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# Negotiating the 'Ghanaian' way of schooling: transnational mobility and the educational strategies of British-Ghanaian families<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

While scholars are increasingly interested in migrants in the Global North educating their children in their homelands, ethnographic studies of how ideas about being educated are shaped, and young people's accounts of these transnational educational practices, remain under-researched. This paper attends to these gaps by drawing on the ethnographic cases of four London-based, British-Ghanaian youth in boarding schools in southern Ghana. Using the concept of the educated person, it shows how young people shape their own schooling experiences, and those of their Ghanaian peers, just as the practices at the schools shape them, thereby expanding local understandings of being educated.

KEYWORDS: West Africa, Ghana, education, transnational migration, children and youth

## Introduction

I asked three British pupils at Guiding Light International School in Ghana regarding their plans after finishing secondary school. Valerie, a nineteen-year-old of Ghanaian and Nigerian heritage responded, 'oh, African parents! University is a must!' and laughed heartedly. She was bemused by my question and looked at me, a fellow British-Ghanaian, as if it was obvious that she would pursue higher education. To Valerie and her British-Ghanaian and British-Nigerian schoolmates, high educational attainment forms part of the expectations towards the 'African child'. In line with their parents' expectations, all three had aspirations to go to

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university followed by a professional career. However, they felt that their environments in Britain were not conducive for achieving this goal. They said that there were too many bad influences, which not only distracted them from their studies but also led them to adopt behaviours that they believed were outside the norm for 'African' children, like disrespecting their parents. Despite the many criticisms they had of their school in Ghana, they felt that it guided them towards 'the right path', as Valerie put it. This view among young people of the value of education in Ghana echoed those of Ghanaian parents from my study.

Comments such as 'training in the UK is not as good as in Ghana' or 'here [in Ghana], it's about academic excellence' were very common during my interviews and informal discussions. Ghanaian and other West African parents, like Valerie's, believed that Ghana offered the ideal educational environment for instilling the values that constitute their understandings of an 'educated person' (Levinson and Holland 1996), such as discipline, resilience and an emphasis on education as a path to economic prosperity. Accordingly, they felt that a minimum of 'a few years' in Ghana was needed to instil these values in their children, and chose to relocate their immediate families or send their children to Ghana during their formative educational years. This paper draws on the experiences of these migrant parents and their children to understand the processes through which visions of the educated person are contested and negotiated in a transnational social field.

### **Literature review and background**

Scholarly attention to how global migration has altered family life has grown in the social sciences since the 1990s due to increased focus on the movement of goods and people (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). The growing body of literature on transnational families includes works on children left behind when parents migrate for work (Boehm 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 2001; Parreñas 2001, 2005). In the Ghanaian context, the

literature on transnational families has explored a range of topics mostly relating to left-behind children, including their well-being, life-satisfaction and educational outcomes (Cebotari and Mazzucato [2016](#); Cebotari, Mazzucato, and Appiah [2018](#); Dito, Mazzucato, and Schans [2017](#); Mazzucato and Schans [2011](#); Wu and Cebotari [2018](#)), how households navigate care arrangements (Poeze, Dankyi, and Mazzucato [2017](#); Poeze [2018](#)) and how parental love is demonstrated through remittances and goods (Coe [2011](#)).

The current paper is situated within the educational mobilities literature exploring the relationship between educational migration and people's aspirations for social and economic mobility (Olwig and Valentin [2015](#); Rao and Hossain [2012](#); Valentin [2012](#)). These include studies on strategies of transnational middle-class families who can reap the benefits of international education to help their children become highly mobile and competitive in the global job market (Huang and Yeoh [2005](#); Waters [2005](#), [2006](#); Zhou [1998](#)). The educational migration trajectories of the families described in such studies have tended to follow migration from poorer to wealthier parts of the world, East to West, Global South to North. Increasingly, scholars are drawing attention to shifts in these educational migration patterns by examining cases of migrant parents in the Global North choosing to educate their children for brief periods of time in their countries of origin (Asima [2010](#); Bledsoe and Sow [2011](#); Coe [2014](#); Coe and Shani [2015](#); Erdal et al. [2016](#); Kea and Maier [2017](#); also see Hoechner in this special issue). A common theme in this literature is that parents are employing this practice due to concerns over raising their children in their immigrant communities. These studies revealed that while parents felt that high levels of education and sensibilities, such as discipline, respect and an appreciation of hard work, were valued in the global labour market, they feared they could not inculcate their children with these attributes in the West. While these studies show how parents are drawing on different cultural and national frameworks in their pursuit of the ideal educational environment for their children, they have not on the

whole considered how ideas regarding being educated are being shaped during the process of transnational educational practices. Likewise, they have paid little attention to how the young people involved challenge local ideas of education in the process. This paper addresses these gaps by examining the transnational educational experiences of British-Ghanaian youths. Through its focus on youth and use of ethnographic fieldwork in schools (in addition to working with families), it highlights the everyday tensions and negotiations involved in the transnational educational process, that are underexplored in other forms of research.

