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# THE CONVERGENCE OF EPISTEMOLOGIES

## International Scholars and the Discourse of International Scholarship

World's Education Journal by CISC

WORLD'S EDUCATION JOURNAL
By CEHD International Student Community

*Volume 1, Issue 1*

# The Convergence of Epistemologies: International Scholars and the Discourse Of International Scholarship

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WORLD'S EDUCATION JOURNAL
By CEHD International Student Community

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# The Convergence of Epistemologies: International Scholars and the Discourse of International Scholarship

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**Abstract**

**English Version**

The inaugural volume of the *World's Education Journal* by *CEHD International Student Community (WEJC)* is grounded in the metaphor of a river, where multiple epistemological currents converge without erasing their origins. Drawing on the metaphor of a river, this volume brings together scholars whose intellectual trajectories converge across disciplines, geographies, and epistemological traditions. Like rivers entering from different points, contributors engage shared currents of inquiry while remaining grounded in distinct cultural, historical, and scholarly lineages. Situated within a critique of Western-centric knowledge production systems and academic capitalism, the editorial piece interrogates how epistemological commodification enables institutions to benefit from global intellectual labor while retaining ownership and authority over knowledge. This issue centers on the intellectual contributions of international students as cross-cultural and cross-epistemological knowledge producers. Acknowledging international scholar status as both temporary and structurally essential to contemporary higher education, the three editors—each affiliated with CIDE and identifying as international scholars—position this journal itself as a co-created project born from shared precarity, mobility, and scholarly collaboration.

**Khmer (ខ្មែរ ) Version**

ទិនានុប្បវត្តិស្រាវជ្រាវសិក្សា *World's Education Journal by CISC (WEJC)* លេខដំបូងប្រើពាក្យប្រៀបធៀប «ទន្លេនៃចំណេះដឹង» ជាជាគំនិតឧបមា ដើម្បីបង្កើតជាកន្លែងដែលចរន្តចំណេះដឹងជាច្រើនបញ្ចូលគ្នាដោយមិនលុបប្រភពដើម។ ដើម្បីប្រមូលផ្តុំអ្នកប្រាជ្ញ ដែលមានគន្លង បញ្ជាបញ្ចូលគ្នាឆ្លងកាត់មុខវិជ្ជា ភូមិសាស្ត្រ និងប្រពៃណីចំណេះដឹង សៀវភៅនេះប្រើប្រាស់ពាក្យ «ទន្លេ» ជាគំនិតឧបមាដែលអញ្ជើញ អ្នករួមចំណែកចូលរួមឆ្លើយសំណួរដែល ប្រឆាំងការវើសវើងចំណេះដឹងនិងការរិះគន់ប្រកបដោយស្ថាបនា ទៅលើការអប់រំដែលផ្តោតតែលើមនោគមវិជ្ជាលោកខាងលិច និងការធ្វើអាជីវកម្មលើវិស័យសិក្សា។ អត្ថបទនេះរិះគន់ស្ថាប័នអប់រំដែលយកគំនិតបញ្ញវន្តអន្តរជាតិទៅរកលុយ និងគ្រប់គ្រងតាមចិត្ត ចំណែកឯម្ចាស់ចំណេះដឹងវិញមិនសូវមានសិទ្ធិសម្រេចអ្វីឡើយ។ បញ្ហានេះផ្តោតលើការចូលរួមចំណែកបញ្ញា របស់និស្សិតអន្តរជាតិជាអ្នកផលិតចំណេះដឹងឆ្លងវប្បធម៌ និងឆ្លងចំណេះដឹង។ អ្នកកែសម្រួលទាំងបីនាក់ ដែលសុទ្ធតែជាអ្នកចេះដឹងមកពីក្រៅប្រទេសដែរនោះ យល់ថាវត្តមានរបស់និស្សិតអន្តរជាតិគឺពិតជាសំខាន់សម្រាប់សាកលវិទ្យាល័យសម័យថ្មី។ ពួកគេបានបង្កើតទស្សនាវដ្តីនេះឡើង ដើម្បីបង្ហាញពីលទ្ធផលនៃការធ្វើការរួមគ្នា ការផ្លាស់ប្តូរទីកន្លែង និងការតស៊ូក្នុងវិស័យអប់រំ។

**Chinese Version**

由 教育与人类发展学院（*CEHD*）国际学生团体创办的《世界教育期刊》（*World's Education Journal——WEJC*）首卷，立足于"河流"这一隐喻，本卷汇聚了来自不同学科、地域及认识论传统的学者的论文。跻身于同一条学术河流，虽切入点不同，但是他们扎根于自身独特的文化、历史与学术传承。本卷的主编们立足于对西方中心主义，知识生产体系及学术资本主义的批判，在本文中剖析"认识论商品化"这一概念，解释各类机构如何既从全球智力劳动中获利，又同时牢牢把控着对知识的所有权与权威这一现象。本期期刊致力于聚焦并突出国际学者作为跨文化、跨认识论的知识生产者所做出的贡献。三位主编均来自比较和国际发展教育项目（*CIDE*），且为"国际学者"；他们深刻认识到，国际学者的身份虽有时效性，却对当代高等教育体系有着结构性的重要意义。基于这一认知，国际学者们通过共同经历的危机、跨地域流动，以及彼此间的学术共创，孕育了这卷期刊。

**Key words**

Epistemological convergence, Knowledge production, Internationalization of higher education, International scholar

## Introduction

The inaugural volume of the *World's Education Journal by the CEHD International Student Community (WEJC)* is a direct response to the critical need for accountability regarding epistemological diversity within education and human development research. This journal, grounded in the metaphor of a river where multiple epistemological currents converge without erasing their origins, centers on the intellectual contributions of international students as crucial cross-cultural and cross-epistemological knowledge producers.

This editorial and volume bring together international scholars—defined as knowledge producers actively committed to their craft—whose intellectual trajectories span various disciplines, geographies, and scholarly traditions. Contributors engage shared currents of inquiry while remaining grounded in their distinct cultural, historical, and scholarly lineages. Situated within a robust critique of Western-centric knowledge production systems and academic capitalism, this work interrogates how epistemological commodification benefits institutions from global intellectual labor while retaining ownership and authority over knowledge. By positioning the journal as a co-created project born from shared precarity, mobility, and scholarly collaboration, WEJC seeks to highlight the essential and unique epistemological insights international students bring to the contemporary landscape of higher education.

## Journey to Knowledge Co-Creation

International students, ***or dare we say, "scholars,"*** have long played a critical role in the co-creation of knowledge within the global (or internationalized) higher education discourse, yet this participation is often shaped by uneven epistemic terrains that privilege Western-centric ideology. As Altbach and Knight (2007) note, internationalization is deeply entangled with global power structures. This further situates these dynamics within a competitive knowledge

economy that stratifies knowledge, and for international students, this means navigating processes of epistemic translation and negotiation within systems that both enable mobility and constrain legitimacy (Anderson, 2020; Marginson, 2010).

Higher education thus functions simultaneously as an enabler and a gatekeeper of knowledge production, where access to dominant academic platforms is mediated by linguistic norms, disciplinary conventions, and institutional prestige (Pennycook, 2022; Stein, 2021). These dynamics reflect broader structures of coloniality (Quijano, 2024) and epistemic injustice, in which marginalized knowledge must (or is asked to) conform to dominant frameworks to be recognized (Boni & Velasco, 2020). Consequently, knowledge produced by international students and scholars in independent spaces is often treated as peripheral or "indie," while similar work gains legitimacy when published in commodified, high-status academic journals, revealing how academic capitalism and institutional validation shape not only what knowledge circulates but also whose knowledge endures.

**Navigating Western-Centric Knowledge Systems and Epistemic Power**

The journey of international scholars in knowledge creation is deeply entangled with Western-centric systems of knowledge production, where higher education operates as one of the most powerful institutional "wheels" shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge. Although global discourses increasingly position education as a common good, this ideal is often reconfigured into a transactional social contract grounded in neoliberalism, human capital, and market logic (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010).

> *"As I reflect, as a Cambodian scholar educated within systems where even writing in* ខ្មែរ *(Khmer) was often rendered invisible or incompatible with '*ទាន់សម័យ *(modern)' academic infrastructures, my early relationship to* ចំណេះដឹង *(knowledge) was shaped through English and French as dominant epistemic languages. Within these*

> *Western-centric frameworks,* ចំណេះដឹងទាន់សម័យ *(modern knowledge) appeared not as something I could author, but as something I was expected to receive, translate, and reproduce."* - Editor in Chief, Hingphith, V.

If the symbol above (or the Khmer alphabet) appears to your readers or viewers as block cubes, it is a reminder that, within this complex education system, knowledge is not neutral but produced and regulated through discursive regimes that determine what is valid, visible, and citable (Foucault, 1982). These regimes are inseparable from the enduring structures of coloniality, where epistemic hierarchies privilege Western frameworks while marginalizing alternative ontologies and epistemologies (Quijano, 2024; Said, 2014). Language—particularly English—further consolidates this dominance, operating as both a medium and a filter through which knowledge must pass to gain legitimacy (Pennycook, 2022; Mair, 2003).

Epistemological development is constrained, forcing scholars to align intellectual traditions with dominant paradigms, making growth uneven. Non-Western knowledge is often translated, reshaped, or silenced to gain recognition in global academia. This structure links to the commodification of scholarship, embedding knowledge production within transactional metrics of value and prestige (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010). Higher education operates in a global knowledge economy, favoring market-oriented outputs and academic capitalism. International scholars and students are both learners and producers of commodifiable knowledge, contributing intellectual labor to institutional metrics. Vavrus and Pekol (2015) argue that English functions as the language of academic neocolonialism because scholars globally feel compelled to adhere to the standards and ideologies of the dominant academic systems that utilize English (p. 18).

However, their epistemic value is mediated by publication norms and linguistic standards. This paradox means international scholars shape knowledge while navigating systems that

appropriate and legitimize their work through institutional ownership. Scholarship thus becomes both a development and a commodity, reinforcing a transactional model in which the value of knowledge is tied to its production and recognition structures.

**Structural Challenges in Knowledge Production Systems**

As the university is the site where international students acquire, produce, and circulate knowledge, it is important for us to remind ourselves that knowledge production is never neutral (Spangler, 2025). The current site of the American university is not only a colonial institution but also a site to produce colonial knowledge (Stein, 2022). The current knowledge production system is rooted in a hegemonic, Eurocentric, colonial structure (Quijano, 2024), which has been produced and reproduced for more than 500 years since the beginning of European colonization (Said, 1979).

> *"Instead of simply categorizing international students as victims, villains or victors, it is important to understand that we are all entangled with coloniality through our own positionality. However, as we constantly reflect on our own relationship with coloniality, we might be able to create alternative knowledge which is beyond the Eurocentric colonial knowledge production system."* - Co-Editor, Cong, Q.

Therefore, the goal of this journal is to challenge the Eurocentric colonial structure of the knowledge production system, where we, among many other scholars (Spangler, 2025; Stein, 2022; Said, 1979), collectively ask who is making the knowledge, what knowledge can be legitimized, and for whom we are creating knowledge. This journal will be a collective stance among international scholars that, rather than being marginalized by the system, we re-center ourselves as sites of knowledge production. At the same time, as emerging scholars ourselves, we would like to resist the academic value of individualism and competition. We believe that

only by building a community and a different type of relationality with knowledge collectively can we move towards a decolonial way of knowledge production.

**Epistemic Challenges in Recognizing Student-Led Scholarship as Legitimate Knowledge**

Students as scholars, production as a challenge to the dominant distribution and production of knowledge.

> *"We, as students, specifically, as international students, do we or can we really say what we need to say just to be accepted as part of the formal knowledge production. Our positionality is already at a disadvantage, just by adding and acknowledging this temporary status."* - Co-Editor, Peng, B.

If the colloquium creates a space for knowledge to be voiced, WEJC asks a more difficult question: who is permitted to turn such knowledge into recognized scholarship? As a peer-reviewed, open-access journal initiated and managed by the *CEHD International Student Communit*y, WEJC inhabits a productive tension. It is at once close to the institutional margins, being grassroots shaped by the energies and constraints of international student life, and yet unmistakably oriented toward the formal circuits of scholarly production. The journal's mission makes this dual position visible. It presents itself not only as a publication but as a movement committed to elevating the voices, experiences, and intellectual contributions of international graduate students, while also aspiring to become work that is read and cited in broader academic conversations. In this sense, the journal does not reject mainstream knowledge production but challenges the assumption that knowledge must always originate from established epistemic centers.

This is where the journal's "indie" quality becomes significant. Its distinctiveness lies not simply in being international student-led, but in the ways in which it massages its values and messages into norms of knowledge production and distribution. WEJC explicitly welcomes

diverse forms of knowledge. That openness matters because it widens the terms on which scholarship can appear, especially for international students whose insights are often shaped by movement across languages, institutions, and educational systems. For those in temporary or structurally disadvantaged positions, the challenge is rarely only whether they have something meaningful to say. It is also whether what they need to say can be expressed in forms that formal academia is prepared to recognize. By creating a rigorous and supportive publishing space, WEJC directly addresses that problem. It makes room for forms of knowledge that may otherwise remain undervalued, mis-translated, or excluded from dominant scholarly venues.

Seen this way, a grassroots international student-run journal is not a lesser version of formal scholarship. It challenges the hierarchy through which scholarship is usually authorized. WEJC's partnership with the University of Minnesota Libraries and its commitment to peer review underscore that this is not a withdrawal from rigor, but a rethinking of where rigor can reside and who gets to enact it.

## Intellectual Contribution of International Scholars

International scholars' intellectual labor is often filtered through systems—such as publication regimes, disciplinary gatekeeping, and institutional valuations—that privilege commodified scholarship (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010). Even inclusive internationalization is often embedded in structures that regulate whose knowledge is deemed authoritative. This colloquium and journal intervene to resist the narrow institutionalization of knowledge production and reframe the value of international scholars' contributions.

### Resisting Through Co-Creation: Reimagining Knowledge Production

Rather than functioning as supplementary or peripheral platforms, this initiative positions co-creation and reflexivity as methodological and political practices for reclaiming epistemic

agency. Co-creation, in this sense, is not simply collaborative production, but a refusal of unilateral epistemic authority, enabling international scholars to actively shape the terms through which knowledge is generated and validated. Reflexivity, as both method and stance, further disrupts fixed epistemic hierarchies by making visible the positional, linguistic, and institutional conditions under which knowledge is produced (Holmes, 2020; Dahinden et al., 2021). Together, these practices align with critical traditions that emphasize the need to unsettle dominant knowledge systems rather than merely diversify them (Stein, 2022; Andreotti, 2011).

This colloquium and journal, therefore, function as epistemic spaces of re-signification, where international scholars are recognized not as peripheral actors within existing systems, but as co-constructors of knowledge in their own right. In doing so, they foreground the often-invisible intellectual labor of international scholars and challenge the assumption that scholarly legitimacy is exclusively mediated through institutional publication regimes. Ultimately, this initiative reclaims knowledge production as a relational, situated, and contested process—one in which co-creation becomes both a method of inquiry and a form of epistemic resistance.

**Resisting Through Acknowledgment: International Students and Scholars in Education and Human Development Research**

International scholars are playing an increasingly crucial and productive role in education and human development research. This prominence reflects a shift in the field, which now recognizes these researchers as active knowledge producers rather than simply recipients of established ideas. The University of Minnesota, which hosts this journal, has its own complicated history with international scholars. *The CEHD International Student Community (CISC)* emerged from a growing need to address both the social well-being and the systemic presence of

international scholar communities whose perspectives (epistemological standpoints) were often challenged, commodified, commercialized, intentionally overlooked, or struggling to find a platform for visibility. ***This is an invitation to co-create a space where diverse epistemological standpoints can flourish.***

This epistemological shift challenges the assumption that knowledge primarily flows from the West, highlighting knowledge creation as relational and contested across borders. As Foucault (1982) suggests, knowledge is produced within discourse regimes, which international scholars actively negotiate and reshape through their research. Thus, education and human development research becomes a site where epistemologies are continuously reconstructed through mobility and transnational engagement.

International scholars contribute more than data; they offer alternative epistemological origins that challenge dominant Western frameworks in theory, methodology, and validation. Their work stems from multilingual, multicultural, and transdisciplinary systems, expanding what counts as rigorous inquiry. However, these contributions are constrained by institutional and publication hierarchies that favor certain epistemic traditions (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010).

Crucially, international scholars are not just situated within existing knowledge systems but are actively reconfiguring them through co-constructed, reflexive, and contextually grounded practices. This represents a shift in educational research from knowledge consumption to knowledge co-production, decentralizing epistemic authority across diverse scholarly positionalities.

**Epistemic Co-Creation in the Colloquium on the World's Education System Series**

The Colloquium on the World's Education Systems Series has, from its inception, aspired to be more than an event. It has been shaped as a space where knowledge is not merely presented but co-created through comparative conversation, the encounter of different educational histories and philosophies, and the intellectual labor of international students whose perspectives often emerge from crossing systems rather than inhabiting only one. The series's architecture makes this ambition visible. All elements of the Colloquium suggest a larger vision of scholarly life, one in which presentation, dialogue, community-building, and publication are not separate activities, but part of a shared ecosystem of knowledge production and circulation.

What has made the Colloquium distinctive over the past several years is a refusal to treat international students as symbolic representatives of "global diversity" alone. Instead, the series has positioned them as thinkers, interlocutors, and knowledge producers. That orientation was already explicit in the first colloquium in 2024, where one of the opening sessions centered on the role of international students in creating a diverse community and participating in knowledge co-creation. The program itself reflected that commitment, bringing together presentations across multiple national and regional contexts and inviting attendees into a comparative mode of listening and thinking. By the second colloquium in 2025, the series had further deepened this vision, signaling that the work of the colloquium was not meant to end when the presentations concluded. Oral exchange was being intentionally linked to writing, revision, and scholarly dissemination.

Seen from this vantage point, the present journal issue marks an important maturation of the colloquium's original purpose. Because it includes articles by presenters from the first and second colloquiums, it shows how those gatherings continue beyond the temporal boundaries of

the event itself. A presentation delivered in a shared scholarly space becomes the beginning rather than the endpoint of intellectual work. Ideas are first voiced before a community, then tested through conversation, carried forward through reflection and revision, and eventually transformed into written scholarship. In this sense, the first and second colloquiums now complete a fuller cycle of knowledge production, from dialogic exchange to manuscript development, and from development to publication and circulation.

**Epistemic Co-Creation as Converging Rivers in the World's Education Journal**

The inaugural volume of the *World's Education Journal by the CEHD International Student Community (WEJC)* is conceptually anchored in the hydrological metaphor of the river. International students develop, metaphorically, from different rivers of epistemic traditions, and here at this journal, they converge to produce intellectual synergies. Such synergy is manifested in this volume's priority on epistemic plurality over immediate coherence, viewing scholarly knowledge as intrinsically relational—produced through complex encounters across disciplinary and linguistic boundaries, and localized knowledges. Contributors are thus recognized as epistemically located scholars whose intellectual trajectories are shaped by differentiated histories, resisting the abstract knowledge-producer role.

Furthermore, situated within critical discourse on academic capitalism and intellectual commodification, this work interrogates the paradoxical global higher education system. This system depends on, yet displaces, international intellectual labor, reproducing asymmetries in knowledge ownership, validation, and circulation (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010). The "brain drain" is reframed, moving beyond demographic concern to examine the epistemological tension of knowledge continuously generated transnationally but subject to differential institutionalization and recognition.

To address these systemic tensions, this inaugural issue centers international students' contributions as inherently cross-cultural and cross-epistemological, challenging monolithic frameworks and expanding educational inquiry. Acknowledging the temporality and structural embeddedness of international student status, the three editors—all CIDE-affiliated international scholars—conceptualize this journal as a co-created epistemic intervention. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and decolonial thought, this initiative serves as a reflexive, collaboratively structured space. Crucially, co-creation is foregrounded as an essential epistemic stance resisting premature closure of meaning and singular academic authority (Fairclough, 2000; Andreotti, 2011).

## Summary of the Journal

This inaugural volume of the *World's Education Journal by the CEHD International Student Community (WEJC)* interrogates how knowledge is produced, validated, and circulated in global higher education, critiquing Western-centric views and enduring colonial structures that privilege certain ways of knowing (Foucault, 1982; Quijano, 2024; Said, 2014). While internationalization is often driven by academic capitalism and global competition (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2010), this journal is a co-created space foregrounding epistemological plurality, reflexivity, and relational knowledge production to disrupt these established hierarchies.

### Knowledge in Motion: Application, Reflexivity, and Co-Creation Across Education

The volume is structured as an open invitation to contributors from the Colloquium on the World's Education System Series, current international students and scholars, and alumni actively engaged in educational practice and research across diverse global contexts. It brings

together empirical, systematic, and conceptual works that reflect the lived intellectual labor of international scholars working across disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

Empirical studies such as *Experience with ABA for Children with Autism in Ghana*, *Simulation to Vocation: Improving the Transition Program in a Special Education Center in the Philippines*, and *Teachers' AI Education Programs: Comparative Study of the US and South Korea* demonstrate how knowledge is contextually applied and reconstituted through practice. These works illustrate how international scholars navigate the translation of theory into localized educational realities, aligning with Anderson's (2020) emphasis on education as a site of translation across cultural and epistemic encounters.

