities in North America: Narratives of African graduate students,” in *The heroine’s journey VI: The social construction of new narratives. Notebooks of the Center for Studies in Design and Communication*, 27(238), 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18682/cdc.vi238.11523>

⁴⁶ Adaobi Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense Feminism: Building on an Indigenous Model* (Lagos: Wealthsmith, 2012); Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (July 1991): 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

⁴⁷ Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

⁴⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

⁴⁹ Collins, “Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory,” 2019.

Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) made history in 2004 as the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize, recognized for her fearless advocacy of democracy, human rights, and environmental conservation. Her Nobel Prize wasn’t just an award; it was a call for the world to see environmentalism as a fight for social justice. Today, as the climate crises worsen, her interdisciplinary approach remains a model for justice. Maathai’s Nobel Lecture (2004): <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/lists/all-nobel-prizes/2009-2000/>

⁵¹ Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 245.

⁵² Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

⁵³ Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69–91.

⁵⁴ Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*, 34.

⁵⁵ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994), 112.

⁵⁶ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All Be Feminists* (New York: Vintage Books, 2015).

⁵⁷ Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Snail-Sense Feminism* 2006, 89.

⁵⁸ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984).

⁵⁹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

⁶⁰ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 111.

⁶¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 75.

⁶² Wiafe, “Western Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana,” 52.

⁶³ George Sefa Dei, “Rethinking the Role of Indigenous Knowledges in the Academy,” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 4, no. 2 (2000): 111–132.

⁶⁴ Njoki Wane, *African Women and Globalization: Critical Perspectives* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986).

⁶⁶ African Union, *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want* (Addis Ababa: African Union Commission, 2015), 19.

⁶⁷ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 45.

⁶⁸ Ilesanmi, "Pneumagogy in Christian Education: Beyond the Theory of Pedagogy, Andragogy, or Heutagogy."

⁶⁹ Cynthia B. Dillard, *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* (Place of Publication: Publisher, 2012).

⁷⁰ Achille Mbembe, "Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive," *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 7–8 (2009), 1–23; Mbembe, Achille. Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive. Public Lecture delivered at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2015.

⁷¹ Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy*.

⁷² Wiafe, *Western Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana*.

⁷³ Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Wiafe, "Western Formal Education in Gold Coast-Ghana."

⁷⁵ Amina Mama, "Beyond the Frontiers: Feminist Activism in the 'Global' Academy," (paper presented at the Elsa Leo-Rhynie Symposium and 15th Anniversary Celebration, Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica, November 2008): 112, <https://www.sta.uwi.edu/crgs/index.asp>.

⁷⁶ Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising the Mind*.

⁷⁷ Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Female Fear Factory* (Cape Town: Melinda Ferguson Books, 2021), 89.

⁷⁸ Gqola, *Female Fear Factory*

⁷⁹ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*.

⁸⁰ hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 12.

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Appendix A - University of Education, Winneba, Admission Letter

 **UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**
Academic Affairs Section
P.O. Box 25, Winneba, Ghana. Tel. (0432) 20964, 22139

AS/A 26/Vol. 4/144 17th June, 2006

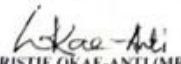
Dear Sir/Madam,

ADMISSION TO PURSUE A FOUR-YEAR B.ED DEGREE PROGRAMME IN UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA - 2006-2007 ACADEMIC YEAR

PROGRAMME: B.ED (SOCIAL SCIENCE) *Geo/Pos*

1. We are pleased to inform you that the Joint Admissions Board on behalf of the Academic Board of University of Education, Winneba has offered you admission to the University in the Faculty of Social Science to pursue a four-year B.Ed Degree programme starting from Saturday, 12th August, 2006.
2. You are required to make full payment of three million, one hundred and seventy thousand cedis (G3,170,000.00) before Monday, 17th July, 2006 if you accept this offer of admission. The University reserves the right to revise the fees anytime without notice. Use the pay-in slip provided to pay your fees at any net-worked branch of Ghana Commercial Bank. Please send copies of your receipt to the Accounts Section and MIS Office for registration when the exercise begins on Monday 14th August 2006.
3. Your admission is for 2006/2007 academic year only and if you fail to enrol or withdraw from the programme without prior approval you forfeit the admission automatically. You will be required to complete a fresh set of application forms if you intend to be considered for admission in a subsequent year.
4. You are warned that if it is discovered subsequently that you do not possess the qualifications by virtue of which you have been offered admission to the programme of study, you will be withdrawn from the University.
5. Your index Number for the Programme is [REDACTED] This number is your Examination and Registration Number. Your index number and programme of study should be quoted on all official documents.
6. Your hall of residence is SIMPA. You have the opportunity to live in the hall for only one academic year after which you would have to find your own accommodation outside campus. You are required to pay a Residential Facility User Fee of one million, sixty thousand cedis (G1,600,000.00) at the Hall Accounts Office.
7. You will be required to adhere to ALL University rules and regulations as contained in the Students' Handbook. All students are considered to be on probation for the duration of their programme they would be dismissed at any time for unsatisfactory work or misconduct.
8. It has to be noted that the University is a secular institution and is not bound by the observance of any religious or sectarian practices. As much as possible, University lectures and for examinations would be scheduled to take place within normal working days, but where it is not feasible, lectures and examinations would be held on other days.
9. The University does not give financial assistance to students. It is therefore the responsibility of students to arrange for their own sponsorship and maintenance during the period of study.
10. A change of programme is not allowed.
11. The University requires that you are declared medically fit. It would be arranged for you to be medically examined. You are therefore required to bring a chest x-ray.

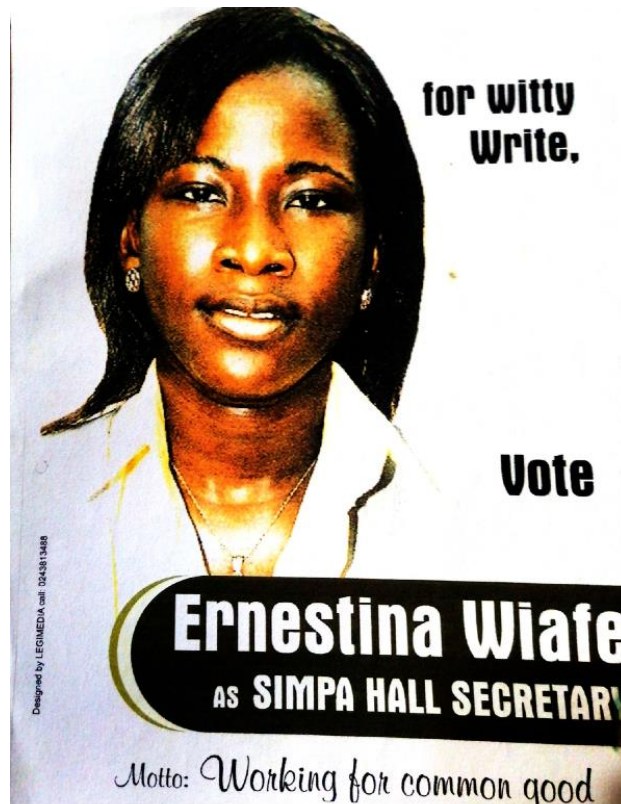
Please accept our congratulations.

Yours faithfully,

CHRISTTIE OKAE-ANTI (MRS)
for: REGISTRAR

cc: Pro-Vice Chancellor
Deans
Finance Officer
Internal Auditor

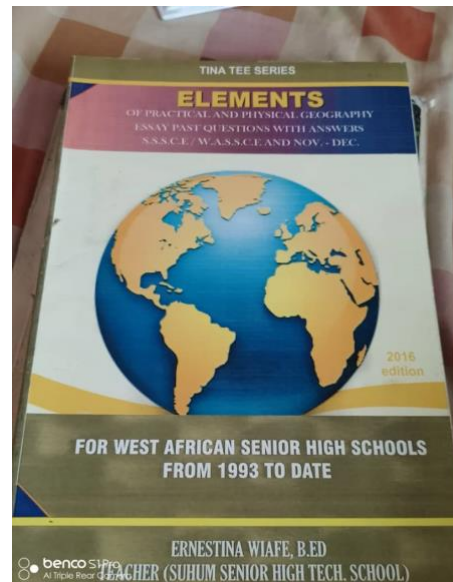
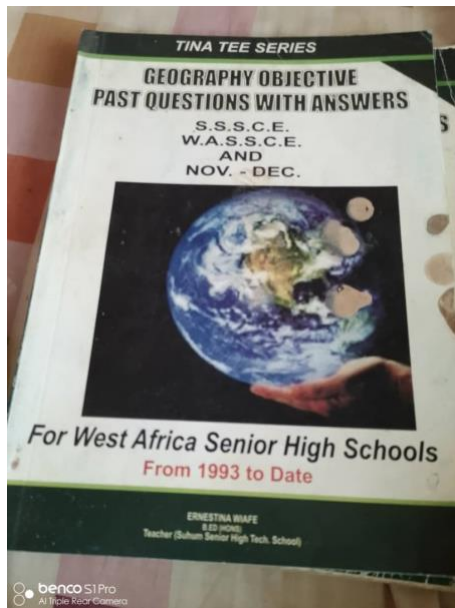
Appendix Figure 1: Undergraduate admission letter (from the author's collection)

Appendix B - Campaign Flyer for Simpa Hall Secretary Election



Appendix Figure 2: Campaign Flyer for Simpa Hall Secretary Election (from the author's collection).

Appendix C - Cover Pages of Tina Tee Series Geography Book



Appendix Figure 3: Cover page of self-published Tina Tee Series geography book (from the authors' collection).

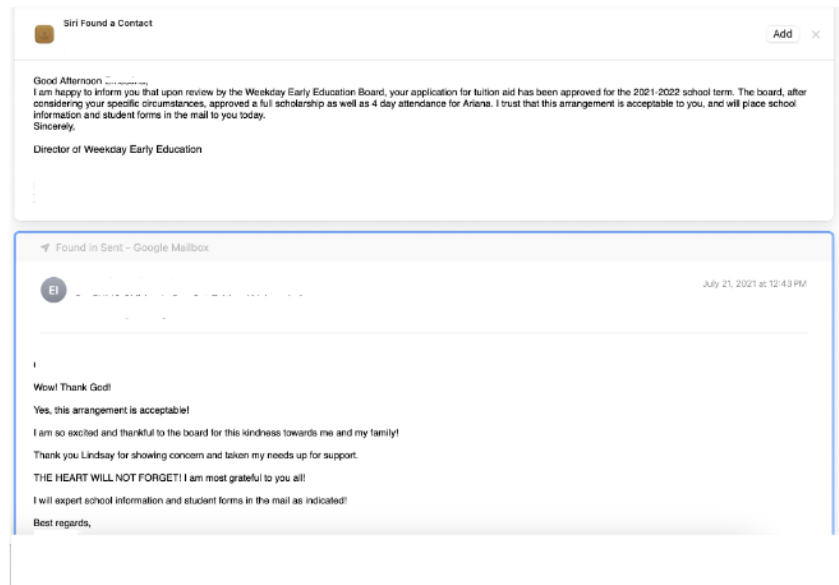
Appendix D - Master's Transcript

Academic Transcript		Kansas State University		OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR Jillie Bundage UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR OFFICIAL IF IN TWO COLORS	
STUDENT NAME	STUDENT NUMBER	DATE PREPARED	PAGE		
[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	01/04/2022	1 OF 1		
ACADEMIC PROGRAM ED GRADUATE DEGREE		ACADEMIC PLAN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION-M MAJOR CURRICULUM & INSTRUCTION-PHD MAJOR		ACADEMIC SUBPLAN MIDDLE LEVEL/SEC. CURR & INSTR	
----- EXTERNAL DEGREES -----			----- SPRING 2021 -----		
UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION WINNEB 07/01/2010 BACHELOR OF EDUCATION			COURSE TITLE ATT EARNED GRD POINTS		
----- BEGINNING OF GRADUATE RECORD -----			EDCI 886 SEM/CURR-INST 6.00 6.00 A 24.000		
----- SPRING 2019 -----			COURSE TOPIC(S): TOP/DYNAMICS OF CURRICULUM		
COURSE	TITLE	ATT	EARNED	GRD	POINTS
EDCI 803	CURRICULUM DEVELOP	3.00	3.00	A	12.000
EDCI 943	PRIN COLLEGE TEACH	3.00	3.00	A	12.000
TERM GPA : 4.000		TERM TOTALS :		6.00	24.000
CUM GPA : 4.000		CUM TOTALS :		30.00	120.000
----- FALL 2021 -----			COURSE TITLE ATT EARNED GRD POINTS		
EDCI 899	MS THESIS	6.00	6.00	CR	0.000
TERM GPA : 0.000		TERM TOTALS :		0.00	0.000
CUM GPA : 4.000		CUM TOTALS :		30.00	120.000
----- SPRING 2020 -----			COURSE TITLE ATT EARNED GRD POINTS		
EDCEP 715	PRIN OF ASSESSMENT	3.00	3.00	A	12.000
EDCI 813	PHILOS AMER EDUC	3.00	3.00	A	12.000
TERM GPA : 4.000		TERM TOTALS :		6.00	24.000
CUM GPA : 4.000		CUM TOTALS :		12.00	48.000
----- FALL 2020 -----			COURSE TITLE ATT EARNED GRD POINTS		
EDCI 812	HISTORY AMER EDUC	3.00	3.00	A	12.000
EDCI 886	SEM/CURR-INST	3.00	3.00	A	12.000
TERM GPA : 4.000		TERM TOTALS :		6.00	24.000
CUM GPA : 4.000		CUM TOTALS :		18.00	72.000
----- SPRING 2022 -----			COURSE TITLE ATT EARNED GRD POINTS		
EDCEP 816	RESEARCH METHODS IN ED	3.00	3.00	SS	0.000
EDCI 886	SEM/CURR-INST	3.00	3.00	SS	0.000
TERM GPA : 0.000		TERM TOTALS :		0.00	0.000
CUM GPA : 4.000		CUM TOTALS :		30.00	120.000
GRADUATE CAREER TOTALS			ATT EARNED POINTS		
GRAD CUM GPA: 4.000			CUM TOTALS :		30.00 36.00 120.000
----- NON-COURSE MILESTONES -----			2021-10-26 THESIS APPROVAL - MASTER'S		
			MILESTONE STATUS: COMPLETED		
			Western formal education in Gold Coast-Ghana: An		
			overview of colonial educational policies and		
			curriculum from 1919-1927		
			2021-10-26 SUBMITTED WORK - COMPLETED		
*** END OF RECORD ***					

THIS TRANSCRIPT IS NOT OFFICIAL UNLESS THE SEAL OF KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY AND THE SIGNATURE OF THE UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR ARE AFFIXED IN MULTICOLOR INK. SEE REVERSE SIDE FOR EXPLANATION. TRANSCRIPT LEGEND LOCATED ON BACK.

Appendix Figure 4: Master's Thesis Transcript (from the author's collection).

Appendix E - Feedback Email from the Director of Weekday Early Education After Presenting My Specific Family Need to the Board



Appendix Figure 5: Director’s Email feedback to me after inquiry from Weekday Board (from the authors’ collection).

Appendix F - Certificate of Achievement



Appendix Figure 6: Certificate of Achievement in recognition of outstanding presentation during K-State Graduate Research, Arts, and Discovery Forum (from author's collection).

Appendix G - Round Trip Flight Ticket to Toronto, Canada, for Conference Presentation

Booking.com

Past

Your booking details

Customer reference: [REDACTED]

PIN code: [REDACTED]



Kansas City (MCI) to Toronto (YYZ)

Sun, May 28 · 3:41 PM - Sun, May 28 · 10:29 PM

1 stop · 5h 48m · Economy

American Airlines · AA1619, AA5382

Booking reference:

[REDACTED]



Toronto (YYZ) to Kansas City (MCI)

Fri, Jun 2 · 6:00 AM - Fri, Jun 2 · 10:23 AM

1 stop · 5h 23m · Economy

American Airlines · AA5188, AA1616

Booking reference:

[REDACTED]

Traveler details



Adult · Female · [REDACTED]

Baggage

Total number of bags included for all travelers

Flight to Toronto



1 personal item

Fits under the seat in front of you

Appendix Figure 7: First International Conference Flight Ticket to Toronto (from author's collection).

**Appendix H - Supervision Certificate from Access Academy and the
University of Manchester, England, in the U.K.**



Appendix Figure 8: Supervision certificate in recognition for guiding student fellows in completing independent academic research of social justice research fellowship in Manchester, England, U.K., (from the author's collection).

Appendix I - Phi Kappa Phi Honoree Society Invitation

Congratulations - We invite you to join Phi Kappa Phi

Tue 3/15/2022 12:01 PM

To: E.....

This email originated from outside of K-State.

Congratulations! You have been elected to membership in the Kansas State University chapter of The Honor Society of Phi Kappa Phi, the nation's oldest, most selective, and most prestigious all-discipline honor society. Standards for election to Phi Kappa Phi are extremely high. Membership is by invitation only to K-State's top 7.5 percent of second term juniors and the top 10 percent of seniors and graduate students.

In joining, you become one of a distinguished group. Our members have served in the White House, Congress, and the Supreme Court of the United States. They have won Nobel Prizes, Pulitzer Prizes, and numerous other national and international awards for service and achievement in their chosen fields. Phi Kappa Phi is proud to include among its membership thousands of men and women who, for more than a century, have sought to make a difference in the communities where they live and work.

This Spring's induction ceremony and reception will be held on Tuesday, May 3, at 4:00pm in the heart of the K-State campus at Hale Library (in room 181). As part of the induction event, we will have a panel of speakers making remarks related to an exhibit currently on display in Hale Library: The Best of Times, The Worst of Times. Initiates will be encouraged to visit this compelling Special Collections and University Archives exhibit (5th floor). We are very excited about the program; as the pandemic winds down and war in eastern Europe erupts, many of us identify with the sense that 2022 is "the best of times" and "the worst of times." Indeed, our program speakers will compare and contrast the goings-on of 1968 (the specific focus of the exhibit) with those of today!

For your membership fee, you will receive an initiation certificate, the official Phi Kappa Phi pin, national and local dues for one year, a one-year subscription to the *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* magazine, and access to members-only benefits and resources. Benefits include access to more than \$1 million in awards each year, global networking opportunities, career resources, internship opportunities, discounts from more than 30 corporate partners, and much more. For more information about the Society and membership benefits, please visit www.PhiKappaPhi.org/Benefits.

The In Person will be held on May 03, 2022, at 4:00 PM in Hale Library, Kansas State University. Please arrive by 4:00 PM to check in and pick up your packet of materials for the initiation ceremony. In order to have your certificate available at the initiation ceremony, you must register online by April 17, 2022. The final deadline to register is June 01, 2022. The password will be terminated on this date.

To accept this invitation to become a member of Phi Kappa Phi, please complete the invitation online at <http://www.phikappaphi.org/members/chapters-list/kansas-state-university>. The access

Appendix Figure 9: Phi Kappa Phi honoree society invitation (from author's collection).

**Appendix J - Division of Academic Success and Student Affairs
(DASS) 2024 Extraordinary Student Award**



Appendix Figure 10: Plaque Award of recognition as DASS 2024 Extraordinary Student (from author's collection).

Appendix K - Social Justice Advocacy Award



Appendix Figure 11: K-State College of Education Spring 2024 Social Justice Award (from the author's collection).

Appendix L - African Student Union (ASU) Outstanding Member

Certificate of Recognition



Appendix Figure 12: Certificate of Appreciation for outstanding contribution to ASU (from author's collection).

Appendix M - Appointment Email to Department of Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) Faculty and Executive Faculty Committee

New Graduate Student C&I Graduate Faculty Representative

Tue 5/28/2024 12:10 PM

1

Happy Tuesday (that seems like Monday) Ernestine!

You are our new C&I graduate student representative to serve on C&I Graduate Faculty and C&I Graduate Faculty Executive Committee! Congratulations – and something to add to your c.v.

All meetings are via Zoom. I'll be sending out an email to everyone with the schedule soon.

Dr. T

Appendix Figure 13: Appointment email as a graduate student's representative on the C&I Faculty and Executive Faculty Committee Member (from author's collection).

Appendix N - Community Engagement by Ernestina Wiafe

EduCare



In case of reply the number and date of this Letter should be quoted.
My Ref: GES/ER/SuM/ [redacted]
Your Ref No: [redacted]



MUNICIPAL EDUCATION OFFICE,
P.O BOX 41,
SUHUM,
7TH JULY, 2024.

REPUBLIC OF GHANA

LETTER OF APPRECIATION

I am writing to express our profound gratitude for your tremendous support and invaluable contributions to the Virtual Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) Academy programme held in our municipality.

Through your enormous efforts, we were able to secure a waiver on the registration fee for the programme, which greatly facilitated the participation of our students. Additionally, your arrangement for media coverage ensured that the event received the attention and recognition it deserved, thereby highlighting the importance of STEAM education in our community.

Your collaboration with the Science, Technology, Mathematics and Innovation Education (STMIE) Coordinator and your unwavering support were instrumental in the successful execution of the programme.

We look forward to continue our partnership with Ernestina Wiafe EduCare International in future initiatives aimed at enriching the educational experiences of our students.

Thank you.