This paper draws on the concept of the 'educated person', which suggests that there exists in all societies a model of the "'knowledgeable" person' – a person who has acquired the 'maximum "cultural capital"' (Levinson and Holland 1996, 21). The concept seeks to move beyond reproduction theory, where schooling forms part of the process of reproducing citizens, as well as playing a key role in structuring identities, power relations, and social hierarchies. Levinson and Holland (1996) argue that with this understanding of schooling 'subjects were imagined as being "interpellated" by ideology, and without agency' (1996, 14). Instead they draw on a cultural production approach arguing that individuals are not passive in the educational process rather they 'actively confront the ideological and material conditions presented by schooling' (Levinson and Holland 1996, 14). Thus, rather than producing "totalizing theories [*sic*]" (Fox 1998) of schooling and cultural production, Levinson and Holland (1996) encourage close attention to these local meanings of the educated person when examining how Western-style 'formal' education, along with local, national and global discourses, interacts with existing conceptions of the "knowledgeable" person. They also advocate being sensitive to the agency of the various actors involved in the educational process and how 'hegemonic definitions of the educated person may be contested along lines of gender, age, and in stratified societies, ethnicity and class' (1996, 2). Accordingly, my paper draws on these two aspects of the educated person.

As the example of Valerie (from the opening vignette) shows, young people's attitudes to education were shaped by parents' notions of educated 'African' children. Thus, the first part of the paper will attend to the values of studiousness, resilience and discipline that shape Ghanaian parents' understandings of the educated person and how they employ schooling in Ghana to produce the types of academically successful children they seek. Through detailed ethnographic description of young people's experiences at schools in Ghana, the second part of the paper shows how young people were, at times, contesting their parent's ideas and demonstrate how particular 'Ghanaian' understandings of the educated person are further complicated by transnational migration. Prior to this, I will briefly provide an overview of the British-Ghanaian context followed by the research methodology.

### **Background**

Ghanaians have been migrating to Britain *en masse* since the 1960s (Van Hear et al. [2004](#)). The numbers of Ghanaians in the UK increased in the 1980s and 1990s due to political and economic instability in Ghana. According to the 2011 UK census, they are the sixth largest African population by country of birth<sup>1</sup> (over 90,000) with well-established communities and a growing number of second and third generation British-Ghanaians in Britain (Aspinall and Chinouya [2016](#)). The largest population of Ghanaians lives in London,<sup>2</sup> but there are also smaller communities in Birmingham, Milton Keynes, and Manchester. The majority of Ghanaians live in some of the most deprived areas in England (DCLG [2011](#)).<sup>3</sup>

### **Methodology**

The paper presents examples from two British-Ghanaian parents and four London-based, British-Ghanaian youth (between 16 and 19 years old) at three private boarding schools in Ghana: Guiding Light International and Christ is Lord School (CLS), both in the Greater Accra

Region, and Collins International School in the Ashanti Region. These youths were part of an ethnographic study on the transnational parenting and educational strategies of British-Ghanaians, which involved interviews with 52 young people aged between 8 and 19, 32 parents, and school staff and caregivers during a 23-month multi-sited fieldwork (November 2013 – September 2015) in the UK and Ghana. This included eleven months in London and Southeast England and twelve months in Ghana, and involved participant observation with young people at schools in Ghana and their families in both sites. The three schools presented in this paper are representative of the ten schools from my fieldwork in Ghana<sup>4</sup> and the types of private institutions parents from abroad generally choose for their children. Guiding Light and Collins are among the elite international schools in Ghana offering the British curriculum, while CLS is a mid-range Ghanaian private school.

I employed an anthropological approach to ethnographic analysis involving close reading of interview transcripts and fieldnotes to code major themes (Mills and Morton [2013](#)), and an iterative process of data analysis where I refined my coding through ethnographic writing. Written and verbal consent was sought from research participants for this study. I provided information sheets about the project and consent forms which were given to potential participants (see Chapter 1 in Abotsi [2018](#)). I ensured my participants that their details would be anonymised, thus all names of individuals and schools presented in this article are pseudonyms and I have omitted information that can be used to identify schools, e.g., names of towns where they are located.