Complementing these empirical contributions are conceptual papers that critically interrogate the epistemological foundations of educational systems. Works such as *From Colonial Medium to Local Agency: Historical Insights for Malawi's K-12 Language of Instruction Policy*, *Reading the Air: School Ethos and Teacher Identity in Japan*, *Ngano as a Method: Reclaiming African Indigenous Epistemologies in Research*, *Critical Internationalization in Chinese Universities*, and *Bridging the Silence: LGBT/Queer Asian/American Collegians and the Politics of Belonging on and off Campus, 1970s–1990s* collectively engage with questions of coloniality, identity, and institutional knowledge production. These contributions resonate with decolonial and critical perspectives that challenge dominant epistemic frameworks and call for epistemic justice in higher education (Andreotti, 2011; Boni & Velasco, 2020; Stein, 2022).

They also reflect the necessity of expanding methodological and disciplinary boundaries, aligning with calls to rethink how research questions themselves are constructed within academic systems (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013).

## Navigating Epistemic Tensions: Internationalization, Decoloniality, and Knowledge Production

Across these contributions, a shared emphasis emerges on the application of knowledge as both contextually grounded and epistemologically reflexive. The studies from Ghana, the Philippines, and South Korea, in particular, demonstrate how educational knowledge is not merely transferred across contexts but actively reconstructed through situated practice, institutional negotiation, and cultural translation. Conceptual works such as *Nagano as a Method* and *Reading the Air* further extend this reflection by foregrounding indigenous and relational epistemologies as legitimate methodological frameworks, challenging the dominance of Western-centric paradigms in educational research. These engagements reflect a broader commitment to co-creation as a methodological stance, where knowledge is not simply produced about contexts but with them, through relational and reflexive scholarly engagement (Holmes, 2020; Dahinden et al., 2021).

At the same time, this volume openly engages with the tensions inherent in processes of internationalization, decolonization, and epistemological transformation. The inclusion of studies situated in China, Japan, and Malawi highlights how educational systems are simultaneously shaped by global discourses and local epistemic traditions, revealing the complex entanglement of knowledge production and institutional power. These works collectively underscore that international scholarship is not a neutral or uniform field, but one constituted through uneven relations of authority, language, and disciplinary normativity (Pennycook, 2022; Mair, 2003). In this regard, the journal does not seek to resolve these tensions but to hold space for their articulation and critical engagement.

Ultimately, *The Convergence of Epistemologies: International Scholars and the Discourse of International Scholarship* positions this volume as an intentional act of co-creation and epistemic resistance. It affirms that international scholars are not peripheral contributors to global knowledge systems, but active epistemic agents whose intellectual labor shapes and reconfigures the field of education and human development research. By bringing together diverse methodological, linguistic, and disciplinary traditions, this journal enacts a commitment to reflexive and relational knowledge production that resists commodified academic normativities and foregrounds epistemological plurality as foundational rather than exceptional.

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# Experience with Applied Behavior Analysis for Children with Autism in Ghana

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**Abstract**

Prevalence rates for autism have been rising across the globe. The rise in autism diagnoses has also increased the need for evidence-based and effective interventions. Behavioral interventions based on applied behavior analysis (ABA) are an effective, evidence-based intervention for individuals with autism. For maximized benefit, ABA interventions have to be accepted by caregivers of children with autism and implemented by trained practitioners. As such, many studies have investigated caregiver and practitioner perspectives regarding ABA interventions. However, there are very few similar studies conducted in Sub-Saharan African countries, such as Ghana. Given Ghana's unique cultural context, where traditional beliefs often attribute autism to spiritual causes, understanding the perceptions of caregivers and practitioners toward ABA interventions is critical for the implementation of ABA interventions. The current qualitative study interviewed six caregivers and 13 practitioners to understand their perspectives on ABA interventions in Ghana, using a phenomenological approach. Results indicated that both caregivers and practitioners trusted ABA interventions to be effective, but both parties also acknowledged challenges related to the high cost. The findings highlight the need for a support system to alleviate caregiver financial burden, empower practitioners, and address barriers to the widespread dissemination of ABA in Ghana.

**Key words**

Applied Behavior Analysis, Autism, Caregivers, Practitioners, Ghana

**Experience with Applied Behavior Analysis for Children with Autism in Ghana**

Recent global discourse indicates a rise in the prevalence rate of autism (Bougeard et al., 2021). The rise in autism also increases caregivers' need to identify appropriate interventions for their children with autism and practitioners' need to provide effective evidence-based practices for their students with autism. Interventions based on applied behavior analysis (ABA) have been found to be an effective intervention for individuals with autism (Hume et al., 2021; Keenan et al., 2015; Reichow, 2012; Smith, 1999; Yu et al., 2020).

However, many studies have also discussed the importance of acceptance of ABA interventions by caregivers of children with autism (Burkett et al., 2020; McPhilemy & Dillenburger; Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2022; Schauder et al., 2025) and the importance of implementation quality by practitioners (Silbaugh & El Fattal, 2022; Zayac et al., 2023) to ensure ABA interventions garner maximum benefits for individuals with autism. Caregivers of children with autism play a key role in implementing ABA interventions due to their direct responsibility for children's daily care, behavior management, and educational development (Becraft et al., 2024; Musetti et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2024). Fidelity of implementation is important because it ensures practitioners adhere to the intervention protocol and deliver the intervention as designed (Akiba et al., 2022). Interventions are effective when implemented with high fidelity and ensure the sustainability of evidence-based interventions (Akiba et al., 2022).

Previous studies that explored caregivers' experiences with ABA interventions commonly shared results regarding challenges caregivers experienced in accessing ABA interventions for their children, such as impact on family well-being (Parker & Childs, 2019; Schwichtenberg & Poehlmann, 2007), barriers to access (Littman et al., 2023; Rosales et al., 2021), and financial burden (Littman et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2024; Parker & Childs, 2019; Rosales et al., 2023).

Studies have also explored the experiences of practitioners providing ABA interventions. For example, Plantiveau et al. (2018) found that two out of every three behavior analysts experienced moderate to high burnout levels and little or no job satisfaction. Similarly, Griffith et al. (2014) found that approximately 42% of ABA therapists felt a lack of personal accomplishment in their work, and 13% reported significant emotional exhaustion. Conversely, Gibson et al. (2009) found low levels of burnout among ABA therapists who received high supervisor support.

Although there is evidence supporting the effectiveness of ABA interventions for individuals with autism, there is an apparent lack of literature about how ABA interventions are received and implemented in Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries. Similarly, there are very few studies that investigated the experiences of caregivers of children with autism receiving ABA interventions and practitioners implementing ABA interventions in SSA countries. One reason for the lack of literature could be that ABA intervention is relatively new in SSA countries compared to Western countries such as the United States. Autism is diagnosed based on direct and indirect behavioral observation (Al-Hendawi et al., 2025; Carr, 2021; Fombonne, 2023). Learning goals and interventions are decided based on these behavioral observations (Cooper et al., 2020).

In addition, ABA is a science of behavior analysis where practitioners identify functional relationships between behaviors and environmental variables that influence these behaviors and design interventions based on these relationships to produce behaviors of social significance (Cooper et al., 2020). The behavioral emphasis of ABA makes it well-suited for autism intervention because it relies on objective observation and measurement of behavior, uses positive reinforcement strategies, and bases intervention decisions on systematic data analysis rather than subjective judgments (Cooper et al., 2020). Human behavior is highly impacted by

environment, society, and culture (Chwialkowska et al., 2020; Burakgazi, 2025). To establish acceptance of ABA intervention in countries where it is relatively new (i.e., SSA countries), it is necessary to investigate ABA intervention across multiple cultural settings (Bailey et al., 1998; Čolić et al., 2022; Jimenez‐Gomez & Beaulieu, 2022).

In Ghana, autism awareness and recognition have historically been limited, with the first diagnostic services only becoming available in the early 2000s (Anthony, 2018; Orfson-Offei, 2021). Many Ghanaians view disability through a cultural lens, with explanations ranging from maternal negligence to supernatural factors (Acheampong, 2024; Kpobi & Swartz, 2019). Stakeholders emphasize the need for community education to dispel myths and promote autism acceptance (Akrofi et al., 2023). While Ghana has made progress with the establishment of a few special schools in urban areas, the vast majority of Ghanaian children with autism, particularly those in rural areas, remain undiagnosed and without access to appropriate services (Senoo et al., 2024).

The introduction of ABA interventions in Ghana has been relatively recent, with most ABA services emerging within the last decade through the efforts of non-governmental organizations (Ahorsu‐Walker et al., 2025; Knochel et al., 2021). However, the shortage of trained ABA practitioners nationwide remains a critical challenge. Ghana faces a significant gap in service provision, with fewer than 10 certified international behavior analysts serving in the country, and those few practitioners are concentrated in the capital city, making ABA service inaccessible for parents in rural Ghana.

Similar to the overall lack of literature regarding individuals with autism and ABA interventions in SSA countries, ABA intervention in the Ghanaian context remains understudied. Given Ghana's unique cultural context, where traditional beliefs often attribute autism to spiritual

causes, understanding the perceptions of caregivers and practitioners toward ABA-based interventions is particularly critical. The severe shortage of trained ABA professionals throughout Ghana, coupled with limited awareness and accessibility issues, creates significant barriers that differ markedly from Western contexts where most autism research has been conducted. Additionally, with fewer than 10 certified behavior analysts serving the entire country, most concentrated in urban centers, investigating how Ghanaian caregivers and practitioners perceive and implement ABA principles is key to developing culturally responsive, sustainable interventions. Therefore, this study investigated how caregivers and practitioners in Ghana experience ABA interventions for children with autism.

## Method

### Design

To investigate caregivers' experiences with ABA interventions in Ghana, we used a phenomenological qualitative design, conducting interviews with participants. Phenomenology focuses on understanding a specific concept, idea, or experience to understand commonalities within that experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological design was chosen because we were interested in caregivers' lived experiences of ABA intervention.

### Setting

The study was conducted in two schools in Ghana that offered ABA intervention to children with autism. School M was located in the Central region, and School N was located in the Greater Accra region. School M and School N were selected because they were the only two schools that had  certified Behavior Analysts in Ghana at the time of the data collection.

## Participants

The current study recruited caregivers of children with autism who received ABA interventions for at least 25 hours a week in Ghana for more than a year, and behavior therapists who provided direct ABA interventions to the children, and behavior analysts who provided supervision to the therapists. (The therapists and analysts are henceforth referred to as practitioners. The first author recruited the participants through purposive sampling (see Etikan et al., 2016) from School M and School N. Six caregivers and 13 practitioners participated in the current study. Caregiver participants were predominantly male (67%) and had a mean age of 48.83 years, ranging from basic education to a PhD level.

The caregivers' children with autism were mostly males (90%) with a mean age of 10.67 years and had received ABA interventions for 3–4 years (83%). Practitioner participants were primarily female (69%) with a mean age of 29.15 years and mostly held bachelor's degrees (77%). The majority of practitioner participants (11) worked as behavior therapists (85%) and had 3–4 years of experience implementing ABA interventions (69%), and 2 (15%) of the practitioners were behavior analysts with more than 4 years of experience. The current study was authorized by the Ethical Review Board of the College of Education Studies, University of Cape Coast, and all ethical regulations were duly followed. The first author obtained informed consent from the participants prior to the study. The first author clearly informed participants that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences. Table 1 provides a demographic overview of the participants.

**Table 1**

*Demographic overview of participants*

| | Practitioners | Caregivers | Children | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Sex** | | | | |
| Male | 4 | 4 | 5 | 52.00 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 9 | 2 | 1 | 48.00 |
| **Age** | | | | |
| 25-30 | 10 | 0 | | 52.60 |
| 31- 35 | 2 | 0 | | 10.50 |
| 36-40 | 1 | 1 | | 10.50 |
| 41-45 | 0 | 1 | | 5.30 |
| 46-50 | 0 | 1 | | 5.30 |
| 51-55 | 0 | 2 | | 10.50 |
| 56-60 | 0 | 1 | | 5.30 |

| **Age of child with autism** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
|---|---|---|
| 7 | 1 | 16.67 |
| 9 | 2 | 33.33 |
| 10 | 1 | 16.67 |
| 12 | 1 | 16.67 |
| 17 | 1 | 16.66 |

| **Years the child received ABA intervention** | **Number** | **Percentage** |
|---|---|---|
| 1-2 years | 0 | 0 |
| 2-3 years | 1 | 16.66 |
| 3-4 years | 5 | 83.34 |

| **Educational Level** | **Practitioners** | **Caregivers Percentage** |
|---|---|---|
| Elementary | 0 | 1 | 5.26 |
| High school | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| College | 10 | 2 | 63.17 |
| Master's | 3 | 2 | 26.31 |
| PhD | 0 | 1 | 5.26 |
| **ABA certification of Practitioners** | | | |
| Behavior therapists | 11 | | 84.62 |
| Behavior analysts | 2 | | 15.38 |
| **Number of years practitioners have worked in ABA settings** | | | |
| 1-2 years | 0 | | 0 |
| 2-3 years | 4 | | 30.77 |
| 3-4 years | 9 | | 69.23 |

## Procedure

### *Recruitment*

The first author emailed the school administrators at School M and School N with the study's scope, objectives, and inclusion criteria. The school administrators dispersed the study information to the caregivers of children with autism in their respective schools.

### *Data collection*

After the first author received informed consent from the participant, the first author scheduled individual interviews with the six caregivers and 13 practitioners. The interviews took place at School M and School N in a quiet staff meeting room and at caregivers' homes. The first author interviewed the participants in English and three Ghanaian languages (i.e., Twi, Ewe, and Ga). All authors, except the third author, are Ghanaians and fluent in English and local Ghanaian languages. All practitioners were fluent in English, a requirement for employment at their schools. The authors' positionality statements are provided in Appendix A. Each interview took 40 to 60 minutes. The interview guide is provided in Appendix B. The first author audio-recorded all interviews with participant consent. During the interview, the first author also took paper field notes to capture salient information that may not be fully captured by the audio recording alone. The data collection period lasted approximately three weeks.

### *Transcription and translation*

The fourth author transcribed all interviews from the audio recordings. Interviews that were conducted with Twi, Ewe, and Ga were transcribed and translated into English. Independent reviewers from the English Department at the University of Cape Coast, who were fluent in Twi, Ewe, and Ga, checked the translations from Twi, Ewe, and Ga to English for accuracy. The first and fifth authors reviewed the final transcripts to ensure they accurately represented participants' statements during the interviews.

## Data Analysis

The first author imported de-identified transcriptions from the interviews to NVivo 14 Plus (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2023) for data analysis. The first author followed the steps of

thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). The thematic analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, assessment of themes, theme definition and labelling, and preparation of the aggregated report. Specifically, the first, fourth, and fifth authors spent time routinely reading and rereading the interview transcripts line by line to familiarize themselves with the data for comprehension and analysis. In addition to the repeated reading of the transcriptions, the first, fourth, and fifth authors also repeatedly listened to the audio recordings while reviewing field notes to increase familiarity with the data. Finally, the first author categorized the codes into themes using both inductive and deductive approaches using NVivo 14 Plus. The fourth and fifth authors independently coded the transcripts into themes, providing triangulation with the first author's codes. Finally, the first, fourth, and fifth authors met to discuss discrepancies and refine the codes and final themes.

## Results

A summary of the major themes, subthemes, and codes generated from the participants' responses is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Summary of coding schemes*

| Major themes | Subthemes | Codes |
|---|---|---|
| Caregivers' experiences with ABA intervention | Positive impact on family-stress | Reduced worry and family burden, hope for the future, improved child independence, relief from initial diagnosis stress. |
| | Mixed impact on caregiver responsibility | Increased child independence reduces workload, home intervention implementation increases responsibility, balancing work and home intervention is challenging |
| | Negative impact on family finances | High cost of ABA services, cost of materials and resources, school-based financial support available for some, call for |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | government support and insurance coverage, financial challenges affect intervention consistency |
| Practitioners' experiences with ABA intervention | Practitioner skills | Improved classroom management skills, behavioral management skills, evidence-based intervention planning, increased self-efficacy |
| | Challenges in providing ABA interventions | Time-consuming preparation and implementation, delayed results require patience, physical demands create stress and burnout, low caregiver involvement in home implementation, and high financial costs of individualized support. |
| | Cultural resistance | Low awareness of ABA in Ghana, need for culturally sensitive interventions, replacing technical terms with everyday language, incorporating cultural backgrounds in interventions, and community education to increase acceptance |

**Caregivers' experience with ABA intervention**

We first analyzed Ghanaian caregivers' lived experiences regarding ABA intervention. The following themes emerged from the interviews with six caregiver participants: the positive impact of ABA interventions on family stress, a mixed impact on caregiver responsibilities, and a negative impact on family finances.

***Positive impact on family stress***

All caregiver participants agreed that the ABA interventions their child received had a positive impact on the family's stress. Caregivers reported experiencing significant stress and worry when their children were initially diagnosed with autism. They described how attending school and receiving ABA interventions brought relief and hope. For instance, one caregiver

shared how the interventions improved their child's ability to perform self-help tasks such as dressing and eating independently, reducing their reliance on others for daily activities. Another caregiver noted that the progress they have seen in their child's communication and social interactions led to a noticeable decrease in family stress and an optimistic outlook for the future.

> *...when my son was diagnosed with ASD, it brought much burden and thinking to the family. My wife and I were worried because we were moving from hospital to hospital, trying all sorts of treatments to get our son well. That was stressful, but when he started attending school M a year later, we began to see results, which relieved me. I worry no more because I see hope coming out for my son with the ABA he is receiving* (Caregiver 3)

Another caregiver stated that ABA interventions helped their child to be independent. Moreover, the caregiver feels less stress and worries less about their child's future.

> *...I used to worry a lot about my son. Especially when I lost my wife. I worry a lot because I do not know how to care for him. My work schedule does not give me time to stay home. It was challenging for his siblings and me until someone told me about school. When he began receiving ABA intervention, he could perform many tasks independently through the self-help skills he was taught. Now I worry no more* (Caregiver 2).

***Mixed impact on caregiver responsibility***

Although all caregivers agreed about the positive effects of ABA interventions on family stress, there were mixed opinions on the perceived impact of ABA interventions on caregiver responsibility. Some caregivers stated that ABA intervention had increased their children's independence, decreasing the time a caregiver needs to spend supporting their child with autism.

> *...My child can bathe, use the washroom, wear his shirt, brush his teeth, and even prepare tea. So, the things I have to do for him have reduced, and the time I spend on him has also reduced. Some years ago, things were not like this* (Caregiver 5).

Conversely, other caregivers stated that ABA interventions increase caregivers' responsibilities because they need to ensure the interventions are implemented in their homes

(i.e., in-home interventions). Caregivers mentioned difficulty balancing tight work schedules with implementing intervention at home.

> *...They have taught us some stuff to teach the children at home; my work schedule is also very tight, so sometimes I cannot carry them out. It is very stressful to balance work and home intervention* (Caregiver 6).

***Negative impact on family finances***

All caregivers shared that ABA interventions were a financial burden on their families. A caregiver explained that ABA intervention is costly and requires financial resources to support its implementation at school and home. At school, expenses include school fees and the cost of materials such as augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, laminated picture cards for picture exchange systems, and sensory toys. At home, costs include in-home therapy and materials such as choice boards, visual aids, timers, beads, sensory items, logos, and flashcards. Some caregivers stated that those who could not afford the full cost of what was required of them chose to opt out of certain aspects of the interventions, such as home training, even though they knew this would ultimately limit the interventions' effectiveness for their child.

> *The ABA fees are high. I understand it is high because my child goes for one-on-one therapy at his school, and during holidays, the therapists come to our home. In addition to the high fees, I also pay for transport for the therapist's home therapy sessions. I buy materials such as communication devices, choice boards, visual aids and sensory items. I can afford them, but I know some parents cannot. Due to a lack of resources, some parents may skip daily skills they cannot afford. Meanwhile, consistency helps with improvements* (Caregiver 4).

However, a few caregivers reported that their children received financial support for ABA interventions from the school they attended.

> *... if you analyze how things are done there, you realize you are not paying much. One teacher for one child, and the materials they use make the service very expensive. ABA services are more than what they offer in our regular and special schools in Ghana. Although the service is very expensive, there is no pressure on my finances because the school offers us free service. Otherwise, I would have paid a lot for the service* (Caregiver

2).

Caregivers expressed the need for financial support in receiving ABA interventions from the government.

> *...I am paying a lot because ABA services are very expensive, and I wish the government could include ABA services in health insurance coverage* (Caregiver 1).

**Practitioners' experiences with ABA interventions**

After we analyzed the experiences of caregivers regarding ABA intervention, we analyzed the experiences of the practitioners who provided ABA interventions to the children of the caregiver participants. The following themes emerged from the interviews with 13 practitioners: practitioner skills, challenges in providing ABA interventions, and cultural resistance.

***Practitioner skills***

Practitioners overwhelmingly expressed positive attitudes toward the effectiveness of ABA interventions and toward how learning to provide ABA interventions has increased their self-efficacy as providers of special education for children with autism.

Practitioners mentioned that learning about ABA equipped them with the skills for classroom management and for individualized behavioral interventions. For example, some practitioners stated that they were able to address challenging behaviors such as aggression and self-injurious behaviors.

> *...When I worked as a special education teacher, managing children with autism was a very challenging task for me. However, now I can say ABA has equipped me with the knowledge and skills to know what immediate action to take when a child engages in challenging behavior, and I can do that with ease. Achieving results with ABA makes me happy and motivates me to work more.* (Practitioner 10)

Practitioners also stated that learning about ABA interventions enabled them to develop systematic, evidence-based behavior intervention plans for their students.

> *.... Through ABA, I have learned to set specific objectives and develop behavior guidelines. Following these guidelines helps us manage our kids' challenging behaviors* (Practitioner 12).