[redacted signature]

MUNICIPAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION
SUHUM

The Chief Executive Officer
Ernestina Wiafe EduCare International

[redacted signature]

Scanned with CamScanner



GHANA
EDUCATION
SERVICE



SUHUM MUNICIPAL EDUCATION DIRECTORATE



Kansas State University
College of Education

**Suhum Municipal Education Directorate
(STEM Unit) in partnership with the Kansas State
University (Dept. Of Curriculum & Instruction) USA**

Present

**Virtual SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, ARTS
AND MATHEMATICS (STEAM) Academy**

MONDAY 10TH – THURSDAY 27TH JUNE, 2024

SUHUM M/A EXP. 'C' BASIC SCHOOL

SPONSORS



Kansas State University
College of Education



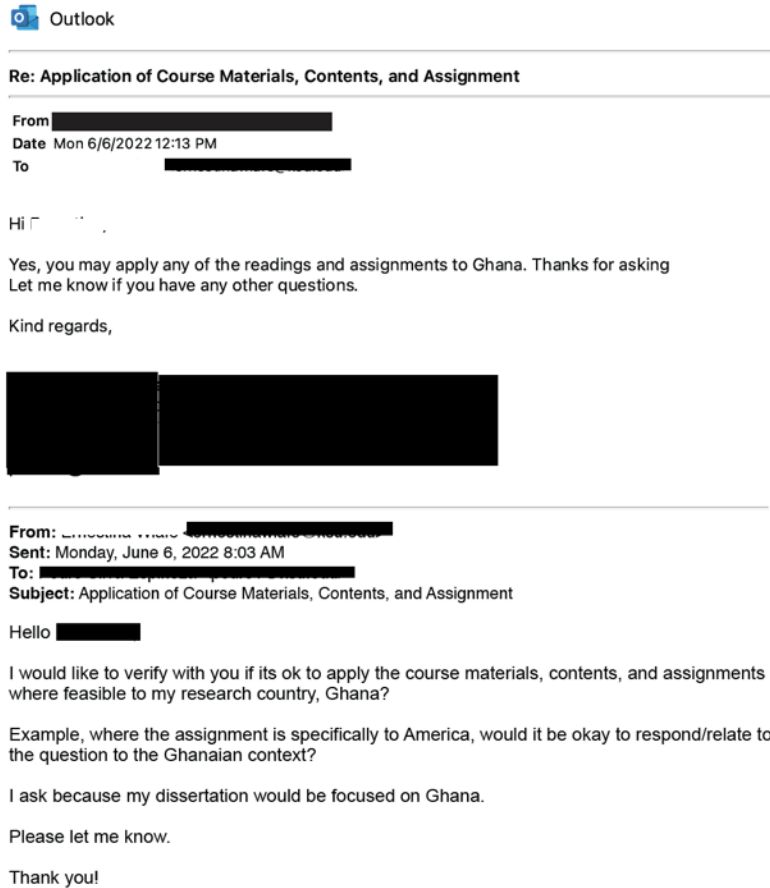
ERNESTINA
WIAFE
EDUCARE



N^K
B
PUBLICATIONS &
EDU. CONSULT

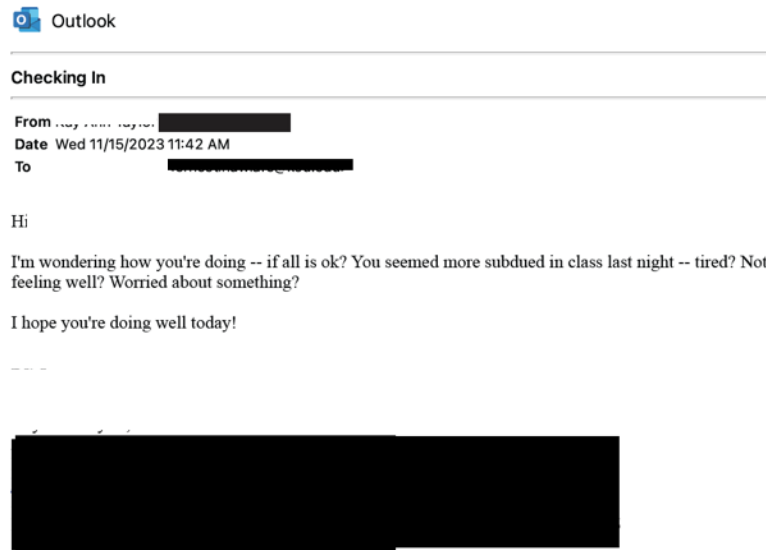
Appendix Figure 14: Community Engagement Through Ernestina Wiafe EduCare Consult (from author's collection).

Appendix O - Inquiry to Relate Course Projects to Research Focus and Instructor's Response



Appendix Figure 15: Email Inquiring to relate course projects to research focus and instructor's response (from author's collection).

Appendix P - Instructor Empathy in Academic Space



Appendix Figure 16: Instructor's empathy email (from author's collection).

Appendix Q - Instructor's Email Prioritizing Students' Well-being



Appendix Figure 17: Instructor email prioritizing my wellbeing (from author's collection).

Appendix R - End of Ph.D., Course Work Transcript

Page 6 of 8

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Official Transcript

Name: _____
Student ID: _____

Cum GPA	3.909	Cum Totals	81.000	75.000	66.000	258.000
Transfer Cum GPA		Transfer Totals	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Combined Cum GPA	3.909	Comb Totals	81.000	75.000	66.000	258.000
Graduate Career Totals						
Cum GPA	3.909	Cum Totals	81.000	75.000	66.000	258.000
Transfer Cum GPA		Transfer Totals	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Combined Cum GPA	3.909	Comb Totals	81.000	75.000	66.000	258.000

End of Official Transcript



Appendix Figure 18: End of Ph.D., Course Work Transcript (from author's collection).

Appendix S - IRB Exemption Letter



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: | Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506
Proposal Number: IRB-12625

FROM: _____, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 02/03/2025

RE: Proposal Entitled, "Tales of an African Woman Toward Scholarship."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects / Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Kansas State University has reviewed the proposal identified above and has determined that it is EXEMPT from further IRB review. This exemption applies only to the proposal - as written - and currently on file with the IRB. Any change potentially affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation and may disqualify the proposal from exemption.

Based upon information provided to the IRB, this activity is exempt under the criteria set forth in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, **45 CFR §104(d), category:Exempt Category 2 Subsection ii.**

Certain research is exempt from the requirements of HHS/OHRP regulations. A determination that research is exempt does not imply that investigators have no ethical responsibilities to subjects in such research; it means only that the regulatory requirements related to IRB review, informed consent, and assurance of compliance do not apply to the research.

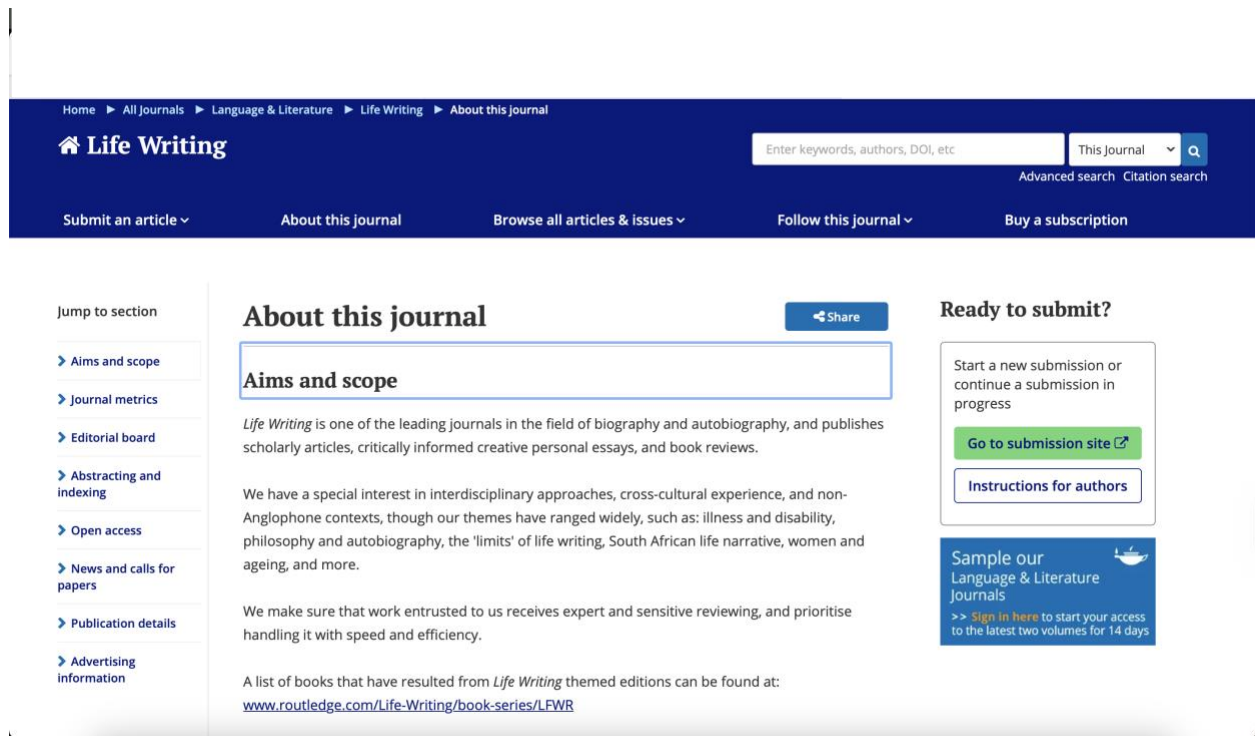
Any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, the University Research Compliance Office, and if the subjects are KSU students, to the Director of the Student Health Center.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 02/03/2025 5:44 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

Appendix Figure 19: IRB Exempt Letter

Appendix T - Screenshot of Life Writings Guidelines



Appendix Figure 20: Screenshot of Life Writings Guidelines

Chapter 3 - Curriculum Experiences of African Female Graduate Students in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa

This research is tailored to the *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*

<https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/ujcp20/about-this-journal#aims-and-scope>. Hence, the manuscript structure followed

<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=ujcp20#article-types> formatting guidelines.

Ernestina Wiafe

Abstract

Africa contributes to over half of the world's population growth, projected to reach 3.9 billion by 2100. Empowering women through education is essential for sustainable development. Yet, African women, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), face persistent barriers in accessing quality education, especially in underrepresented fields like STEM. This study examined the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students in the U.S. and sub-Saharan Africa, analyzing challenges and opportunities through the frameworks of Critical Postcolonial Curriculum Theory (CPCT), Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), and transnationalism. Using a qualitative comparative-case study design, it employed semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled participants from diverse sub-Saharan African nations and disciplines to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural environments, gender dynamics, identity negotiation, socioeconomic factors, and academic support systems influence the academic successes and challenges faced by female scholars from this demographic within two distinct educational contexts: the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa. This article contributes to decolonizing education by shifting the conversation about female educational intersectionality

beyond a Western or Eurocentric perspective, thereby enriching the theoretical framework in academic research.

Keywords: Curriculum, Culturally Relevant Education, ..., transnationalism, intersectionality, multiple case study, and comparative case study analysis.

Introduction

Africa is projected to account for more than half of the world's population growth, reaching approximately 3.9 billion people by 2100 (United Nations, World Population Prospects, 2022; Dyvik, 2024). In this context of rapid demographic expansion, empowering women through education is widely recognized as a cornerstone for unlocking the continent's potential and advancing sustainable development (Frick et al., 2016). Significant progress has been made at the foundational levels, where completion rates for elementary to secondary education rose from 52% in 1990 to over 70% by the late 2010s, while gross tertiary enrollment more than doubled from 9% to 19% between 2000 and 2023 (UNESCO, 2024; World Bank, 2024). However, this promising educational pipeline narrows considerably at the graduate level, especially during doctoral studies. Scholars have long criticized the deep-rooted gender inequalities in African higher education, noting that women's education is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural norms, religious beliefs, colonial histories, and economic factors (Aina, 2010; Mama, 2003; Odejidi et al., 2006). This underrepresentation of women with doctorate degrees has a dual negative impact, including reducing the pool of experts who can lead African-driven research and development. The impact of an educated woman has a ripple effect; At home, she mentors the next generation of boys and girls, with studies consistently linking mothers' educational levels to their children's academic achievement and cognitive development (World Bank, 2018; Smith & Zaslow, 2015). In the public sphere, she is equipped to shape policies that ensure equitable access and opportunity, as women in leadership are more likely to invest in social spending that benefits broader communities (World Economic Forum, 2024; OECD, 2023). Women create a legacy that extends far beyond personal achievements to reflect the core truth of the saying, "... if you educate a woman, you educate a nation" (Aggrey,

n.d.). With 75% of Africa's population under 35 and 49.8% female (United Nations, 2022), young Africans are a vital resource for the continent and the world, poised to drive economic growth, innovation, and sustainable development. However, realizing this potential depends on educational curricula that effectively support this goal by equipping students with essential knowledge and skills aligned with national, continental, and global priorities (African Union Commission, 2014).

Statement of the Research Problem

For Africans, education is a key avenue for empowerment, particularly for women, enabling agency and the capacity to drive positive change. Many African nations face persistent challenges in providing equitable educational opportunities, while U.S. graduate programs often struggle to offer culturally responsive and tailored experiences for diverse student populations. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020), females constitute 61% of the total graduate student population in U.S. universities, approximately 1.9 million students. Of these, 71.5% are pursuing master's degrees, and 65.9% of doctoral, medical, and dental degrees (Fast Facts: Association of American University Women, n.d.). However, the proportion of Black African women studying on student visas remains unknown, as this demographic is not disaggregated in existing data. This gap highlights a lack of research on this specific scholarly group, leading to misrepresentation and marginalization, as each subset of female graduate students experiences higher education differently based on intersectional factors (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). The absence of recognition in research and statistical reporting diminishes the visibility of African female graduate students, obscuring their voices, experiences, contributions, and achievements.

In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), higher education literature has increasingly addressed topics such as student supervision (Muraraneza et al., 2016), institutional ranking (Dlamini, 2016; Ntshoe et al.), access and value of higher education (Allais, 2017; Ilie & Rose, 2016; Oketch, 2016), entrepreneurial education (Amadi-Echendu et al., 2016), and curriculum internationalization (Gwakwa, 2016; Higgs, 2016). Yet these discussions often neglect the voices and experiences of the graduate students for whom they are intended.

Research Purpose

This study explored the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students in the U.S and SSA.

Significance of Research

This study fills a critical gap in the literature on graduate education for African women. Comparing the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students in two different contexts: SSA and U.S universities, offers insights into how geographic contexts, cultural settings, academic support, and gender issues shape graduate education and career paths. By highlighting the curriculum experiences of African women, this research contributes to advancing the decolonization of graduate education. The findings play a crucial role in promoting a more inclusive and culturally relevant curricular framework that meets the specific needs of the students they intend to serve.

Research Questions

Two questions guided the study:

1. In what ways do African female graduate students interpret their experiences with the curriculum in universities in the U.S. and SSA?

2. How do African female graduate students reflect on the personal and academic impact of their experiences with the curriculum in universities in the U.S. and SSA?

Relevant Literature and Theoretical Grounding

The word “curriculum” has multiple meanings. Generally, curriculum refers to the knowledge integrated into teaching and learning programs, as reflected in Herbert Spencer’s 1884 title, “What Knowledge Is Most Valuable?” Although there are various viewpoints on curriculum, one that emerged prominently in the latter half of the twentieth century and remains prominent in the first two decades of the twenty-first century is Tyler’s and Biggs’s. Tyler and Biggs define curriculum as a basic, tightly connected system in which it is both possible and desirable to closely align what students learn with expected learning outcomes and how they are assessed (Tyler & Biggs, 1949, p. 7). This view of curriculum, agreeing with Grange (2016a), represents an instrumentalist and utilitarian perspective that is colonial in nature, as it presents a single method of knowing, being, and becoming as the only valid approach. In other words, this dominant view of curriculum does not reflect the uniqueness of each individual, in this case, graduate students’ particular ambitions, expectations, and beliefs, as well as those shaped by race, gender, and sexual orientation (Gough, 2013; Grange, 2016a).

In his work *Curriculum Theorizing: The Reconceptualists*, Pinar (1975) redefined curriculum by returning to its Latin root, *currere*, which means to run the course or racecourse. This definition shifted the focus of curriculum from standardized content to the importance of individual experience, as cited in Le Grange (2016a). This suggests that the core of the curriculum is not in a fixed path but in how each person uniquely “runs” it (Pinar, 1975). This complexity, according to Pinar, arises from our different genetic, social, and cultural identities,

including race, gender, and class, making the experiences of one's academic journey, here, graduate education, central to the curriculum (Pinar, 2011).

Grumet (1981) provided an alternative view of curriculum to that of Tyler (1949), describing it as “the stories that we tell students about their past, present, and future.” (as cited in Le Grange, 2016a, p. 7). Grumet's (1981) alternative view is vital because it prompts us to ask critical questions, such as “whose stories are students told about their past, present, and future, and who has the power to tell them?” (as cited in Le Grange, 2016a, p. 7). Ted Aoki (1999), contends that curriculum should not only focus on what is planned (the curriculum-as-plan), but also on how it is lived (the curriculum-as-lived), thus, how students and lecturers experience the curriculum (as cited in Grange 2016, p. 7). Aoki (1999) emphasizes that legitimizing the curriculum-as-lived does not eliminate the curriculum-as-plan, but instead creates a space between the two, one of struggle, innovation, and transformation. The South African student demonstrations of 2015 and 2016, for instance, revealed that many professors and university managers had failed to understand students' lived experiences, both inside and outside the institution, and that this dimension of the curriculum lacked legitimacy in the university (Grange, 2016). Paying attention to Aoki's insight into legitimizing the curriculum-as-lived, alongside the curriculum-as-planned, has the potential to transform African and global universities, as the tension between the two can serve as a decolonizing space (Aoki, 1999; Grange, 2016).

Consistent with Pinar's (1975; 2011) perspectives on curriculum, this study aligns with the definition of curriculum provided by Marsh and Willis (2007), who describe it as “an interrelated set of plans and experiences that a student undertakes under the guidance of the school” (p. 15). This definition is especially suitable for this research because the phrase “an interrelated set of plans and experiences” captures the combination of pre-planned activities and

unanticipated or emergent experiences that graduate students encounter (Marsh & Willis, 2007). It recognizes that while some aspects of the curriculum can be planned, others develop naturally through student experiences, engagement, and interaction. Marsh and Willis' (2007) definition also highlights the importance of both instructors and students, emphasizing how their interactions shape the "lived" curriculum; thus, the curriculum is how each individual actually experiences it.

Marsh and Willis' (2007) definition aligns closely with Eisner's (1985) idea of the explicit, implicit (hidden), and null curricula, which reveal how educational experiences are shaped. The study agrees that understanding curriculum requires considering three interconnected dimensions: the explicit, the implicit or hidden, and the null curriculum. The explicit curriculum includes approved materials like syllabi and assessments, while the implicit curriculum involves unofficial learning of the school's culture and values. This creates a standard for an "ideal" graduate, reinforcing it and framing non-conformity as "other." The null curriculum refers to excluded subject matter or perspectives. Within this working definition, the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students in the U.S. and SSA universities were viewed as curriculum guiding what is officially designed (the planned curriculum), how instructors deliver it (the enacted curriculum in the universities), and how students ultimately receive and internalize it (the experienced curriculum). This helps bridge the space between the planned curriculum and the lived curriculum, which the study agrees may function as a decolonizing space (Aoki, 1999; Grange, 2016a).

Given that this research investigates the curriculum experiences of African female students in U.S. universities and SSA universities, Critical Postcolonial Curriculum Theory (CPCT) was employed to examine how colonial histories and power structures influence

education, critiquing Western knowledge dominance, and advocating for decolonization epistemologies (Said, 1978; Andreotti, 2011; Le Grange, 2016; Mbembe, 2016) and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) by Ladson-Billings (1995), was applied to assess how curricula and teaching either marginalize or affirm the students' knowledge systems, guiding decolonizing recommendations through its pillars of (1) academic success, (2) cultural competence, and (3) critical consciousness. Transnational literature helps explain how culture and power transcend borders, shaping their identities and fostering hybrid ways of knowing (Quayson & Daswani, 2013). At the same time, intersectional resources acknowledged that these students' experiences are shaped by the convergence of race, gender, class, and immigration status (F1 visas), revealing how interconnected barriers limit access and success in graduate education (Crenshaw, 1991; Cho et al., 2015).

Research Methodology and Method

This study employed a qualitative methodology, utilizing a comparative case study approach (Spradley, 1979; Yin, 2018) to gain insights into the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students across two distinct educational contexts: the U.S and SSA. Each participant was regarded as a unique case, enabling both detailed multiple-case analysis and cross-case synthesis. Primary data sources were collected through semi-structured interviews, and minor linguistic errors in the transcripts were corrected to enhance readability without altering meaning. Additionally, six course syllabi, one per participant, were analyzed to systematically identify alignment or divergence points between participants' transcripts and the course syllabus through a document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003) as shown in Table 2. Since the study aimed to compare curricular experiences of African female graduate students, a comparative case study approach was most appropriate.