Being a British-Ghanaian researcher, there are similarities between myself and my research participants which could lead to the perception of being a ‘insider’ researcher. However, this view of the insider-outside divide has been critiqued by researchers who argue that such distinctions are rarely straightforward (Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati [2014](#)). Certainly, in my case, factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, national and citizenship status complicated

the simplistic categories of being an insider or outsider (see Chapter 1 in Abotsi [2018](#)). That said, I am mindful of the assumptions from my background that I took into the field and how this can impact my analysis. I maintain a reflexive approach by reflecting on, and challenging, my assumptions and discussed my analysis with ethnographers with experience working in Ghana.

### **Transnational mobility and parental strategies around the educated person**

Ghanaian parents are heavily influenced by their observations of high levels of unemployment, petty crime and youth delinquency as Black Britons living in inner-city areas of the UK (also see Asima [2010](#)). Their concerns about issues of low educational attainment among young Black people in Britain are also reflected in national statistics where GCSE<sup>5</sup> results often report that Black children are on the lower end of educational attainment<sup>6</sup> (Easby [2015](#)). Research on low achievement among Black pupils has identified issues such as low expectations by teachers and academic selection practices dating back to the 1970s, which disadvantage Black children (Coard [1971](#); Gillborn et al. [2012](#); Wright [1988](#)). African and Caribbean parents from Black British communities responded to the problems Black youths were facing with the educational system through campaigns and initiatives, such as the Black Parents Movements, and establishing Black supplementary schools to provide academic support as well as cultural education (including African languages and history) which parents felt was missing from mainstream schooling (Gerrard [2013](#); Reay and Mirza [1997](#); Rollock et al. [2015](#)). Recent studies on educational strategies of middle-class British-Caribbean families reveal that, in addition to private tuition and extra-curricular activities, parents also used to teach their children African history as part of their strategies to ensure their children's academic success (Vincent et al. [2012](#)). These approaches reveal a long history of parents in

the African and Caribbean immigrant communities expanding the notion of what it means to be 'educated' to include a sense of belonging to a wider African diaspora.

Ghanaian parents in Britain's Black communities also draw on references from their home countries that inform their visions of the educated person. These families are often embedded in transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004) through their communities and religious networks in Britain, as well as by maintaining their connections to Ghana through regular communication with extended family, sending remittances and visiting Ghana. As I observed during my fieldwork in London and Southeast England, ideas regarding the 'good African child', which includes being studious, respectful and disciplined, circulated among Ghanaian parents and their children through community gatherings, media (including videos and social media from Ghana and the diaspora) and phone calls with relatives back home. Additionally, internal and international migration for educational purposes is common in West African societies. There is a wealth of literature on children being sent away and raised by the extended family, or in some cases fostered by unrelated 'pro-parents' (foster parents entrusted with the social development of the children including the provision of education and training opportunities) (Goody 1982; Bledsoe 1990; Asima 2010; Coe 2014; Schildkrout 1973). Thus, when faced with challenges regarding their children's education, Ghanaian parents in Britain drew on particular cultural formations of the educated person, and well-established practices of seeking the best educational opportunities for their children through migration.

The values of studiousness, discipline and resilience are strong in contemporary ideas about the educated person prevalent among wide segments of the Ghanaian population, believed to be acquired through academic rigour, discipline and the experience of hardships that boarding schools provide. Below I will discuss two examples that are representative of the experiences of many British-Ghanaian parents. In 2013, Regina, a Ghanaian mother from

south London, sent two of her four children to Collins, an elite, international boarding school in the Ashanti Region, Ghana. She felt that her 19-year-old daughter, Daniela, and her youngest son, Neil (16-year-old) were academically capable but they had become complacent over their education as they were more focused on things like fashion and hanging out with friends. She explained that, in the UK, teachers do not push children, thus high educational achievement depends on the child's personality; if they are 'serious' they do well. However, in Ghana, children are taught to strive for academic success. She said, 'they [teachers in Ghana] force you to learn, you are supposed to achieve something, so it's good for a child who's not serious, you are forced to achieve something'. Regina's comments were echoed by other Ghanaian parents from my study, for instance, Naomi, a British-Ghanaian mother who had relocated to Ghana with her children in 2013, said that:

I think just[the] general approach and attitude to academics [in Ghana] is where I want my kids to be at and that's what they're getting here, whereas I felt I had to push for it in the UK to kind of get that same outcome.

While Naomi had little concern over her children's educational performance and behaviour (her son was among the high achieving pupils at his school), she was worried about what she felt was low aspiration in her daughter's career choice to be a hairdresser which she attributed to a lack of emphasis on academic studies in the UK. Also, unlike Regina and her family, who lived in an inner-city neighbourhood of south London that Daniela described as 'the ghetto area', Naomi lived in a predominantly white, middle-class area of Southeast England, where her children were enrolled in one of the best performing schools in her neighbourhood. Consequently, her family did not have direct experience of issues such as low educational attainment, high unemployment, and perceptions of youth delinquency that typically shaped the anxieties of many Ghanaian parents, including Regina (cf. Hoechner in this special issue).