***Challenges in providing ABA interventions***

Although practitioners agreed on the effectiveness of ABA interventions, they also identified many challenges in implementing them. Practitioners stated that whilst ABA interventions were effective for their students with autism, they agreed that the preparation of the intervention was time-consuming.

> *...Another challenge is time. ABA needs a lot of time and patience to see results, which could be very frustrating at times, but I realized that with ABA, you need patience to see results*. (Practitioner 10)

In addition, the practitioners added that although they had seen many positive effects, when practitioners first started using ABA interventions, they did not see results after several months. The practitioners admitted that they blamed themselves for not implementing the interventions well and that it was 'frustrating'.

> *...So, just as growth takes time, so does ABA; we are not magicians to make it happen abruptly. So, it takes time to see results with ABA for special needs. For example, training daily living skills like brushing and toileting can take a month or more to see results; though it takes time, it is worth the wait. Yeah!* (Practitioner 11)

Because of the additional work required to ensure consistent implementation over a long period to reach learning goals through ABA intervention, practitioners identified this additional work and dedication as a challenge in implementing ABA interventions. According to practitioners, the physical demands and long work hours caused stress and burnout, making the role of an ABA practitioner a high-stress job.

> *I would say ABA is a high-stress job. The physical demand of the work is high. You*

> *have to work with high intensity to make the therapy fun for your child* (Practitioner 2)

Practitioners also mentioned that providing solutions for and preventing student behaviors such as aggression and self-injury day in and day out was another cause of stress that could sometimes result in burnout. According to the practitioners, high-stress situations, such as de-escalating a student's self-injurious behavior, would also affect them even after the workday and negatively impact their personal lives.

> *... Sometimes when a child engages in challenging behavior, say, aggression or tantrums with high intensity and long duration, I feel like I am not progressing. Managing challenging behavior in itself is very tiring and stressful. You go home, and you are all worn out* (Practitioner 9).

> *...When a client engages in property destruction or challenging behaviors, their physical weight alone can make the work even more challenging. On some occasions, you return home tired and could hardly do anything else* (Practitioner 7).

Practitioners also noted low caregiver involvement as a challenge in implementing effective ABA interventions. The challenge in caregiver participation was also revealed as a challenge for our caregiver participants. Whereas the caregivers stated that this was a cost and resource issue, the practitioners had a slightly different perspective on home implementation of ABA interventions. Although the continuation of intervention between the school and home is very important and directly affects optimal outcomes for ABA interventions, practitioners stated that caregivers did not implement the home interventions that practitioners had taken the time to train them on. The practitioners added that this disconnect between the school and the home was worse during breaks because students would return to school, and the practitioners would have to restart the intervention.

> *... I have realized that whenever my case child returns from vacation, he forgets some skills. Later, I was told that some parents do not continue the home intervention during school vacations. This is quite disturbing because ABA cannot work effectively when*

> *home intervention is not effective; in ABA, we train the children so that they generalize it in their home environment. For example, when we do toilet training, brush teeth, or eat, we train parents how to do it, so we expect them to carry it out at home* (Practitioner 6)**.**

Similar to the caregivers, the practitioners also discussed financial barriers as a challenge to ABA interventions. Practitioners agreed with caregivers that ABA demanded many resources, making the intervention very expensive.

> *…….The major challenge has been financing. You know ABA is quite expensive, but our school provides its services free of charge, so it relies on donors to raise funds to pay its staff and manage the facility. It is quite difficult and financially very expensive to run ABA programs* (Practitioner 10).

Specifically, some practitioners pointed out that the cost of ABA interventions were related to the nature of individualized support.

> *…You know ABA is individualized; we need more trained staff and resources to run ABA Programs; take a look at the facility we have here; you will understand that this is capital-intensive. Special education is expensive, but ABA is more expensive; not many parents in Ghana can afford ABA. Many parents want to bring their kids to school, but our facility is at capacity. We need more funds to expand our services* (Practitioner 11).

***Cultural resistance***

Practitioners shared that awareness of ABA interventions and their effectiveness for individuals with autism was generally low in Ghana, both for caregivers and the general public. Practitioners added that the lack of awareness is consistent with Ghanaian culture, where something ‘new’, such as ABA interventions, is scrutinized and slow to be accepted. Practitioners mentioned that showing positive effects would be the most effective way to promote evidence-based practices, such as ABA interventions for individuals with autism, and that when the general public sees the results, they will accept ABA interventions. However, the long lag to effectiveness was a challenge in ABA interventions, as mentioned in an earlier theme by practitioners.

> *…When it comes to acceptance, people do not know about ABA; they think that once a child has Autism, there is no treatment. So, we had to spend a lot of time educating people about ASD and ABA intervention through community outreach programs. When people who brought their children to our school started seeing results, their neighbors started asking questions and believing in ABA* (Practitioner 9).

The practitioners also emphasized the importance of culturally sensitive ABA interventions to overcome cultural resistance. Some practitioners mentioned that they make sure to replace technical terms with everyday language.

> *As a behavior therapist working with Ghanaian families, I aim to make ABA therapy and service delivery culturally relevant and accessible. When commuting with parents, I avoid technical jargon like 'verbal operant,' 'manding,' 'tact,' or 'intraverbal.' Instead, I use common, relatable terms. For instance, I replace 'verbal operant' with 'ways of communicating,' 'manding' with 'asking for things,' 'tact' with 'naming or labeling things,' and 'intraverbal' with 'talking back and forth.' Similarly, I refer to 'echoic' as 'repeating words or sounds,' 'prompting' as 'helping out' or 'giving hints,' 'generalization' as 'using skills everywhere,' and 'shaping' as 'step-by-step learning '* (Practitioner 7).

In addition to replacing jargon with lay people's terms, practitioners also emphasized the importance of incorporating the cultural backgrounds of their students. Practitioners agreed that these changes to enhance the cultural relevance of ABA interventions help caregivers feel more engaged and confident in supporting their child's development.

> *…I think people have not understood the ABA therapy well enough yet. They see it as a foreign thing. However, we have tried to break it down to fit our cultural setting, making it culturally relevant. When running our programs, we use a language the child understands best, such as their local language* (Practitioners 5).

## Discussion

The current study's objective was to investigate caregivers' and practitioners' experiences with ABA interventions through individual interviews and qualitative analysis. The results of this preliminary study can inform policies and practices for the broader dissemination of ABA interventions in Ghana, drawing on the lived experiences of caregivers of children with autism who receive ABA interventions and practitioners who provide them.

**Implications for both caregivers and practitioners**

Both caregivers and practitioners mentioned the effectiveness of ABA interventions for students with autism. Caregivers stated that positive developments in their children with autism, such as gaining independence in daily tasks like dressing and eating, significantly reduced family stress and provided hope for their children's future, reinforcing their belief in the effectiveness of ABA interventions. A noteworthy by-product of the developmental growth in children with autism was the reduction of stress in the families of the children with autism. As their child with autism learned new skills, increased independence, and showed autonomy, the amount of time and effort the caregivers spent solely on supporting their child with autism was reduced. This finding is consistent with Liao et al. (2018), in which caregivers of children with autism receiving ABA intervention reported that ABA interventions made their workload more manageable and reduced family stress.

Practitioners indicated that training in ABA interventions had equipped them with the knowledge and skills to support students with autism better. The practitioners pointed out that, unlike other training they received, ABA interventions were systematic and detailed, which made it easier for them to apply what they learned in their classrooms, both in individual interventions and in classroom management. This finding supports previous studies showing that training practitioners in autism-specific or ABA interventions can enhance practitioners' self-efficacy and skills to support students with autism (Siu, 2014). Loiacono and Palumbo (2011) also found that school administrators who understood ABA perceived themselves as better equipped, more skilled, and more confident in supporting practitioners working with students with autism. Both general education teachers and paraprofessionals showed increased knowledge and self-efficacy following autism-focused training, particularly after practical sessions (Bertuccio et al., 2019). Training in evidence-based practices for autism was found to improve school professionals'

self-efficacy when working with students with autism (Corona et al., 2017). Practitioner self-efficacy is important for teaching students with autism because higher self-efficacy is associated with lower stress, increased engagement, and better student outcomes (Love et al., 2019).

Although both caregivers and practitioners agreed that ABA interventions had a positive impact on children with autism, both caregivers and practitioners also agreed that the cost of receiving and providing ABA interventions was high and a burden for caregivers. The high costs stem not only from therapy sessions but also from the accumulation of required materials and resources. Caregivers in our study mentioned purchasing augmentative and alternative communication devices, laminated picture cards for picture exchange systems, sensory toys, choice boards, visual aids, timers, beads, and flashcards. These material expenses accumulate quickly, particularly in Ghana, where many specialized items must be imported at additional cost. Many previous studies also discuss the high cost related to ABA interventions, and because of these financial impacts, the effectiveness may not always outweigh the cost (Daley et al., 2013; Grindle et al., 2009; Pan et al., 2024). As some caregivers noted in the current study, reducing the financial burden of receiving ABA interventions can be achieved through government and other support programs. For example, some caregivers in the current study mentioned that, because their child's school offered ABA intervention for free, even though they perceived the ABA program as expensive, they incurred no direct financial burden. Caregivers emphasized the importance of financial support stemming from policies such as including ABA interventions in the Ghanaian health delivery system so that ABA services could be financially accessible.

This reflects a similar campaign by caregivers of children with autism in Canada (Perry et al., 2008) and the United Kingdom (Kendall et al., 2013) to have ABA interventions covered by health insurance. Similarly, in the United States, the effectiveness and widespread availability of ABA interventions have led several caregivers to advocate for their coverage by health insurance (Simpson et al., 2011; Kirkham, 2017; Makrygianni et al., 2018). The financial difficulties that caregivers of children with autism in Ghana face in accessing ABA interventions may be reduced if relevant parties, such as the Ghanaian Ministries of Health and Education, adopt and implement ABA interventions as part of special education for students with autism and provide funding for implementation and management. Reducing the costs of ABA-related materials to enhance the applicability of the intervention in low resource setting such as Ghana would also demand that stakeholders and explore culturally low-cost alternatives such as locally-produced visual aids using photographs from the community, laminated cards created with locally printed images rather than imported materials, homemade sensory items fashioned from readily available household objects (e.g., rice-filled bottles, textured fabrics), and choice boards constructed with culturally relevant pictures drawn or photographed locally rather than purchased commercial products.

Practitioners also mentioned the high cost of implementing ABA interventions noting that ABA interventions require substantial financial resources due to the need for individualized support, trained staff, and specialized materials. Practitioners emphasized that implementing ABA programs is capital-intensive and beyond the financial capacity of many families in Ghana. However, for practitioners who implemented ABA interventions, the high cost was not only financial but also due to labor and logistical limitations. Practitioners expressed burnout and stress that followed the physical demands of providing individualized ABA interventions. Due to

the heterogeneity of needs and skills of students with autism, teaching children with autism can be a challenging and complex task for many practitioners. Especially if there are other students in the classroom with other disabilities and support needs. Providing individualized support, managing the classroom, and completing the daily educational objectives can be a daunting task for even the most experienced practitioners.

Many studies have found high-stress levels can lead to burnout when practitioners perceive the occupational demands as exceeding their resources and coping abilities (Hakanen et al., 2006; Griffith et al., 2014; Plantiveau et al., 2018). Practitioner burnout can lead to high job turnover and service disruption and the negative effects can consequently harm student progress and the overall quality of interventions provided to students with autism (Boujut, et al., 2017; Cappe et al., 2025; Hurt et al., 2013). Another reason for practitioners' sense of 'high cost' of ABA interventions was the low involvement of caregivers in in-home training, the long wait for results, and cultural barriers in Ghana.

Increasing caregiver involvement in ABA requires multi-faceted approaches. Effective caregiver involvement in intervention begins with education, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness participation (Heitzman-Powell et al., 2014; Rodriguez & Williams, 2020). When communication between practitioners and families aligns with family cultural values, it enhances participation in intervention (Rodriguez & Williams, 2020). Cultural considerations, such as language, community support, and family dynamics, further enhance active caregiver involvement and caregiver-mediated interventions (Martinez-Torres et al., 2021). Caregiver education delivered via telehealth, especially in remote areas, can also increase caregivers' understanding and implementation of ABA interventions (Heitzman-Powell et al., 2014).

For practitioners, education on the long-term impact of behavioral interventions is important, especially for those with low knowledge or a negative perception about the outcome of behavioral interventions. For example, educational training has positively influenced positive attitudes towards ABA interventions among practitioners who had negative perceptions about ABA (Allen & Bowles, 2014). Also, when practitioners' knowledge of evidence-based practices is deepened, they can better appreciate that meaningful and lasting behavioral changes require persistence, not instantaneously (Dixon et al., 2021; Kincaid, 2023).

To increase awareness for ABA and autism in Ghana, culturally focused staff training can help practitioners deliver more effective praise and support to students with autism (Knochel et al., 2020). Similarly, training community health ambassadors within inner-city communities (e.g., religious centers) has improved autism awareness and confidence in making referrals (Johnson & Van Hecke, 2015). Public education campaigns, including religious institutions, public spaces, and media platforms, can help increase awareness of autism and ABA in Ghana (Alsehemi et al., 2017). These integrated approaches can help foster greater understanding and acceptance of ABA interventions and autism, which could improve outcomes for individuals and families in Ghana. It is important to note that Schools M and N represent relatively well-resourced settings with access to certified behavior analysts, a rare advantage given that fewer than 10 such professionals serve the entire country. Many other educational settings in Ghana may attempt to implement behavioral interventions with considerably less specialized training and supervision. If significant challenges exist even in these best-case scenarios with highly qualified practitioners, the barriers facing typical settings with less specialized support are likely even more pronounced. This indicates the urgent need for systemic support, including

increased training opportunities, supervision infrastructure, and policy frameworks to support sustainable ABA implementation across diverse settings in Ghana.

The findings from this study may have implications beyond the two schools and inform ABA implementation in other low-resource settings facing similar contextual challenges. Several lessons emerge that may be transferable to other low-resource settings: First, the financial burden identified by both caregivers and practitioners suggests that sustainable ABA implementation in resource-limited contexts requires innovative funding models beyond out-of-pocket payment, such as public-private partnerships, health insurance coverage, or subsidized services for low-income families. Second, the shortage of certified behavior analysts in Ghana (fewer than 10 nationwide) mirrors workforce challenges in many low-resource settings, highlighting the need for international training collaborations and expanding certification opportunities. Third, the cultural context, including traditional beliefs about autism and disability, indicates the importance of culturally responsive implementation that engages with local belief systems rather than dismissing them. Finally, the concentration of services in urban areas suggests that effective dissemination strategies must address rural-urban disparities through telehealth supervision, or community-based training programs.

**Limitations and future recommendations**

As a limitation of many qualitative studies, the researchers' views, beliefs, and personal opinions pose a threat to the interpretation and analysis of the results. To compensate, we were very cautious and objective in the analysis and interpretation of the findings to ensure that personal views did not influence the findings presented. Specifically, we incorporated responses from both caregivers and practitioners, which aided the verification of findings and avoided bias and skewness; described the study context and how the participants were sampled in detail; and

took consistent documentation of all decisions made during the research process, including the data collection instrument, data collection coding, and data analysis.

The first author is Ghanaian and has familiarity with the social, educational, and caregiving contexts in which this study was conducted. This insider perspective facilitated rapport-building and cultural understanding during interviews but required conscious effort to bracket assumptions and remain open to unexpected findings. To address potential bias, the first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, and the research team held regular debriefing sessions to discuss emerging themes and interpretations of findings.

Another limitation of the study is the small sample size, collected from caregivers and practitioners from two schools. Although the objective of a qualitative study is not to generalize the results but to learn the lived experiences of select communities or groups of individuals, a quantitative approach may add to the results of this study in recommending an efficient and effective way for Ghanaian caregivers of children with autism to receive ABA interventions and for practitioners to provide these interventions. As such, future studies should consider a mixed-method approach that includes a quantitative survey of caregivers and practitioners across multiple regions of Ghana to provide an overview of caregiver and practitioner experiences with ABA interventions for students with autism, followed by focus group interviews with both caregivers and practitioners.

## Conclusion

ABA interventions are an evidence-based practice that can help improve the quality of life for individuals with autism and their families (Hume et al., 2021; Keenan et al., 2015; Reichow, 2012; Smith, 1999; Yu et al., 2020). Moreover, ABA's emphasis on positive reinforcement and evidence-based techniques can enhance family dynamics, promoting a more

harmonious and less stressful environment for all members (Sneed & Samelson, 2022). Practitioners trained to provide ABA interventions can create tailored, evidence-based interventions that can enhance the learning experience and outcomes for students with autism (Carmona, 2017). However, the financial burden of ABA intervention can be a challenge for caregivers to afford, potentially delaying access to these important interventions (Paff, 2020). In addition, practitioners perceive ABA interventions as burdensome to maintain, which may discourage them from learning and implementing ABA. However, it is essential to understand that the expenses and burdens of ABA interventions are often compensated by their long-term advantages, such as improved educational outcomes, reduced family stress, and a decreased need for further special education services. There is a strong need in Ghana to advocate for greater accessibility and insurance coverage for ABA interventions to ensure that all students with autism receive timely, practical support, ultimately leading to better educational outcomes and improved quality of life.

## Positionality Statements

### John Ahorsu-Walker

I am a first-generation scholar and a doctoral student in Special Education. My positionality is shaped by my lived experiences growing up in Ghana, where I observed limited access to inclusive education and community-based support for individuals with disabilities. These experiences inform my commitment to advancing equitable, culturally responsive interventions for autistic individuals and their families. My research interests focus on the inclusion, participation, and transition of autistic individuals across school and community settings; the intersection of faith, disability, and evidence-based practices; autism intervention and service delivery innovations; and caregiver training and coaching to support autistic individuals' communication across settings. I am particularly interested in developing and evaluating interventions that promote meaningful engagement, independence, and quality of life beyond the classroom.

My work bridges multiple contexts, including Ghana and the United States, emphasizing culturally responsive and accessible interventions. Drawing on African philosophical traditions of Ubuntu and grounded in socio-cultural and ecological frameworks, I employ participatory action research methodologies that position community members as co-investigators rather than passive participants. My scholarship emphasizes cross-cultural adaptation, community engagement, and the development of interventions that are both effective and contextually relevant. As a Ghanaian researcher conducting this study in Ghana, I recognize both the strengths and potential biases my insider position brings. My familiarity with Ghanaian social, educational, and caregiving contexts facilitated rapport-building and cultural understanding during interviews. However, I remained conscious of the potential subjectivity arising from my

experiences and perspectives. To address this, I made deliberate efforts to bracket my assumptions and focus on the information presented in the interview data rather than imposing my preconceptions. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis, documenting my reactions and interpretations. Moreover, I actively collaborated with my co-authors, engaging in iterative discussions and triangulation of codes and themes throughout the research process to ensure the findings authentically represented participants' lived experiences rather than my own assumptions.

**Edward K. Ntim**

I am a faculty member in the Special Education program. My positionality is shaped by my professional experiences as a Ghanaian special education scholar committed to advancing inclusive education within my local context. My research focuses on the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in regular schools and Ghanaian society. As an insider to the Ghanaian educational system, I bring intimate knowledge of the cultural, systemic, and practical challenges facing the implementation of inclusive education in Ghana. This positioning allows me to understand the lived realities of families, educators, and individuals with disabilities navigating a system where traditional beliefs about disability often intersect with emerging evidence-based practices.

In this study, my role centered on methodology development, supervision of data collection processes, and critical review of findings. My familiarity with qualitative research methodologies and the Ghanaian context ensured that our phenomenological approach was culturally appropriate and methodologically rigorous. Through regular supervision meetings with the first author, I provided guidance on interview protocols, participant recruitment, and ethical considerations specific to conducting research in Ghanaian schools. My critical review of

transcripts and themes helped ensure our interpretations authentically represented participants' experiences while maintaining methodological integrity.

**Enoch Jr. Mensah**

I am a Ghanaian clinical psychology trainee with academic and practical experience in child and adolescent mental health. I hold a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and an MPhil in Clinical Health Psychology with additional training in child and adolescent psychotherapy. My professional background includes working as a psychology assistant at tertiary and psychiatric hospitals in Ghana, where I have been directly involved in assessing and supporting children with neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism spectrum disorder, and in providing interventions for children with autism and their caregivers.

In this study, my role included data collection, analysis, and manuscript drafting. My clinical experience provided insight into the practical realities of caring for children with autism within the Ghanaian context, including systemic constraints, cultural perceptions of autism, and limited availability of specialized services. However, I recognize that my professional training and clinical exposure present potential sources of bias, as I may hold assumptions about ABA's effectiveness and challenges based on observations. To address this, I adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process, consciously prioritizing participants' narratives over my interpretations. I engaged in careful data analysis, peer discussion, and iterative reflection to ensure findings authentically represent participants' lived experiences rather than my professional preconceptions.

**Eric Abodey**

I am a Black African male from Ghana with a longstanding commitment to special education that began in 2009, during my Bachelor of Education in Social Science, when I first encountered it as a semester course. This initial interest laid the foundation for my MPhil and PhD in Special Education. My professional experience includes working as a part-time lecturer, teaching courses on inclusive education and educating children with special educational needs, which has provided me with numerous opportunities to interact with autistic children, their parents, and caregivers. Additionally, I have worked as a facilitator at a Center for Child Development Research, deepening my understanding of developmental disabilities within the Ghanaian context.

In this study, my dual positioning as both an academic researcher and a practitioner with direct experience supporting families of autistic children informed my analysis and interpretation of the data. My prior research collaborations examining caregiver perspectives provided valuable methodological insights. However, I remained reflexive about how my accumulated experiences might shape my interpretations, engaging in collaborative analysis with co-authors to ensure our findings reflected participants' authentic voices rather than predetermined assumptions.