Participant Recruitment

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to select six participants: three from U.S. doctoral programs and three from universities in SSA (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure diversity in disciplines, institutions, languages, and countries of origin, inclusion criteria required that participants: (1) identify as female and Black African. This helped distinguish the population set from White South African experiences where racial and ethnic distinctions have a specific historical and social meaning (2) be enrolled full-time in a Ph.D. program on a student visa in the U.S. or be an African citizen and be based in a Sub-Saharan African (SSA) country; (3) represent any academic discipline; and (4) Speak English or French as an official language. A sample size of six participants and six syllabi was expected to achieve thematic saturation (Saunders et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection, Analysis

Data collection involved two rounds of semi-structured interviews, each lasting at least one hour, conducted and audio-recorded via Zoom (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcriptions were created using MAXQDA transcription software (VERBI Software, 2023) and verified against the original recordings for accuracy and clarity. A grounded coding approach was used to identify meaningful data segments for each case. Codes with shared meanings were grouped into categories, which were then refined and constructed into broader themes following Braun and Clarke (2006). These themes were organized in a comparative matrix under each research question to illustrate the multi-case analysis (Tables 2 and 3). A cross-case synthesis was then employed to highlight similarities, variations, and key insights, supported by direct quotes.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Upon IRB approval, ethical standards were maintained by obtaining informed consent, using pseudonyms, and ensuring anonymity to protect participant identity. The methodological design achieved data saturation through multiple data sources and analytical approaches. The inclusion of diverse institutional contexts across US and SSA institutions further strengthened transferability, as thick, contextualized descriptions offer readers sufficient detail to determine the applicability of the findings to other settings (Nowell et al., 2017). To enhance the study's trustworthiness, credibility was ensured through member checking, which allowed participants to review and clarify their interview transcripts and emerging interpretations. Confirmability was ensured through triangulation of data sources (interview transcripts and course syllabi) and through analytic triangulation via cross-case synthesis (Yin, 2004; Mills & Wiebe, 2010), which enabled comparisons across multiple cases (Yin, 2018).

Findings

The study's findings first describe the demographic composition and backgrounds of research participants in the U.S. and SSA universities, as summarized in Table 1. Next, key themes constructed from each case were compiled into a comparative matrix for a multi-case analysis and organized by research questions one and two, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. A cross-case synthesis then compared patterns across the two regions, identifying both similarities and differences to provide a comprehensive comparative perspective. To enrich the analysis, direct participant quotes were incorporated to offer deeper insights for inductive interpretations drawn from the data.

Table 1

Demographic Representation and Background of Research Participants

Category	Sub-Saharan Africa-based			United States-based		
Participants	Tina (Benin)	Daavi (Ghana)	Nancy (Kenya)	Girl's Girl (Zimbabwe)	Makida (Ethiopia)	Grace (Zambia)
Age	27	32	39	33	38	31
Nationality	Beninese	Ghanaian	Kenyan	Zimbabwean	Ethiopian	Zambian
Ethnicity	Fon	Kasena	Kikuyu	Shona	Amharic	Tumbuka & Ngoni
Language(s)	French, Fon	English, Kasem	English, Swahili, Kikuyu	English, Shona	Amharic-speaking	English, Tumbuka, Ngoni
Family Status	Not specified	Married with children	Shared concerns about sexist comment “marry first”	Not specified	Married, two children	Not specified
Degree Program	PhD in Applied Linguistics and dialectics	PhD in Molecular Biology	PhD in HR Management	PhD in Chemistry	PhD in Agricultural Economics	PhD in Sociology
Program Duration	3 years (Year 2)	4 years (Year 3)	4 years (currently in 15 years (collecting data for dissertation))	5+ years (writing dissertation)	4 years (Year 4)	3 years (Year 3)
Career Background	English as a Foreign Language Teacher at high school & university (7 yrs.)	Clinical Microbiology, with expertise in Public Health research, specializing in vaccine trials and device evaluation	HR Manager	Chemist Trainee & Teacher in Zimbabwe	Agricultural Researcher	Demographer
Anticipated Career	Continue Teaching English as Foreign Language	Lead Independent Research	University Vice- Chancellor	Industrial Chemist	Undecided (seeking U.S. options) due to current instability in Ethiopia.	Sociologist

Source: Wiafe, E. (2025). Demographic and academic background representation of research. In a *semi-structured interview*, data were collected.

Demographic Representation and Academic Background of Participants

A total of six female African Ph.D. students participated in the study. Three of them, based in Sub-Saharan Africa, were Tina (Benin), Daavi (Ghana), and Nancy (Kenya), studying in Applied Linguistics, Molecular Biology, and Human Resource Management, respectively. The other three students based in the U.S., including Makida (Ethiopia), Abby (Zimbabwe), and Grace (Zambia), are pursuing degrees in Agricultural Economics, Chemistry, and Sociology, as shown in Table 1. These fields span disciplines in STEM, Social Sciences, Education, and Business, representing diverse academic areas.

Age

The participants' ages range from 27 to 39 years old. Tina (Benin) is the youngest, and Nancy (Kenya) is the oldest. While there is no single, widely cited statistic for the average Ph.D. completion age for Sub-Saharan Africans in both study regions, the age distribution of these female African scholars (27-39) mirrors the average Ph.D. graduation age of 36.1 years for African American women in the U.S. (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2021).

Academic Background and Integration of Prior Knowledge

Makida (Ethiopian) stands out for her rich international educational background, which includes a Master's degree from Wageningen University in the Netherlands and a post-MSc program at the University of Ghana. All six participants had relevant pre-Ph.D. education and work experience, ranging from an agricultural economist, chemist, demographer, EFL teacher, clinical microbiologist with expertise in public health research, specializing in vaccine trials and device evaluation, to a human resources manager and university lecturer. This likely provided strong preparation for their doctoral programs, aligning with their future career goals.

As Grace noted, “I’ve been allowed to incorporate my demographic knowledge into sociology and from my other work experiences into education, which wouldn’t have happened in Zambia at all” (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 77). In contrast, Makida found few opportunities to integrate her experiences. At the same time, Girl’s Girl believed that her master’s degree from Zimbabwe gave her an advantage when she entered the U.S. Ph.D. program. She reflected, “I felt like I was overqualified in some way. In some classes, when I was learning certain content, it felt more like a revision” (Zimbabwe Participant Transcript, Pos. 75).

Ethnicity and Linguistic Identities

The participants display a diverse range of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds from across sub-Saharan Africa, and these identities are closely connected to their academic journeys.

Tina, a member of the Fon, a major ethnic group in Benin, is fluent in French, the official language, as well as the Fon indigenous language. Her education and years of experience teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to French speakers directly inform her career in language education. Daavi is from the second-largest ethnic group in Northern Ghana, called Kasena, and she is proficient in both English and Kasem, the indigenous language of her people. She emphasizes that bilingualism is essential for conducting scientific research within local communities and for communicating findings, which shows a direct link between her language skills and her effectiveness in her local disease project.

Similarly, Nancy, from the Kikuyu, Kenya’s largest ethnic group, is trilingual in English, Swahili, and Kikuyu. She finds that this trilingual ability directly shapes her approach to human resources management, which indicates her capacity to navigate different cultural and linguistic contexts in her work. Abby is from the Shona ethnic group, who make up about 80% of Zimbabwe’s population. As a Shona, she speaks Shona, a Bantu language that is one of the

country's official languages. Abby has leveraged her bilingual skills to effectively communicate with her academic advisor, who is also from her ethnicity in Zimbabwe.

Makida from Ethiopia rejects ethnic labels, saying, "There are many ethnic groups, but I just want to identify as an Ethiopian. Ethnicity is why Ethiopia is like this" (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 14), showing her political stance against ethnic politicization (Kleppe, 2022). Despite her international education, she sees English proficiency as a barrier, illustrating how even the highly educated face language limits.

Grace comes from two ethnic groups, the Tumbuka and Ngoni groups of Zambia. She is trilingual in Tumbuka, Ngoni, the indigenous languages of her people, and English as the official language. Her multiethnicity, mixed heritage, and trilingual identity highlight how she is leveraging her educational background in Demography to her current graduate studies and research in Sociology.

Participants' demographics, educational backgrounds, and experiences reveal meaningful links between their prior learning, careers, and current doctoral work, boosting their confidence, improving adaptability, and fostering a sense of readiness. This supports Nettles and Millett's (2006) research findings, which show that postgraduate students with relevant pre-Ph.D., experienced tend to have higher persistence rates due to more targeted goal alignment.

Multi-case Thematic Analysis of Research Participants for R.Q. 1 and Document Analysis of Course Syllabus

In what ways do African female graduate students interpret their experiences with the curriculum in universities in the U.S. and Sub-Saharan Africa?

Table 2

Multi-case Thematic Analysis of R.Q. 1 and Course Syllabus Analysis

Category	Sub-Saharan Africa-based				United States-based	
Theme	Tina (Benin)	Daavi (Ghana)	Nancy (Kenya)	Abby (Zimbabwe)	Makida (Ethiopia)	Grace (Zambia)
Curriculum & Pedagogical content	PhD content lacks a structured curriculum and is self-directed. Focuses mainly on research and theoretical knowledge rather than practical.	Structured PhD which includes coursework & lab work. Focus on independent research skills.	Corporate focused HR content which lacks HR content and skills good for academia.	Contains foundational courses in research analysis, methods, theory, and teaching.	Curriculum focuses on coursework over practical research, which she finds less beneficial for her learning style.	Offered foundational courses in research methods, analysis, and teaching.
Culturally Relevant & Reaction to African-focused Research	The linguistics curriculum ignores local culture. Relies heavily on Western materials.	The curriculum overlooks local diseases (e.g., those attributed to “witchcraft”). Biomedical research prioritizes Western-published studies over local realities.	Uses a lot Kenyan/African in case studies. Students are encouraged to cite Kenyan/African examples. Currently collecting data for research on African focused research.	No direct cultural integration. Cultural comfort came only via the Zimbabwean advisor. Mostly Western focused research.	The African context is self-integrated. The curriculum lacks institutional cultural reflection. Some flexibility to choose Africa-focused topics through advisor support.	Curriculum is U.S.-centric. African perspectives are often dismissed in class. Abandoned her African research due to lack of faculty support or inadequate knowledge of the research area.

Category	Sub-Saharan Africa-based			United States-based		
Theme	Tina (Benin)	Daavi (Ghana)	Nancy (Kenya)	Abby (Zimbabwe)	Makida (Ethiopia)	Grace (Zambia)
Career Alignment of Curriculum	No alignment with teaching career.	Prepares independent researchers.	Does not align with her academic focused career.	Strong practical and research exposure; feels equipped for both industry and academia.	Curriculum leans heavily on coursework; limited practical research experience.	Well-aligned with a research career; flexibility to tailor coursework toward career goals.

Document Analysis of Course Syllabi

Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Global Pluralism	Contains only information for research expectations and due dates.	Promotes active learning through journal club presentations, lab practical, and exams that encourage dialogue and analysis, but it primarily reflects a Western scientific perspective with sources drawn mainly from Western scholarship.	A syllabus was not provided, as coursework was completed many years ago, and now in the fifteenth year of the degree.	Primarily uses a lecture-based approach with limited structured student participation. Does not reference diverse perspectives, but encourages relevant topics for societal impact.	Focus on economics model and their real-world application from various global context. Course is lecture-based with participatory activities such as group assignment.	Uses dialogue and participatory approach to build a community where students voices and experiential knowledge are central. Content incorporates global and transnational perspectives to contextual U.S. racial formations.
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Source: Wiafe, E. (2025). Multi-case thematic analysis of research participants for Research Question 1. *In semi-structured interview data and course syllabus document analysis.*

Cross-Case Synthesis for Research Question 1

Curriculum and Pedagogical Content

Across cases, the study noted that the curriculum of graduate programs often fell short of participants' expectations, particularly in terms of structure and cultural relevance, with few exceptions.

Tina described her doctoral program as less structured. In her words, "In the PhD program, there is no set curriculum to follow. It is self-directed. There are no lectures or anything.... honestly, it's mainly just theory, no practical" (Beninese Participant Transcript, Pos. 84). On the other hand, Nancy (Kenya) lamented the imbalance between an academic-focused Human Resource (HR) curriculum, which she was interested in, and the corporate skills emphasized in her program. For Abby, even though she gets to do research, teach courses, and mentor students in the research lab, as and when the need arises, she feels in her department, "the curriculum and training are designed in ways that prepare us primarily for academic careers to become professors." (Zimbabwean Participant Transcript, Pos. 102)

Grace, however, enjoys both a theoretical and research-grounded curriculum in her graduate studies. In expressing her excitement about that, she said, I have noticed my PhD curriculum is structured to begin with foundational courses, mainly in research analysis, research methods, theory, and teaching. As the program progresses, students can choose their focus" (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 54)

Meanwhile, Makida made a strong case that the content of the curriculum has been different from what she expected, stating:

...the experience here has been different from what I expected. I thought I would be doing more research and engaging in practical studies, but instead, there is a heavy

emphasis on coursework... at this level, there should also be more emphasis on practical research rather than just sitting in class. (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 86)

In contrast, Daavi's curriculum offered a structured balance of coursework and lab work, positioning her more firmly on the path to becoming an independent researcher. She explained:

I think the curriculum is structured to expose you to different aspects, not just classroom work or lab work. The first year is dedicated to coursework, that's very critical for developing new research ideas. Another component is experiential learning, where you can attach yourself to an organization or setting that aligns with your thesis to gain practical experience. Then there is the thesis itself, I believe this prepares you better for becoming a Principal Investigator (PI) after the PhD. (Ghanaian Participant Transcript, Pos. 56)

Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Reaction to African Research

The dominance of Western content, materials, and frameworks in the curriculum was a recurring concern when participants were asked about how the curriculum acknowledges and integrates their cultural background. Tina (Benin) noted that curriculum materials disregarded local contexts. Similarly, Daavi criticized courses for ignoring local diseases, indicating:

I would say not so much, because when it comes to the sciences and the biomedical aspects of health, there isn't much representation from the Ghanaian context. Most of the material is based on what has been published elsewhere, usually from the West, and we don't have many in-depth published studies from our side of the world. This makes it difficult to relate to much of what we are learning. Sometimes we struggle to connect classroom learning with what happens in our own setting, especially in areas like genetic

studies, where research is still very limited. That makes it challenging to fully relate as a Ghanaian. (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 59)

In the same vein, Grace (Zambia) found her curriculum to be dominated by U.S.-centric perspectives and dismissive of her African contributions. She complained:

I think the majority of the curriculum is very U.S.-based, and I don't feel included. There are times in class when I try to participate by sharing my experiences in Zambia or aspects of our educational system, but most people can't relate and seem disinterested. It feels like they don't really want me to talk about it. (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 67)

She, however, acknowledged exceptions, stating:

There have been a few classes, like the one I'm currently taking on race and inequality, where I feel my cultural identity is valued. In such classes, because we look at history and issues like slavery, there is some overlap in the discussions, and my voice is heard. Professors and students alike show interest in my experiences and culture. However, when I look at the curriculum of the program, I don't feel that my local context and experiences are really valued. For a long time, I was the only international student, though now there are a few more. I think inclusion will improve with time, but there is still a need for the curriculum to better reflect diverse cultural perspectives. (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 70.)

Only Nancy's courses explicitly used African case studies. However, these were initially sidelined due to tribal focus. Makida observed that cultural relevance had to be self-initiated rather than one that is embedded in the curriculum. She mentioned:

The good thing is you get to work on topics you are interested in. At the same time, you have the chance to choose an advisor from among the professors in the department. My professor, for instance, had experience working in Africa, which was a great opportunity for me to integrate my existing knowledge with what I wanted to work on. (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 96)

However, Abby relied on her Zimbabwean advisor, who understood her background and provided relevant support and opportunities. In her words:

My PI is from Zimbabwe. She is Zimbabwean, so she introduced me to some of the organizations that I didn't know about. Like the National Organization for the Professional Advancement of Black Chemists and Chemical Engineers (NOBCCChE)... I mean, obviously, if you have a white professor, they will tell you information that they know. But sometimes it's good to see people who look like you and how they do things, especially in your field. It just feels good. (Zimbabwe Participant Transcript, Pos. 162)

Notwithstanding, she admitted that there is a general absence of culturally relevant integration in the curriculum, likely due to the program's nature.

On the issue reactions to African research, participants' responses were divided regarding the pursuit of Africa-focused scholarship. Grace (Zambia), Daavi (Ghana), and Abby (Zimbabwe) said that it was often discouraged either due to the unavailability of expert supervisors in that field or because of the nature of the graduate program.

Grace's struggle exemplified this, as she had to abandon her African-centered research, noting:

After my original advisor left, I faced significant challenges finding a new one who understood the project I had brought with me from Zambia. I approached roughly five

advisors, but each one was reluctant to work with me. They were unfamiliar with the African context of my data and were unwilling to engage with it because it fell outside their area of expertise ... I had to switch my topic and use data from the US, which is sad. (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 94, 98)

Daavi (Ghana) observed that biomedical studies prioritize established diseases and published research, primarily conducted by Western scholars, over local realities. Stating:

I think this has to do with the kinds of diseases we encounter in our context, especially in rural areas. Some of these diseases are often attributed to witchcraft, yet we know there are scientific explanations behind them. However, they are not fully captured within our scientific system. As a result, no matter how common they are, we are unable to design studies to address these conditions. This leaves a significant gap. Instead, most of the diseases we study are those already documented elsewhere. There is limited capacity to investigate conditions that don't even have English names, diseases that are unique to our communities but unfamiliar in Western contexts. It feels as though research efforts are focused on solving problems discovered elsewhere, rather than addressing the ones that directly affect us in our setting. (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 71)

Despite this, she acknowledges that her program's curriculum is fostering contextual integration by enabling students to design proposals tailored to their environment, aimed at addressing problems specific to our setting, which is in addition to their thesis work (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 65).

Nancy (Kenya), however, was at the data collection stage for her Africa-focused research. At the same time, Madika (Ethiopia) praised the flexibility in research, noting that students can pursue topics of interest and choose their own advisors. She highlighted her positive

experience working with her professor, who has prior experience and exposure to Africa, who allowed her to "...integrate what I know and what I want to work on." She also emphasized the autonomy given to students in their coursework, stating, "it's really up to you" to select projects based on her interest. Naturally, you select topics you already have some experience or understanding of. (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 96).

Abby noted that, due to the nature of Chemistry, most of its content is mainly Western-focused. She stated:

I feel like, in terms of chemistry itself, because it's a pure science, maybe there is nothing really directly related, but maybe because my mentor is also from Zimbabwe, I feel like there is good communication there. Like she knows my culture, and maybe she knows what I mean when I say certain things. So, I feel like maybe I was fortunate in that way, that it's easy to communicate and not misunderstood when you say certain things.

(Zimbabwe Participant Transcript, Pos. 52)

Career Alignment of the Curriculum

The degree to which participants' curricula aligned with their career aspirations varied. Grace found strong alignment with research. She noted:

My biggest passion has been doing research, social research, specifically, healthcare access. And so that is my main goal here, to learn as much as I can to be able to do my own research and probably work with a research organization" (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 44); as a result, "I have had the opportunity to pick as many research methods classes as I wanted. (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 54)

Similarly, Daavi (Ghana) feels equipped with independent research skills.

On the other hand, Abby (Zimbabwe) felt less prepared for an industry career, noting:

I felt behind in terms of career guidance. I was lacking direction. Perhaps Americans don't consider this a major issue because they receive better career guidance from a young age. They seem to know already what they want to do; they have mentors and clear aspirations. However, I believe my graduate program could incorporate a small section of career guidance to enlighten students and give them realistic expectations. Specifically, that a PhD isn't only about academia. Right now, I feel the focus is mostly there. (Zimbabwe Participant Transcript, Pos. 148)

In contrast, Nancy lamented the lack of preparation for academic careers in the HR graduate program, which she feels is more geared towards corporate roles. She said:

During my one-year coursework, which was divided into three semesters, I felt the curriculum was primarily targeted toward corporate careers. I believe the only component that prepared me for my goal of teaching at the university level was the research methods course. What was lacking was instruction on how to teach others. (Kenya Participant Transcript, Pos. 57)

For Tina, there was complete misalignment with her teaching aspirations, she explained:

The institution carved out a three-month period for lectures. Stating that we attended lectures every day from Monday to Saturday. At the end of the three months, they gave us about three weeks to revise and go through everything. Then we had an exam. Now, regarding whether it really prepared us for a full career and stuff... I don't even know what to say, because it was theoretical.... It will prepare us in a way... at least we have the theory, and we try to apply it. (Benin Participant Transcript, Pos. 98)

Makida (Ethiopia), meanwhile, criticized the imbalance of heavy coursework against limited practical research experience. She noted "my expectation was I would do more research

and engage in more research. But what I observe here is we need to take a lot of coursework... I feel like it's a little bit too much at the PhD level" (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 86).

Document Analysis of Participants' Syllabi

An analysis of the provided syllabi confirmed their alignment with participant interviews, supporting the descriptions of curriculum experiences shared in Research QI. The syllabi also reflect a variety of teaching methods, ranging from self-directed and participatory learning to traditional lecture-based approaches. However, few courses explicitly structure their syllabi to emphasize diverse global perspectives as a core component; most instead encourage students to adapt the content to their individual research interests.

While this document analysis of participants' course syllabi helped triangulate the findings, it is not intended to generalize to all participants' graduate course syllabi. Rather, it provided an in-depth contextual analysis of what the research participants presented and what was available to the researcher at the time of the study.

Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Global Pluralism

The syllabus provided by Tina (Benin) clearly serves as a guideline outlining the dissertation milestones each student must achieve throughout the program. Supporting her claim that the PhD program does not have a fixed curriculum, it is self-directed, with no lectures, and primarily emphasizes theory over practical training. Therefore, the syllabus's content and pedagogical approach validate what is described in the participants' interview transcripts.

Daavi (Ghana) provided a syllabus for the "Molecular Mechanisms of Human Genetic Disease" course. It features journal club presentations, lab practical, and an exam, illustrating that students actively participate through dialogue and analysis, fostering deeper understanding. They develop practical skills via activities like DNA extraction, PCR, and bioinformatics, which

simulate real geneticist work. The exam emphasizes application rather than rote memorization. These varied approaches directly validate Daavi's description that "the curriculum is structured to expose you to different aspects, not just classroom work or lab work." However, the course mainly adopts a Western scientific perspective, citing Western sources, also serving as a clear example noted by the Ghanaian participant that the course content is "based on what has been published elsewhere, usually from the West, which makes it abstract and complex to relate to local realities" (2023, p. 4).

A few exceptions in Daavi's syllabus include lecture 11, which compares retinitis pigmentosa in African and European populations to help students practically assess the significance of this rare disorder across regions (Molecular Mechanisms of Human Genetic Disease, 2023, p. 4). Similarly, students analyze DNA databases for the prevalence of the sickle cell trait in Africa using OMIM links to highlight regional genetic variation (Molecular Mechanisms of Human Genetic Disease, 2023, p. 5), which contradicts Daavi's claim that the syllabus doesn't include the local or African context due to the nature of the program. These examples further demonstrate how her cohort learn that disease prevalence and genetic factors vary across populations due to unique ancestries and evolutionary histories.

Nancy (Kenya) couldn't provide a course syllabus because 15 years have passed since she completed her coursework requirements for the Ph.D. program.

Makida (Ethiopia) offered a "Macro Economics Theory 2" syllabus that follows a traditional, lecture-based method for teaching concepts and theories, as implied by the course title. Although it suggests students could apply these theories in future research, it does not specify how they would do so within the course or as part of a research project. It is clear, however, that "grades will be based on problem sets, a midterm exam, and a final exam," and

students are encouraged to work in groups on assignments. This reflects Makida's view that the curriculum offers limited practical research experience, instead focusing on coursework and exams. A closer look at the syllabus shows that it broadly covers global economic concepts, equipping students with tools to explore and address various issues. Nonetheless, the syllabus lacks regional or cultural specifics but allows for some adaptation based on the choice of topic, stating, "While we will focus on macroeconomics in our choice of topic, the tools of our investigation will be more broadly applicable" (Macroeconomic Theory Syllabus, p.1). This supports Makida's view that the African context is self-contained and that individuals must add personal or regional content, as the curriculum does not include these as core elements.

The "Special Topics in Analytical Chemistry, Chemical and Biomedical Sensors" course syllabus was presented by Abby (Zimbabwe) for this part of the study. The pedagogical approach is primarily lecture-based, with some structured student participation, including a presentation partly peer-evaluated based on their colleagues' understanding of the literature, presentation quality, comprehension, and Q&A responses. There is also an allocated 10% grade for student class participation, including questioning, answering, and discussion. These demonstrate a strong participatory and collaborative assessment method. While the syllabus doesn't explicitly mention diverse perspectives, as noted by Abby, this is "likely due to the program's nature." It is, however, refreshing to see that the course's Objective #4 aims to "link the research with societal impact so that the students can identify potential topics in their own research and prepare themselves for future careers" (Special Topics in Analytical Chemistry, Chemical and Biomedical Sensors, 2).

Grace (Zambia) submitted a seminar course title, "Race From Bruce Lee to Black Lives Matter: Sociological Perspectives on Structures of Racism, Colonialism, and Afro-Asian

Solidarity.” The course is highly inclusive with a decolonial focus. It employs a dialogue-based, participatory pedagogical approach to foster a learning community where student voices and experiential knowledge are at the center. This directly substantiates Grace’s claim that her background, identity, and voice are valued in the course because of its connection to Africa, colonialism, and slavery. While focusing on U.S. racial issues, the course uses post-colonial, anti-colonial, and decolonial frameworks to encourage comparative and historical analysis linking U.S. race to global and colonial issues.

Multi-case Thematic Analysis of Research Participants for R.Q. 2.

How do African female graduate students reflect on the personal and academic impact of their experiences with the curriculum in these universities?

Table 3

Multi-case Thematic Analysis of Research, R.Q2

Category	Sub-Saharan Africa-based				United States-based	
Theme	Tina (Benin)	Daavi (Ghana)	Nancy (Kenya)	Abby (Zimbabwe)	Makida (Ethiopia)	Grace (Zambia)
Language and Communication Barriers	Not a core issue as she is English proficient (both oral and written).	Not a core issue as she is English proficient (both oral and written).	Not a core issue as she is English proficient (both oral and written).	Not a core issue as she is English proficient (both oral and written).	English language is a major challenge.	Some adjustments needed initially.
Gender & Familial Responsibility	No explicit mention of gender or familial responsibilities.	Advocates for maternity support (nurseries, extended timelines).	Referenced sexist remarks like “marry first” and mental health concerns.	No explicit mention of gender & familial responsibilities but thankful for a female advisor who is from Zimbabwe.	Burdened by navigating family needs (unforeseen circumstances in Ethiopia) with personal dreams.	No explicit mention of gender challenges.
Institutional resource, Advising, Mentoring, and Funding	No post-coursework support. No Wi-Fi: students buy internet bundles. Faculty provide mentorship at the final stages of writing research. Initial family supported funded, now entirely self-funded. Compared	Strong digital resources (e-library) and international partnerships (e.g., Imperial College, London). Mentorship and practical/hands-on guidance throughout. Full NIH scholarship including tuition, stipend, & research costs.	No post-coursework follow-up. Relies on supervisors who are “too busy.” Initially family-supported funding, now self-funded (15-year PhD). Critiques the public university’s lack of financial aid.	Strong mentorship from an African advisor who provided access to culturally relevant networks and opportunities. However, mentorship toward industry careers is lacking. Full NSF scholarship (tuition & stipend)/ GTA from Department	Valued library, literature access, and workspace; quiet study areas enhanced learning. Positive advisor experience, but no culturally specific mentorship noted. USAID full funding.	ITA training and support offices were key. Initially supportive advisor left, however struggled to find someone willing to work with African data till dropping the African focus research. Full Departmental funding

Category	Sub-Saharan Africa-based				United States-based	
Theme	Tina (Benin)	Daavi (Ghana)	Nancy (Kenya)	Abby (Zimbabwe)	Makida (Ethiopia)	Grace (Zambia)
	to students who previously studied for their Ph.D.					(Teaching/research assistantship).

Source: Wiafe, E. (2025). Multi-case thematic analysis of research participants for research question 2. *In semi-structured interview data and course syllabus document analysis.*

Cross-Case Synthesis for Research Question 2.

Language and Communication Barriers

Language issues were minimal for participants like Grace (Zambia), Daavi (Ghana), Abby (Zimbabwe), and Nancy (Kenya) who were proficient in English and come from countries where English is an official language, or for Tina (Benin), who has English language training despite being from a French-speaking African country and received additional preparation to teach English as a second language to French speakers. Makida (Ethiopia) on the other hand shared that “the challenge I always have is with discussions. I’m quieter. It doesn’t mean I don’t know,” (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 96) when asked about her challenges transitioning to U.S. graduate school as an English as a second language learner. She complained about the U.S. assumption that silence equates to not knowing.

However, Grace (Zambia) initially used some language skills that her school’s Institute of International Teaching Assistant (ITA) helped her with, particularly in teaching contexts. She said:

The Graduate School has the ITA program for International Teaching Assistants.

Through it, we got to meet several other international students. They taught us about the curriculum, how to teach, and how to speak clearly so that we could communicate effectively with local students. (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 74)

Gender and Familial Responsibilities

Gendered issues varied among participants. Daavi referenced the need for resources for graduate parents, such as on-campus nursing rooms and course requirement accommodations, explaining that:

We're not saying anyone should relax the rules for us. But in designing the curriculum, there should be consideration for female students who are not teenagers but in their reproductive years, and who may need to raise families while in the program.

(Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 123)

She elaborated, this is not just about caregiving, citing that:

When it comes to general caregiving, one can easily get or hire someone to help. For example, I have a son now, and I don't need to worry so much at his age because we are two parents, his father can take care of him just as I can. But imagine when I am pregnant or breastfeeding... That's not something anyone else can carry or do for me. (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 125, 127, 129, 133, 135)

Nancy didn't explicitly mention a gender related issue of childbirth and caregiving, but reported receiving sexist remarks from someone in her department earlier in her Ph.D studies. While narrating what happened, Nancy said she was told, "You are such a young girl. First go and get married, and have kids. Then come back and finish" (Kenya Participant Transcript, Pos. 83), which she found very demeaning. Now a lecturer in Human Resources at a Kenyan university, she reflected on her experiences with Ph.D. students dropping out of the program due to mental health crises. This is how she put it:

Today, just before our call, I was talking to someone dealing with mental health issues. Besides female graduate students, others say, 'I have stopped doing this research,' or 'I don't feel supported,' or 'I'm no longer going to class.' This raises the question: how do we address the mental health challenges tied to the PhD program? They tell us to focus on our goals despite the obstacles, but as graduate students, life keeps happening. Life doesn't stop. So, how do we balance all of that with our mental health? Today, for

example, I felt fatigued. I even mentioned that I was mentally overwhelmed. So, how can we manage all of this? (Kenya Participant Transcript, Pos. 83)

Makida's family circumstances differed significantly. She noted that the political instability in Ethiopia forced her husband and children to join her in the U.S., disrupting her plans to return home after completing her PhD. She explained, "I planned to return to Ethiopia to start a consultancy... but now I'm trying to figure out where to fit in the U.S. system" (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 69). On the other hand, Tina (Benin) and Grace (Zambia) didn't mention any gender-related barriers. Abby, however, shared positive notes as she complimented the valued guidance of her female African advisor, who is also Zimbabwean.

Institutional resource, Advising/mentoring, and Funding

Daavi has access to substantial institutional resources, including library resources and international partnerships through her institution. She mentions that her university actively collaborates with institutions such as Imperial College London, the Medical Research Council in The Gambia, the University of Birmingham, and the University of Nottingham. She reflected that these collaborations offer her essential opportunities to gain international exposure and diversify her academic and professional skills (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 78, 84). In terms of mentorship, Daavi similarly appreciated hands-on mentorship; she acknowledges that "They take their time to train you on essential academic skills such as conducting literature reviews, systematic reviews, and related tasks....When there are any concerns, they typically organize small workshops to provide further explanations" (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 97 & 119). Financially, Daavi benefits from a comprehensive NIH Digital Diagnostics for Africa Network scholarship, which covers tuition, research, travel, and stipends, providing financial stability that likely accelerates her progress.

In contrast, Tina (Benin) struggles with basic internet access, an outdated library, and research resources. She complained, “We do have a library, of course, but for me, it’s not enough. It isn’t an e-library,” she continued, noting “Most of the materials are very old, mostly dissertations from a long time ago. It’s not up to date” (Benin Participant Transcript, Pos. 158, 160). Her experience with faculty support was also limited, described as often only engaging at the dissertation stage. Furthermore, Tina is entirely self-funded, with limited family support at the beginning of her program.

Meanwhile, Grace had a mixed experience. She recounted benefiting from international teaching assistant (ITA) training for international teaching assistants and departmental offices that supported her integration. However, her experience with mentorship was complex; she initially had supportive advising, yet her African-centered research was ultimately abandoned after her advisor left due to faculty reluctance to supervise her research or their limited expertise of the research region. For funding, Grace relies on teaching assistantships.

Similarly, Makida valued access to literature and quiet study spaces at the library. She mentions, “I really enjoy spending time in the library. I’m also very happy with how easily I can access literature here. Back home, it wasn’t easy because I had to pay for many resources to get access. So, this is nice” (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 108). She had a positive supervisory relationship, but cultural mentorship was absent. Makida receives USAID funding, but she expressed concerns that recent funding cuts could potentially disrupt her research project, although she remains optimistic about completing her degree program.

Abby (Zimbabwe) benefited significantly from an African advisor who connected her to culturally relevant resources and networks, although career guidance for an industry path was limited. She suggested that professional development sessions should “invite alumni who have

graduated and are now working in the industry. These alumni can share their experiences and offer advice to help current students better prepare for entering the industrial workforce” (Zimbabwe Participant Transcript, Pos. 150–152). Financially, Abby faces financial precarity, depending on NSF grants that require her to “alternate between graduate research and teaching assistantships depending on funding availability.” She also expressed concerns that recent funding cuts could potentially disrupt her research project, but she remains optimistic about completing the degree program.

Like Tina (Benin) and Nancy (Kenya), who described limited engagement with faculty, often only during the dissertation stage, she is also entirely self-funded, with limited family support at the start of her program, which may explain her slow progress over 15 years amid professional and personal commitments.

Discussions

This section interprets the findings in relation to the research questions, connecting them to the two CPCT and CRP, transnationalism and Intersectionality discourse, and the existing body of literature.

RQ1. In what ways do African female graduate students interpret their experiences with the curriculum in universities in the U.S. and Sub-Saharan Africa?

Curriculum and Pedagogical Content

African female graduate students based in SSA reported that the curriculum mainly reflects Western perspectives, leading to a “...struggle to connect classroom learning with what happens in [their] own setting” (Ghana Participant Transcript, Pos. 59), a finding also supported by document analysis of course syllabi. This disconnects highlights longstanding critiques that post-colonial African higher education still favors Eurocentric epistemologies over indigenous

knowledge systems (Altbach, 2016; Teferra & Altbach, 2004), reinforcing calls for the continent to move beyond dependency on Western frameworks toward epistemic justice that affirms African worldviews and intellectual mores (Dei, 2012; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Nyamnjoh, 2019). This call for decolonization (African Union CESA 16-25, 2025; Jansen, 2017; Mbembe, 2016; wa Thiong'o, 1986) goes beyond simply replacing Western content, as Wiafe (2025) argues. It promotes a curriculum that is both rooted in local contexts and globally capable, able to recognize African knowledge systems and scholarship within an interconnected world (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2015; Wiafe, 2025). As detailed in the African Union's Agenda 2063, the vision is "An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena" (African Union Commission, 2014, p. 2).

Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Reaction to African Research

The dominance of Western perspectives also extends transnationally, as illustrated by Grace (Zambian) in the U.S., who felt her African experiences was rendered irrelevant, with peers who "... can't relate and seem disinterested... they don't really want [her] to talk about it" (Zambian Participant Transcript, Pos. 67). This illustrates the epistemic exclusion that happens when dominant educational systems fail to recognize or validate knowledge created outside Western frameworks (Apple, 2004; Smith, 2012). Grace's experience also highlights a common issue faced by many international students, who often feel marginalized (Gay, 2018; Giroux, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995;). This indicates that intellectual mobility involves not only physical relocation but also navigating epistemic boundaries (Kim, 2017; Quayson & Daswani, 2013). While "... a few classes, [like the one she took] on race and inequality" provided a space for her perspective, this selective acknowledgment in isolated or "safe" courses symbolizes a

tokenistic engagement rather than genuine integration (Pinar, 2011; Giroux, 2011). Grace had to abandon her Africa-focused research after her advisor left, and she couldn't find another faculty member with relevant expertise. This mirrors broader issues in higher education, where limited diversity and Western-centric knowledge restrict research options (Domínguez et al., 2022; Lee & Rice, 2007). Students engaging with global South perspectives often face pressure to conform, and Grace's experience shows how a lack of diverse mentorship limits academic freedom and burdens international and minority scholars (Marginson, 2014).

Career Alignment of Curriculum

Concerns about the disconnect between higher education outcomes and labor market expectations reflect a longstanding global issue that continues to drive curriculum reform (Barnett, 2000; UNESCO, 2015). Across SSA, graduates often leave university underprepared for the skills, innovation demands, and context-specific problem-solving required in contemporary workplaces (African Union Commission, 2015; Wangenge-Ouma, 2010; Wiafe, 2025). Yet reform conversations rarely center on students' experiences of courses and whether they align with their goals. Nancy (Kenya), for example, was concerned about the mismatch between her program's corporate-oriented training and her desire for an academic career. Such misalignment in African higher education is exacerbated by continued reliance on borrowed or Eurocentric curricula that overlook local knowledge and national priorities (Altbach, 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018), as reflected in a participant's concern that the curriculum was overly theoretical (Benin Participant Transcript). Abby and Madika (Ethiopia), in U.S. graduate programs, highlighted a lack of career guidance for industry pathways and frustration that their curricula prioritized coursework and exams over research and hands-on learning. Their experiences reflect a broader discrepancy between the training students receive and the skills

they expect to need for their future careers, a challenge particularly pronounced for international students navigating cultural, institutional, and immigration-related barriers (Lee & Cervero, 2017; NAFSA, 2023; St Clair et al., 2017).

Two participants emphasized that seeing “people who look like you and how they do things, especially in your field” (Zimbabwe Participant Transcript, Pos. 162) and working with professors who allow them to “integrate what I know and what I want to work on” (Ethiopian Participant Transcript, Pos. 96) strengthened their academic experience. These reflections align with Ladson-Billings’ (1995) emphasis on cultural competence in CRP, underscoring how representation supports students’ academic and social success. Abby further noted that her Zimbabwean professor introduced her to NOBCCChE, illustrating how culturally responsive mentorship fosters a sense of belonging in spaces dominated by mainstream norms.

RQ2. How do African female graduate students reflect on the personal and academic impact of their experiences with the curriculum in universities in the U.S. and Sub-Saharan Africa?

Language and Communication Barrier

All participants are bilingual and educated in English, one of the official languages of their home countries. This reflects a dual dynamic in decolonization debates: English proficiency stems from colonial language imposition, perpetuating a colonial legacy where access to opportunities depends on a colonial language framework and Western epistemic dominance in African and global education. Makida, an Ethiopian Amharic speaker learning English, expressed concerns about the assumption in U.S. classrooms that silence signifies not knowing. Citing Lippi-Green (2012) and Rubin (1992). The study agrees that these bias disadvantages non-native speakers, particularly those from cultures where silence reflects Ethiopian norms and

where people don't talk much as a sign of respect (Liu, 2001), like Chinese and American Indian cultures. This demonstrates a lack of cultural competence, as instructors often misinterpret silence and overlook diverse discourse patterns (Ladson-Billings, 1995) in academic settings that equate verbal participation with critical thinking (Tatar, 2005), thereby marginalizing students from listening-valuing cultures (Lee & Rice, 2007; Morita, 2004).

English literacy offers an advantage for students entering international English-speaking universities worldwide, enabling them to navigate linguistic and cultural spaces, using English for mobility while maintaining their identities (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Vertovec, 2009). However, CPCT reminds us that colonial hierarchies influence this mobility, as English and other colonial languages remain dominant academic currencies due to historical imposition (Andreotti, 2011; wa Thiong'o, 1986). The aim isn't to reject English in decolonizing education as doing so would limit participation in global networks, but to elevate African languages and epistemologies as equally valid (Dei, 2012; wa Thiong'o, 1993). The bilingualism of participants highlights this tension and emphasizes the need for policies that decolonize language, affirming African identities while maintaining access to global academic spaces.

Gender and Familial Responsibilities

The faculty member's sexist remark that Nancy should get married and have kids, then return to finish, reflects widespread gender expectations that see African women's primary value in marriage and reproduction, as documented in African and global higher education (Mama, 2003; Morley, 2006). Nancy's fifteen-year journey through her Ph.D. program further accentuates how gendered biases can intersect with structural barriers to impede academic progress. Research shows that discriminatory microaggressions, gendered role expectations, and lack of institutional support contribute significantly to delays, attrition, and emotional distress

among women doctoral students (Leath & Chavous, 2018). These experiences also point to broader concerns related to mental health in doctoral education, where students routinely face high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety conditions exacerbated by hostile or unsupportive academic environments (UC Berkeley Graduate Assembly, 2014).

Davis's request for resources like on-campus nursing rooms and accommodations for expectant and nursing graduate mothers is reasonable and aligns with calls for family-friendly, gender-responsive academic environments (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). It highlights gaps in African graduate education policies that often neglect the needs of student-parents. Research shows women in graduate programs often struggle to balance academic, pregnancy, childbirth, and caregiving responsibilities due to a lack of institutional support (Bueskens, 2018; Wiafe & Azubuike, 2024). Universities that lack lactation spaces, flexible policies, or parental guidelines reinforce gender inequalities, causing delayed degrees and higher attrition, underscoring the need for inclusive policies recognizing caregiving as a structural challenge in graduate education.