Yet both parents adopted similar educational strategies. Similar to David Sancho in this special issue, these examples show that what the parents admired about schooling in Ghana was a strong emphasis on studiousness and academic rigour. However, parents were also seeking an educational environment that would help their children develop resilience and aspire for economic success through witnessing, and to some extent experiencing, hardships. As Regina explained:

Here [in Ghana] [...] you have to struggle, especially when they went to boarding school, sometimes they don't have money in there, they say "mummy, mummy, our money has finished we don't have money". Daniela [Regina's 19-year-old daughter] said "I have to sell my Indomie [instant noodles] for one Cedi [£0.20], now that I realised that one Cedi is big money" [Regina laughs].

Having been through the Ghanaian boarding school system herself, Regina had a strong belief that it was a good learning experience which taught her to be independent, and that the situations her children experience only served to help them become more serious people. Regina draws on the idea of hardship which, as Cati Coe ([2014](#)) observes, features in people's impressions of schooling in Ghana. This is connected to long-standing beliefs in West African societies where prosperity is linked to 'properly approved personal struggle' (Bledsoe and Sow [2011](#); also see Bledsoe [1990](#); Goody [1982](#); Hoechner [2018](#); Hoechner in this special issue). This belief can be seen in Regina's perception that experiencing 'how [in] Ghana we suffer for money', rather than being in the UK, would enable her children to focus on their studies and set them on a path for economically successful futures.

Another advantage of schooling her children in Ghana was to introduce them to other youths who embodied the ideals she admired and which she found were lacking in her

children's friends in the UK. Regina disapproved of them, finding them to lack good manners and direction. She said:

You know, in the UK, they can tell that their friends there are not serious, but their friends here [Ghana], I mean, they are serious. [...] The friends here most of them have been living here throughout so they are disciplined, so they [her children] can see the difference, even the way they talk, the way they do their beds, it's different from theirs.

Regina's idea of serious children who focused on their studies, and were also disciplined and tidy, was the image of the ideal educated person among Ghanaian parents (also see Coe [2014](#)). This is linked to the colonial history of education in Ghana where Christian missionaries<sup>2</sup> sought to produce "modern", "civilised" Christian subjects at the boarding schools they established (Miescher [2005](#)). Likewise, as Epifania Akosua Amoo-Adare's ([2012](#)) accounts of the personal histories and everyday lives of Ashanti women revealed, 'home training' was seen as an integral part of education at boarding schools. Therefore, in addition to academic knowledge, children were supposed to acquire qualities such as self-discipline, respect, and good manners as well as 'domestic training', like the one they would have received in the home with their parents and caregivers (Amoo-Adare [2012](#)). As seen in Regina's case, these ideas continue to shape education and visions of academic success in Ghana and the diaspora in the present day.

### **(Re)configuring the production of the 'good Ghanaian' pupil**

Drawing on examples from British-Ghanaian teenagers, their Ghanaian and West African friends from Europe and North America, and school staff, this section explores the ways in which young people negotiated schooling in Ghana and the key values and sensibilities of studiousness, discipline and resilience associated with the educated person.

### ***Valuing academic excellence***

Commonly cited among the British-Ghanaian youths and the other 'children from abroad', as they were known at their schools, was the perception that their teachers in Ghana invested more in them than their previous teachers in Europe and North America. As Neil, Regina's 16-year-old son, said:

In Ghana, they [the teachers] show that they care more, like, they'll force you to learn, but in London they'll just tell you if you don't learn, they won't force you.

By being 'forced' to study, Neil is referring to teachers at his international school constantly monitoring and pressuring them to work. In addition to extra academic support available through supplementary classes and 'Prep', a 2-hour evening study period, the pupils were also in an environment where being studious was valued. Similarly, Samuel, a 16-year-old British-Ghanaian and Sierra-Leonean pupil at CLS, stated in the following interview:

Samuel: when I was there [London] I wasn't learning [...] nuh, I was just that kind of student if the teacher say something that I understand it, the only time I would revise let's say we've got a test on this day, then that's when I would revise but apart from that, [shakes head], and [...] if it's library period, then I would be revising but, I didn't really, like how I'm learning in Ghana, I wasn't learning like that over there.

Interviewer: How are you learning in Ghana?