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We thank all parents and practitioners who took time off from their busy schedules to participate in this study. Although the American Psychological Association recommends using identity-first language (i.e., autistic individual), this preference can vary between individuals and cultures. The authors use person-first language (i.e., "child with autism") in accordance with the preferences of all participants in the current study.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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The study received no funding.

## Ethical approval

The study was approved by the College of Education Studies Ethical Review Board of the University of Cape Coast (Ref. CES- ERB/ucc edu/85/21-5). All participants in the study gave their informed consent before agreeing to participate in the study

## Data availability statement

All recorded interviews are available in audio format. However, due to the right to privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality clause agreed upon with participants during the data collection, only transcribed versions of the interviews shall be made available upon request.

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## APPENDIX A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

### Introduction Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study about experiences with ABA interventions in Ghana. I am interested in learning about your personal experiences; there are no right or wrong answers. This study is primarily for academic work, and you are assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity in all the information you provide. Everything you share will be kept confidential. You may choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time without any consequences. Our conversation should take about 40 to 60 minutes.

Thank you once again for your time and participation.

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR CAREGIVERS

**Opening/Background Questions**

1. Can you tell me a little about your child?
    i. *Probe: Age, when diagnosed, current school/program*
2. How long has your child been receiving ABA interventions?
    i. *Probe: Where do they receive services? How many hours per week?*

**Experience with ABA Interventions**

3. Can you describe your overall experience with ABA interventions for your child?
    i. *Probe: How did you first learn about ABA?*
    ii. *Probe: What made you decide to pursue ABA services?*
4. What changes, if any, have you noticed in your child since starting ABA interventions?
    i. *Probe: Changes in behavior, communication, daily living skills?*
    ii. *Probe: Can you give me specific examples?*
5. How has your child receiving ABA interventions affected your family?
    i. *Probe: Impact on daily routines, family relationships?*
    ii. *Probe: Impact on your stress or worry levels?*

**Caregiver Involvement and Responsibilities**

6. Have you been asked to implement any ABA strategies at home?
    i. *Probe: If yes, what kinds of things do you do at home?*
    ii. *Probe: How do you feel about implementing interventions at home?*
7. How has ABA intervention affected your responsibilities as a caregiver?
    i. *Probe: Has it increased or decreased your workload?*
    ii. *Probe: How do you balance home interventions with other responsibilities like work?*

**Financial Aspects**

8. What has been your experience with the cost of ABA services?
    i. *Probe: School fees, materials, transportation?*
    ii. *Probe: How do these costs affect your family?*
9. Are there any supports or resources that help you afford ABA services?
    i. *Probe: School support, family support, other sources?*
10. What would make ABA services more affordable or accessible for families like yours?
    i. *Probe: Government support, insurance coverage, other ideas?*

**Challenges and Barriers**

11. What challenges, if any, have you encountered in accessing or continuing ABA services for your child?
    i. *Probe: Distance, availability, waiting lists?*
    ii. *Probe: Understanding the intervention, communication with practitioners?*
12. Is there anything that has made it difficult to maintain consistent ABA services for your child?

**Cultural Context**

13. In your community, how do people generally view autism or children with autism?
    i. *Probe: Family members, neighbors, broader community?*
14. Do you feel that ABA interventions fit well with your cultural beliefs and values?
    i. *Probe: Any conflicts or challenges?*
    ii. *Probe: Any aspects that align particularly well?*

**Closing**

15. Is there anything else about your experience with ABA interventions that you would like to share?
16. Do you have any questions for me?

## INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PRACTITIONERS

**Opening/Background Questions**

1. Can you tell me about your background and how you came to work in ABA?
    i. *Probe: Training, education, certifications*
    ii. *Probe: How long have you been working with children with autism?*
2. What motivated you to work specifically in ABA interventions for children with autism?

**Training and Professional Development**

1. Can you describe the training you received in ABA?
    i. *Probe: Where did you receive training?*
    ii. *Probe: What type of certification or qualification do you have?*
2. What ongoing professional development or support do you receive?
    i. *Probe: Supervision, continuing education, workshops?*
    ii. *Probe: What additional training or support would be helpful?*

**Work Experience and Practice**

5. Can you walk me through what a typical day or week looks like in your work?
    i. *Probe: How many children do you work with?*
    ii. *Probe: What does implementation look like on a day-to-day basis?*
6. What do you find most rewarding or satisfying about your work?
    i. *Probe: Can you give specific examples?*
    ii. *Probe: What keeps you motivated?*

**Effectiveness and Skills**

5. How do you feel ABA interventions have equipped you as a practitioner working with children with autism?
    i. *Probe: Skills you've gained?*
    ii. *Probe: Confidence in your work?*
6. What evidence of effectiveness do you see in your work with children?
    i. *Probe: Types of progress children make?*
    ii. *Probe: How do you measure or track progress?*

**Challenges in Implementation**

5. What challenges or barriers have you encountered in implementing ABA interventions in Ghana?
    i. *Probe: Resources, materials, time?*
    ii. *Probe: Staffing, support personnel?*
6. Can you tell me about any difficulties related to the time or effort required for ABA?
    i. *Probe: Preparation time, seeing results?*
    ii. *Probe: How do these demands affect you?*
7. How does the physical and emotional demand of this work affect you?
    i. *Probe: Stress, burnout, work-life balance?*
    ii. *Probe: Managing challenging behaviors?*

**Working with Families**

5. Can you describe how you work with caregivers?
    i. *Probe: Training, communication, collaboration?*
    ii. *Probe: Home intervention implementation?*
6. What has been most successful in your work with families?
7. What challenges, if any, do you encounter in engaging caregivers or supporting home implementation?
    i. *Probe: How do you address these challenges?*
    ii. *Probe: What happens during school breaks or vacations?*

**Financial and Resource Challenges**

15. How do financial constraints affect your work or the services you can provide?
    i. *Probe: Funding for programs, materials, staff?*
    ii. *Probe: Impact on families' ability to access services?*
16. What resources would enhance your ability to provide effective ABA services?

**Cultural Context**

15. How do cultural beliefs about autism in Ghana affect your work?
    i. *Probe: Family beliefs, community attitudes?*
    ii. *Probe: How do you navigate these?*
16. How do you make ABA interventions culturally relevant or sensitive for Ghanaian families?
    i. *Probe: Adaptations you make?*
    ii. *Probe: Language use, communication strategies?*
    iii. *Probe: Using local languages versus English?*
17. What is the level of awareness about ABA in Ghana, in your experience?
    i. *Probe: Among families, in the broader community?*
    ii. *Probe: How do you address low awareness?*

**Sustainability and Support**

20. What supports or resources have been most helpful to you in your work?
    i. *Probe: Supervision, colleagues, materials, institutional support?*
21. What would make it easier or more sustainable for you to continue in this work?
    i. *Probe: Professional support, working conditions, compensation?*
22. Do you see yourself continuing in this field long-term?
    i. *Probe: What factors influence this decision?*

**Closing**

23. What do you wish people understood better about ABA or about your work?
24. Is there anything else about your experience implementing ABA interventions in Ghana that you would like to share?
25. Do you have any questions for me?

WORLD'S EDUCATION JOURNAL
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# Fostering Skills Development and Inclusivity for Transition Program Students and Philippine School Stakeholders

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**Abstract**

Despite limited access to special education services in the Philippines, an urban public elementary school offers a transition program to support learners with special needs in preparing for post-school opportunities. However, the program requires further enhancement to address instructional gaps for transition-aged students, which currently limit their skill development. Moreover, opportunities for collaboration and engagement between the general and disability communities remain limited. By establishing a café simulation facility in the school, complemented by on-the-job training with partner businesses, the transition program students showed improvements in their social, daily living, pre-vocational, and employability skills. It also created opportunities for regular interaction within the school community. Lastly, the disability inclusion workshop series conducted among parents, teachers, and students led to increased disability sensitivity and awareness, suggesting that a localized approach can promote inclusive mindsets and supportive practices at home and in school for learners with special needs.

**Key words**

Transition, employment, inclusion, public school, Philippines

## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ensures the promotion and protection of the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006). Aligned with this commitment are the existing mandates of the Philippines, like the Magna Carta for Disabled Persons (Republic Act No. 7277, 1992) and the Inclusive Education Act (Republic Act No. 11650, 2022), ensuring the quality education and equal participation of learners with special needs in all school levels and settings. In the school year 2024-2025, there are 381,089 enrolled public school learners with special needs, and around 60% of them have limited access to special education (SPED) programs, facilities, and teachers (Second Congressional Commission on Education & IDinsight, 2025).

Despite this limited access, a local urban public elementary school (UPES) in Metro Manila previously served 60 learners with special needs, of whom 22 were enrolled in the SPED department's transition program to learn relevant skills for productive living. However, 6 of them remained in the same program for at least 5 years, indicating a learning plateau and barriers to post-school support. This reflects the data gathered in the city that only two public school graduates with special needs were known to have been hired.

Moreover, most UPES teachers have direct experience with learners with special needs, but only a few have completed formal coursework in inclusive education. Additionally, many parents of learners with special needs do not think that their children are capable of working, nor would a company hire them. Lastly, general education (GenEd) students needed greater trust and confidence when interacting with peers with special needs.

With these, this study is weaved into the Social Role Valorization theory and the Social Model of Disability affirming that the social factors (eg., stigma, limited opportunities and

capacities of the general community) hinder learners with special needs' maximum potential; hence, enhancing their skills and the stakeholders' perceptions about the disability community are equally important (Wolfensberger, 1983; Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation, 1976). Given this context, we envision our learners with special needs (hereafter referred to as "transition students") to be equipped with the necessary skills helpful for their future employment while building bridges within their immediate community towards a more inclusive society.

## Method

The project team, consisting of one GenEd and two transition program teachers, employed the S.P.E.D approaches during the school year 2019 to 2020 to:

1. Systematize the transition planning aligned with families' goals and the transition students' needs and interests;
2. Provide a school platform to hone transition students' skills for increased self-esteem and productivity;
3. Expose them to employment settings for skills training or job opportunities; and
4. Develop the skills of the faculty, learners, and parents to support the potential and capacities of learners with special needs.

This approach was developed based on UPES needs analysis and benchmarking to some Metro Manila private and public schools implementing transition programs with transition planning, existing school simulation facilities, and partnerships with businesses for skills training.

**Participants**

Twenty-two transition students with intellectual and developmental disabilities participated in skills training in school and job settings. Of these, 15 learners with adaptive social skills were selected to participate in the disability awareness workshops, including 35 Grade 4 and Grade 5 learners holding active roles in student groups/clubs.

Additionally, 50 GenEd teachers working with learners with special needs participated in the parent-teacher workshops, alongside 30 parents from the SPED Department, most of whom are parents of transition students.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The following processes are guided by the S.P.E.D. approach.

Firstly, a private school with various therapists conducted assessments for our learners with special needs to identify their baseline needs for educational interventions. The project team conducted home visits to gather more data and collaboratively develop the students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) with their parents/legal guardians. IEP transition goals (social, daily living, pre-vocational, and employability skills) were set for each student.

Secondly, the team established the school café simulation facility through fundraising and voluntary contributions from school and community members. They also taught transition students in three small groups, three times a week, covering food preparation, customer service, cash handling, and housekeeping. Students served in the café weekly, based on their learning.

Thirdly, the transition students travelled to two inclusive local restaurants and participated in on-the-job training (OJT) twice a week throughout the school year. They were coached by their teacher and co-staff, performed their duties, and earned their daily-based pay.

Finally, the team conducted a three-day disability inclusion workshop for 50 teachers, 30 parents, and 50 students, with each session lasting 3.5 hours. They taught students to address peers by personal names, identify their positive attributes, and learn disability characteristics (Day 1); identify their strengths and demonstrate collaboration through booth displays (Day 2); and exhibit self-confidence and cooperation via an advocacy performance (Day 3). Students completed identical pre- and post-tests, consisting of a rating-scale and multiple-choice items aligned with the session goals (e.g., relationship-building, self-confidence, growth mindset, cooperation, creativity).

For parent-teacher workshops, a university instructor provided interactive lectures and role-playing activities for teachers (Day 1) and parents (Day 2) on how to implement behavioral management techniques applicable at home and school. On Day 3, parents and teachers participated collaboratively to establish a community of practice and empathy to support diverse students' needs across settings. Participants completed post-event forms after each session, providing both scaled ratings and open-ended responses aligned with the objectives, including empathy, inclusivity, skillfulness, collaboration, and communication.

The team assessed the transition students quarterly based on daily observations and teacher-made progress monitoring tools with structured scoring (eg., "1: Beginning" indicates little to no participation; "2: Developing" indicates participation with frequent prompts; "3: Approaching Proficiency" indicates participation with moderate prompts; "4: Proficient" indicates participation with occasional prompts; and "5: Advanced" indicates independent participation) aligned with their IEP's learning targets across four domains. Both SPED teachers jointly rated each student's school and workplace performance. Moreover, they analyzed the scores from the disability inclusion workshops using a 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 4 ("Strongly

Agree") scale, reflecting students' agreement with session competencies, and parents' and teachers' satisfaction with the workshop objectives.

The team then evaluated outcomes by calculating the descriptive statistics (M ± SD) across four IEP learning domains between quarters 1 and 4, and the disability inclusion workshop responses.

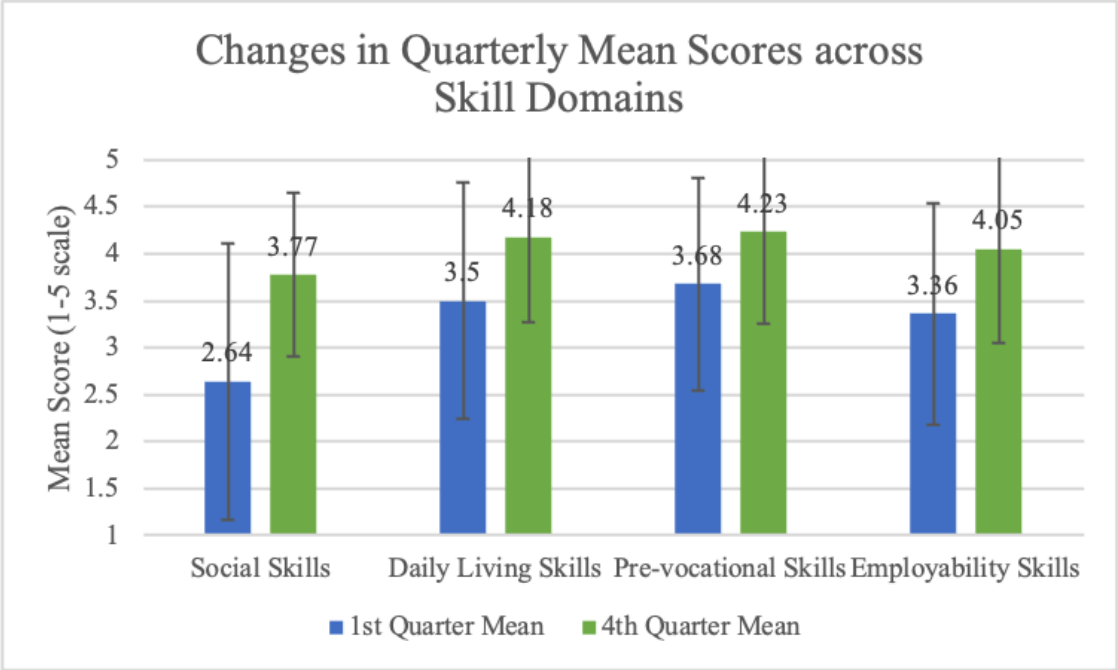
## Results

### Transition Student Outcomes

Across the transition students' (N=22) four learning domains, their mean (M) scores improved from first to fourth quarter (Figure 1), while the standard deviations (SD) decreased throughout those periods (Table 1). This means that through the implementation of the school café and OJT, their skills improved and became more consistent by Quarter 4.

**Figure 1**

*Transition Students' Quarterly Mean Scores by Skill Domain*




*Note*. N=22 students. Error bars indicate ±1 SD. Scores follow 5-point scale (1=Beginning, 2=Developing, 3=Approaching Proficiency, 4=Proficient, 5=Advanced).

**Table 1**
*Descriptive statistics for each learning domain across quarters*

| Learning Domain | 1st Quarter (M ± SD) | 4th Quarter (M ± SD) | Mean Gain |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social Skills | 2.64 ± 1.47 | 3.77 ± 0.87 | 1.13 |
| Daily Living Skills | 3.50 ± 1.26 | 4.18 ± 0.91 | 0.68 |
| Pre-vocational Skills | 3.68 ± 1.13 | 4.23 ± 0.97 | 0.55 |
| Employability Skills | 3.36 ± 1.18 | 4.05 ± 1.00 | 0.69 |

*Note.* N=22 Students. Mean scores ranged from 1 (Beginning) to 5 (Advanced).

When looking at each learning domain's quarterly mean scores, transition students' social skills improved the most, from 2.64 to 3.77, with a mean gain of 1.13. This is followed by employability skills improvement from 3.36 to 4.05, with an average gain of 0.69, and the daily living skills with an increased mean score from 3.50 to 4.18, or a mean gain of 0.68. The area of least growth is their pre-vocational skills, slightly elevating from 3.68 to 4.23, reflecting only a 0.55 mean gain.

Concurrently, their social skills had the most consistent scores (SD=0.87), followed by their daily living (SD=0.91) and pre-vocational (SD=0.97) skills, while their employability skills had the least consistency (SD=1.00). As variability decreased across quarters, the majority of transition students consistently improved their skills while participating in café and OJT duties over time.

**Table 2**
*Number and percentage of students who improved, remained steady, or regressed across skill domains from 1st to 4th Quarter (N=22)*

| Outcome | Social Skills | Daily Living Skills | Pre-vocational Skills | Employability Skills |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Improved | 16 (73%) | 11 (50%) | 10 (45%) | 14 (64%) |
| Remained Steady | 6 (27%) | 10 (45%) | 12 (55%) | 8 (36%) |
| Regressed | 0 | 1 (5%) | 0 | 0 |

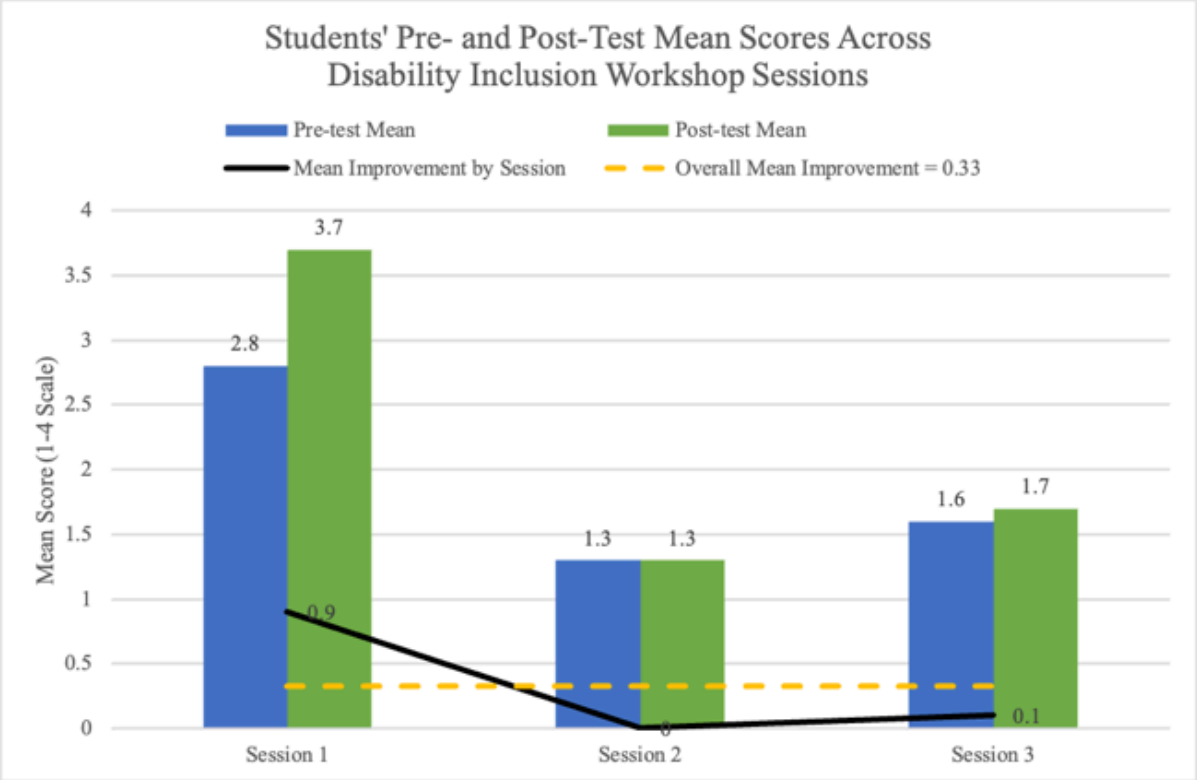
Examining the number and percentage of students who improved, remained steady, or regressed across skill domains (Table 2), the majority of students improved the most in their social skills, with 16 of 22 students (73%) improving, while 6 (27%) remained steady. Following

this, 14 (64%) students enhanced their employability skills, while 8 (36%) remained unchanged. Meanwhile, in daily living skills, 11 (50%) improved, 10 (45%) stayed consistent, and 1 (5%) regressed. In pre-vocational skills, 10 students (45%) improved, while 12 (55%) showed no change. These show that most students' daily living and pre-vocational skills are maintained rather than enhanced.