Institutional resources, Advising/Mentoring, and Funding

Four participants benefited from institutional support, such as advising, mentoring, and funding, which are key to student persistence and well-being (Gardner, 2009; Tinto, 2012). Effective advising guides students academically and professionally, vital for international and minoritized students navigating unfamiliar cultures (Schlosser et al., 2011). By embodying those values, cultural humility boosts research confidence and a sense of belonging (Curtin et al., 2013; Felder et al., 2014). Funding lessens financial stress, helping students complete degrees and stay productive, especially under visa restrictions (Benin et al., 2011; Domínguez et al., 2022). The participants' positive experiences demonstrate that strong institutional support can

address challenges such as isolation, unclear expectations, and financial strain, thereby promoting resilience, retention, and well-being (Golde, 2005; Evans et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This study examined how African female graduate students interpret and reflect on their curricular experiences in universities across the United States and SSA, situating their narratives within the discourses of CPCT and CRP, transnationalism, and intersectionality. Across both contexts, the study concludes that curriculum experiences converge around persistent Western epistemic dominance, misalignment between training and career aspirations, and the centrality of mentorship and institutional support in shaping graduate student success. At the same time, they diverge in the forms that in Sub-Saharan Africa, students emphasized the disconnect between Western-oriented curricula and local realities, while in the United States, participants described epistemic marginalization, tokenistic inclusion of African perspectives, and structural limitations on research and advising support.

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Appendix U - IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity,
Compliance and Security

TO: Curriculum and Instruction
Manhattan, KS 66506

FROM: Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 02/18/2025

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Curriculum Experiences of African Female Graduate Students in the United States and Sub-Sahara Africa."

Proposal Number IRB-12622

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 02/18/2025

EXPIRATION DATE: 02/17/2028

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 02/18/2025 6:37 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu

Appendix Figure 21: IRB Approval Letter

Appendix V - IRB Written Informed Consent Form



KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
University Research
Compliance Office

Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Informed Consent Template Form
comply@ksu-state.edu | 785-532-3224

If you are performing research involving human subjects, it is your responsibility to address the issue of informed consent. This template is intended to provide guidance for crafting an informed consent document. The Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB) *strongly* recommends that you model your consent form on this template. However, if you choose a different approach, it must contain at a minimum the same elements as this standard version. Language and terminology used in the consent form must be written at no more than the 8th grade level, so that the potential participant can clearly understand the project, how it is going to be conducted, and all issues that may affect his or her participation. In addition, please write the consent form in a manner that addresses your subjects directly instead of writing it in a manner that addresses the University Research Compliance Office directly. *Information on the important issue of informed consent can be found in 45 CFR 46 at <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.116>.*
Federal law mandates that all signed and dated informed consent forms be retained by the P.I. for at least three years following completion of the study.

WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT: *There are limited instances where the requirement for a formal informed consent document may be waived or altered by the IRB.*
45 CFR 46 states that "An IRB may waive the requirement for the investigator to obtain a signed consent form for some or all subjects if it

finds either:

- 1) *That the only record linking the subject and the research would be the consent document and the principal risk would be potential harm resulting from a breach of confidentiality. Each subject will be asked whether the subject wants documentation linking the subject with the research, and the subject's wishes will govern; or*
- 2) *That the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context."*

If a study employs only questionnaires and surveys as the source of their data, it may generally be assumed that to answer and return the questionnaire is an appropriate and sufficient expression of free consent. However, there are circumstances that might call this assumption into question - e.g., teacher-student relationship between the investigator and the subject, etc. However, a statement should be included on the questionnaire or survey form indicating that participation of the subject is strictly voluntary, the length of time reasonably expected to complete the questionnaire or survey form, and that questions that make the participant uncomfortable may be skipped.

Form Content
PROJECT TITLE: Full title of project. If possible, the title should be identical to that used in any funding/contract proposal.
PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: provided in the approval letter, must be in place before distributing to subjects.
LENGTH OF STUDY: Estimate the length of time the subject will be expected to participate.
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Must be a regular member of the faculty.
CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Name, phone number and/or email address of the P.I.
IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: *For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.
PROJECT SPONSOR: Funding/contract entity.
PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: Explain in lay terms that this is a research project, and why the research is being done.
PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED: Explain in lay terms and in language understandable at the 8th grade level how the study is going to be conducted and what will be expected of participants. Tell participants if they will be audio or videotaped, if they will be paid, etc.
ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES OR TREATMENTS, IF ANY, THAT MIGHT BE ADVANTAGEOUS TO SUBJECT: Explain any alternative procedures or treatments if applicable.
RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: Describe any foreseeable risks or discomforts from the study. If there are no known risks, make a statement to that effect.
BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Describe any *reasonably expected* benefits from the research to the participant or others from the research.
EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Explain how you plan to protect confidentiality.
IS COMPENSATION OR MEDICAL TREATMENT AVAILABLE IF INJURY OCCURS: *In cases where more than minimal risk is involved.*
PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS: If minors or those who require the approval of a parent or guardian are participants, you should include a space for their consenting signature.
PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNATURE: Name of research participant and signature.
WITNESS TO SIGNATURE (PROJECT STAFF): Staff signature.

If any of the following content sections do not apply to your research, feel free to delete from the consent form.

Appendix Figure 22: IRB Written Informed Consent Form

Appendix W - Research Interview Guide

Dissertation Research Interview

1

Dissertation Research Interview

Thank you for participating in this research study titled "*Curriculum Experiences of African Female Graduate Students in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa*." Your insights are invaluable to this study, which aims to explore and understand the unique curriculum experiences of African female graduate students. (A girl's girl for Pricilla)

Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions. You are welcome to skip any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without consequences. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for academic purposes.

Demographic Questions

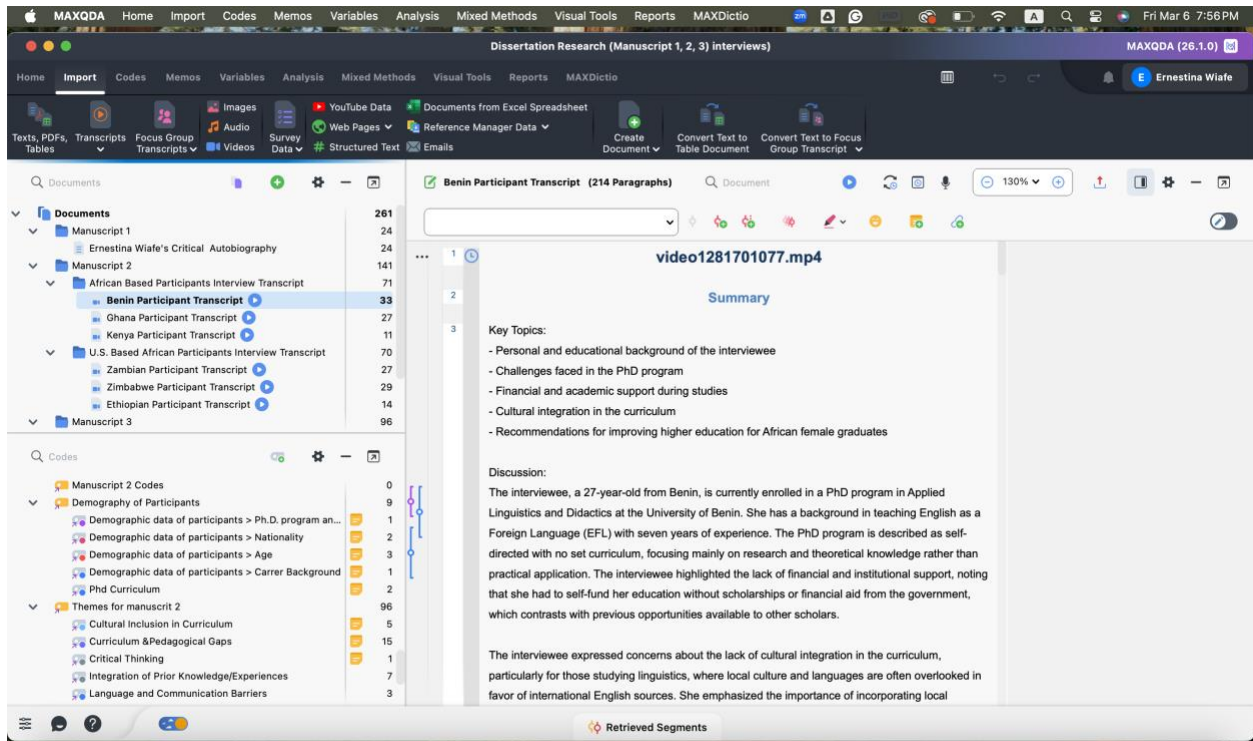
1. What is your age?
2. What is your nationality or country of origin?
3. What is your ethnic or cultural background?
4. What is your native and official language(s)?
5. What degree program are you enrolled in?
6. At which university are you currently enrolled?
7. What is your current field of study?
8. How long have you been in the program?
9. What is the highest level of education you completed before enrolling in your current program? Where?
10. What is your career background/work experience before graduate school?
11. What is your career expectation?
12. How are your studies funded?

First Interview Questions

1. How does the curriculum in your graduate program prepare you for your future career goals?
 - o How do the teaching approaches and learning experiences align with the skills you need for your intended profession?
 - o How are the resources and assessments in your program helping you meet your career aspirations? If not, how could they be improved?
2. How does the curriculum in your program acknowledge or integrate your cultural background?
3. What teaching approaches and learning experiences in your program make you feel that your cultural identity is valued?
 - a. Please provide specific examples.
4. What areas in the curriculum make you feel your cultural identity is overlooked or misrepresented? Please describe.
5. What types of academic or institutional support (such as financial aid, mentoring, or educational resources) have you received to help you engage effectively with the curriculum? How has this support impacted your learning experience? What specific

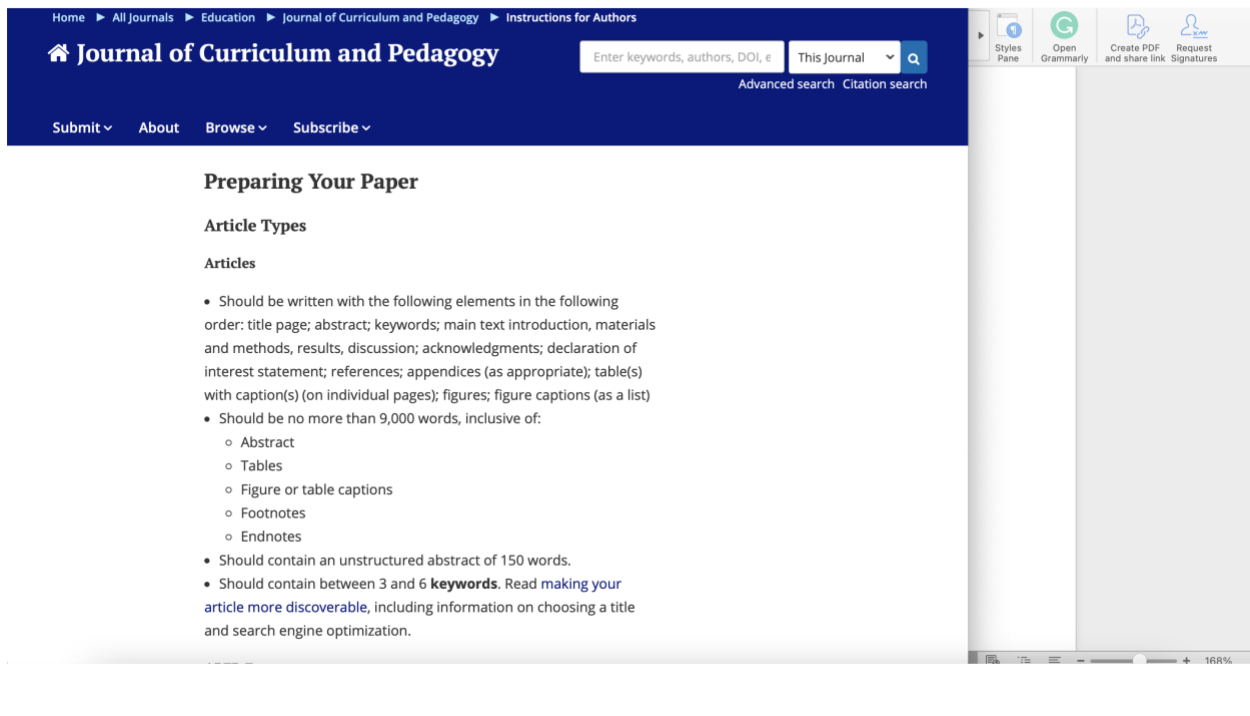
Appendix Figure 23: Research Interview Guide

Appendix X - Screenshot of MAXQDA Coding



Appendix Figure 24: Example of MAXQDA Coding Output for Manuscript 2 Data Analysis

Appendix Y - Screenshot of Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy Guideline



Appendix Figure 25: Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy Author Guideline

Chapter 4 - Toward Equitable Education-An Analysis of Policies in Higher Education in Sub-Saharan Africa

This study will be submitted to the *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy* <https://www.tandfonline.com/journals/znst20/about-this-journal>. Hence, the manuscript will follow the journal guidelines outlined at <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=znst20>

Ernestina Wiafe

The chapter critically explores how gender equity or related policies, mainly aimed at promoting women's access and opportunities in higher education, are conceptualized, the priorities they set, and the specific strategies implemented to ensure fair treatment for female students. This study explores the University of Ghana, Makerere University, the University of Yaoundé I, and the University of Cape Town, SSA's leading institutions across West, East, Central, and Southern Africa. It fills an essential gap in the literature by exploring the concepts, priorities, and strategies embedded in gender equity policies within higher education in SSA, using Fairclough's (1995, 2010) three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model, which conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice, highlighting institutional and policy efforts to increase women's access to higher education in the region. Findings from the study contribute to an expanding body of research on social justice education, gender equity, and policy reform in African higher education, helping institutional leaders, policymakers, and advocacy groups strengthen gender equity initiatives and develop more transformative and actionable policies. The terms "female" and "women" are used interchangeably in this research.

Keywords: Norman Fairclough Critical discourse analysis, minoritized groups, and gender equity policy.

Introduction

Higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has expanded significantly in recent decades, becoming increasingly central to economic development, social mobility, democratic participation, and innovation (Bloom et al., 2006). Despite this growth, many higher education institutions continue to face deep-seated equity challenges. Structural inequalities shaped by colonial legacies, economic disparities, sociocultural norms, and rural-urban divides continue to limit educational access for historically marginalized groups, including women, low-income students, students with disabilities, and individuals from remote communities (United Nations Girls' Education Initiative [UNGEI], 2019). In response to these persistent inequalities, universities and policymakers across the region have introduced policies and reforms to expand access, create equitable learning environments, and expand educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations (UNESCO Office Dakar & African Union, 2023), including policies addressing gender inequity. However, despite growing attention to gender equity, widespread disparities remain (Ajani, 2024). Enrollment and completion rates for women continue to lag national averages as many women in higher education encounter sociocultural barriers, gender-based discrimination, and sexual harassment, including coercive practices such as “sex for grades” (BBC Africa Eye, 2019). Students from economically disadvantaged families and rural communities also often face financial obstacles that hinder their ability to enroll in or complete higher education (Klapper & Panchamia, 2023).

Research Problem

Although many higher education institutions in SSA have developed gender policies aimed at advancing equity, the widespread disparity between female students' enrollment and completion raises critical questions about the actual content, priorities, and commitments

embedded within these documents. It remains unclear how these SSA higher education policies conceptualize equity, what they prioritize, and what concrete strategies they outline to promote it. Existing research rarely examines how the language, values, and ideologies embedded in institutional policies influence their capacity to create genuinely gender-equitable learning environments (Zickafoose et al., 2024). As a result, the gap between policy intentions and lived realities remains largely underexplored. These uncertainties raise further questions about whether the discourse within these policies reflects genuine institutional commitment to equity or merely symbolic compliance with national, regional, and global expectations. Understanding what these policies contain and what they omit is essential for evaluating their capacity to transform inequitable educational environments within SSA.

Purpose of the Study

This study examined how institutional gender equity or related policies, primarily focused on advancing equity for women, are conceptualized, the priorities they articulate, and the concrete strategies in place to promote equitable access, opportunities, and treatment for female students in higher education across SSA. By analyzing the language, values, and underlying ideologies embedded in these policies, the study assessed the extent to which institutions demonstrate a substantive commitment to gender equity.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses a crucial gap in the literature on the concept, priority, and strategies contained in gender equity policies in SSA higher education, highlighting institutional and policy-driven efforts to promote women's higher education in the region. It contributes to an expanding body of research on social justice, gender equity, and policy reform in SSA higher education. The findings can help institutional leaders, policymakers, and advocacy groups

strengthen gender equity initiatives and develop more transformative and actionable policies.

Female and women are used interchangeably in this research

Research Questions

Three research questions guided the study

1. How is gender equity for female students represented in higher education policy texts in SSA?
2. How are discourses of gender equity for female students produced, circulated, and legitimized within higher education policies in SSA?
3. What broader historical, sociocultural, and political forces shape these gender equity discourses?

Literature Review

Background

Historically, African higher education institutions were established primarily to serve instrumental colonial objectives, particularly the production of technical and administrative knowledge necessary for colonial governance (Hailu et al., 2023). Within this framework, colonial governments advanced male-centric, gender-neutral, and often explicitly gender-blind ideologies that systematically excluded gender equity considerations in access, participation, and outcomes across multiple sectors, including education (Aina, 2013; Hailu et al., 2023). Colonial educational policies deliberately restricted Africans' access to education comparable to that afforded to Europeans, while simultaneously transferring European gender hierarchies into African contexts (Aina, 2013; Wiafe, 2021). Borrowing the words of Aina (2013), this intersection produced a condition of “double jeopardy” for African women (p. 5), whose exclusion was further reinforced by entrenched patriarchal norms in many African societies.

Notably, colonial administrations explicitly positioned African men as the primary, and often exclusive, targets of formal education (Aina, 2013; Hailu et al., 2023).

First Wave of Postcolonial Higher Education in Africa

The first wave of postcolonial African universities emerged in the 1960s, coinciding with the United Nations' designation of "Development Decade" (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1961). This period unfolded amid significant development crises, as newly independent States in the Global South, including colonial Africa inherited distorted economies, widespread poverty, and limited physical infrastructure as enduring legacies of colonial rule (Hailu et al., 2023; Shaw, 2002). The UN Development Decade prioritized rapid industrialization as a pathway to economic growth, operating under the assumption that development gains would eventually "trickle down" to broader populations. According to Goldin and Katz (2023), when this assumption failed to materialize, development paradigms shifted toward an emphasis on "human capital," reframing investment in people as a prerequisite for sustained economic growth. This shift emphasized commitments to fairer wealth and income distribution, social justice, and enhancements in education, health, and social security. In this context, education was seen as key to addressing the structural inequalities in society.

The Twenty-First Century Higher Education in Africa

As Africa advances further into the twenty-first century, higher education institutions are being reshaped by rapid technological, scientific, and economic transformations, alongside globalization and increased migration (Aina, 2013; Hailu et al., 2023; Wiafe, 2025). These shifts have rendered the university environment more dynamic and complex, intensifying demands on institutions to respond to evolving contextual realities. In this contemporary context, gender-balanced human resource development has emerged as a central concern in higher education

policy discourse (Aina, 2013; Hailu et al., 2023). Increasingly, national, continental, and global policy frameworks recognize gender equity as essential to building inclusive, responsive, and sustainable societies to increase productivity and achieve long-term economic growth (Elson & Seth, 2019; Ministry of Education of Kenya, 2015; United Nations, n.d.; World Bank Group, 2017; World Bank, 2021b). Higher education systems play an important role in addressing persistent inequalities while navigating ongoing global transformations.

Gender and Higher Education in Africa

Within many African contexts, including those examined in this study, gender is predominantly understood through a binary framework of male and female that organizes social life around socially recognized roles and responsibilities, such as father and mother, husband and wife, and brother and sister (Aina, 2013). These gendered categories are deeply embedded in cultural, familial, and social structures and continue to shape expectations, access, and participation within institutions, including education (Mama, 2019). As an integral part of society, the higher education sector is shaped by prevailing gender categories and stereotypes thus, power relations between men and women within society are reflected and reproduced in academic institutions. Although academia often perceives itself as a progressive sphere and a driver of innovation, the realities of gendered power dynamics within higher education frequently challenge this self-perception (Galizzi et al., 2024; Llorens et al., 2002; Moley et al., 1996).

Pattern in program enrollment

Patterns of gender inequality are particularly evident in the distribution of students across academic disciplines, with Science and Technology fields reflecting persistent male overrepresentation. Data from the National Universities Commission (NUC) on Africa's most

populous nation, Nigerian universities in 2019 show female enrolment into ‘Engineering and Technology’ and Sciences was far below that of males, 12.06% of females and 87.4% of males enrolled for ‘Engineering and Technology’, 27.6% of females and 72.4% of males enrolled for ‘Sciences’ (NUC, 2019). These disparities are reinforced by institutional environments that are often unwelcoming to women. Sources also confirm the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) and other Zimbabwean higher education institutions are perceived as gender-hostile, marked by prevalent sexual harassment from staff/students, weak policies, poor reporting, and victim impact (mental health, dropouts), leading to a national crackdown by the Gender Commission and UNESCO-backed policy reforms for safer campuses (Zimbabwe Gender Commission, 2025). However, deep-rooted issues like poverty and power imbalances persist. Gender disparities become even more pronounced at advanced levels of study, where participation data reveal a steep decline in women’s representation at the doctoral level, particularly within research-intensive and STEM-oriented fields in Africa (Morley et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2017; UN Women, 2020). Yotebieng’s (2021) research findings showed that, in some African countries, women’s participation decreases by nearly 30% at this stage.