Samuel: like it's more learning, Ghana is just a place they like learning so if you're just sitting there someone would just come and say, "hey yo, let's go to the class, let's just learn". And it's different from London, cos if you're in London, you're independent,

you're by yourself, no one will call you to say "let's go learn" but in Ghana that's how it is [...] so when you roll with, when you walk with people that are like that, you start learning.

Both Neil and Samuel highlight the element of peer pressure and support at their schools, which they both attribute to a general educational culture in Ghana. The pupils themselves are focused on their education, which the two British boys found to be different to their previous schools in Britain. This is seen as a positive influence which, as Samuel suggests, encourages learning.

In line with Samuel and Neil's comments, I also observed at all the schools I visited during my fieldwork, regardless of the curriculum and whether it was day or boarding, elite or otherwise, that they fostered an atmosphere of valuing academic achievement through systems of rewarding high-achieving pupils. At Ghanaian schools like Samuel's corporal punishment was used when pupils got something wrong in class. Such practices were not used at Neil's international school, yet the school encouraged a competitive academic atmosphere through other means, for example displaying pupils' test scores in public. Pupils who achieved low grades or were seen not studying were ridiculed by their classmates. Thus, pupils strived to achieve high grades in order to avoid such scenarios.

While the 'children from abroad' appreciated some of these approaches, they could also be quite critical of these methods. For instance, Daniela, Regina's daughter, found the expectation of having to study everyday overwhelming at times, saying:

You can be learning, like tough learning and one day you choose not to learn, and they [the teachers] are like, "you have A Levels [exams] why are you not learning" [...]. It's nice that they care about you, but then sometimes [...] it's too much.

This feeling of being under constant surveillance was one of the many features the British-Ghanaian youth disliked about their boarding schools. However, in line with their parents' expectations, the pressure from Ghanaian teachers and peers seemed effective in encouraging them to focus on their studies.

### ***Contesting hardships and discipline***

The young people from my research found their educational experience in Ghana challenging. Those sent to boarding schools additionally struggled with various aspects of school life so much so that they generally longed for it to be over. One of these was the pressure of the timetable. The pupils' time at all the boarding schools I visited was scheduled from the moment they woke up between 4 and 5 am to 'lights out' (bedtime) at 9:30 pm. This was unusual for the majority of the British-born youths from my research who had no previous experience of being at boarding school. Consequently, some compared it to being incarcerated, as Daniela commented:

I feel trapped because this is boarding school, it's like prison [...] you wake up at 5/5:30[am], bath with cold water, go to school, come back, bath again, go to prep, like the same daily routine, nothing changes. You can't go out unless there's a good reason, let's say I need to go to the dentist or stuff like that or to do my hair, but you're lucky if they would allow you to go and do your hair [...] it's like you're locked up.

They had little leisure time and experienced a sense of powerlessness over their use of free time, along with a feeling of being restricted to the school grounds.

The British-born pupils also had difficulties dealing with underdeveloped infrastructure. For instance, Samuel's Ghanaian school had no plumbing in the bathrooms and pupils had to fetch water for their baths. Though Daniela and Neil's international school had a backup generator and water storage tanks, it still struggled to manage with power cuts and

water shortages which impacted the pupils' lives. For example, even though the school had good plumbing, they still had to fetch water from the school's water storage tank for their showers. The water pump required electricity to pump the water through the plumbing system, meaning that water did not flow during power cuts. While they understood that this was a typical problem in Ghana, Neil and Daniela expected not to have these problems at their international school. To Daniela, this type of hardship seemed counterintuitive to the purpose of being at school and she expected her school to manage the problem better.

Regina had wanted her children to experience hardships. However, she was not keen on some of the adverse experiences the children had, particularly their encounters with wild animals which were common in the school's rural setting. Her children regularly reported cases of snake bites and even sent her photos of snakes they found on the school's grounds. These incidents made her very anxious regarding her children's safety and quite critical of the school in this regard. She said, 'oh my God, I did pray for them, that, hey, protect these children, they [the school] have to do something about that'. Equally, although she liked the school's academic culture, she was concerned about some practices, such as children cleaning their dorms, even though it formed part of the school's moral and domestic training. She appreciated that the children had to do some cleaning but felt that the school's cleaners should have more responsibility for these tasks to ensure that the dorms were thoroughly cleaned.

Like their mother, Daniela and Neil agreed that some of their chores were beneficial for their development and taught them skills that they would need in life. However, they despised having to hand-wash their clothes. They found this task arduous and time-consuming, and felt that it was a skill that they would not need when they returned to their homes abroad, where washing machines are standard household appliances. Neil paid the 'Aunties', the school's cleaning staff, to do his laundry, a common practice among the boys

(particularly those from Europe and North America). But Daniela, like the other girls, felt uncomfortable handing over her dirty laundry to the Aunties, who were notorious for misplacing or mixing up laundry loads.