**Stakeholder Outcomes**

**Figure 2**

*Pre- and Post-Test Mean Scores across Student Workshop Sessions*



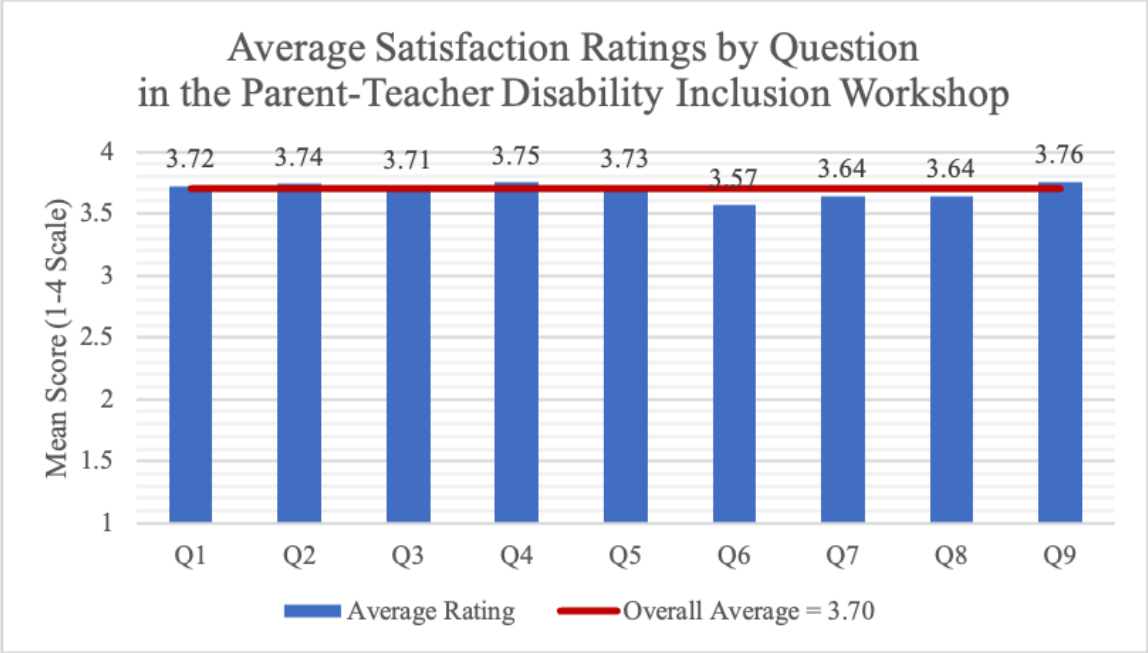

*Note*. Scores follow a 4-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree)

Following the disability inclusion workshop series, the students' pre- to post-test mean scores improved from 2.8 to 3.7 in Session 1, and slightly from 1.6 to 1.7 in Session 3. Meanwhile, session 2 mean scores remained steady at 1.3 in both tests. Moreover, the

session-level improvements ranged from 0.0 to 0.9 on a 4-point scale, with an average improvement of 0.33 across all sessions, representing about 11% of the total possible score range. Despite its short duration, the workshop resulted in a modest but observable increase in students' disability-related knowledge, values, and skills, where they agreed the most in recognizing the unique abilities of individuals with disabilities and referring to them by name rather than by their disability.

**Figure 3**

*Average Satisfaction Ratings for the 9 Questions in the Parent-Teacher Disability Inclusion Workshop*




*Note.* Scores follow a 4-point scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree).

Based on the survey forms across three sessions, parents and teachers almost strongly agreed (3.57-3.76) that the workshops were facilitated smoothly (Q1) with topics clearly taught (Q2) and with appropriate activities (Q3); were useful to enhance their role as parents/teachers in guiding (Q4) and connecting positively (Q5) with diverse students/children; and were helpful to create a safe space between parents and teachers (Q6). They also appreciated the conducive

workshop setting (Q7); indicated that they would recommend it to other teachers/ parents/guardians (Q8); and expressed positive overall workshop feedback (Q9). With an overall mean rating of 3.70 (Figure 4), the participants rated the parent-teacher workshop series as valuable and useful, indicating strong satisfaction.

## Discussion

Transition programs that incorporate goal setting and work experience on or off-campus facilitate post-school employment (Test et al., 2009; Schutz et al., 2023; Lindstrom et al., 2014). Aligned with this is the S.P.E.D. approach, where the students had transition planning and worked in the school café and local restaurants. Consequently, they enhanced their social, daily living, pre-vocational, and employability skills, with their socialization as the most consistently improved skill across quarters. With the introduction of job exposure, the intervention contributed most to students' consistent growth in social skills (Almaqhzi & Alqahtani,2020). However, unforeseen circumstances such as a pandemic may lead to skills regression, especially when socialization and job opportunities are limited. Therefore, a risk management plan should be in place.

Although employability skills were the second most improved after social skills, some students improved moderately, while others remained in the steady group, partly due to higher baseline scores. Gains were also less consistent than in other domains, suggesting that sustained workplace practice beyond one academic year is necessary, as it encompasses employment-related soft skills that may require mastery and long-term retention. Additionally, more individualized strategies could have supported students with low baseline scores, while advanced performance indicators could have challenged high-performing students.

Meanwhile, daily living skills demonstrated substantial improvement, particularly among students with lower baseline scores, and performance remained consistent alongside gains in social skills. Conversely, one student regressed in this skill. Because this skill applies across multiple settings, consistent practice in different environments is recommended to improve performance.

Furthermore, the students' pre-vocational skills improved the least, where the majority remained steady, while some improved moderately. This may also be due to most students beginning with higher baseline scores; hence, a small room for improvement. This indicates a need for more individualized and authentic instruction with greater task complexity and longer practice duration.

Overall, the intervention improved transition students' skills across all four domains. Students with lower initial scores showed the greatest gains in social and daily living skills, while those with higher baseline scores maintained their abilities, particularly in employability and pre-vocational skills. These findings suggest that the intervention promotes functional independence and employment readiness through contextualized skill practice and social engagement. Future research should explore the effects of more individualized, intensive, and longer-term implementation.

Alongside this, the disability inclusion workshop sessions provided a moderate increase in stakeholders' competencies in engaging with learners with special needs. Students learned the most in addressing peers with special needs by name and recognizing their strengths, fostering more positive perceptions and actions. Students also consistently demonstrated collaboration and showed slight improvements in self-confidence and relationship-building. This may be attributed

to the workshop participants' existing skills as student leaders and members, as well as the transition students' adaptive social abilities.

Moreover, parents and teachers indicated that the disability inclusion workshop enhanced their awareness and capacity to support learners with special needs at home and in school; thus, further study is needed to examine how these insights were actually implemented in practice. Nonetheless, parent and teacher expectations are considered valuable to facilitate students' post-school employment goals (Mazzotti et al., 2021; Schutz et al., 2023; Holwerda et al., 2015).

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. First, in transition planning, more stakeholders should have been actively involved (e.g., GenEd teachers, other SPED teachers, administrators, employer/s, and the students themselves) to gather more data across different quarters and to co-facilitate a more intensive approach. Second, the teacher-made progress monitoring tools had limited formal testing, and observations may be subject to observer bias; hence, inferences drawn may be restricted. Third, the conduct of workshop pre- and post-tests lacks a control group, limiting causal inferences. This warrants further investigation in future studies. Fourth, while self-ratings were captured via satisfaction forms post-workshops, parents' and teachers' behavioral or attitudinal change was not explicitly measured. The stakeholders' inclusion practice should have been evaluated further. Finally, only aggregated scores from the 2019 student and parent-teacher workshops were retained, limiting access to individual participant data and variability. Future studies should aim to retain data for stronger analysis.

**Practical Implications**

Implementation of a transition program may be hindered by stakeholders' limited knowledge of the appropriate procedures, mandates, or resources essential for the successful transition of learners with special needs (National Association of SPED Teachers, n.d.). For countries that currently face some transition program challenges, the national and local education agencies are urged to strengthen transition policies based on local schools' needs (eg., writing student-centered transition goals within IEP, tapping relevant stakeholders including but not limited to teachers, families, students, counselors, and employers/community members to be part of the transition team, and structuring partnerships for students' workplace experience or post-school placement), effectively relay existing transition resources, and systematically conduct transition-related training, especially to SPED teachers.

Also, school administrators are urged to engage with mandated agencies and initiate employer partnerships, especially if there are funding or opportunity constraints. If simulation labs are needed, the school should prioritize inclusion in budget plans or enhance the existing facilities to optimize resources. Moreover, the SPED teachers should be updated on essential resources and practices, contextualize them based on students' needs, and co-advocate with families and students through dialogues or platforms where students can showcase their strengths.

Most importantly, learners with special needs and families need more active involvement in setting and implementing their post-school goals; hence, collaborative IEP discussions with all relevant stakeholders are essential (Test et al., 2009). In parallel, the transition programs and activities should be aligned with the students' needs and interests to lessen challenges (Scott et al., 2021). Furthermore, all school personnel should go beyond disability awareness training and

ensure the inclusion of learners with special needs in general education for at least 80% of the school day (Flexer et al., 2011). Additional content and pedagogical training are required when inclusive teaching competencies are limited.

## Conclusion

With the increasing age range of students and the growing population in the UPES transition program, there is a need to further enhance its program features and activities. Through hands-on training in school and workplace settings, along with the collaborative efforts of families, teachers, and employers, learners with special needs showed improvement in their functional and employability skills. Additionally, the disability workshop series raised awareness and encouraged active interaction between learners with and without special needs, as well as between parents and teachers. Despite varying levels of change in stakeholders' competencies, the study promoted greater inclusion within the school community and advanced learners' skills and families' aspirations for post-school opportunities.

## Ethics Declaration

Having no applicable ethics oversight body in the study's location, the project underwent a formal review and approval process via a non-profit organization and the school, followed by the participants' informed consent.

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## Declaration of Conflicting Interest

No conflict of interest is declared except that the author taught at the school explored.

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# Teachers' AI Education Programs: Comparative Study of US and South Korea

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**Abstract**

This study compares K–12 AI education programs for teachers in the U.S. and South Korea using qualitative content analysis on ten documents (2020–2025) across macro, meso, and micro levels. Both countries stress AI ethics and literacy for digital citizenship and workforce readiness. Key differences emerge from contrasting educational systems: South Korea's centralized system offers structured, curriculum-aligned guidance and tool-specific training, while the decentralized U.S. system provides broader frameworks for local adaptation and shareholder involvement. Instructionally, U.S. materials frame teachers as facilitators, whereas South Korean programs position them as learners developing practical competencies. The study highlights how sociopolitical contexts shape teacher AI education and suggests combining structured guidance with local flexibility to support teachers' AI literacy.

**Key words**

Teacher Professional Development, Teacher AI Literacy, Comparative Education, AI in Education

## Introduction

This paper is a comparative analysis of Artificial Intelligence (AI) education programs and guidelines targeting teachers, in the US and South Korea. Employing content analysis at varying levels,–macro, meso, and micro–the paper aims to holistically comprehend the similarities and differences between US and South Korean AI education for teachers and to explore social and educational settings that affect them.

There is an exponential growth in the use of AI in education. The World Economic Forum (2025) shows that the AI education market will grow by approximately 22 times, from $5.18 billion in 2024 to $112.3 billion by 2034 (para. 1). However, K-12 teachers are not yet ready to keep up with the trend to implement AI with confidence. According to Diliberti et al. (2024, p.3), “66% of US K-12 teachers are non-AI users”. Even among teachers who use AI, the majority do so simply because it is provided or recommended by others. Korean Educational Development Institute (KEDI)’s research in 2024 also indicates a similar trend; 67.6% of K-12 teachers are not actively using nor have they heard about AI tools for education (Baek, 2024). This leads to teachers’ perception and readiness to use AI in education. Only 6% of American K-12 teachers perceive AI as beneficial, and 35% have no opinions on AI (Lin, 2024, para. 2).

While many South Korean teachers agree on the use of AI in education, they do not feel well prepared due to the complex management of devices and platforms, as well as the challenges and fatigue that comes with learning new AI tools and strategies. The data imply the importance of AI literacy education for teachers. Many studies have pointed out that there is a lack of an AI literacy framework and education for K-12 teachers (Nazaretsky et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2021), despite the need for effective AI use by teachers to nurture the next generation (Ding

et al., 2024; Du et al., 2024; Ryu & Han, 2018). Thus, this content analysis of AI education and guidance for teachers will address the following questions:

- (a) What are the stated goals and contents of AI education training programs and guidance for teachers?
- (b) What are the similarities and differences in macro/meso/micro levels in relation to each country's educational settings?

## Literature Review

### Teacher PD AI Framework

Long and Magerko (2020) defined AI literacy as "a set of competencies that enables individuals to critically evaluate AI technologies; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace" (p. 2). Going further, Allen and Kendeou (2024) proposed the ED-AI Lit structure, emphasizing the importance of contextualizing AI across diverse fields and understanding how AI affects discussion about bias, fairness, and transparency (p.8). There have been efforts to apply AI literacy targeting teachers. For instance, Ng et al. (2021) introduced the AI literacy Technological, Pedagogical, and Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework, tailoring learning artifacts, pedagogies, and instructional contents to AI tools. Nazaretsky et al. (2022) recommended making teacher AI training programs to cover the basics of AI mechanism and be more relevant and practical for teachers to use (p. 928). This connects to Zhang et al. (2024)'s study that shows the successful teacher-led Developing AI Literacy (DAILy) initiative. However, there is an absence of concrete suggestions and strategies for teachers to try, as well as acknowledging how various shareholders around

education will be part of this change; not only teachers and students but school and district administration and sociopolitical circumstances that affect AI's development.

**Comparative Study of AI Education for Teachers**

Since the use and impact of AI tools have become increasingly ubiquitous, it is essential to understand how they are being used on a global scale, identifying similarities and differences and which contexts are influencing them. There have been some comparative studies on AI education and curriculum on a global scale (Erümit et al., 2024; Lee, 2020; Zhou et al., 2022). However, literature on teacher AI professional development programs is primarily conducted internally within a country (Du et al, 2024; Lee et al., 2024; Park & Han, 2024; Zhang & Zhang, 2024) or skewed towards the US and European countries (Lucas et al., 2025; Sperling et al., 2024). The US and South Korea were chosen for this study as they differ significantly in population–students and teachers–and educational systems.

Unlike the US where schools are run by each state and district, South Korea has a very centralized system, the Ministry of Education (MOE) is closely tied with the president's office as ministers are appointed by presidents and a standardized national curriculum that all schools must follow. I am well situated to conduct this study with a focus on the US and South Korea because I was born and raised in South Korea going through K-12 schools. I have participated in and organized TPD programs in different countries, ranging from attending a workshop for Korean language teachers to designing TPD for American and Laotian K-12 teachers. Especially since non-Eurocentric focus is demanded in the learning technologies field (Kim & Kwon, 2023; Lamrabet et al., 2025; Vermunt & Endedijk, 2011; Watted, 2025), I intend to develop TPD that holistically incorporates teachers' needs where teachers can connect and learn from each other.

Familiarity with these both contexts would be a good foundation to fill in the gap to compare teacher AI in different countries.

## Methodology

According to Krippendorff (2019), content analysis is a method to analyze text in relation to certain contexts. Given the rapid development of AI tools in education, this study examines documents of teacher training programs and guidance on using AI in education. Specifically, the study employs qualitative content analysis, acknowledging that text does not have a single meaning (Krippendorff, 2019). I recognize that the way I introduce and interpret them with my own K-12 education experience in both countries might vary from how others would do it, and materials by governmental and private institutions might be distinct. In addition, the contents were categorized into macro, meso, and micro level. Adapting the educational content analysis done by Bozkurt et al. (2015), macro level refers to social aspects such as ethics and globalization. Meso level includes technology and organizations for teacher support. And micro level entails instructional design, teacher / learner characteristics. Applying this specific content analysis allows for systematic comparison to identify recurring themes and unique differences, as well as opening up future opportunities for academia to approach these guidelines in another aspect.

Ten documents–five from each country–have been selected for the analysis. Criteria used for the selection were (a) published within 2020-2025 range and (b) geared towards K-12 education and teachers. Table 1 below describes which documents were analyzed. The type of the document–training material or guideline–and publisher–governmental or private institution–was also noted but not used as selection criteria. This is because American AI education courses for teachers (US training material) and Korean training courses by private

institutions (Korean publisher type) were not accessible due to the paid subscription and I am not a licensed teacher.

**Table 1**

*Documents Used for the Content Analysis*

| Country | Material Type | Publisher Type | Name | Authors (If indicated) | Publisher (Organization) | Year |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| US | Guideline | Private | AI Guidance for Schools Toolkit | Teach AI | Teach AI | 2024 |
| US | Guideline | Private | AI Literacy: A Framework to Understand, Evaluate, and Use Emerging Technology | Mills et al. | Digital Promise | 2024 |
| US | Guideline | Private | Review of Guidance from Seven States on AI in Education | Roschelle et al. | Digital Promise | 2024 |
| US | Guideline | Governmental | Artificial Intelligence in Education | MN Dept of Education | MN Dept of Education | 2024 |
| US | Guideline | Governmental | Framework for AI-Powered Learning Environments | NCEE | The National Center on Education | 2024 |
| Korea | Guideline | Governmental | AI 디지털교과서 선정 도움자료 / Guideance for Choosing AI Digital Textbook | Do | 한국교육학술정보원 (KERIS) | 2024 |
| Korea | Training Progr... | Governmental | 초등 에듀테크 AI 활용 교원 직무연수 / Elementary School Teacher PD for EduTech AI Use | Park et al. | 한국교육학술정보원 (KERIS) | 2021 |
| Korea | Training Progr... | Governmental | 초등 인공지능 기본 역량 강화 / Elementary School Teacher PD for AI Skill | Kang et al. | 한국교육학술정보원 (KERIS) | 2021 |
| Korea | Training Progr... | Governmental | 체험과 실습을 통해 이해하는 AI윤리 / AI Ethics through hands on experience | Kim & Jeong | 한국교육학술정보원 (KERIS) | 2022 |
| Korea | Training Progr... | Governmental | 사례를 통해 체험하는 기계학습과 AI융합교육 / Machine Learning and AI Integrated Learning Case Studies | Kim & Jeong | 한국교육학술정보원 (KERIS) | 2022 |

## Findings

### Similarities

There were some similarities between the two countries at the macro level. First, programs and guidelines from both countries highlighted the ethics around AI. They acknowledge the growing impact of the AI tools and the significance of using them in a safe and responsible manner. According to the Digital Promise framework, one of the core AI literacy skills that teachers should be aware of is responsible engagement “in the consumption, creation, or sharing of AI-enabled products, including ethical sourcing and citation” (Mills et al., 2024, p.7). Kang et al. (2021), stated that “responsibility around making and managing AI gets bigger as its influence gets bigger. We must ponder what kind of influence that technology makes and potential risks that we did not anticipate” (p. 197). Specifically, ethics around bias in AI generated sources were common. Teach AI (2024) mentioned the goal of the guideline is to have teachers “be more prepared to lead discussions on AI's ethical and societal aspects, such as bias, privacy, and fairness, and promote its responsible use” (p. 16). Kim and Jeong (2022) asserted

that “Data provided to AI should be objective and ethical. But since data are selected and given by humans, it is crucial to know that developers’ personal values and bias might intervene the process” (p. 217).

The need for AI literacy in the US and South Korea was framed in relation to the new digital citizenship and workforce skill set. Mills et al. (2024) shared that “AI literacy can equip them with essential skill sets to responsibly use emerging technology for the good of society throughout their lives and in the workforce” (p. 4). Park et al. (2021) claimed that AI ethics education is necessary not only as an individual but as a virtue of citizens (p. 9). Stating the importance of AI education for students as nurturing citizenship and workforce skill for the next generation, training and guidelines emphasize the role of teachers to be aware of AI literacy and incorporate them into teaching. Likewise, both countries at the macro level address the growth of AI and its emergence as a new skill set, and they are aligned in promoting the responsible use of AI around ethics and bias.

**Differences - Macro Level**

The sociopolitical settings of the two countries affect the materials in different ways. South Korean documents explicitly described how training contents are aligned with the most recent 2022 revised national curriculum standards and teachers should learn how to tailor AI into them. For instance, Do et al. (2024) stated that “based on MOE's task force on enhancing AI in education, this program is designed to share ideas for integrating AI in numbers of subjects based on the national curriculum” (p. iii). In contrast, AI implementation in the US is largely determined at the district and school levels. Not all state governments and departments of education announced AI use guidance in education (Roschelle et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Mills et al. (2024) introduced several case studies on what kind of AI guidelines and teacher support

programs that schools and districts are using, stating “teacher expertise should be leveraged to fine tune broader implementation of AI tools for teaching and learning, and district policy and procedure should facilitate that” (p. 32). This clearly indicates how the education system at the macro level affects the teacher AI education. Although national policy or curriculum has not been mentioned in American sources, it would be worthwhile to see the political impact on AI education and support for teachers with the recent executive order of President Trump Advancing Artificial Intelligence Education for American Youth (2025).

The social factors that affected AI education narrated were also different. The US acknowledged the emergence of the new generation and their characteristics as digital natives as the justification of teaching AI. NCEE (2024) explained that “the incorporation of AI into popular social platforms used by Gen Z and Gen Alpha suggest that AI-driven informal learning outside of the classroom is happening faster than ever” (p. 2). Meanwhile, South Korean materials rather highlighted how COVID-19 shifted the education field and needs for AI in general. Stating that COVID-19 has made digital gap bigger (p. 14), Do et al. (2024) provided chapters to call for AI education and teachers focusing on closing the digital divide among students as well as several cases studies of using AI for COVID-19 responses.