Gender Stereotype in Program Choice

Gender stereotypes further shape student experiences and program choices within African higher education institutions. Academic and career choices are frequently guided by gendered expectations, affecting students’ choice of subjects and post-graduation employment paths. Students who deviate from socially prescribed male-female academic and career paths, according to Aina (2013) and Hailu et al. (2023), are more likely to experience unequal treatment and discrimination, both within academic spaces and in the labor market. Although the number of female graduates in science, mathematics, and technology has increased slightly in recent years,

men continue to dominate these fields globally and across Sub-Saharan Africa (Aina, 2013; UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2021b). In contrast, women comprise more than 80% of students in education and in health and welfare disciplines, a pattern that reinforces the gendered segmentation of academic fields and reflects deeply rooted sociocultural and institutional norms within African higher education systems (Elson & Seth, 2019; Mama, 2001; UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019;).

Gap in the literature

The literature on gender equity in SSA higher education traces a clear historical path from colonial exclusion of women to contemporary patterns of women inclusion across disciplines, persistent barriers in STEM, declining female participation at advanced levels of study (NUC, 2019; UNESCO, 2017; UN Women, 2020; Yotebieng, 2021), and commitments to equity. However, significant gaps remain in understanding how institutional and national policies operationalize gender equity. Most studies focus on enrollment statistics and access, with limited exploration of the language, framing, and discursive strategies within policy documents that shape institutional commitments and practices (Mama, 2001; Morley et al., 2017). Data on the effectiveness of policies in addressing intersectional inequalities, including rural-urban, socioeconomic, and disciplinary disparities, remain sparse. This study addresses these gaps by employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine institutional gender equity policies across higher education institutions in SSA.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in CDA, drawing specifically on Fairclough's (1995, 2010) three-dimensional model, which examines texts, discursive practices, and social practices. CDA interrogates the semiotic dimensions of language in relation to power, exposing how discourse

reflects, reproduces, or challenges social inequalities (Johnson, 2011; Kaveh et al., 2022; Van Dijk, 2001). As a theoretical approach, CDA explicitly centers on issues of social inequality, power, and dominance, highlighting how discursive practices can function as mechanisms through which dominant groups influence and control public discourse, thereby abusing power (Van Dijk, 2001). In education policy studies, discourse can be analyzed through theoretical, epistemological, and methodological lenses (Anderson & Holloway, 2020).

As expressed by Johnson (2011) and Kaveh et al. (2022), at its core of CDA is exposing and unpacking the power structures embedded within discourse. Specifically, CDA enables researchers to examine how sociocultural, political, and economic contexts shape the language and meaning of policy. CDA is particularly valuable for analyzing the extent to which colonial legacies (Hodes, 2018), gendered hierarchies (Lazar, 2007), and Eurocentric epistemologies are reproduced or contested (Dabie, 2025). This is why this framework is appropriate for the study. By analyzing texts, processes of discourse production, and the sociocultural and historical contexts in which they are situated, CDA enables a critical examination of whose voices are legitimized, whose experiences are marginalized, and how knowledge about SSA women and their educational experiences is constructed and sustained within institutional gender equity policies in higher education across SSA.

Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

Fairclough's (1995, 2010) three-dimensional model conceptualizes discourse as simultaneously a text, a discursive practice, and a social practice.

Textual Level

At the textual level, the analysis attended to linguistic features such as word choice, modality, intertextuality, and representational strategies through which gender equity is defined

and framed. This level of analysis reveals how policy language constructs female students, assigns responsibility for equity, and signals institutional priorities (Fairclough, 1995; 2010). From an African feminist perspective, close textual analysis is essential for identifying silences, omissions, and gendered assumptions that may obscure African women's lived realities (Mama, 2001).

Discursive Practice

The second dimension, discursive practice, focuses on the processes of policy production, circulation, and interpretation. This includes examining how global gender equity discourses, often shaped by international development agendas and donor frameworks, are taken up, adapted, or resisted within institutional contexts in SSA. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly Spivak's (1988) critique of subaltern representation, this level of analysis interrogates whose voices inform policy construction and whether African women's epistemologies are meaningfully centered or marginalized. Mohanty's (2003) critique of homogenizing representations of women in the Global South further informs this analysis by cautioning against universalized policy narratives that erase contextual specificity.

Social Practice

At the level of social practice, the analysis situates institutional gender equity policies within broader historical, sociopolitical, and ideological structures, including patriarchal norms, colonial and post-colonial legacies, and national and global gender frameworks. This allows the study to assess whether policy discourses function as mechanisms of substantive institutional transformation or as symbolic commitments that maintain existing power hierarchies.

Methodology and Method

A qualitative method based on Fairclough's (1995, 2010) CDA was employed to examine gender-equity or related policies, primarily focused on advancing equity for women, on the official websites of the highest-ranked public universities across Western, Eastern, Southern, and Central Africa geographic regions of SSA (African Union, 1976; University of Pittsburgh Library System. (n.d.); United Nations Statistics Division, 2025). Fairclough describes CDA as a method that explores the semiotic aspects of language, particularly in relation to power dynamics. He also viewed CDA as a means for promoting social change, highlighting its role in examining how discourse (as semiotic practice) interacts dialectically with wider social practices and events. In line with Fairclough, van Dijk (2001) argues that discourse is inherently shaped by social structures and generated through social interactions, making CDA particularly relevant for addressing issues of social inequality, power, and dominance. CDA, rooted in the work of Norman Fairclough, is appropriate for the study because it provides a model for analyzing the language of policy texts and revealing underlying power dynamics, ideologies, and assumptions.

Data Sampling

Using a purposive sampling strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015), the University of Ghana ((UG) Accra, Ghana; West Africa), Makerere University ((MU) Kampala, Uganda; East Africa), the University of Cape Town ((CT) Cape Town, South Africa; Southern Africa), and the University of Yaoundé I ((UY) Yaoundé, Cameroon; Central Africa) were deliberately selected based on their prominence as highest-ranked universities in global and continental rankings (SCImago, 2025; U.S. News & World Report, 2025) as indicated in Table 4.

Contextual Description of Selected Universities

The University of Ghana (UG), Ghana

The UG was established in 1948, during British colonial rule in the then Gold Coast, as the University College of the Gold Coast, based on recommendations of the Asquith Commission on higher education in British colonies. While the British Government at first accepted the minority report of the Elliot Commission and decided that a University College for the whole of British West Africa should be established at Ibadan in Nigeria, intended to be one institution serving all British West Africa, the local people of the Gold Coast, led by scholar and political figure the late Dr. J.B. Danquah, argued successfully for their own university college. Consequently, the British Government reviewed its decision and agreed to the establishment of the University College of the Gold Coast, founded by ordinance on August 11, 1948, as an affiliate of the University of London, and later gained full university status in 1961, becoming Ghana's premier institution of higher learning (UG n.d.).¹ Situated near Accra, Ghana's capital, the UG has grown steadily since its colonial beginnings and is today the country's oldest and largest public university. According to the UG Institutional Research and Planning Office (2024), as of the 2023–2024 academic year, the student population totaled 73,155, with about 36,630 males and 36,525 females, reflecting near gender parity across programs.²

The University of Makerere (MU), Uganda

MU was established in 1922 in Kampala, Uganda, as a modest technical school offering courses in carpentry, building, and mechanics to just 14 day students. Over the next decade, the institution expanded its curriculum to include medical care, agriculture, veterinary sciences, and

¹ <https://www.ug.edu.gh/about-ug/history>

² <https://irpo.ug.edu.gh/sites/irpo/files/ENROLLMENT%20STATISTICS%202024.pdf>

teacher training, and by 1935 had become a center for higher education in East Africa. In 1949, it became a University College affiliated with the University of London, and after the dissolution of the University of East Africa, it became an independent national university by Act of Parliament in 1970. Today, it stands as one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Africa, known for its broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs and for its significant role in the region's intellectual and socio-economic development.³ Over the decades, Makerere has grown from its small beginnings to host a student body numbering in the tens of thousands. It enrolls approximately 38,000 students, including about 35,000 undergraduates and 3,000 postgraduates, drawing students from Uganda and beyond. Recent enrollment data for the 2023/24 academic year show an overall student population of around 29,258, with 44.6% female students and 55.4% male students, indicating progress toward gender inclusion in higher education (MU, 2023).

The University of Cape Town (UCT), South Africa

The UCT traces its origins to 1829, when it was founded as the South African College, initially serving as a high school for boys with a small tertiary education component. The institution began to expand significantly after 1880, spurred by the discovery of diamonds and gold in South Africa and the resulting demand for skilled professionals in mining and related fields. During this period, the College developed dedicated science laboratories and established departments in mineralogy and geology, laying the foundation for its transformation into a fully-fledged university. UCT was formally established as a university in 1918, supported by the Alfred Beit bequest, contributions from mining magnates, and increased state funding. In 1928,

³ <https://new.mak.ac.ug/web/about/history?utm>

the university relocated most of its facilities to its current Groote Schuur campus on the slopes of Devil's Peak, a site bequeathed to the nation for a national university.

UCT also played a notable role in South Africa's history of resistance to apartheid, earning the nickname "Moscow on the Hill" between the 1960s and 1990s for its sustained opposition to racial exclusion in higher education. Although it admitted its first small group of Black students as early as the 1920s, broader demographic transformation accelerated significantly from the 1980s onward, with the university implementing deliberate policies to increase access and diversity. Today, UCT continues to pursue equity and inclusion through transformation initiatives focused on student access, staff diversity, curriculum reform, and leadership, reflecting its commitment to redressing past injustices and contributing to South Africa's democratic and socio-economic development (UCT, n.d.).⁴ Over the decades, UCT has evolved into South Africa's oldest university and one of the continent's leading research and teaching institutions, known for its broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs and its pivotal role in intellectual, cultural, and socio-political life. In 2023, the university enrolled 29,034 students, comprising 17,550 undergraduates, 11,020 postgraduates, and 465 occasional students.⁵ Among this cohort, 16,249 were females, of whom 6,062 were postgraduates, reflecting a modest female majority in overall enrollment.

The University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon, Cameroon.

⁴ <https://uct.ac.za/history-introduction>

⁵ <https://uct.ac.za/institutional-planning/institutional-facts-and-figures>

The UY I trace its origins to 1962, when it was established as the Federal University of Cameroon shortly after the country’s independence from the British in 1961 after they had gained same from the French in 1960. The University of Yaoundé was created to train a national elite capable of leading the newly sovereign state within a broader post-independence agenda that prioritized human capital development and nation-building. In 1973, it was renamed the University of Yaoundé, consolidating its position as the country’s principal center of higher education.

Over the decades, the UY I have expanded significantly in both enrollment and infrastructure. It now comprises multiple faculties and graduate schools offering diverse programs across the sciences, humanities, social sciences, and technological fields. The university has invested in modern laboratories, digital libraries, and lecture facilities designed to accommodate a large and dynamic student population. Its faculty includes highly qualified professors and researchers who contribute to national and international scholarship through collaborative research initiatives. The university is recognized as one of the most prestigious higher education institutions in Central and Francophone Africa and it continues to strengthen its global partnerships, embrace digital innovation, and advance scientific and technological research while remaining central to Cameroon’s intellectual life and socio-economic transformation.

Step-by-Step Gender-Equity Search Protocol

Table 4

Step-by-Step Gender-Equity Policy Search Protocol

Stage	Component	Description
Institutional Identification	Purpose	Ensure regional representation and institutional comparability across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

Stage	Component	Description
Policy Search Strategy	SSA Subregions	West Africa, East Africa, Central Africa, Southern Africa.
	Ranking Sources	SCImago Institutions Rankings (2025) https://www.scimagoir.com/rankings.php?sector=Higher+educ.&country=Africa ; U.S. News & World Report – Best Global Universities (2025) https://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/africa .
	Selection Criteria	(a) High ranking within Africa; (b) Consistent performance across both ranking systems; (c) Recognition as first ranked or leading research institutions.
	Selected Universities	West Africa: University of Ghana (Ghana) https://www.ug.edu.gh/about-ug/overview
		East Africa: Makerere University (Uganda) https://mak.ac.ug/
		Central Africa: University of Yaoundé 1 (Cameroon) https://uy1.uninet.cm/en/
		Southern Africa: University of Cape Town (South Africa) https://www.uct.ac.za/
	Search Scope	Official institutional websites; university-hosted policy repositories; and equity-related pages.
	Keywords Used	“Gender policy,” “gender equity,” “gender equality,” and “equity and inclusion”
	Policy Retrieval Outcomes on December 23, 2025	
Policy Retrieval Outcomes on December 23, 2025	University of Ghana (UG)	Publicly accessible gender policy identified via Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy: https://cegensa.ug.edu.gh/gender-policy
	Makerere University (MU)	Gender Equality policy identified through official website; https://policies.mak.ac.ug/policy/gender-equality-policy
	University of Cape Town (UCT)	Publicly accessible institutional framework addressing SDG 5 (Gender Equality) identified: https://uct.ac.za/research-innovation-uct-and-un-sdgs/goal-5-gender-equality
	University of Yaoundé I (UY I)	No gender-equity or related policy found in publicly accessible form on the official website at the time of data collection. Absence of a publicly accessible policy does not imply policy non-existence but reflects limitations in online availability at the time of data collection.

Source: *Compiled by Ernestina Wiafe, 2026.*

It is important to note that, unlike the other universities, no gender-equity or related policy primarily focused on advancing equity for women was found on the official website of the UY I (Yaoundé, Cameroon; Central Africa) in a publicly accessible form, despite an extensive

search of institutional policy archives and the UY I web pages, accessed on December 23, 28, and 30 2025. This absence, or the lack of online availability, reflects either a paper copy or an unpublished policy format, limited web dissemination, or non-existence of a standalone gender equity policy or related at the time of the research's web search.

Justification of Sampling and Selection Criteria

The data sampling and selection criterion ensured regional representation of the highest-ranked university in each sub-region, allowing the study to use gender equity or related policies from institutions that are often leaders in higher education and pace-setters or models for institutional practices within their respective geographic regions in SSA. Although the sample comprised three institutional policy documents, the scope is methodologically justified as qualitative inquiry emphasizes depth, contextual sensitivity, and interpretive rigor rather than large sample sizes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). This study used thick description (Geertz, 1973; Hailu et al., 2023) in accordance with qualitative rigor standards to ensure analytic transferability. Providing richly detailed, contextualized findings that help readers assess their relevance to similar settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Following Fairclough's (1995, 2010) three-dimensional CDA model of textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, the data were analyzed to interpret meaning. In the first and second stages of analysis, the study conducted an inductive and deductive analysis by reading and annotating the three gender-equity policy documents with the first two research questions: 1) How is gender equity for female students represented in higher education policy texts in sub-Saharan Africa? 2) How are discourses of gender equity for female students produced, circulated, and legitimized within higher education policies in sub-Saharan Africa?

The textual analysis focused on a line-by-line examination of how gender equity was defined for female students and how equity initiatives were linguistically presented, including their goals, rationales, and strategies. Special emphasis was placed on key terms and phrases such as female, gender mainstreaming, women empowerment, gender-based constraints for women, equal participation for women, Gender balance, and support mechanisms, as well as on how policy language outlined institutional responsibilities and suggested strategies to address barriers faced by female students. The findings were supported by direct quotes taken inductively from the policies.

The discursive practice phase of the analysis examined the processes of policy production, distribution, and consumption of text. This included examining how global gender equity discourses, often shaped by international development agendas and donor frameworks, are taken up, adapted, or resisted within institutional contexts in SSA within the broader local and global gender-equity discourse, like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UN SDG), the African Union, the African Union International Centre for Girls, and Women's Education in Africa (AU CIEFFA), etc.

The final stage of analysis engaged the social practice dimension of Fairclough's third model in the study's discussion, situating the policies within the broader historical, sociocultural, and political contexts of Ghana, Uganda, and South Africa to examine how the policy text reflects and responds to enduring patriarchal norms, colonial and post-colonial legacies, and gendered hierarchies that shape higher education systems in SSA countries and regions.

Analytical Rigor

To enhance analytic rigor and credibility, the study conducted systematic coding procedures using MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2023), consistent with critical discourse

analysis. Policy documents were analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding aligned with the research questions, purpose, and Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. Codes were iteratively refined through repeated readings of the texts to ensure consistency and coherence across documents. Credibility was further strengthened through close attention to textual evidence, triangulation across policy frames including rationales, strategies, and outcomes, and the alignment of interpretations with the broader historical, sociocultural, and political contexts in which the policies were produced. For data transparency, only publicly available gender equity documents from university websites were used. Document sourcing was conducted through official, reliable websites, and citations of these sources were provided accurately to maintain credibility and transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The section focused on the first two dimensions of Fairclough's model: Textual level (Description) and Discursive Practice (production, distribution, consumption of text, and intertextuality), where the study reported findings inductively from the UG Gender Policy (2022),⁶ The MU Gender Equality Policy (2019),⁷ and The UCT Gender Equality (© 2026),⁸ and deductively with the first two research questions, definitional framing, dominant lexicon, aim, and strategies in mind.

⁶ <https://cegensa.ug.edu.gh/gender-policy>

⁷ <https://policies.mak.ac.ug/policy/gender-equality-policy>

⁸ The University of Cape Town & the UN Sustainable Goal 5:
<https://uct.ac.za/research-innovation-uct-and-un-sdgs/goal-5-gender-equality>

RQ1. How is gender equity for female students represented in higher education policy texts in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Textual Analysis (Description)

This section reports on the definitional framing, dominant lexicon, and aim of equity policy documents and strategies outlined to create and provide equal graduate educational opportunities for women.

Table 5

Textual analysis of gender equity policies from the University of Ghana, the University of Cape Town, and Makerere University

CDA Dimension	Analytical Category	University of Ghana (UG)	Makerere University (MU)	University of Cape Town (SDG 5) UCT
Textual Analysis	Definitional Framing	Gender equity is defined as “the process of treating males and females fairly and typically includes measures to correct historically created imbalances, resulting in substantive equality.” (p. 7) Gender is framed as a “socially constructed roles and relations between females and males.” (p. 6)	Gender equality is the absence of discrimination which is based on a person’s sex, in opportunities, allocation of resources and benefits, human rights, and in access to services such as education. (p. 7) Gender is explicitly defined as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon, distinct from biological sex. (p. 7).	Frames gender equality within the context of UN SDG 5, defining it as achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The text positions inequality as structural and sustained through underrepresentation in leadership, violence, and discriminatory law. The discourse centers on gender justice as a university research and institutional focus rather than a social issue (Through Goal 5).
	Dominant Gender Lexicon in the Text	“Gender mainstreaming,” “affirmative action,” “gender stereotype,” “gender based violence,” “gender sensitization,” “patriarchal structures” “traditional family roles,” “domestic responsibilities,” “gender sensitivity,” “gender gap,” “gender parity,” and “gender based discrimination.” (pp. 3-4)	“Gender equality,” “gender equity,” “gender mainstreaming,” “gender parity,” “women empowerment,” “affirmative action,” “patriarchal norms,” “gender-based violence,” “gender-responsive policy,” “nondiscrimination,” “organizational culture,” “gender parity” and “substantive equality.” (pp 3-6).	Gender equality, empowerment, gender justice, gender equity, underrepresentation, gender-based violence, gender discrimination, gender access, disadvantaged background (Through Goal 5.3.1 to 5.6.9)
	Aims	To promote “equity, remove gender stereotyping, and set up a level playing field to allow all sexes to fairly compete for available opportunities and to protect the dignity of the human person.” (p.1) “...ultimately to	To “achieve gender equality and non-discrimination for all staff and students by integrating gender as a cross-cutting issue in all core and support functions of the University.” (p. 7; 9). A gender-responsive	Create a university community where gender equity and inclusivity are core to all recruitment, teaching, and research processes and to advance gender equality through research, policy, and

CDA Dimension	Analytical Category	University of Ghana (UG)	Makerere University (MU)	University of Cape Town (SDG 5) UCT
		mainstream gender in all university policies.” (p. 2)	University in which substantive gender equality is realized. (p. 10).	strategic initiatives that address structural inequalities. It emphasizes increasing representation of black women and ..., addressing gender-based violence, and supporting interdisciplinary research that tackles gendered societal challenges (Goal 5).
	Strategies	That “all undergraduates must take a foundational gender course to promote gender sensitivity,” “a detailed grievance procedure (Appendix) that allows students to report issues to Hall Masters, Department Heads, or directly to the Equal Opportunity Board (EOB) Administrator, ensuring accessible and multiple points of entry for support, “the University provides child-care facilities for students and employees of the University.” (6.1(vii), p. 11)” “Curriculum engendering in all courses,” “encourage staff and students to undertake gender-sensitive research including those focused on the university” and acknowledges that “to enable the University to achieve gender equality, there may be the need to enact special measures for the benefit of one gender and, according to law, the University shall not be held to be in breach of this policy by those who do not benefit from or who feel	“Engendering the curriculum including... review of all existing curricula and ensure that new programs are gender responsive.” (p. 11). “Students enrollment, retention, and performance including loan scheme to assist students meet their tuition and related financial obligations. (p. 12). “A secure environment including the Implementation of policy and regulations on sexual harassment.” (p. 12). “Organizational culture including the review and update all existing University policies, forms, and procedures to eliminate sexist language and establish gender equality (p. 14). “Research and Innovation including developing guidelines to ensure that all research processes and innovations, irrespective of discipline, integrate gender analysis.” (p. 14).	Include advancing womxn: a call for change, scholarships and mentoring aimed at women and underrepresented genders; promotes gender equity through targeted recruitment, mentorship, and support initiatives that empower women students’, policies against discrimination for women and..., childcare and pre-primary education for the children and research units focused on gender health, justice, and racial and gendered power dynamics. Student Women Economic Empowerment Programme (SWEEP), (Goal 5.3.2, 5.3.3, 5.6.5, 5.6.6).