Regina was not too concerned with her son's decision not to participate in such learning opportunities. She was responsive to her children's discomfort and she even considered moving them to another school where she hoped they would not have to deal with such issues, but the youth were hesitant to change schools as they did not want to start over again. Consequently, while she could not address all their complaints about the difficulties they faced at school, Regina was attentive to her children's issues. One of these concerned food. During my stay at Collins, I observed that Daniela and Neil, like their British peers, did not eat the school's food. They complained about its quality, which they felt was a result of the kitchen staff having limited ingredients to work with, and also expressed concerns about hygiene. Regina responded to this by ensuring that someone – sometimes herself – brought food (including popular snacks from the UK) on a weekly/ fortnightly basis. Thus, Regina, by mitigating some aspects of her children's experiences of hardships, was simultaneously making a distinction between what she deemed was a beneficial part of their experience in Ghana and attempting to minimise what she considered to be unnecessary. The ideal of the educated person, as one who is tidy and shaped by the hardships of boarding school which Regina held in her exemplar of 'serious' children, was contested by her own children who, assisted by Regina, disrupted the practices at their school and presented an alternative, based on visions of themselves as particular British children who do not need to endure unnecessary hardships.

### ***School staff managing pupils' behaviour***

Schools in Ghana are seen by parents as sites for developing values and sensibilities associated with the educated person, thus they are places for shaping children's character as well as

places for academic achievement. Accordingly, school staff at the various schools I visited in Ghana saw themselves as a crucial part of children's behavioural development. School personnel were also aware of their obligation to deliver on the parents' financial investments in their children's education. As Margaret, the Assistant Director of Mount Grace, an international school in Greater Accra, said:

Ghanaians like money, so when they invest in their children they want them to go far. They want to be able to say something when people ask, "so what is your child doing over there?" If they have to say "ah" [she said whilst flipping her wrist from palm facing down to facing up, a typical Ghanaian gesture indicating annoyance], then it means it's not good. How can they spend all that money on you, send you here [to Ghana] to study then you go back there [to the UK] and you're not doing anything, they want their children to achieve.

As historical and contemporary accounts of parenting in West African societies show, parents and caregivers invest in their futures through educating their children (Berry [1985](#); Kaye [1962](#); Coe [2014](#)). Accordingly, school heads like Margaret were aware of their role in ensuring that these investments yielded the desired results, especially as institutions like hers charged in school fees more than the average Ghanaian could afford. With this idea of parents' expectations in mind, as well as the history of practices where schools were responsible for the holistic development of the child, some school staff adhered to the belief that Ghanaian immigrant parents in Europe and North America were seeking a specific Ghanaian educational environment.

For Gladys, the director of Guiding Light School, this meant a school with strict discipline, as she explained: 'a school without discipline is no school'. She said that parents must have recalled the 'training' they had when they were growing up in Ghana 'and that's what they're hoping for by sending their children to Ghana'. In many respects, the

observations of these school heads are apt. After all, parents frequently mentioned ‘discipline’ as a fundamental aspect of the Ghanaian education they sought, as Regina’s example of ‘serious’ children discussed earlier suggests. However, the British-Ghanaian youths and their peers from Europe and North America found the school staff’s insistence on strict discipline unnecessary.

In a discussion with Valerie (from the opening vignette) and her British peers at Guiding Light International, Jerome (15-year-old, British-Nigerian) reported that teachers ‘draw a line’ between themselves and the pupils which can be very strict and gave an example: ‘even if you don’t say “yes sir, yes sir”, it’s a problem’. His fellow British schoolmates agreed with his observations. The feeling that they were not being listened to due to their status as ‘children’ was very common. My young research participants would regularly contest these rules by deploying the notion of being ‘Western children’ with ‘rights’ to challenge adult authority. This was particularly the case when they wanted to be exempt from certain school practices that they deemed unnecessary.