On the other hand, some sections around the social impact of AI were distinct. American sources narrated the environmental footprint of AI and academic integrity as a core part of AI literacy to teach. Mills et al. (2024) stated that incorporating AI in teaching should “consider the benefits and/or costs of AI to individuals, society, and the environment” (p.8) and recognize how “large AI systems will likely harm our environment through unchecked energy consumption” (p. 16). Roschelle et al. (2024) covered how generative AI can be implemented in courses to a divergent extent and how to ensure academic integrity by preventing cheating and plagiarism.

And Teach AI (2024) asserted that "AI simultaneously offers staff and students an opportunity to emphasize the fundamental values that underpin academic integrity–honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility" (p. 23). South Korean data has extensive contents for teachers about the history of AI and computer science education and basics of how AI works. Claiming that many aspects of AI education share similar direction and goals (p. 3), all the data analyzed had chapters to explain history of computing and software education curriculum along with AI and its mechanisms such as Large Language Models (LLM) and deep learning.

**Differences - Meso Level**

At the meso level, technology used and scope of shareholders to be involved in AI education are different. American sources generally explained components of AI literacy in general and did not refer to specific AI tools, while South Korean materials organized chapters introducing a wide range of existing AI tools–from self-driving cars, AI robots for surgery, to AI job recruiter. The inclusion of more concrete technologies presented can be attributed to South Korea having a longer history of using technology in education nationwide. In South Korea, introducing digital textbooks has been discussed and studied since 1997 and officially distributed to K-12 schools from 2018 after several planning and operating pilot schools (Yoon, 2023, p. 2). This year, South Korea has nationally implemented AI digital textbooks–not only a digital version of traditional paper textbooks but has AI components to personalize learning for students–for the very first time in the world (Ministry of Education, 2023). Thus there is more data and better resources in South Korea to identify which AI platforms and tools to be incorporated in curriculum and how teachers should use them.

Regarding shareholders, America has a bigger scope of shareholders engaged in AI education. Not only teachers but staff–specific to support Information and Communication

Technology (ICT) or wireless network in the building, and just any administrative staff–were included as shareholders to be AI literate (Minnesota Department of Education, 2024; Teach AI, 2024). Mills et al. (2024) also emphasized families and communities, mentioning they need "to be aware of how AI tools are being used, and to understand the agency they have in deciding if and how they will use them to impact their lives and society" (p. 33). Meanwhile, there is no mention of staff nor community involvement in South Korean materials, but more focus of teacher-student relationship. AI digital textbook checklist entails user interface and experience and convenient communication between teachers and students (Do et al., 2024, p. 3), and all the KERIS sources are geared towards teachers only. This is because there is no designated educational technology person in the building in South Korea, which shows how the school structure affects the range of shareholders and who are narrated as a part of the AI education.

**Differences - Micro Level**

Teachers' roles in AI implementation were narrated differently in the two countries. Many American sources highlighted how teachers' role needs to be reinforced as a facilitator. This is evident in Minnesota Department of Education (2024) guidance that stated "new technology innovations and disruptions make the role of teachers even more important, especially in relation to guiding students' development of critical thinking, collaboration, and application of knowledge" (p. 1). However, South Korean training programs recognize teachers as learners. Kim et al. (2022) described "content is structured to help teachers learn and apply AI literacy skills to their pedagogy, based on understanding AI concepts, real-life case studies, hands-on activities, and sharing with fellow teachers" (p. 3).

Instructional designs suggested for teachers were distinct as well. American documents covered general benefits and risk mitigation of AI around the instructional part of teaching itself,

from curriculum and assessment design, improving and personalizing student feedback, and administrative work as a teacher. Going further, Korean materials provided a specific framework and model to follow to use AI in the classroom; AI convergence and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) education.

This approach is not merely about applying AI tools but also incorporating aspects of AI—such as computational thinking, algorithm mechanisms, and problem-solving—into various subject areas. With that, Kang et al. (2021) focused on introducing strategies and cases of AI convergence education, highlighting the interdisciplinarity between AI and different subjects. With the clearer vision of converging AI into each subject field, South Korean sources focused on having teachers experience different tools firsthand as a new learner of AI. This is a crucial approach as Ellsworth (1989) argued for critical pedagogy that redefines teachers as a learner, who *re-learns* by learning with students. South Korean teacher education about technology has been emphasizing reflection on their past teaching experience to think about how they can tailor it for their classrooms (Ahn, 2007, p. 145). Kim (2004) also addressed the community of teachers as crucial to support each other and relieve hesitance, especially from veteran teachers, who are not used to utilizing digital devices or trying unfamiliar teaching strategies.

## Discussion

Looking at characteristics of AI teacher education from the US and South Korea, the education system is the primary factor that affects the structure. In the US, which is much less centralized, generic guidelines on AI use exist and they do clearly mention potential benefits and risks, yet it is ultimately up to district and schools to determine how to support teachers and draft guidelines and implement AI use for their students. In South Korea with its very centralized system, contents are very organized and there are very clear directions on how to use AI in

diverse circumstances. By combining these approaches, the US could learn from South Korea's consistency on guidelines for different shareholders to be on the same page on AI adaptation. As much as empowerment is important, recent news has pointed out how teachers are confused with AI regulation and its effective use without certain guidelines and starting point to learn more about it (Langreo, 2025). Meanwhile, South Korea could work on adding more flexibility from the US, allowing more room for teachers to customize AI literacy skills and tools.

Beyond the analysis of similarities and differences, I noticed that both countries lack thorough onboarding on significance of AI and use of AI specifically as a teacher. Guidelines on ethical and responsible use of AI and different aspects around it–trust, mechanism, bias, etc.–are something that anyone can relate to. Although it clearly specifies AI's progress and social change around it as a importance of AI education for both teachers and students, they do not prompt teachers to reflect personally on what AI means to them and how they will apply the skill in their own contexts, which would lead to essential and deeper shift and innovation of their pedagogy (Camburn, 2015). Recognizing factors around teachers' perceptions of AI and their pedagogy elaborating AI literacy framework and support that is specific to teachers context would be crucial.

This work is meaningful as it analyzes AI education for teachers at different levels. It elaborates how sociopolitical settings and factors (macro) affect the goals and contents of the teacher AI education, the technology and shareholders involved in it (meso), and how teachers are narrated and instructional methods used in these programs and guidelines (micro). This is helpful to see aspects of teacher AI education more holistically. The distinct education systems underscore how teachers are encountering and getting trained with AI similarly at a macro level but also how these experiences vary due to sociopolitical settings and the organization of

schools. Likewise, this study helps fill the gap in comparing AI education for teachers in different countries. As AI is ubiquitous globally and many AI tools are being developed in collaboration with different countries, recognizing these factors and conducting further comparative research to explore connections and differences will be vital.

**Recommendations**

The biggest challenge during the process was the limited access to materials. I was only able to gather American AI education and guidelines rather than actual training programs as they required a subscription and payment. Although many sources available were published by MOE in South Korea, it was hard to log into some private teacher education institutional platforms to see which tools teachers are using as I do not have teacher credentials.

Moving forward, based on this analysis of AI teacher education documents, future research could investigate whether teachers are able to effectively use or apply the information presented in these documents, as well as which aspects of the materials are more relevant to their classroom. Research should inquire the perceptions and attitudes that teachers' and learners have towards AI, and their relationship with the behavior and development of AI Literacy skills (Rütti-Joy et al., 2023). How do they find and access these trainings for AI in education? Do they go through the training from personal interest or to fulfill a requirement of fulfilling the professional development credit? (which Korean teachers must do) After completing the program, do they feel more confident in using AI and shifting their opinions on AI in education? Specifically given the rapid development of AI and the changing environment around technologies, answering these questions and aligning them with the stated goals in the materials would be beneficial for policymakers and educational stakeholders in designing more effective and practical contents for teachers.

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# Reading the Air: School Ethos and Teacher Identity in Japan

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of tacit knowledge in Japanese education by examining the traditional cultural practice known as *reading the air.* Three key elements that constitute this tacit way of knowing, as well as a type of traditional community as its potential birthplace, are introduced to illuminate the foundational epistemological perspectives that sustain this practice. The paper explores the self-sacrificing teacher image as part of the school ethos and examines the role of the teacher community both as a gatekeeper of this knowledge and as a foundation that reinforces the notion of what is given. The paradoxical nature of teachers' worldviews, caught between individual concerns and established practices, is illustrated through examples of contemporary teacher identity and the custom of long working hours. By linking the challenges teachers face, this paper highlights the need to critically examine how these cultural logics perpetuate teacher overwork and hinder systemic change despite policy interventions. Finally, it emphasizes the significance of examining teachers' tacit knowledge arguing implicit yet impactful dimensions of the teachers' knowledge system may be overlooked to understand the fundamental challenges for teachers in the contemporary era of globalization.

**Key words**

School ethos, teacher identity, tacit knowledge

## Introduction

Reading the "air" or "*kuuki"* (the air) *"wo yomu*" (to read) is a type of tacit and non-verbal communication commonly used in Japan to understand the hidden and unspoken knowledge shared within the circles. It requires people to pay attention to small cues and signs so they can understand the unspoken knowledge. A closer meaning of an English phrase could be "reading the room." Similar customs arguably exist in countries like Germany, Korea, and the U.S.; however, none of those cultural practices fully explain what reading the air really means (Ito, 2002). It is said that individuals typically have limited control over the type of air generated (Yamamoto, 1977). Instead, it tends to arise naturally from the dynamics of their relationships with others (Emura, 2019). Thus, for people in Japan, air is regarded as a "superpower" (Yamamoto, 1977) or a "monster" (Reizei, 2012; Yamamoto, 1977) that could not simply be explained as a part of cultural hegemony and ideology (Ito, 2016; Yamamoto, 1977). It is as "a judgemental criterion with extreme power to dominate peoples' minds" (Yamamoto, 1977, p. 22), a "climate of opinion" (Ito, 2016), a "premise" (Suzuki, 2018), or "vague codes" (Monoe, 2020) that has served as a critical culturally-based knowledge and social system to understand cultural norms and societal expectations (Koukami, 2009; Yamamoto, 1977).

The idea of the air in education never occurred to me until I started re-narrating my teaching experiences to non-Japanese audiences after starting the Ph.D. program at the University of Minnesota. I realized that I often referred to the air to explain my challenges as a school teacher in Japan, which doesn't make sense to people unfamiliar to Japanese culture, and stumbled upon how to articulate what it was that I was reading in education. I realized my challenges were rooted in this particular way of knowing in education, which is tacit, cultural, hidden and unspoken in many ways. This paper is motivated by the idea that the air and its

reading in education has a significant impact on the quality of education as well as teachers' well-being. To raise awareness of the impact of tacit knowledge in educational contexts in Japan, and other countries where similar custom is practiced, this paper poses the central question: How is the practice of reading the air connected to teacher identity and contemporary educational issues in Japan? Thus, this paper is an attempt to understand its relationship between the traditional way of knowing through reading the air, and the ways in which the climate of schooling is shaped both by the identities of Japanese teachers and contemporary educational environments.

To address this question, this paper first outlines its theoretical framework, situating reading the air within scholarship on tacit knowledge in education. It then explores reading the air through the lenses of empathy, spirituality, and the concept of absolutization, as well as through the traditional notion of society specific to the Japanese context, framing it as a culturally situated practice. Finally, the paper analyzes how this practice intersects with teachers' professional ethos and contemporary challenges, including long working hours and the tendency to accept existing conditions as given.

## Theoretical Frameworks

This study examines the Japanese practice of reading the air through the concept of tacit knowledge, which I argue is especially prominent among teachers. To understand how unspoken knowledge shapes teachers' professional practices and perceptions to contemporary educational challenges, this paper aims to conceptualize reading the air as a culturally-based knowledge system that guides how teachers perceive expectations, understand responsibilities, and exercise agency within school organizations.

Polanyi's (1966) foundational insight that "we know more than we can tell" underscores

how professional practice relies on embodied, experiential, and situational knowledge rather than through explicit rules and instructions. In educational research, scholars have emphasized that teaching is a profession deeply grounded in such tacit forms of knowledge. Elbaz (1991), for example, characterizes teachers' knowledge as nonlinear, holistic, imbued with personal meaning, and largely tacit, developed through everyday interactions rather than formal instruction. Thus, teachers' capacity to draw on this tacit knowledge in their daily practice constitutes a core component of professional expertise, significantly contributing to the professionalization of teaching (Guerriero, 2017).

Tacit knowledge plays a significant role for teachers in navigating their roles and commitments by interpreting societal expectations and role attachments that are rarely made explicit and that have been historically constructed. These expectations are embedded in daily routines, interpersonal interactions, and organizational norms, functioning as what Stigler and Hiebert (1999) describe as "cultural scripts" that guide practice without being formally taught but implicitly learned through cultural activities such as teaching and learning. Anyon's (1980) work on the hidden curriculum similarly illustrates how teachers play their role in transmitting and enacting their own knowledge beyond the written curriculum including unspoken rules, expectations, and subtle power dynamics. In the same vein, reading the air can be understood as a form of tacit knowledge through which teachers interpret subtle nuances and cues in school settings to navigate their professional roles and responsibilities.

Despite the paucity of research on the impact of reading the air on teachers, Pierre Bourdieu's (1980) concept of habitus provides a useful lens for understanding how individuals unconsciously embody dispositions shaped by social structures. In educational contexts, these dispositions are enacted and reproduced through everyday practice as educators bring their

habitus into the school system (Kudomi, 1992). By conceptualizing reading the air as a culturally situated form of tacit knowledge, this study highlights how traditionally embedded ways of knowing influence teachers' professional identity and contemporary educational issues in Japan.

## What is reading the air?

In Japan, tacit knowledge is traditionally valued highly as a polite, respectful, and socially appropriate manner of engagement. Specific communication characteristics include such as “an indirect and digressive communication, use of few words, reliance on contextual cues, avoidance of the use of personal names, respect for long silences, and waiting politely until the other person has stopped speaking before taking turns” (Nishimura et al., 2008). These nuanced and ambiguous communication patterns guide individuals in understanding expectations, enabling them to avoid offending or disrespecting others through direct communication.

Reading the air is one of the most prominent communication skills to respond to this expectation. Hamaguchi, Kumon, & Creighton (1985) noted that the fundamental characteristics of Japanese collectivism are “role attachment” and “receptive diligence,” an attitude to commit themselves to play the role with intense effort. The sense of the self in Japan is regarded as a “relational actor” (Hamaguchi et al., 1985) and “a social entity whose meaning is intimately linked to relationships with others and to the situation one is in” (Cousins, 1989), making Japanese more susceptible to social influence from significant others (Yuki, 2023). By understanding the unsaid, people deliberately secure their understanding of the self and significant others to construct their worldview. The seken, a native notion of network (Kurihara, 2007), is one of the particular forms of traditional social circles people are sensitive about. The details of this notion of society (*seken*) will later be discussed as a possible context where the concept of air is generated.

Teachers are no exception to those who are subjected to the air, perhaps as they also shape it. Despite a significant literature gap indicating whether teachers are active readers of the air in schools, there is an abundance of literature showing that a specific atmosphere is present in the current school system, distinctively among teachers, and that teacher identities are susceptible to it (Isemoto, 2018; Katsuno, 2012; Kudomi, 1992, 1995, 2003, 2007; Ruth, 2016; Takashima, 2011; Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010; Yufu, 2010).

To further understand the function of reading the air and its impact on teachers in Japan, below I will briefly describe the three key essences of what makes the air darwin on: empathy, absolutization, and spirituality, as well as the notion of given grounded in the Japanese traditional notion of society, *seken*, as the possible birthplace of the air.

**Empathy (kanjyo-inyu)**

Expressing sensitivity to others' feelings is an essential social skill in Japan. For example, "*omoiyari,*" a Japanese term meaning to feel for others, is regarded as a critical social skill to be nurtured at a Japanese preschool (Tobin et al., 1989). When it comes to reading the air, empathy merely means just feeling for others (Vinton & Harrington, 1994). It means explicitly an attitude to project one's belief or expectation outside of one's mental picture as a credible truth or fact (Yamamoto, 1977; Suzuki, 2018). The literal translation of this type of empathy is called "*kanjyo"* (emotion) *"inyu*" (to transplant), which means an attitude to feel others' emotions exactly the same way they are feeling (Yamamoto, 1970). As the Japanese sense of self is not one direction but it demands to be mutual (Lebra, 1992), it requires individuals to be attuned to what others expect of them in a given context. For example, Koiwa (2023) says when someone at a meeting asked you if the room was cold, the air you needed to read was whether you should adjust the room temperature or not, and whether you think the room is cold or not is secondary.

Hence, reading the air carries a risk of  feeling compelled to prioritize others'psychological needs over one's own especially if there is a power imbalance. This relationship between the self and others, grounded in empathy, is particularly critical when considering teachers' educational practices in schools. What an individual teacher perceives as fair or ethical may not always be recognized as such in a context where one is expected to consider the perspectives of others beyond personal beliefs. In these situations, teachers often regulate their own judgments by prioritizing perceived collective expectations, a process through which self-restraint and self-sacrifice become normalized as appropriate professional conduct.

**Absolutization (zettaika)**

This idea of absolutization is particularly important to understand Japanese teachers' challenges in adopting critical thinking on traditionally recognized educational practices in contemporary educational settings. In connection with empathy, the notion of absolute truth implies that what one empathizes with becomes the only truth one is willing to accept. This is a key attribute of reading the air, as epistemic certainty that the knowledge one perceives is appropriate within a given context is essential for motivating and sustaining the practice itself.

Such a stance further reinforces normative pressure to show respect to others, positioning conformity not only as socially desirable but also as ethically appropriate. In a context of Japan where group harmony is paramount in the relational dimensions of people's lives, showing empathy through the lens of absolutization helps maintain relationships with care and respect. People who read the air are in fact described as "considerate, conformist, and responsible for the maintenance of harmony" (Jung et al., 2023, p. 351). In contrast, perceiving themselves as having disrupted group harmony leads to self-doubt or a sense of embarrassment (Komiya & Tudor, 2016, p. 338).

The risky tendency of such belief systems to be applied in modern society is that it gains full credit from people of the inner circle despite a seemingly lack of legitimate analysis, making it difficult to build constructive discussion and potentially leading to destructive consequences (Yamamoto, 1977), especially in political settings (Ito, 2006). Yamamoto introduced the example of a World War II vice-admiral's fatal decision, which killed over 3,000 lives despite foreseeable consequences. The vice-admiral reportedly answered that the decision was the only choice allowed by the air (Ito, 2002; Yamamoto 1977). However, based on Hidaka and Kosugi's (2012) argument that people only read the air when their views differ from those of dominant others, the admiral's personal decision might have been different, yet he could not voice opposition to what he perceived as the absolute truth in the given context.

Despite such knowledge being shared invisibly, questioning and adopting a critical perspective on what people consider appropriate becomes especially difficult in such circumstances. Those who are poor at reading the air are regarded as "selfish, uncommunicative and uncooperative" (Jung et al., 2023, p. 348). Like the admiral, who could have made a different decision but instead sacrificed many lives, people, including teachers, may make problematic choices by reading the air. Therefore, understanding what kind of absolute knowledge teachers are seeking in the contemporary educational settings and examining the impact of contributing to such belief systems, whether actively and passively, is crucial, especially in today's society where social, educational, and cultural values are shifting dynamically.

**Spirituality (rinzaikan)**

Understanding or accepting implicitly shared knowledge may appear less credible to people who are unfamiliar with this practice. In many European countries, though not

completely, spiritual belief has been either historically banned or naturally extinguished mainly by the introduction of Christianity (Koukami, 2009; Suzuki, 2018; Yamamoto, 1977). In Japan, spirituality is still practiced broadly from funerals to weddings including many other traditional and spiritual customs and ceremonies found in different places including corporates and schools (Kawano, 2021; Koukami, 2009; Reizei, 2012). Nakayama (2019) reports that spirituality is linked with moral education in Japanese schools, highlighting how ethical and spiritual values are often taught together and embedded in everyday classroom practices.

Reading the air becomes incomplete without spirituality because it requires the capacity to perceive and engage with what is not immediately visible or even unable to articulate verbally. Civil rituals, Kasulis (2002) argue "are somatically acquired through the acculturation process" (p.127). Interestingly, spirituality makes such knowledge not always codifiable, even for those who access it. When asked what it is that they are reading, people often find themselves unable to articulate it, despite navigating it in practice (Kasulis, 2002; Koukami, 2009; Monoe, 2020; Yamamoto, 1977). However, spirituality also enables people to sense that this knowledge exists within an intimate circle, even though it remains indistinguishable to those who are not part of that circle. Hence, spirituality is a cultural attribute through which people recognize that there is knowledge to be read beyond personal belief, even though they cannot articulate it.

## School ethos and the role of teacher community

This section explores the traditional ethos of Japanese schooling, which has been preserved despite significant societal changes since the emergence of modern education more than 200 years ago. It examines the fundamental role of the teacher community in maintaining and reproducing the image of the self-sacrificing teacher as part of the tacit professional knowledge that teachers are expected to internalize and sustain in contemporary educational

contexts.

**Self-sacrifice teacher image**

Ethos is a concept interchangeably used with the idea of "spirit," "ambiance," "atmosphere," and "climate" (Allder, 1993). It is a product of culture (Solvason, 2005) that can be found somewhere in the social system or an institution, including school (Allder, 1993; Smith, 2003; Solvason, 2005). Similar to the idea of reading the air, school ethos is difficult to formally document but emerges from school members' intention, interactions and behaviors (Donnelly, 2000, p.137).