CDA Dimension	Analytical Category	University of Ghana (UG)	Makerere University (MU)	University of Cape Town (SDG 5) UCT
		discriminated against, as a result of these special measures.” (p. 4; 9)		

Source: Wiafe, E. (2026). Textual Analysis of gender equity policies from the University of Ghana, University of Cape Town, and Makerere University.

Definitional Framing

Across the UG, MU, and the UCT, policies that seek to advance graduate education opportunities for women are referred to as gender policy, gender equality policy, or gender equality, respectively. Despite the different labeling, in all three policy contexts, gender inequality is understood as embedded in university governance systems, organizational cultures, and historical power relations. The UG frame gender within a “socially constructed roles and relations between females and males” (p. 6), and MU explicitly frames as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon, distinct from biological sex (p. 7). These framings make gender a socially constructed role and relations between females and males, indicating moving beyond biological sex (chromosomes, anatomy) to social meanings, expectations, and power relations attached to being female or male. In contrast, UCT’s gender policy includes transgender women, reflecting the institution’s recognition of gender identity as a lived reality shaped by the social and cultural context in which the university operates.

This suggests that the framing of gender is informed and shaped by social realities, practices, culture, and norms that are accepted within communities in which universities are located.

Dominant Gender Lexicon in the text

The three institutions also share a common gender lexicon. Terms such as “gender mainstreaming,” “gender equity,” “gender equality,” “affirmative action,” “non-discrimination,” and “women’s empowerment” (UG, pp. 3-4; MU, pp. 3-6) signaled a shared commitment to addressing gender-based disparities against women in graduate education. Noticeably, UCT’s discourse draws on SDG-specific language such as “underrepresentation,” “gender-based violence,” “gender access,” and “disadvantaged background” (Through Goal 5.3.1 to 5.6.9),

aligning gender equity with measurable global development outcomes. By contrast, MU and the UG rely more extensively on policy-heavy and governance-focused terminology, emphasizing regulation, compliance, and institutional structures.

Policy Aim(s)

Across the three texts, gender equality is framed not as an individual concern but as a systemic condition requiring intentional intervention across governance, academic, and research domains in the universities. The repeated use of terms such as equity, mainstreaming, non-discrimination, and gender-responsive signals a shared aim toward transforming institutional norms, cultures, and power relations. At the UG, the discourse of equity and human dignity functions to morally legitimize institutional intervention, therefore positioning the university as a guarantor of fairness and equal opportunity. The emphasis on removing gender stereotyping and creating a “level playing field” (p. 1) constructs gender inequality as a distortion within institutions that must be corrected through policy mainstreaming. Similarly, MU’s aim to integrate gender as a “cross-cutting issue” (p. 6) across all core and support functions reflects institutional responsiveness. The construction of a “gender-responsive university” (p. 7), indicates an active institutional recognition and efforts to address structural inequities. Through this language, gender equality is framed with emphasis on outcomes and institutional accountability rather than symbolic compliance.

The UCT extends this discourse by explicitly linking gender equity to research, policy, and strategic knowledge production (Goal 5). Its emphasis on representation, particularly of Black women, alongside its addressing of gender-based violence and support for interdisciplinary research, introduces an intersectional discourse that foregrounds the interconnectedness of race, gender, and power. Here, gender equality is not only an internal

institutional goal but also a broader societal intervention, which positions the university as a critical actor in challenging structural inequalities.

Strategies

Across the three texts, gender equity is approached as a systemic concern that requires intervention across the curriculum, governance, research, and student support structures. However, the ways these strategies are set up reveal distinct priorities shaped by institutional histories and sociocultural contexts. At the UG, gender equity strategies are framed as a cross-cutting institutional obligation, advanced primarily through systemic gender mainstreaming. This is reflected in mandatory foundational gender courses for undergraduates, “the gendering of curricula across all academic programs,” “accessible grievance and reporting mechanisms,” “affirmative action measures” (pp. 4-9), and “childcare provisions,” (6.1(vii), p. 11)” MU similarly adopts a holistic and institution-wide approach but places particular emphasis on structural integration and institutional reform. Its policy focuses on “gender-responsive curriculum review” (p. 11), “student enrollment, retention, and performance” (p. 12); financial support mechanisms; gender-sensitive research; secure learning environments; and efforts to transform organizational culture by “eliminating sexist language” (p. 14) in university policies and procedures.

In contrast, the UCT prioritizes targeted, transformative interventions to advance women and other underrepresented groups, particularly in research, innovation, and leadership. Initiatives such as Advancing Womxn: A Call for Change, alongside scholarships, fellowships, mentoring programs, childcare and pre-primary education provisions, and specialized research units focused on gender, health, justice, and racialized power dynamics, position knowledge production and leadership pipelines as critical sites of gender transformation. Programs such as

the Student Women Economic Empowerment Programme (SWEEP) further highlight UCT's emphasis on targeted recruitment, mentorship, and economic empowerment as mechanisms to address the persistent inequities women encounter in graduate education (Goal 5.3.2, 5.3.3, 5.6.5, 5.6.6).

RQ 2. How are discourses of gender equity for female students produced, circulated, and legitimized within higher education policies in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Discursive Analysis (Interpretation)

The discursive analysis model concerns the processes involved in the production, distribution, consumption, and intertextuality of the gender equity policy text.

Table 6

Discursive analysis of the gender equity policy of the University of Ghana, the University of Cape Town, and Makerere University

CDA Dimension	Analytical Category	University of Ghana	Makerere University	University of Cape Town (SDG 5)
Discursive Practice	Production	By the “University Council and involved bodies like the Equal Opportunities Board (EOB) and the Centre for Gender Studies & Advocacy” (CEGENSA)” (pp. 11-12).	Through formal institutional authority, led by the “University Council and Senate, and informed by the Gender Mainstreaming Division.” (p. 6).	Led by the “Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC) and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness” (Goal 5.6.1)
	Distribution	Through various forms such as “integration into all key documents (University Statutes, Strategic Plan, student handbook, conditions of service, code of conduct and the sexual harassment and misconduct policy...“..including as handout at orientation programs and on the university website.” (p. 8)	The policy is distributed through official governance channels, including Senate, Council, Gender Mainstreaming structures, and publication on the University website.	Published on official website under Research & Innovation. Targets internal and external audiences interested researchers, prospective students, and policymakers.

CDA Dimension	Analytical Category	University of Ghana	Makerere University	University of Cape Town (SDG 5)
	Consumption	The intended consumers include faculty, administrative staff, students, and university leadership. However, consumption is uneven: senior administrators and policy units are positioned as primary implementers, while students and junior staff are framed more as beneficiaries than active agents.	For “Individuals in the university, and all those associated with the university” (p. 16). However, consumption is stratified: university council, the vice chancellor, deputy vice chancellor and embers of top management, principals, deans/directors, heads of departments/divisions and sections, staff, and students, then partners, service providers, and contractors (pp. 16-17).	Consumers include students, staff, academics, research partners, donors, and global SDG stakeholders.
	Intertextuality	Draws on the national “1992 Constitutional of Ghana,” (p.4) and international frameworks such as Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), The African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights of Women in Africa, and the Beijing Platform for Action.	References and aligning with the “Constitution of the Republic of Uganda; National Gender Policy of 1997 (p. 6),” Also are “the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol)” (p. 6), “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)” (p. 7), “Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),” (p. 7), the “Beijing Platform for Action (1995)” (p. 7).	Explicitly linked to the UN SDG 5 framework, linking UCT initiatives to global targets and indicators (e.g., access measures, non-discrimination policies, mentoring schemes). It also references African Gender Institute, Gender, Health, and Justice Unit, UCT Transformation Office.

Production

Across the three universities, policy production is centralized within top-down channels, typically involving university councils, senior leadership, and specialized gender units. This convergence reflects a shared understanding that gender equity is an institutional responsibility that must be designed, coordinated, and implemented through recognized centers of power and authority within universities.

The UG policy production is led by the University Council in collaboration with bodies such as the Equal Opportunities Board (EOB) and the Centre for Gender Studies and Advocacy (CEGENSA). CEGENSA's involvement highlights gender discourse as an important part of policy formation, thereby enabling research-informed advocacy. Similarly, MU's policy production is led by the University Council and Senate, and informed by the Gender Mainstreaming Division. UCT's gender discourse, led by the Office for Inclusivity and Change (OIC) and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Student Affairs, and Social Responsiveness, is also embedded within its research and innovation portfolio to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). Reflecting the university's strategic positioning within global academic and development networks.

Distribution

In all three contexts, policy consumption extends beyond formal adoption to include strategic dissemination through institutional texts, governance channels, and digital platforms such as University websites, which are sources of policy documents, thereby shaping how gender equity is interpreted, accessed, and enacted by university communities and external stakeholders.

At the UG, policy consumption is facilitated through integration into key institutional documents, including the University Statutes, Strategic Plan, student handbook, conditions of

service, codes of conduct, and sexual harassment and misconduct policies. The distribution of the policy as handouts during orientation programs and its availability on the university website further embeds gender discourse into the global access to internet services. MU similarly relies on formal governance structures to mediate policy consumption, distributing the policy through the Senate, Council, and established Gender Mainstreaming structures, as well as by publishing it on the university website. This mode of dissemination reinforces the policy's authority by situating its use within official decision-making and administrative hierarchies.

In contrast, the University of Cape Town's policy consumption strategy centers broader visibility and knowledge circulation by publishing the policy on its official website under the Research and Innovation domain. This positioning targets both internal and external audiences, including researchers, prospective students, and policymakers, and constructs gender equity as an intellectual, strategic, and public-facing institutional commitment. UCT's approach situates gender policy within knowledge production and policy influence.

Consumption

Patterns of policy consumption and agency further distinguish the institutions. UCT reaches a broad audience for its gender equity discourse, including external stakeholders such as global partners, donors, and international evaluators, positioning the policy as a tool for accountability and visibility. In contrast, both the UG and MU exhibit clearer internal hierarchies of consumption, with senior administrators and planning units positioned as primary agents of implementation, while students and junior staff are more often framed as beneficiaries or those who are to report victims rather than active participants in shaping gender policy development, distribution, and evaluation.

Intertextual

The intertextuality of gender policies at the UG, MU, and UCT reveals how gender equity discourses at SSA universities are produced through strategic alignment with national constitutions, regional instruments, and global gender equity frameworks. The policy text at the UG references the 1992 Constitution of Ghana alongside continental and international frameworks such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights of Women in Africa, the Beijing Platform for Action, and UN (SDG5). This tri-alignment situates the policies within binding legal texts and internationally recognized commitments.

MU similarly aligns its gender policy with the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, the National Gender Policy of 1997, and a range of regional and international instruments, including the Maputo Protocol, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), CEDAW, and the Beijing Platform for Action. This layered intertextuality constructs MU's policy legitimacy through alignment with national, regional, and international gender justice frameworks.

The University of Cape Town's intertextual on the other hand is rooted in global development and institutional transformation agendas, explicitly linking its gender initiatives to the UN (SDG 5). By referencing global targets and indicators related to access, non-discrimination, and mentoring, UCT constructs gender equality as measurable, strategic, and outcome-oriented. The policy further draws on internal institutional texts and knowledge centers, such as the African Gender Institute, the Gender, Health, and Justice Unit, and the UCT Transformation Office, thereby linking global frameworks with localized epistemic authority and institutional expertise.

Discussion

In line with Fairclough's third dimension of CDA, the discussion situates the textual and discursive findings within broader social practices shaped by historical, sociocultural, political, and ideological structures, including patriarchal norms, colonial, and post-colonial institutional legacies, as well as in response to the third research question

RQ.3 What broader sociocultural, historical, and political forces shape these gender equity discourses?

Social Practices

The social practice model argues that the textual and discursive models articulated in the UG, UCT, and MU gender equity policies are shaped by intersecting historical, sociocultural, political, and ideological forces that extend beyond the institutional texts themselves (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak & Meyer, 2016). In all three cases, SSA universities tend to employ either gender equity or equality policies to explain their approach to providing graduate education opportunities for women and to tackle deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, colonial, and postcolonial governance legacies as well as within national and contemporary global frameworks. Which positions the policies as both a human rights issue and a crucial developmental concern (Mama, 2003; Morley, 2011).

Patriarchal Norms

All three discourses are rooted in societies historically organized around patriarchal gender roles, where male dominance in leadership, knowledge creation, and public spheres has become the norm (Connell, 2009; Mama, 1996). The persistent emphasis on affirmative action, gender-based violence, underrepresentation in leadership, unpaid care work, and organizational culture reflects an institutional recognition that gender inequality is structural rather than

incidental (Acker, 2006). These policy texts also inherently acknowledge universities as sites where patriarchal norms are both reproduced, through masculinized academic cultures and epistemologies that can only be contested through deliberate policy intervention (Morley, 2013; Unterhalter, 2017).

Colonial and Postcolonial Institutional Legacies

While the policies' textual and discursive discourse advances understandings of gender inequity as socially constructed and structurally produced, it also reveals enduring ideological tensions. For UG and MU, female students and junior staff are mostly positioned as beneficiaries of the policy rather than as co-producers. This framing, according to Mama (2011) and Nnaemeka (2004), reflects broader historical patterns in African higher education, which supports their argument that, even though Institutions have shifted from colonial-era exclusion to a postcolonial inclusion framework, they continue to operate within entrenched bureaucratic, elite, and male-dominated spaces modeled on European academic traditions (Berglund, 2009; Assié-Lumumba, 2006). Drawing on Morley (2011), this suggests that gender equity discourse operates within a paradox: while it challenges historical injustices, it remains embedded within institutional structures shaped by colonial legacies and systemic hierarchy.

National and Contemporary Global Frameworks

Each university's discourse is also shaped by its respective national gender institutions and political commitments. References to constitutions, national gender policies, and legal frameworks situate the gender equity initiatives within state-led agendas (Goetz, 2003). This reflects the broader post-independence role of African universities as instruments of national development and social transformation, in which gender equity is framed not only as a moral imperative but also as a requirement for modernization, economic growth, and international

legitimacy (Unterhalter & North, 2017). Also, the strong alignment with contemporary global frameworks such as CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, SDG 5, and African Union gender frameworks situates these policies within global gender discourse (United Nations, 1995; United Nations, 2015).

The UG, MG, and UCT, situating their gender equity policy within global gender discourse, enhance legitimacy, foster transnational collaboration, and provide a shared conceptual vocabulary for addressing structural and systemic inequalities. According to Cornwall et al., (2008) even though this helps to construct a measurable, manageable, and auditable, aligned with indicators, targets, and institutional accountability mechanisms, it also reflects neoliberal and development-oriented ideologies that frame gender equality as both a human rights issue and a tool for institutional excellence, sustainability, and global competitiveness. This is why it is important to critically engaged with these indicators to ensure contextual appropriateness in adoption and Implementation to avoid reproducing dominant gender models that may not be culturally responsive.

Conclusion

Across the UG, MU, and UCT, gender equity policies for women's graduate education are framed within a shared institutional and global discourse that emphasizes systemic interventions, compliance with national and international frameworks, and alignment with measurable development goals, such as SDG 5. Policy production is centralized through top-down channels, strategically distributed via governance structures and digital platforms, and consumed by university communities with varying degrees of agency. While these frameworks successfully position gender equity as a structural and institutional concern, advancing women's

access, representation, and empowerment within the text predominantly treats women as a homogeneous group.

With the exception of UTC's consideration of race and scholarship to support the Black South African female population, likely due to its Apartheid political history of segregation that has created systemic disadvantages for Black South African women, critical intersectional factors, including socio-economic status, disability, and rural-urban location, remain mostly unaddressed in the policies. The singular framing of women/females without consideration of their intersectionality risks overlooking the differentiated barriers they face and limits the transformative potential of these policies, despite their alignment with global gender equity discourse and institutional accountability mechanisms. At the same time, the policies reveal meaningful institutional variation in emphasis and strategy. The UCT prioritizes global sustainability, research leadership, and visibility, aligning closely with UN SDG 5 frameworks, and leverages international networks to enhance funding and influence. MU fronts systemic integration and governance to translate national, regional, and international commitments into detailed operational strategies within the university. The UG gender equity policy positions between the UCT and MU frameworks, which aligns national and global gender equality agendas.

Relationally, these differences position each university distinctly within local and global gender equity landscapes, which help shape both its reach and impact in advancing gender equity/equality for women in graduate education within its geographic region in SSA.

Policy Implication

The findings of this study highlight the need for higher education institutions in SSA to move beyond compliance- oriented gender equity policies toward transformative approaches

aligned with SDG 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and Agenda 2063's aspiration for an Africa where development is people- driven and gender- responsive (African Union Commission, 2015; United Nations, 2015). While current policies align with SDG 5 targets, particularly Target 5. 5.1 (ending discrimination), Target 5. 5.5 (ensuring women's full participation and leadership), and Target 5.c (adopting and strengthening gender-responsive policies), their technocratic framing risks reducing gender equity to procedural compliance rather than substantive contextual institutional transformation. Universities should therefore embed gender equity more deeply into core academic functions, governance practices, and resource allocation systems to ensure that policy implementation advances not only formal equality but also substantive gender justice, as envisioned in Agenda 2063. In line with SDG Target 5. 5.5 and Agenda 2063's commitment to inclusive participation and accountable leadership, gender equity policies should reposition students and junior staff as active agents in policy design, implementation, and monitoring. Participatory governance structures, such as gender councils with student and early-career representation, co- created reporting mechanisms, and inclusive decision-making forums, can strengthen institutional accountability and enhance policy effectiveness. Such approaches reflect Agenda 2063's emphasis on democratic ownership, social inclusion, and the empowerment of youth and women across African institutions.

Finally, to advance SDG Target 5. 5.1 and 5.c and to operationalize Agenda 2063's principle of equity and social justice, SSA universities must explicitly integrate intersectionality into gender equity policies. This includes addressing how gender intersects with academic discipline, socioeconomic status, rural–urban background, disability, and academics. Developing disaggregated data systems, context- sensitive interventions, and targeted support mechanisms will enable institutions to respond more effectively to differentiated forms of inequality.

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Appendix Z - Screenshot of the Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy Guideline

The screenshot displays the website for the Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy. The top navigation bar includes links for Home, All Journals, Education, and the current page, Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy. A search bar is located on the right, and a dropdown menu for 'This Journal' is visible. Below the navigation bar, there are links for 'Submit an article', 'About this journal', 'Browse all articles & issues', and 'Follow this journal'. The main content area is titled 'About this journal' and features a 'Share' button. The 'Aims and scope' section describes the journal as a peer-reviewed, open access journal covering the relationships between educational policy, practice, and research. It mentions that all articles are made permanently and freely available online immediately after acceptance. The 'Ready to submit?' section provides links for 'Go to submission site' and 'Instructions for authors'. A sidebar on the left lists various sections: Aims and scope, Journal metrics, Editorial board, Abstracting and indexing, Open access, News and calls for papers, Society information, and Publication details. At the bottom right, there is a section titled 'Sample our Politics & International Relations Journals' with a link to 'Sign in here' to start access to the latest two volumes for 14 days.

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- Journal metrics
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About this journal

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Aims and scope

The *Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy (NordSTEP)* is a peer-reviewed, open access journal covering the relationships between educational policy, practice and research in different temporal and spatial configurations. All articles will be made permanently and freely available online immediately after acceptance, and publication is free of charge for the authors and their institutions.

NordSTEP welcomes theoretically rigorous papers that discuss and contribute to educational policy research. The journal calls for papers that analyse politics, policy making, the intersection of policies and practices, and the political nature of everyday encounters in formal and informal education from early childhood education to higher education and continuous learning. The journal publishes both theoretical and empirical papers across the spectrum. Articles published in the journal are not limited to the Nordic educational space, but should relate to, elaborate on, or be of relevance to the Nordic region and Nordic scholarship. In addition to original research articles the journal encourages submissions of high quality manuscripts including literature reviews and theoretical discussions, book reviews, responses/critiques and invited commentaries.

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Appendix Figure 26: Nordic Journal of Studies in Educational Policy Guideline

Chapter 5 - General Conclusion

This final chapter brings together insights from the three manuscripts to offer an integrated understanding of my journey in pursuit of scholarship, the curriculum experiences of African female graduate students in U.S. and SSA Universities, and gender-equity policies in the University of Ghana, (Ghana), Makerere University, (Uganda), and the Cape Town University in South Africa, in the West, East, and the Southern geographic regions of SSA respectively. While each manuscript explored distinct yet related aspects of the dissertation, this general conclusion summarizes key findings across the three articles and synthesizes their theoretical, methodological, and scholarly contributions. The chapter concludes by acknowledging the dissertation's limitations, noting specific examples for each manuscript, proposed recommendation for future research, and reaffirmed the significance of centering African women's voices in global academic conversations.