School staff, like Ms. Okyere at Collins (the House Mistress of Daniela’s boarding house) were understanding of the situation of pupils from Europe and North America who had to adjust to a new country and the structure of the school, but she also had the responsibility of producing types of hardworking, tidy, disciplined pupils that she felt parents wanted. For these school staff, this meant insisting that pupils obey school rules. However, Ms. Okyere found that the ‘children from abroad’ would often complain that their rights were being violated whenever they felt they were being ‘forced’ to adhere to rules they found excessive, for instance being told they had to vacate the dorms at a certain time in the mornings. Like many Ghanaian teachers I met during my fieldwork, Ms. Okyere found her disputes with the pupils from the Ghanaian diaspora over their ‘rights’ quite tiresome. She felt that she was having to deal with ‘two calibres of children’: Ghanaians who upheld local ideals of the

educated person such as unquestioning respect for adults, and defiant 'Western' children who were problematic for the cohesion of the school. Consequently, Ms. Okyere, like many of the teachers I met, did not always insist on 'good' behaviour from the European and North American pupils, preferring to turn a blind eye in certain situations to avoid conflicts. However, this strategy had an unwanted effect as Ms. Okyere explains:

when they disrespect you in front of others, who are Ghanaians, experiencing the same opportunity to learn an international curriculum, when they insult you in front of them [...] you feel hurt, because the Ghanaians also copy that, the next time you see them also trying to do the same, some of them have a lot of influence on the Ghanaians.

Ms. Okyere's comment shows the Ghanaian pupils were adopting attitudes from the British-Ghanaian youths and their peers from Europe and America.<sup>8</sup> This was particularly hurtful for Ms. Okyere as it was both difficult in terms of managing unruly behaviour, and it was, in her view, eroding a fundamental Ghanaian value of respect for elders. However, the pupils from abroad were not always boisterous and argumentative, just as the Ghanaian pupils were not always 'well-behaved'. In addition to instances of 'disrespectful behaviour' I observed among the Ghanaian pupils (e.g., not greeting their teachers and being rowdy in class), teachers also commented on Ghanaian pupils being difficult at times, as Ms. Boah another teacher at Collins said:

[there] are Ghanaian children born and raised here who behave like that [misbehave] because they are at international school, they think they can act that way, the school has international standards, so they can't cane them, you can't punish these children.

However, even when confronted with Ghanaian pupils who do not fit the image of the respectful, disciplined child, the teachers tended to blame the influence of 'Western' values, either by highlighting the effects of the 'children from abroad' on their Ghanaian peers, as Ms.

Okyere did, or by criticising the international ethos of the school and the restrictions they have on disciplining children in the 'Ghanaian' way, which for them meant corporal punishment and insisting on strict hierarchies between adults and children as seen in Ms. Boah's statement. Through these contentions with school staff over rules and respectful behaviour, the young people from abroad challenged notions of discipline inherent in the ideas of the educated person which their parents and schools sought to produce.

### ***Negotiating norms around gender and sexuality***

In addition to being critical of, and at times, rejecting rules regarding respect for elders, gender norms relating to particular notions of the educated person, were another source of contention among the youths from abroad and the school staff. Similar to Hannah Hoechner's accounts from Senegalese Islamic boarding schools in this special issue, the schools I visited in Ghana attempted to separate pupils by sex. Though the schools were co-educational, the staff tried to restrict boys and girls socialising with each other outside scheduled lessons and extra-curricular activities. School, as pupils were constantly reminded, was for learning and not romantic relationships. 'Good students' are those who were solely focused on their academic performance and extra-curricular activities, who were respectful and followed the schools' Christian ethos.<sup>9</sup> These views of the 'good student' particularly impacted girls, who were not allowed to wear make-up or dress in 'provocative' styles (e.g., wearing short skirts), and were supposed to eschew sexual attention from boys. Staff were also under significant pressure to monitor pupils' interactions with the opposite sex, especially the girls due to fears over pregnancies. While the Ghanaian pupils did not always follow this policy, (rumours of romantic relationships among pupils were common), they did not criticise it either. Rather, it was seen as part of the accepted social norms. However, my participants from abroad found these restrictions on boy-girl interactions absurd. As Daniela commented, regarding a situation

where she was chastised by school staff for physical contact with her brother: 'imagine I'm sitting with my brother having an emotional conversation and you're telling me it's incest. How can you do that?!'

Pupils like Samuel at CLS followed the tactics of his Ghanaian peers by keeping his interactions with female classmates away from the watchful eyes of the school staff. However, Valerie at Guiding Light overtly disobeyed these rules. In addition to having restrictions over her appearance, these rules meant limiting her social circle to her female classmates whom she did not particularly like, as she commented that they gossiped too much. She explained that her friends in London were mostly boys and was annoyed that both staff and pupils quickly jumped to the conclusion that friendship between boys and girls implied a romantic relationship. By visibly defying these rules, Valerie contested the normative views over girls' sexualities that formed part of local ideas regarding the 'good' educated girl. Despite believing that schooling in Ghana put her on the 'right path' toward academic success, Valerie was critiquing other aspects of the education experience which she deemed unnecessary. Thus, in addition to their disputes with the teachers over their 'rights' as 'Western children', these tensions over gender differences formed part of the ways in which the 'children from abroad' disrupt some aspects of the Ghanaian approach to schooling that challenge local ideas of the educated person. Through these contestations, their peers and school staff are also having to negotiate different ideas about adult-child hierarchies and gender relations in ways that add layers of complexities to locally accepted norms.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to examine how particular ideas of the educated person shaped the educational projects and experiences of British-Ghanaian parents and their children. In particular, it addresses gaps in the literature on education and homeland returns by attending