The Japanese traditional school ethos for teachers is described as self-sacrifice (Kudomi, 1995; Takashima, 2011). It originated from the historical background that the teachers' professional image was politically created around 1920 (Kudomi, 1999) to establish a high social status of teachers as a project of "governmental professionalism" (Beck, 2008). The teachers, most of them samurai warrior class descendants at the time, were considered to be the core driving force for the educational reform that aimed to establish "the new Japan as a modern state like those of the West" (Kimura & Iwata, 2007, p.21). With a lack of public school systems except for private feudal clan-owned schools for samurai warriors and temple-owned schools for tradesmen and farmers (Yanagisawa, 2015), the successful establishment of a modern schooling system was a big political and educational mission for the new government. (Kimura & Iwata, 2007). By drawing on premodern Confucian trust-based master–student relationships, they constructed teaching as a "sacred" profession to elevate its social status, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical school system grounded in teacher authority and student obedience (Kimura & Iwata, 2007).

The teacher image started to shift dramatically in the 1970s due to Japan's high economic growth which changed people's lifestyles and educational demography accordingly (Kimura & Iwata, 2007; Kudomi, 1999). Compulsory education has extended from six years in elementary school to nine years in junior high school, resulting in a remarkable decline in students' willingness to study causing different modes of "escape from learning" (Kimura & Iwata, 2007). Teachers' authority and trust started to diminish with an increasing number of students' misbehavior in class including bullying, truancy, school violence, and so on (Kudomi, 1999). People started to see education as a private service, rather than a sacred occupation, according to the growth of private companies that provide educational services such as *juku*–cram schools for preparing entrance examinations and remedial (Kimura & Iwata, 2007). Accordingly, the neo-liberalistic trend of educational reform since the mid-1980s such as the introduction of a teacher evaluation system and a new school management system affected the ways teachers work more on individual basis (Kimura & Iwata, 2007), gradually collapsing by promoting competitive concepts based on liberalization and diversification (Kimura & Iwata, 2007; Kudomi, 1999; Takashima, 2011).

**Seken and the notion of given**

Interestingly, however, such drastic social transitions did not seem to have a similar degree of impact on the types of ethos teachers pursue at school as most teachers still believe teaching "requires a spirit of self-sacrifice" (Kudomi, 1994, 1999). Such indication of an unchanged teacher image, despite the rapid societal change, might be due to the Japanese teachers' circle, often described as a "closed field." Historically, Japanese teachers have engaged in limited social interactions outside the profession, with marriages and friendships primarily

formed within teacher networks. These networks have been supported and reinforced over time through the collective teacher identity and occupational culture (Kudomi, 1992, 1999, 2017).

This form of teacher community is similar to a traditional Japanese closed community native to Japan, known as *seken*, which has long functioned as a foundational social structure since the seventh century (Kurihara, 2009). It refers to "the appearance of the total network of social relations that surround an individual" and "conveys the corresponding cultural norms and values that function to regulate social behavior, and hints at how such relations and behavior are maintained" (Kurihara, 2009). It is different from the Western concept of "society," translated as *shakai*, which was introduced to Japan in 1877 (Abe, 1995). The use of the term seken is still popular in contemporary Japan. Many people find that they still situate both modern and traditional notions of societies simultaneously (Abe, 1995; Nakada, 2018; Sato, 2001). This suggests that contemporary teacher communities may still be shaped, at least in part, by the relational logic of seken rather than solely by the modern notion of society. Unfortunately, however, the seken ideology has not gained full academic attention and its implication on education remains unclear.

Koukami (2009) arguably claims that this traditional form of society plays a significant role in generating the air. He argues that although the traditional form of society no longer exists, people's mentality remains situated within seken, leading them to seek traditional norms and expectations in given contexts much as they did in the past. As individuals navigate the diverse possibilities available in modern society, negotiating between these options and the sense of absolute truth signaled by reading the air becomes increasingly challenging. The practice of reading the air, as a result, becomes more frequent and normalized in today's society. Questioning the status quo becomes especially difficult because, through the other two elements

that constitute the air, empathy and spirituality, individuals become aware, even before raising a question, of the potential consequences of creating tension with others and the vulnerability required to do so. If one's thoughts are already aligned with the air, there is no need to read it proactively. One reads the air precisely because one's ideas differ from it (Hidaka & Kosugi, 2012), and in doing so, seeks to avoid such conflicts. Teachers' relatively closed community has likely contributed to sustaining the school ethos across generations, as teachers have embodied the self-sacrificial image as a professional virtue, and that has become the tacit knowledge for teachers to read.

Notably, it is critical to understand that this traditional form of society has long been regarded as a given (Abe, 1995), and is still today to some extent including for teachers. The notion of given matters because it suggests that individual efforts to actively construct the society might be undermined by the established practices and dominant discourse. Kasulis (2002) also noted that people seemed apathetic in Japan for the change as some of the "natural" conditions are regarded as givens, echoing the broader tendency among Japanese people to view larger social structures as unchangeable.

Depending on the degree to which teachers situate themselves in this culturally-based knowledge, critically understanding issues and reflecting educational practices would then become extremely challenging. Kariya (2022) indicates that the notion of given prevents teachers from questioning a new education led by educational reform. He argues that most discussions focus on how to understand and implement the new ideas, rather than questioning their foundational assumptions or the values they promote. Difficulties to question larger discourse or established practice at school are also reported by Kudo (2018), a former school principal who became well known in Japan through various educational reforms such as abolishing homework

and exams. He claims that school activities have already lost sight of their original purpose as the means are prioritized over the ends, highlighting the difficulties to challenge what is “normal” in school. The idea that Japanese people internalize their knowledge system including a concept of society and school ethos is of critical importance when thinking about Japanese education and teachers' worldviews. Understanding teachers’ challenges at the epistemological level would contribute to a better understanding of the fundamental root causes of their professional dilemmas.

## Paradox of teacher identity and habit of overwork

The next section examines contemporary educational issues for teachers, particularly how Japanese teachers’ culture of self-sacrifice and the notion of given are expressed in the contemporary teacher identity and the custom of long working habits. I revisit the question posed at the beginning of this paper: How is the practice of reading the air connected to teacher identity and contemporary educational issues in Japan? I argue that tacit knowledge or what I refer to as the air is generated and shared within the teacher community, signaling teachers to uphold the traditional teacher image of being a devoting teacher. As they navigate the demands of contemporary society that is more individualistic and transnational than traditional form, teachers face more tension and challenges by pursuing the air.

### The notion of given and teacher identity

Despite the school ethos of self-sacrifice that contemporary teachers seemingly pursuing, recent literature suggests, a new shift of teacher identities to be more individualized with a shift in teachers’ self-images (Katsuno, 2012; Kudomi, 2003; Takashima, 2011; Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010). It suggests the sign of a weakened or divided form of the teacher circle (Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010; Kudomi, 2003), in which the self-sacrificing

image is no longer a positive construct for teacher identity but rather becomes an obstructive factor for the stabilization of teacher identity (Yamada & Hasegawa, 2010). A noteworthy claim about current teacher identity is what Hasegawa and Kudomi (2006) called "a strategy of dualism," a mechanism to maintain the professional identity by dividing it into two dimensions of "stable" and "disturbed." A stable professional identity is built on a positive sense of fulfillment, welldoing, and successfully building a good relationship with students. The disturbed professional identity is based on a negative sense of their own teaching, doubts on educational beliefs, and difficulties that they feel they can not cope with (Hasegawa & Kudomi, 2006). According to their comparative study in 2004 and 2005 on teacher identity, while in Korea, Sweden, and the U.S, teacher identity is reported to be susceptible to the disturbing elements, Japan showed the most developed dualizing strategy. They delineate their professional responsibilities from the difficult school situations they perceive as the given, which is out of their control, similar to the way of understanding their worldview they use for the traditional notion of society. Katsuno (2012) also reports a similar tendency to regard educational challenges as the given in shaping teacher identity.

The notion of a given demonstrated in contemporary teacher identity underscore that teachers still situate themselves in traditional notion of teacher community and potentially reading the air generated within the teacher circle. As Yamada and Hasegawa (2010) indicated, while this strategy of dualism helps sustain the current teacher identity, it discourages teachers from solving existing problems and has them stick to the status quo. Stable teacher identity is a combination of self-evaluation and recursive positive evaluation from others (Giddens, 1991) and unbalanced teacher identity could lead to a teacher burnout. For teachers in Japan, collegial support has long been a critical aspect of stable teacher

identity development. Although current teachers prefer to solve issues more on an individual basis, collegiality is still a major element to support their identity and prevent from being burnout (Kudomi, 2003). Given the gradual shift in understanding the school ethos and teacher identity, such dualism may affect the quality of education, not only by constraining its capacity to evolve in response to changing societal demands, but also by undermining teachers' well-being through the internalization of conformity, potentially leading to discrimination or marginalization of those who deviate from the regulation of the air.

**Sacrificial work hours**

One major issue for teachers in Japan is unhealthy working habits and environments that promote long voluntary working hours, and their mental health issues associated with such working behavior. Self-sacrifice through engaging in unpaid overtime functioned as invisibly articulated knowledge and as air to be read by teachers whose role as a "sacred vocation" has been historically legitimized (Matsumoto et al., 2026). One survey showed that over 57% teachers in Japan worked past the *karoshi,* death by overwork threshold line amid the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Okubo, 2020). With more than half of teachers engaging in long working hours that could potentially kill their lives, the increasing number of teachers taking leave for mental health reasons has become a significant factor contributing to the teacher shortage (Naruiwa, 2024).

In 2019, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduced guidelines to limit teachers' overtime to 45 hours per month and 360 hours per year (MEXT, 2019). While the government encourages teachers to limit excessive working hours, the average working hours for teachers remains more than 88 hours (The Japan Institute for Labor Policy and Training, 2024). Existing literature on Japanese teachers' overwork that attributes this

to school culture, collegiality or conformity among teachers (Kudomi,2003; Kimura et al., 2020). However, I agree more with Yufu (2010) who called this teachers' behavior "pathological phenomena for teachers" (p.23) that they choose to work late without any identifiable oppressor in the room, and they eventually find it impossible to opt out from problematic situations.

Many teachers perceive long working hours as an expected norm and feel guilty if they do not comply (Naruiwa, 2024). The understanding of people feeling guilty, led by empathetic concern and the spiritual way of knowing apparently motivates teachers to engage in overwork, regardless of the legitimacy of such actions. Additionally, working late symbolizes the act of self-sacrifice and is regarded as ethically appropriate within the moral framework of Japanese teachers. Criticizing the practice of teachers' overwork or not conforming to this invisibly required practice may be regarded as an unethical act as a professional teacher, and could be defined as "selfish, uncommunicative and uncooperative," a person who is poor at reading the air (Jung et al., 2023, p. 348). This may help explain why certain educational reforms fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Policy implementation that overlooks teachers' epistemological foundations is unlikely to function effectively in practice.

Similar to the case of teacher identity, where teachers navigate paradoxical situations between their individual concerns and reliance on the teacher community, overwork practices also involve a tension between prioritizing personal time and well-being versus engaging in voluntary long working hours. Urakawa (2018) suggests that a vicious cycle emerges when teachers' devoted and passionate attitudes toward education lead them to engage in endless tasks, ultimately resulting in burnout and mental health challenges. In 2023, MEXT reported the highest number of teachers who took the absence of leave for mental health reasons (MEXT, 2024). The increasing number of teachers taking leave of absence from schools due to mental

health issues could be a sign of teachers conforming to these expectations at the expense of their own well-being.

The implications of such tacit and culturally embedded knowledge systems and their impact on teachers' lives demand further investigation. Teacher burnout and mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, are a worldwide concern (OECD, 2025), but their relationship with teachers' tacit ways of knowing remains unclear. Overwork culture and unspoken professional norms are not unique to Japan, and comparative inquiry may reveal parallel structures operating under different cultural and social conditions.

## Conclusion

The air could possibly present in various contexts and the idea of reading would possibly be viewed as vague and unresolved. My intention in this paper is not to resolve the air or to define it in this paper but to discuss how this concept of the air has a role in Japanese society in such a way that it is present in education. My interest is in understanding when the air is implicated in Japanese schools, how it is linked with teacher identity and policies, despite being viewed as a cultural and social element, that is many things. You may find that reading the air is similar to the notion of cultural norms or traditionally shared sets of beliefs that are omnipresent in any type of society, which can be considered one type of the air. My intention is not to argue the different types of cultural values people hold in society and in the field of education but to understand the dominant and recursive pattern of thought that people, including teachers, access both intentionally and unintentionally to proceed with educational activities in schools, and the repercussions of such a culturally-based knowledge system in the contemporary era of globalization.

Developing strategies to relativize the notion of the air and other forms of tacit knowledge is essential for advancing this research. One possibility to relativize such "Japaneseness" could be teachers' comparative and international experiences (Shibano, 2018) as if I only became aware of the presence of the air in education once I was no longer under its influence. Teachers with international teaching experience tend to realize a different and often exclusive atmosphere when they come back to their working school from abroad (Morimoto, 2011). Understanding teachers' challenges at the epistemological level through comparative lenses would contribute to a better understanding of the fundamental root causes of their professional dilemmas.

Revealing how teachers' complicated epistemological worldviews shape their tacit or hidden knowledge system under global neo-liberal and neo-conservative pressures on social, political, and educational aspects contributes to the field of Comparative International Education (CIE) in Japan and globally. As mentioned earlier, similar customs to reading the air exist globally, and so as the notion of seken. For example, Kurihara (2009) indicates that Western sociological and psychological theories of habitus, social fact or superego have theoretical proximity to seken. Tan (2015) reminds us, attention to the epistemological foundations of belief systems allows comparativists to understand why certain indigenous beliefs come to be privileged over others (p. 197). This effort also highlights the CIE's effort to challenge the historical legacy of "othering" non-English speaking countries to advance scholarship in the postcolonial era (Takayama et al., 2017). By uncovering the invisible belief systems of teachers in Japan, my research provides critical insights into how underlying epistemological assumptions shape teacher knowledge.

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# From Colonial Medium to Local Agency: Historical Insights for Malawi's K-12 Language of Instruction Policy

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**Abstract**

**English version**

This paper interrogates and analyzes English-based instruction in public schools, especially lower elementary classes in Malawi—a former British colony—as a demonstration of imperialism and epistemecide. Using a review of literature, the author argues that this English-based instruction policy, even in lower elementary classes—that is, grades 1 to 4—is counterproductive to the educational outcomes for students since English is a minority language in the country. Framed within historical accounts of educational resistance from marginalized and disenfranchised groups, the paper draws insights from such groups to argue that code-switching from English to Chichewa pedagogy enacted by Malawian teachers is a form of epistemological liberation that warrants endorsement. Ultimately, the author proposes a policy modification that sees lower elementary classes being taught using Indigenous languages or household languages and English being demoted to a regular subject or course.

**Chichewa version**

Pepalali likufufuza ndikusanthula maphunziro omwe amachitika pogwiritsa ntchito Chingelezi m'masukulu a boma, makamaka m'makalasi oyambilira a pulayimale ku Malawi—dziko lomwe kale linali pansi pa ulamuliro wa atsamunda la Britain—ngati umboni wa utsogoleri wa chitsamunda komanso kuchepsa kwa nzeru zachikhalidwe. Pogwiritsa ntchito kafukufuku wa mabuku olemba kale, wolemba pepalali akutsutsa kuti ndondomeko iyi yophunzitsa m'Chingelezi ngakhale m'makalasi oyambilira—kuyambira sitandade 1 mpaka 4—imakhala yotsutsana ndi zotsatira zomwe zikuyembekezeka m'maphunziro, chifukwa Chingelezi ndi chilankhulo cha ochepa kwambiri m'dziko muno. Pepalali likutenga nzeru kuchokera ku mbiri zakale zomwe zidaonetsa kuti ndi kotheka kusintha njira yakaphunzitsidwe ndi kupeza njira yoti ana a sukulu azithandizikira. Pomaliza, wolemba akupempha kuti ndondomeko yophunzitsira ana m'ma kalasi a sitandade 1 mpaka 4 isinthe. Ana aziphunzitsidwa mu zilankhulo zakwawo, kapena zilankhulo zomwe zimagwiritsidwa ntchito m'mabanja mwakwawo, ndipo Chingelezi chikhale chabe ngati imodzi mwa ma kalasi omwe ana amaphunzira.

**Keywords**:

English, marginalized, language of instruction, disenfranchised, Chichewa

## Introduction

Somewhere in a standard 6 mathematics classroom in the central region of Malawi, southeast Africa, a teacher writes a mathematical word problem on a chalkboard: 'If Mr. Banda harvests 90 bags of maize and sells ¾ of the maize, how many bags of maize does he have left?' The classroom is silent; no murmur is heard. The teacher—noticing that the students, who are bright and capable of solving such fractions, are stumped with the language barrier—switches to Chichewa. "Ngati a Banda akolola matumba 90 a chimanga, kenako iwo ndikugulitsa matumba ¾ a chimangacho, kodi a Banda atha kukhala ndi matumba angati a chimanga chotsala?" Upon switching to Chichewa—the predominantly spoken native language in Malawi—a wave of hands shoots up, demonstrating the students' comprehension of the math problem. This scene does not describe an isolated case but depicts a common occurrence across public primary and secondary schools in Malawi, where a policy of English as the medium of instruction is creating inequalities largely felt by students in rural districts of Malawi, where English is not commonly spoken and learning resources are limited (Kamwendo, 2016; Kamwendo, 2021).

I situate this problem within the broader frameworks of Phillipson's (2008) linguistic imperialism, where the dominance of a colonial language remains long after independence. Phillipson (2008) argues that the remaining of colonial languages, especially English, is not merely incidental but rather a mechanism and tool of white supremacy and structural power maintained through policy and consequently leads to the devaluation of indigenous languages. A look at the suppression of indigenous languages among Native American students in boarding schools (Adams, 2020), for example, attests to these linguistic imperialist frameworks of using language as a tool of control.

This paper argues that English as a medium of instruction in Malawi's primary and secondary public schools is a perpetuation of imperialist frameworks that function as a form of epistemicide. While existing scholarship on this subject has emphasized the harmful effects of this linguistic epistemicide on students' educational trajectories, this paper takes a different approach. It draws critical connections to the historical resistance of marginalized groups in the United States of America (USA) against white supremacy frameworks to reconceptualize the pedagogical acts of code-switching among Malawian teachers and students as practices of epistemological and linguistic liberation. This paper, therefore, aims to explore the resources that both historically and currently disenfranchised individuals have utilized to overcome barriers and oppressive educational systems. By foregrounding these acts of resistance and survival, this paper illustrates how such histories of struggle provide avenues for envisioning more just educational futures.

## Disenfranchised Groups' Agency and Counter-Narratives in US History

Historically disenfranchised people and communities are typically defined as groups and communities that have faced systemic challenges and barriers to social, educational, economic, and political participation due to historical practices and policies (Blesset, 2015). These communities include, but are not limited to, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexican Americans, Asian Americans, and indigenous peoples. Given the historical harmful practices experienced by these disfranchised communities (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999), such as indigenous language suppression and genocide (Adams, 2020), enslavement (Wolfe, 2006), and social segregation (Esparza, 2023; Williams, 2005), the likelihood of focusing on these depressing and negative narratives is warranted. However, from my perspective, it is equally important to foreground the counternarratives that illuminate how these historically marginalized

communities circumnavigated these oppressive systems. By centering these stories of agency, we reveal not only the resilience in these people but also the multitude of contributions they made throughout history (Walker, 1996).

During the reconstruction era, formerly enslaved people built and managed native schools throughout South America. In Virginia alone, there were about 500 native schools run solely by ex-slaves who resisted external control from white people (Williams, 2005). According to Williams (2005), “the ex-slaves' educational movement became a test of their capacity to restructure their lives and to establish their freedom. Although they appreciated northern support, they resisted infringements that threatened to undermine their initiative and self-reliance" (p. 12). Formerly enslaved people initiated these educational movements, which gave rise to the concept of universal public education in America (Anderson, 1988). We see similar resistance to ‘external’ educational control in San Felipe Independent School District (SFISD), where Mexican Americans, another historically disenfranchised group, organized themselves to establish an autonomous school district that resisted industrial-based education for their children during the Jim Crow era (Esparza, 2023).

The presented examples of the resistance of marginalized communities and groups towards oppressive systems in history provide the idea of possibilities of countering the contemporary repressive systems that continue to oppress minoritized communities and students in education today. An example of these repressive systems is the disproportional discipline of Black and brown students in contrast with that of white students in schools (Townsend, 2000). Townsend (2000) argues that exclusionary discipline practices are used with students across ethnic groups; however, for African American students, they are disproportionately subjected to corporal punishment, suspension, and expulsion, which results in widening the achievement gap

in education. A more recent study on the same issue of discipline found that Black students are usually disciplined for behaviors that their white peers are not (Darling-Hammond, 2023), which includes “subjective behavioral categories like defiance or disrespect” (Carwin, 2018).

Another example of an oppressive system in contemporary times with historical roots is the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools. The works of Adams (2020) in Education for Extinction, Esparza (2023) in Raza Schools, Thiong’o (1991) in Decolonizing the Mind, and Phillipson (2008) in The Linguistic Imperialism of Neoliberal Empire exemplify the struggle that minoritized communities have faced in relation to English as the most prized language. Historical acts of resistance to this ideology range from Native American students in off-reservation boarding schools going into hiding (some climbing trees) just to speak their indigenous languages (Adams, 2020). SFISD, on the other hand, went into a legal battle to maintain their autonomy in educating their students using a curriculum befitting the cultural background and language of the Mexican American students.