Summary of Key Findings Across the Three Manuscripts

The three manuscripts offer a layered and multidimensional understanding of African female graduate students' academic journeys across transnational higher education contexts. Moving intentionally from personal educational to collective curriculum experiences, and ultimately to institutional gender-equity discourse, the dissertation advances analysis across three interconnected levels: identity, curriculum, and policy. Manuscript 1 began with a critical examination of my lived experience as a first-generation college student, immigrant, and transnational scholar who has navigated educational systems in Ghana and the United States. The reflection on whether my story was singular or structurally patterned opened critical space for manuscript 2. Manuscript 2 extended the inquiry from my critical educational autobiography to the collective, exploring the transnational curriculum experiences of six African female doctoral

students across SSA and the United States. The findings revealed recurring themes across contexts of curriculum and pedagogical content; career alignment and professional preparation; responses to African-centered research; gendered family responsibilities; language and communication barriers; and institutional support structures including funding, advising, and mentoring. These shared patterns demonstrated that the findings in Manuscript 1 were not individual but rather reflected broader structural patterns and curricular systems shaping African women's educational journeys across transnational spaces and in higher education. If manuscripts 1 and 2 showed patterned findings, are SSA universities aware of these collective experiences? how are they formally addressing these to endure gender equity experiences? Following Fairclough's CDA (1995, 2010), manuscript 3 examined how gender equity is articulated, prioritized, and operationalized by first-ranked universities within SSA higher education policy frameworks. The findings' revealed universities are making efforts to address some of these challenges noted in manuscript 1&2 like providing funding support, mentorships for women in STEM, maternal leave, and childcare centers, as well as integrating gender discourses into every aspect of the curriculum. Policies are framed within institutional, national, and international gender-equity frameworks with measurable development goals, such as SDG 5 and the classification of women as a homogenous group without considerations for their socio-economic status, disability, and rural-urban location. These patterns mirrored the lived and curricular experiences identified in Manuscript 1 and 2, reinforcing the interconnectedness of identity formation, curriculum systems, and institutional policy.

Convergences Across the Manuscripts

Across all three studies, African female scholars in higher education in SSA and the U.S emerge as active agents rather than passive recipients of institutional systems. Resilience appears

not as an individual attribute detached from context, but as a situated response to systemic constraint. Collectively, the manuscripts demonstrate that the curriculum is lived rather than merely delivered in a classroom setting; identity is continuously negotiated rather than fixed; and policy has real-world effects rather than merely symbolic meaning. Together, these reveal that educational equity cannot be meaningfully addressed at a single analytical level. Across the manuscript 1 and 2 curriculum experiences converge around persistent Western epistemic dominance, misalignment between training and career aspirations, similarity in curriculum and pedagogical practices, unfavorable responses to African-centered research and the centrality of mentorship and institutional support in shaping graduate student success

Divergences Across Contexts

At the same time, important contextual distinctions emerged. Within the U.S., participants described epistemic marginalization, tokenistic inclusion of African perspectives, and structural limitations on research and advising support. Among SSA participants, gendered constraints like sexist comments, resource limitations like libraries and internet access, and postcolonial institutional hierarchies were more central. Research participants also emphasized the disconnect between Western-oriented curricula and local realities. These divergences illustrate the importance of context-sensitive and regionally grounded reform efforts across transnational academic spaces.

Methodological and Theoretical Contributions

Manuscript 1

A key methodological contribution of my critical educational autoethnography is its emancipatory praxis, which shifts my educational experiences from merely recounting events to engaging in systemic critique. I treated my artifacts, journals, academic records, and email

correspondence as qualitative data and subjected them to systematic analysis rather than relying solely on memory. Through triangulation, my critical educational autobiography maintained scholarly credibility while preserving experiential and emotional depth, formalizing self-data, and analyzing it with the same rigor as required in qualitative research. By situating my educational autobiography within critical theories (Snail-sense African feminism), existing literature (Ama Atta Aidoo, Wangari Maathia's memoir), and decolonizing works by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, I transform personal experience into critical social analysis through dialectical meaning-making, in which lived experiences converse with society to extend academic discourse. I did not merely mention frameworks; I actively interrogated and related them to my experiences. Snail sense African feminism, for instance, takes on new dimensions through my slow but deliberate academic progress, transforming my educational autobiography into a case study of decolonial persistence. Likewise, Intersectionality theory in the African context becomes concrete through my experiences as a child of a widow, financial constraints, international student visa restrictions, and balancing parenting with graduate studies, making systemic inequities apparent. My intentional incorporation of Ghanaian proverbs, indigenous language, history, culture, and Akan epistemology further renders the research legible as epistemic resistance.

Manuscript 2

For Manuscript 2, the study expanded on the application of comparative case study methodology in qualitative research. The focus on African female graduate students in the U.S. and SSA, moved the study's focus beyond single-site analysis and positions the methodology within as a transnational design. The sampling framework of three participants pursuing their Doctorial studies in Benin, Ghana, and Kenya in SSA, and the other three from Zambia,

Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe studying in U.S. universities, highlights how transnationalism theoretical frameworks can be integrated structurally into research design, rather than just cited conceptually. Importantly, the manuscript does not approach comparative case studies as institutional rankings or system evaluations of curriculum experiences. Instead, it situated the methodology and applied a cross-case synthesis to identify patterns of convergence and divergence in lived curricular realities of African female graduate students in SSA and the U.S. higher education. Methodologically, this shifts the comparison from judging or hierarchically positioning to analyzing how the curriculum is experienced across transnational spaces.

This also broadens the scope of curriculum studies beyond course syllabi, teaching resources, and pedagogical approaches to include curriculum as a lived, interpreted, negotiated, and embodied experience. Linking curriculum to mentorship, research, advising, and institutional systems, thus expanding what is considered curriculum data. This new perspective enhances methodological approaches in curriculum studies by emphasizing the experiential and relational aspects of academic life beyond document analysis.

Manuscript 3

This study extends Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA to African contexts. Although Fairclough's framework has been widely applied in Western settings, this study demonstrates its relevance for examining gender equity policies within postcolonial Africa. Applying the interconnected levels of textual, discursive, and social practice to institutions across West, East, Southern, and Central Africa, the study shows how Fairclough's CDA can move beyond describing policy language to interrogating how such language reproduces or challenges entrenched power relations.

Methodologically, the study also contributes a structured regional comparative sampling framework to doing CDA. Through purposive selection of the University of Ghana, Makerere University, University of Cape Town, and University of Yaoundé I, the study ensured subregional representation while focusing on institutions recognized as leaders within their respective contexts. This design connected institutional prestige with policy leadership and allowed for meaningful cross-regional comparison. Importantly, the lack of a publicly available gender equity policy at the University of Yaoundé I is not seen as a limitation but as significant data analytically, demonstrating that the absence of policy can serve as discursive material. Viewing absence as data introduces an important methodological insight in this research.

Major Takeaways for Research Question 2

The belief that STEM fields are fundamentally Western, epistemically dominant, and disconnected from cultural relevance or diversity often overshadows the multiple ways these disciplines engage with broader pluralistic contexts. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) highlights the importance of linking learning to students' identities, histories, and sociocultural backgrounds (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Although STEM programs may not always explicitly state these goals within the language of CRP or diversity discourse, certain teaching choices naturally reflect these principles. For example, population-based genetic comparisons or analyses of regional disease prevalence in the course document analysis show how scientific knowledge is influenced by human variation, geography, and lived experience, which are central to culturally relevant teaching. A transnational lens further reveals how STEM learning may never be confined to one cultural frame. Girl's Girl, a research participant for this study navigates scientific training across borders, interpreting course content through experiences rooted in African contexts while learning in U.S.-based programs. Transnationalism helps illuminate how

knowledge production is influenced by global flows of people, ideas, and scientific data. When African-relevant examples appear, even in limited forms, they affirm that STEM knowledge is globally interconnected and shaped by diverse epistemologies, even if instructors do not explicitly label these practices as “diversity” or “inclusion.”

Despite these take aways, issues of curriculum equity remain. In Daavi’s case, although her course syllabus included assignments involving African and European population comparisons and sickle cell trait analysis, these examples appeared only as isolated tasks rather than being embedded in core lectures, readings, or learning outcomes. This placement reflects a broader structural pattern in STEM education: diversity-related content is often supplementary rather than foundational. As a result, students from underrepresented or transnational backgrounds may still feel that their contexts are peripheral rather than integral to scientific inquiry.

This is a key insight from the study because it challenges the simple idea that STEM fields don't recognize diversity due to their nature and Western epistemic dominance. Instead, this research suggests that diversity and cultural relevance often exist implicitly, embedded in scientific phenomena, datasets, or case studies, but remain undervalued or underarticulated in mainstream course syllabi language. Moving toward curriculum equity, therefore, requires making these connections explicit and expanding them beyond isolated assignments so that all students can see their backgrounds, regions, and global realities reflected in the core fabric of STEM courses.

Implications for Institution, Policy, and Practice

Implications for U.S. and SSA Universities

Findings from manuscripts 1 and 2, along with my interactions with graduate students over the years, suggest that prevailing models of graduate advising and mentorship often operate in a transactional manner. Advising is frequently reduced to monitoring degree progress, reviewing annual evaluations, and signing institutional paperwork. While these functions are necessary, this limited approach overlooks graduate students as multidimensional individuals whose academic trajectories are deeply shaped by their personal circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and the systemic barriers they navigate daily. The findings also call for transformative mentorship that extends beyond compliance with academic benchmarks. In my own scholarly journey, the most impactful support came from advisors and supervisors who recognized that intellectual growth is inseparable from social context, identity, and lived realities. Their mentorship was not confined to formal requirements but included advocacy, affirmation, accountability, and holistic guidance. Such support was instrumental in my successful completion of both a master's degree and a Ph.D. under their watch, demonstrating that relational and culturally responsive mentorship can significantly shape graduate student persistence and achievements.

Universities should move toward professional development that equips faculty with culturally sustaining mentorship practices. This includes training that centers humanity in advising, encourages awareness of structural inequities, and prepares faculty to engage students' diverse epistemologies and experiences as assets rather than deficits. Advising frameworks should therefore expand beyond procedural oversight to include relational accountability, cultural responsiveness, and systemic awareness. For me and other graduate students, effective mentorship requires recognizing the full humanity, intellectual potential, experiences, and contextual realities of graduate student scholars. For students from historically marginalized

backgrounds, such recognition is not supplementary but foundational to our ability to survive and thrive in academic spaces. Institutions in the U.S. and SSA committed to equity must therefore reimagine advising beyond transactional requirement, to transformative and practice embedded within graduate education.

Implication for Policy

Findings from this dissertation, including the experiences of African female graduate students across SSA (manuscript 2) and the author's own experiences in Ghanaian education, reveal that many SSA education systems remain constrained by colonial frameworks that emphasize rote memorization and Eurocentric knowledge over critical thinking and indigenous epistemologies. To address these structural limitations, policymakers should pursue deliberate decolonization of curricula, pedagogy, and instructional materials. This involves centering African philosophies, oral traditions, and Indigenous knowledge systems as foundational to teaching and learning, rather than merely including African content in a superficial way. Such policy reforms would advance epistemic justice by legitimizing African ways of knowing and equipping students to think critically and creatively to generate contextually grounded solutions to local and global challenges. Notably, while decolonization centers local realities and knowledge systems, it should coexist with initiatives that cultivate global competencies and cross-cultural collaboration to ensure that African students can engage meaningfully in an interconnected world.

Implications for Practice in Sub-Saharan African Education

The persistence of teacher-centered, "spoon feeding" instruction in many SSA schools highlights the need for a transformative shift in educational practice. Teacher training institutions, colleges of education, and ministries of education across the region should prioritize

the integration of critical pedagogy into curricula and professional development programs. Educators who often teach as they were taught must be positioned not merely as transmitters of knowledge but as facilitators who empower students to critically engage with content, challenge dominant narratives, and collaboratively construct knowledge. Classroom practices that move beyond rote memorization to engage students in analysis, synthesis, innovation, evaluation, and knowledge creation lay the foundation for a more capable and critically minded student body. By incorporating culturally relevant materials, indigenous knowledge systems, and local community contexts, while connecting learners to regional and global perspectives, at the K-12 education level in Sub-Saharan Africa can produce students who are reflective, socially responsible, and equipped to engage deeply with complex problems, authentic dialogue, structured debates, applied learning, and problem-based fundamentals not only develop critical thinking skills but also establish habits of inquiry and independent reasoning.

It is from this enriched educational background that higher education institutions in SSA will receive students who are ready to engage in advanced research, interdisciplinary inquiry, and innovative problem-solving. When students enter universities with prior experience in critically analyzing content, questioning assumptions, and collaborating meaningfully, curricula designed to foster critical thinking, civic engagement, and transformative learning can be fully realized. Consequently, graduates are better positioned to address local and regional challenges, contribute to sustainable development, and help create more equitable and innovative societies.

Limitations of the Dissertation

Generally, the dissertation's approach was somewhat restrictive, as my committee required structuring each manuscript according to the targeted journals' guidelines. While the approach provided a clear path to publication and allowed for the development of multiple

independent manuscripts tied together by a central theme, the word limits imposed by the journals restricted the opportunity to include additional details, contextual discussions, and analysis beyond the findings. In addition, this general limitation, each manuscript in this dissertation faced its own limitations, including:

Transnational Research Constraints

One overarching challenge across manuscripts 1 and 2 was the time difference during data collection. Having been away from Ghana for the past six years, I found it difficult to access copies of records and artifacts for my critical educational autobiography. Although my family made every effort to assist when specific ones, like the search for my undergraduate admission letter, came up, the 5-to-6-hour time difference created constraints for effective communication. As a result, I often had to stay up late at night to connect with family and guide them to the specific locations where I had stored my educational records. Similarly, scheduling, and interviewing participants based in Benin, Ghana, and Kenya in SSA for manuscript 2 posed challenges due to time differences of 7, 6, and 9 hours, respectively. While internet connectivity was not an issue, coordinating mutually convenient times required significant flexibility and extended hours to get responses. In this way, time differences and geographic distance constrained the ease of data collection, communication, and interview scheduling, affirming legitimate methodological constraints in a single nation and transnational research in which data are collected virtually.

Institutional Gaps in Global Knowledge Representation

Additionally, limited access to autobiographical writings by African women necessary for manuscript 1 was another obstacle. Much of this literature was not easily available through the Kansas State University library, its interlibrary loan, or other open-access platforms, so I had

to personally fund and purchase several books. While I am grateful that I could afford it, this extended the time needed to gather relevant literature, engage with it, and understand how it connects to and helps situate my experiences within it. These access restrictions slowed down my writing process, as I waited weeks for books to arrive, while it also highlighted gaps in knowledge circulation in academia, exposing systemic barriers faced by scholars involved in the Global South and transnational research.

Regional Representation Constraints Due to Policy Inaccessibility

For manuscript 3: It is important to note that, unlike the University of Ghana, Makerere University, and Cape Town University included in this study, no gender-equity or related policy primarily focused on advancing equity for female graduate students was found in a publicly accessible format on the official website of the University of Yaoundé I (Yaoundé, Cameroon; Central Africa), despite an extensive search of institutional web page and policy archives accessed on December 23, 28, and 30, 2025. This absence, or lack of online availability as indicated in the manuscript, may reflect a paper-based or unpublished gender equity policy format, limited web dissemination, or the non-existence of a standalone gender equity policy at the time of the search. This situation posed a limitation on the study because it was designed to analyze four equity policies across four first-ranked universities representing different regions of SSA. The absence of publicly accessible documentation from the University of Yaoundé I meant that the Central African's case could not be included in the policy analysis. Consequently, the regional representation of the study became uneven; hence, analysis across West, East, Southern, and Central Africa remained incomplete. As a result, the findings may not fully reflect policy realities in the first-ranked university of Central Africa, so the depth and balance of the cross-regional policy comparison were constrained. While this limitation does not invalidate the study,

it narrows the scope of the policy analysis and constrains the breadth of the cross-regional comparison. However, consistent with qualitative research standards, the study does not seek statistical generalizability; rather, it provides a thick description to support transferability, allowing researchers and readers who engage with this paper to determine the applicability of the findings to their own context, across continents, and decolonial gender equity discourses.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights, several questions and avenues for further research remain. The three-manuscript dissertation model used in this study, although well-regarded in STEM and applied disciplines such as Park, Recreation, and Tourism for enabling quick publication of peer-reviewed articles and preparing graduates for future careers, is still not widely adopted in education. This limited use means there are fewer resources within Curriculum and Instruction or Education to support scholars in applying this approach, which could provide more options for students interested in this format. Moving forward, future research should plan to develop practical guidelines, resource sets, and frameworks to help researchers in the of education who want to adopt this dissertation approach. This will provide a publish as you go option or offer options to the traditional format that create more flexible research pathways for graduate students at both the master's and doctoral levels.

Engaging with the existing literature on autobiographical writing, I affirmed that most works take the form of memoirs or personal narratives. Although rich in lived experience, these texts typically do not incorporate key components associated with rigorous scholarly research, such as clearly articulated research questions, an explicit theoretical or conceptual framework, sustained engagement with relevant literature, a defined methodology and analysis and discussion of findings as it is typical of autobiography works. Additionally, much of the

scholarship on critical autobiography focused primarily on defining the genre and distinguishing it from traditional autobiographical research. The limited number of scholars who have adopted a critical autobiography methodology often situate their work within narrative inquiry, memoir, or storytelling traditions, while grounding their analyses in critical theoretical frameworks and socio-cultural contexts. None provided a clearly structured methodological model that emerging researchers can replicate and situate within their research trajectory.

In response to this gap, I developed a model that synthesizes the various methodological and theoretical elements identified across the literature, enabling me to make scholarly sense of my lived experiences in pursuit of academic inquiry. Building on this foundation, I intend to further expand this into a comprehensive resource for teaching critical autobiography studies. Such a resource would demonstrate how research components, including research questions, theoretical framing, literature review, methodology, analysis, and discussion, can be thoughtfully integrated into critical autobiographical scholarship. In doing so, it would help bridge the gap between personal narrative and rigorous scholarly inquiry.

Future research could further explore how the three-manuscript dissertation approach can be systematically adapted across diverse educational settings, including K–12, higher education, and community-based learning environments, to offer flexible and innovative pathways for scholarly work in education.

Significance of Centering African Women's Voices

Centering African women's voices is significant in repositioning them not as passive subjects of research but as active producers of knowledge whose lived experiences generate theory, critique, transformation, and measurable solutions. When African women narrate their educational journeys, naming cultural dissonance, racial microaggressions, immigration

precarity, epistemic exclusion, and identity negotiations, they shift the focus from individual struggle to structural realities within higher education. In doing so, vulnerability is reframed not as weakness, but as epistemic resistance: a courageous and decolonial act that challenges dominant constructions of strength rooted in silence and assimilation. Centering our voices makes visible the patterned inequities embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional policies, while expanding the meaning of resilience to include truth-telling, help-seeking, solidarity, and advocacy. More importantly, it advances decolonization beyond symbolic inclusion by validating African women's ways of knowing, being, and theorizing as legitimate and necessary to academic transformation.

Reframing Vulnerability as Epistemic Resistance and Strength

I encourage African female students in higher education and international students worldwide to actively seek support and share the vulnerabilities they encounter during their academic journeys. You know what? Life happens. It happened to me, but these moments of vulnerability, ranging from cultural dissonance, systemic marginalization, financial constraints, immigration challenges, and identity negotiations to racial microaggressions, epistemic exclusion, feelings of invisibility, and identity fragmentation, should not be mistaken for personal weaknesses or shortcomings. Instead, they highlight the structural, intersectional, and cultural burdens that transnational scholars face. In many African societies, including Ghana, vulnerability is often misunderstood as a sign of weakness or shame, influenced by cultural norms that prioritize silence and endurance as forms of resilience. However, in U.S. higher education and many Western educational settings where mental health issues are understood and openly discussed, speaking about one's struggles to trusted individuals, including trained and certified persons, is not only a courageous act but also a critical scholarly practice. Because I

believe it fosters healing, understanding, solidarity, and institutional support while resisting the erasure and marginalization that may/are encountered. Telling such truth asserts presence, personhood, and the right to be heard in spaces that were not originally built for our experiences.

I also emphasize the importance of intentional communication. Vulnerability, when unspoken, risks invisibility or misinterpretation. It cannot be assumed that faculty, peers, or institutional stakeholders will intuitively recognize these challenges without explicit communication. Thus, creating avenues for disclosure through narratives, mentorship programs, support groups, research opportunities, storytelling projects, culturally informed counseling services, and safe space is essential for fostering this wellness. Institutions must move beyond superficial statements of access and success to cultivate environments where African women and international scholars are not merely present but also heard, believed, and understood in their full complexity. This call also involves African women redefining vulnerability as agency and knowledge sharing rather than viewing it as weakness and shame.

From this dissertation, I have learned that the act of naming one's pain and sharing one's experiences is a decolonial gesture that challenges dominant ideas of strength, which transforms personal struggles into opportunities for advocacy, community growth, and institutional change. Most importantly, recognizing vulnerability as a legitimate way of knowing enables African women and other international student-scholars to see their truth-telling as both a form of personal liberation and a collective scholarly effort to succeed in higher education.

The End