to how ideas about being educated are shaped during transnational educational practices and how young people are involved in these processes. This has been achieved by employing the concept of the educated person (Levinson and Holland 1996) which advocates being attentive to how local understandings of the educated person intersect with dominant discourses and practices of schooling, as well as the individual, familial and societal factors that influence people's active participation in the educational process. With this framework, I examined the values that form particular Ghanaian understandings of the educated person and people's agency in (re)shaping these ideas. I explored how parents use migration as part of their educational strategies when they faced challenges in the UK that they felt threatened their children's future success. In particular, I focus on the values of studiousness, resilience and discipline that inform ideas of the educated person which parents sought to produce. My study reveals that the youths themselves embraced certain features of these local visions of the educated person, including their schools' emphasis on studiousness and felt encouraged by their teachers' efforts to motivate them. However, the young people were also sceptical of other aspects of their educational experiences in Ghana, including developing resilience through character-building hardships, and were unwilling to tolerate certain aspects of school life, such as the food. Also, young people were active in shaping their parents' ideas about the types of experiences they deemed beneficial for their children's success. Similarly, while strict discipline and respect are considered by parents and school staff to be a fundamental aspect of Ghanaian schooling, I show that the British-Ghanaian youths attempted to resist practices aimed at shaping them towards local visions of the ideal pupil by questioning adult authority and positioning themselves as particular rights-bearing 'Western children'. I also demonstrate that the British-Ghanaian youths were influential in shaping their own schooling experiences, as well as those of their Ghanaian peers, just as the practices at the schools shaped them.

Through detailed long-term ethnographic engagement with families and in schools, my study brings light to the subtle tensions and contestations that emerge in the everyday practices in the educational process, currently underexplored in the literature on education and homeland returns. Through this approach, my research shows that these tensions form part of the ways in which educational institutions are having to make sense of, and adapt to, ideas that challenge their perceptions of the educated person. Thus, I argue that by paying attention to young people's experiences, we gain a better understanding of how transnational mobility adds layers of complexities to the qualities of the types of successful, educated persons parents hope to produce, thereby expanding local understandings of being educated.

While the study benefitted from the in-depth multi-sited ethnographic approach, and multiple perspectives of youths, parents and school staff, there were some limitations to the research. For example, the study would have been enhanced by employing a longitudinal approach to examine how young people's views may change during different stages in their lives such as going to university, starting their careers etc., to understand how these events shape their visions of the successful educated person. Despite these limitations, the study highlights that these homeland returns for educational purposes form sites through which ideas about education are being constantly negotiated with reference to multiple frameworks of a transnational social field.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Notes

1 Source: Census 2011 Table: QS213EW, Country of birth (expanded), regions in England and Wales available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/qs213ew> (accessed 11 March 2017).

2 According to the 2011 census, two-thirds of the Ghanaian population live in London.

3 Based on seven different domains of deprivation which include: income deprivation; employment deprivation; education, skills and training deprivation; health deprivation and disability; crime; barriers to housing and services and living environment deprivation.

4 I was based in five schools where I conducted participant observation and interviewed pupils, parents, and staff at an additional five schools.

5 General Certificate of Secondary Education, the exams taken at the end of compulsory education in England.

6 However, it is noteworthy that in the 2013–14 national exams, 56.8% of Black British African children achieved at least 5 A\*- C GCSEs which is just above the national average (56.6%), whereas 47.0% Caribbean children achieved those grades. Also, reports by the DfE suggest that the performance of Black children has been improving in recent years (DfE [2014](#)).

7 Mission schools were the most common form of European education in colonial Ghana, mostly provided for by Protestant churches of the Breman mission, Basel mission (later Presbyterian), the Catholic Church, and the Wesleyan Methodist mission (Miescher [2005](#); Antwi [1992](#); Coe [2005](#); Behrends and Lentz [2012](#)).

8 Many of the pupils from Europe and North America were popular among their Ghanaian peers due to being 'from abroad' and having food, clothes and other everyday goods from

Europe and North America. For a more in-depth exploration of these dynamics, see Abotsi (2018).

9 The majority of the schools I visited were Christian, following Charismatic Christian or Pentecostal worship practices even though some of them did not explicitly categorise themselves as such. Church services and prayers before meals and school events were the norm.

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