While the historical and political conditions behind these U.S. cases differ in significant ways from the Malawian context, the two settings are analytically connected through mechanisms of linguistic and educational injustice. In the United States, the marginalized communities named previously struggled as racialized and linguistically minoritized groups within a white-majority nation that elevates the English language as the norm for full citizenship and educational success (Adams, 2020; Blesset, 2015). By contrast, in Malawi, it is the majority of the population—students and families who do not use English in everyday life—who are marginalized by an English-dominant school policy designed and maintained by a postcolonial legacy and elitism (Kamwendo, 2016). I therefore use the term "disenfranchised" not to claim that these histories are the same but rather to name a shared mechanism in how language policy

and schooling devalue local and indigenous languages and constrain educational participation (Mchombo, 2017). Reading these cases together allows me to trace resonances in how communities respond to linguistic domination in schools, even as I attend to the distinct colonial and postcolonial trajectories that shape each setting.

Given this legacy, I argue that culturally relevant language instruction in public schools is possible, with a specific focus on Malawi. In the context of discussing disenfranchised people in this paper, I argue that Malawians fit that description due to the history of colonialism as well as the imperialist legacy that continues to inform policies in Malawi to this day. The freedom dreams of historically disenfranchised communities affected by oppressive educational systems, policies, and practices and their acts of resistance provide me with the impetus to critically examine English as a medium of instruction in Malawi public schools.

## The Contemporary Manifestation—Imperialism in Policy

### History of Language Policy Development in Malawi's Education

Malawi has a total of 16 languages, with Chichewa being the dominantly spoken national language (Chepkemoi, 2017). After Malawi gained its independence from Britain in 1964, during the presidency of Dr. Kamuzu Banda, who was Malawi's first president, the new administration decided to retain the colonizer's language, making English the official language of the nation (Kamwendo, 2008). In 1968, the new administration made some language policy changes that saw the institution of Chichewa as the language of instruction in lower elementary classes (standards 1 to 4[1]) even in districts where Chichewa was considered a minority language. The rationale was to instill a sense of unity in citizens by speaking and learning the same

[1] Primary school runs for 8 years. Lower elementary classes are standards 1 to 4. Standards 5 to 8 are considered middle to high elementary classes.

language from formative years of schooling. The policy also made English the language of instruction from standards 5 to 8 in elementary schools (Kamwendo, 2008).

In 1994, a new administration rose to power under the leadership of Dr. Bakili Muluzi, who also made changes to the language of instruction policy. As cited by Kamwendo (2008), the secretary of education in 1996 announced that:

> *With immediate effect, all Standards 1, 2, 3, and 4 classes in all our schools will be taught in their own mother tongue or vernacular language as a medium of instruction. English and Chichewa will, however, continue to be offered as examination subjects in the primary curricula. In the past, Chichewa was used as both a medium of instruction and a subject, making it very difficult for beginners to grasp ideas. However, English will continue as a medium of instruction beginning in Standard 5* (p.355).

According to Msonthi's (1997) study, the majority of Malawians were unhappy with the policy change. Concerns ranged from people fearing the policy would encourage ethnicity, which takes away the unity of Malawians as a whole. For instance, the primary identity for people would be Yao, Tonga, or Tumbuka [2]first, and being Malawian would be secondary. Others were concerned that the government did not have adequate resources to finance the production of textbooks and curricula in all 15 indigenous languages in Malawi. Yet others were concerned that removing English as the language of instruction in the lower elementary classes would limit their children's chances of attaining fluency in English (Kamwendo, 2008; Msonthi, 1997), which was contrary to their hopes and dreams because, despite English being a minority language in Malawi, compared to indigenous languages, it possesses higher linguistic capital (Kamwendo, 2021).

[2] These are some of the ethnic tribes in Malawi. The indigenous languages spoken by these tribes are also known by the same name of the tribe. For example, Yao is both a name of a tribe and a name of an indigenous language

In 2014, another modification, or rather, a retrogression, was made to the policy. This change reinstated English as the language of instruction in lower elementary classes—standards 1 to 4. As mentioned earlier, the English language holds more prestige and is viewed as the language of the elite by most Malawians, indicating that linguistic imperialism undermines other languages, including native ones (Phillipson, 2008). Kamwendo (2021) adds that "one of the consequences of colonialism has been the devaluation of African languages and the acceptance by the population of the pernicious myth of their inferiority to major Western languages" (p. 524). Former minister of education Dr. Luscious Kanyumba was quoted on Al Jazeera saying, "English speaking has been a problem for our pupils, even for those who complete secondary school education. It is the wish of the government to see most of the pupils write and speak good English while at primary school" (Masina, 2014). This exemplifies how a Black Malawian, influenced by white supremacy frameworks, views English as the most valued language even today. This ideology is supported by the Malawi Education Act (2014) section 78 which states "the medium of instruction in schools and colleges shall be English" (p.29).

**Schooling Problems Associated with the Policy**

According to a study by Kayambazinthu (1998), only a small percentage of people in Malawi speak English fluently. Chichewa and other indigenous languages are the main languages of daily interaction. Kamwendo (2016; 2021) corroborates the minority status of the English language in Malawians and calls Chichewa and other indigenous languages household communication languages. Due to this fact, a majority of students face linguistic challenges when transitioning from home to school because, as Kamwendo (2021) argues, some learners meet English for the first time when they enter primary school in standard 1. Among other consequences of this linguistic disconnect, Kamwendo (2016) found that there is a 'silent

students' phenomenon in lower elementary where students remain silent during class periods because they do not know how to say what they want to say. In some cases, this phenomenon affects students in Standard 4 because, even at this level of their education, they have not yet mastered the English language and still possess a limited vocabulary. In most cases, students with no knowledge of English prior to primary school continue to face academic challenges beyond lower elementary (Issa & Yamada, 2013).

Others have argued that the new language policy perpetuates educational inequities (Issa & Yamada, 2013; UNESCO, 2015). The schooling structure in Malawi can be divided into three types: public schooling, private schooling, and international school. The first two types, public and private schools, use the national local curriculum developed by the ministry of education in Malawi. Students attending these schools write the same national examinations, which are conducted in English. Research has shown that middle-income Malawians prefer sending their children to private schools, which are better resourced and have qualified teachers (Kamwendo, 2016; Kathewera, 1999), rather than to public schools that are heavily under-resourced and where teachers lack motivation due to low pay and high student-to-teacher ratios of around 74:1 (Kamwendo, 2016; UNESCO, 2015). This creates an unlevel ground where students are not provided with the tools they need to succeed academically.

A study by Masina (2014) found that the linguistic situation for rural public schools is worsened since most of the teachers in primary schools are not fluent in English. In this context, students are provided with second-class education due to teachers struggling with the language. Coupled with the 'silent students' phenomenon, it is unrealistic to expect students in such learning contexts and environments to perform as well as students from private schools during national examinations.

**Historical Foundations of Language Policy in Malawi**

While colonialism has played a significant role in the development and implementation of these deficit-based language policies in Malawi, imperialism has kept these colonial frameworks alive to this day. I use the term deficit-based here because the retainment of the colonial language English as an official language was endorsed under the guise of modernization (Kamwendo, 2021). This association of colonial frameworks to modernization is similar to the characteristics of settler colonialism, as Wolfe's (2006) study found that "settler colonialism was foundational to modernity" (p. 394). The framing of the English language as a steppingstone to the modernization of Malawian people is counterproductive and contrary to reality because the education department is heavily underfunded and teachers are in short supply, especially those fluent in English (Kamwendo, 2016; Kamwendo, 2021). The government does not have the financial capacity as well as human resources—teachers fluent in English—to effectively use English as a medium of instruction (CSEC Malawi, 2024). The practice of teaching instruction in English also falls contrary to empirical research conducted by many scholars and organizations, one of them being UNESCO. UNESCO (2003) proposes that the best medium of instruction in lower elementary classes is mother tongue languages.

In 'Decolonizing the Mind,' Thiong'o (1991) cautioned that as Africans, how we view ourselves and even our environment is dependent on how we understand imperialism in its colonial and neocolonialism stages. He continues that if Africans are to do anything about their collective ways of being today, they must confront what imperialism has been doing to them and how they view themselves in the world. Indigenous Americans in off-reservation boarding schools present similar examples of white supremacy frames influencing how people view themselves. The narrative of using boarding schools as a mechanism for indoctrination, where

the savage was eliminated to be replaced with a civilized American (Adams, 2020), provides reasons to confront white supremacy and, if I may add, imperialism's influence on the self-perception of minoritized people. In his book Education for Extinction, Adams (2020) covered vignettes from students who came to loathe their cultural identity and even their language. One account exemplifies the influence of white supremacy on a female Indigenous American student's perception of her own culture and language, as she wrote an apology letter to her White school principal for speaking her indigenous language. In what follows, I discuss avenues taken in confronting imperialist frameworks in education.

**Forms of resistance to white supremacy and imperialist frameworks in education**

A study by Chilora (2000) reported that some teachers in rural districts circumnavigate the policy by code-switching when teaching lower elementary classes. This involved using English and the indigenous language widely spoken in that district. Although the educational policy in Malawi does not endorse this practice, other scholars have confirmed its effectiveness. For example, a study by Jones (2008) sought to understand teachers' responses to a language in education policy in Kenya and found that most teachers would use indigenous languages to explain and clarify the meaning of new English vocabulary.

I interpret the code-switching that teachers enact as a polyvalent response to the English as the medium of instruction policy, rather than a single act of resistance. Teachers' deliberate use of Chichewa and other local languages may be regarded as a manifestation of pedagogical and epistemic resistance. In this context, Malawian teachers' methods are in line with the research on code-switching pedagogies, which shows how teachers employ students' household languages to support marginalized identities and epistemologies (MacSwan & Faltis, 2019). At the same time, code-switching in these situations is a practical way to cope with problems that

are caused by teachers' limited English fluency, large class sizes, and a lack of suitable materials (Kamwendo, 2016; Masina, 2014). In such circumstances, switching to local languages is a pragmatic decision teachers make to alleviate challenges incurred by the English-dominant system imposed upon the majority of the Malawian population without providing the requisite training, resources, or linguistic resources for its success.

Though it is a different context, the example of Blacks in South Africa resisting Bantu education during apartheid contributes to the argument in this paper. To their argument, they feared that the fundamental aim of the Bantu type of education was to produce a semi-illiterate industrial force that should serve the needs of the Whites who controlled the economy at that time (Marivate, 1993). Bantu education would be instruction of lessons using Black indigenous languages other than the official languages, which at that time were only English and Afrikaans. During apartheid, Black Africans who had limited mastery of English or Afrikaans served as a cheap source of labor (Marivate, 1993). It is with this background that students protested and resisted Bantu education, although the policy was later implemented anyway. Still, these acts of resistance provide the optimism to reimagine the future where marginalized people are empowered to influence policy changes and equitable policy developments. Two decades later, South Africa now has 11 official languages, including indigenous/Bantu languages, which have equal linguistic capital as English and Afrikaans.

## Envisioning Just Educational Futures in Malawi

Given the historical context and possibilities of equitable educational practices of Mexican American youth discussed in Raza Schools by Esparza (2023) and the education of Black youth in Caswell County Training School (CCTS), which was heavily underfunded and under-resourced (Walker, 1996), I am proposing to examine the ways that schools should be

centering indigenous languages in Malawian schools alongside the English language in pedagogy.

In Raza Schools, the San Felipe Independent School District (SFISD) exemplifies the centering of indigenous languages in their school curriculum by establishing culturally relevant teaching practices that were embedded in Mexican American heritage and language (Spanish) (Esparza, 2023). Esparza (2023) highlights cases where the SFISD resisted the broader Texas state educational policies that marginalized Mexican American students by enforcing English instruction through Americanization classes. In response, the independent school district developed its own policies that allowed instruction in lower elementary classes to be in Spanish to ensure that students develop crucial foundational literacy and numeracy skills. As the students moved ahead in their classes, they transitioned to English and Spanish instruction, which enabled them to excel academically while transitioning to English proficiency (Esparza, 2023).

Similarly, I propose a pedagogical practice that students in lower elementary classes be taught in their Indigenous language, that is, whatever household communication language is dominant in that district, and English should be taught as a subject. It is imperative to comprehend the distinction between English as a language of instruction and English as a subject. The distinction by UNESCO is as follows:

> *The language of instruction in school is the medium of communication for the transmission of knowledge. This is different from language itself where the grammar, vocabulary, and the written and oral forms of a language constitute a specific curriculum for the acquisition of a second language other than the mother tongue* (UNESCO, 2003, p. 17).

In this way, having English as a subject will only familiarize lower elementary students with the language, which is different from English being the medium of instruction. I propose to

use indigenous languages as mediums of instruction to ensure that critical foundational skills in these formative elementary years, such as numeracy, literacy, and writing, are mastered in the language that students are fluent and comfortable in. This would also provide room for parents and family members to support lower elementary students in reviewing their school lessons since Kamwendo (2021) found that even most parents do not know how to speak English; thus, they do not know how to assist their children with schoolwork. By implementing this practice in pedagogy, teachers would recover their confidence in teaching and explaining new concepts in vernacular language, as research has shown that most teachers cannot clearly express themselves in English and thus cannot teach effectively using it (Masina, 2014). Another implication of this would be an increase in cultural awareness and pride in both teachers and students, which would gradually counter the imperialist and white supremacy frameworks that have created a narrative that indigenous languages are inferior to English.

It is imperative to acknowledge that a similar policy to what I am proposing here was already implemented during the administration of Malawi's second president, Dr. Bakili Muluzi. However, the policy was poorly planned and thus faced overwhelming backlash from the citizens. One of the critiques of the policy, for instance, was that the government had failed to consult relevant educational stakeholders before policy development and implementation (Kathewera, 1999). People worried that the Ministry of Education and schools were ill-prepared to shift the medium of instruction to Indigenous languages considering that all textbooks prior to this were in the English language (Kathewera, 1999), a concern that I validate.

Drawing from the experiences of Black educators in segregated America, precisely in Caswell County Training School (CCTS), yes, resources are helpful, but they are not critical. If teachers are willing to teach and students are willing to learn, then education will happen

(Walker, 1996). Despite the systemic inequalities they faced with the state withholding funds for their school and inadequate resources and infrastructure, Black educators at CCTS made extraordinary efforts to nurture and educate their students and helped them reach their highest potential (Walker, 1996). Nevertheless, I contest that CCTS being an example of one school, the feasibility of its success therefore cannot be extrapolated to a national level.

The experiences of SFISD and CCTS exemplify the accomplishments of communities in the midst of adversity and material scarcity (Esparza, 2023; Walker, 1996). Even so, it would be erroneous to generalize that willpower and community mobilization alone, as was the case in the aforesaid examples, can uphold a national transition in the language of instruction policy. In Malawi, any effort to use indigenous languages as a medium of instruction must immediately deal with the financial, infrastructure, and human resource problems that made the earlier Muluzi-era strategy less effective (CSEC Malawi, 2024; Kathewera, 1999). My proposal does not dismiss concerns about a lack of stakeholder consultation, materials, and teacher training. Instead, it uses them as design lessons: start with small, district-level pilots in Standards 1–4 where one or two local languages are already dominant; use low-cost, locally made materials instead of waiting for full textbook sets; offer short, practice-focused in-service modules on multilingual pedagogy (Kamwendo, 2016; Reilly, 2022); and repurpose existing English textbooks for teaching English as a subject, not as the only way to learn.

In this proposed model, teachers would give instructions in lower elementary classes using students' indigenous languages while simultaneously teaching the English language as a mere subject. Doing this would provide lower elementary students a strong foundation in foundational subjects while at the same time exposing students to the English language, which would facilitate a smoother transition to the English medium of instruction in Standard 5

onwards. The proposed approach would also fulfill parents' expectations over their children's English acquisition without compromising students' foundational learning skills (Kathewera, 1999; Reilly, 2022). Ministry officials, school management committees, and parent associations would work together to make local plans for how parents can help their children learn at home and how progress will be measured. These plans would be based on lessons learned from Malawi's own language of instruction debates in previous administrations (Kamwendo, 2016; Reilly, 2022). Taken together, these steps reframe my proposal not as a low-resource miracle modeled on CCTS and SFISD, but as a phased, context-sensitive pathway that combines historical lessons about community agency with sober attention to Malawi's structural constraints (Esparza, 2023; Walker, 1996).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that English instruction in lower elementary classes in Malawi is counterproductive to the educational outcomes for students. Additionally, it also creates inequities, especially between rural and urban students, which is felt during national examinations taken in English despite the discrepancies in the instruction of lessons in various rural schools. I therefore proposed a policy modification that would see lower elementary classes being taught using Indigenous languages, and English would just be one of the subjects learned. Drawing from examples of Esparza (2023) in Raza schools, Walker (1996) in Their Highest Potential, and the back-and-forth debates of language of instruction policy in Malawi, I believe that having Indigenous languages as mediums of instruction in lower elementary is the best hope for an equitable and just educational future for students in Malawi.

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# *Ngano* as a Method: Reclaiming African Indigenous Epistemologies in Research

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**Abstract**

*Ngano* is a traditional Shona storytelling practice used as an Indigenous research method in African culture, seeking to bring back African ways of knowing often overlooked by Western research that focuses on individualism, data collection, and written records. *Ngano* relies on relational validity, meaning that truth and meaning are created together through social connections and group participation, and is built on three main principles: storytelling as a way to pass down history and knowledge, relational knowledge utilizing cultural practices to build trust, and oral and embodied practice valuing songs, gestures, and emotions as valid information sources. These ideas are put into practice through *Rungano Rwako* (individual storytelling) and *Gungano* (group gatherings), which makes participants into *Sarungano*, or keepers of knowledge. Guided by *Ubuntu* ethics, *Ngano* offers a decolonial, relational, and people-focused way to do research.

**Key words**

*Ngano*, Shona Epistemology, Indigenous Research Methodologies, Ubuntu, Storytelling, Decoloniality, Zimbabwe.

## Introduction

Epistemological foundations fundamentally shape how we define and validate knowledge, guiding our research methods. Research is inherently cultural. Ignoring these foundations risks applying unsuitable approaches to different communities, as assumptions about valid knowledge affect our methods. Historically, Western epistemologies have marginalized alternative knowledge systems by promoting an individualistic approach to inquiry. Within this framework, knowledge is frequently conceptualized as an object to be extracted, discovered, or owned by researchers, with a strong emphasis on the written word and statistical significance as primary indicators of truth.

Traditional African knowledge systems, particularly those of the Shona people in Zimbabwe, conceptualize knowledge as dynamic and communal in nature. According to Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013), knowledge and its investigation are deeply embedded in historical and cultural contexts, making them inseparable from the lived experiences of the community. While Western research often prioritizes objective detachment, Shona epistemology emphasizes relational validity, which holds that knowledge is legitimate if it resonates with collective experience, fosters social harmony, and aligns with the community's moral values. In this framework, truth is not isolated and discovered independently; rather, it is remembered and negotiated through communal relationships.

The dominance of Western paradigms has historically influenced policies and programs that promote Western norms while neglecting or discarding Indigenous and local knowledge. It shapes which voices are heard, determines which problems are prioritized, and legitimizes which solutions, transforming knowledge creation into a tool controlling narratives, resources, and power instead of promoting inclusion and mutual understanding. These paradigms often

overlook local language, symbolism, and norms such as ‘unhu’ (being human) that shape how participants respond to research protocols and questions. Methods that ignore local traditions may misrepresent results and reduce participant engagement. Wen et al. (2025) highlight that when research ignores local traditions, it risks low validity and participant alienation.

In Western epistemology, knowledge is often seen as something linear and limited that can be stored, patented, or owned. In contrast, Shona epistemology sees knowledge as always changing and cyclical. For the Shona, researchers are knowledge stewards who work with a shared inheritance, rather than just individuals collecting data. Here, ignorance is not simply a lack of information; it is a break from the community, ancestors, and the natural world. Western research can misrepresent these local realities, which is not only an academic mistake but can also be an act of epistemic violence that weakens the important connections between the community and their shared truth.

Ideally, research methodologies should align with the community’s epistemological frameworks. To challenge dominant paradigms, Smith (2012) proposed prioritizing marginalized voices through storytelling. Storytelling offers a culturally grounded methodology that centers participants' narratives to produce knowledge reflecting a holistic worldview (Archibald, 2008; Chilisa, 2012). Owusu-Ansah and Mji (2013) contend that, within African knowledge systems, storytelling functions as an oral, relational, and community-based method. It serves both as a data collection tool and as an ethical practice that fosters trust and co-creation between researchers and participants.

This paper explores *Ngano*, a traditional African storytelling practice, as a culturally grounded research methodology. By aligning interviews with local understandings of story and

communal wisdom, *Ngano* challenges Western epistemic dominance and promotes a research framework where the pursuit of truth is inseparable from the pursuit of human connection.

## *Ngano*- the Shona Folktale as Epistemic Foundation

*Ngano is* a communal storytelling tradition of the Shona people of Zimbabwe. As a performative and participatory approach, it engages listeners through active involvement and shared meaning. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and Vambe (2001) note, storytelling is a social, spiritual act of knowledge production. Similarly, Kayanja (2021) agrees that African identities connect to stories that act as knowledge sources and collective memory. *Ngano* aligns with social constructivist principles by co-creating meaning through community and culture. Grounded in Indigenous ontologies prioritizing collective wisdom, *Ngano* uses storytelling for knowledge production. In doing so, it challenges deficit-based paradigms and roots research in African realities and relationships**.**

*Ngano* refers to oral folktales full of advice and cultural wisdom. The term itself is etymologically linked to *zano* or *mano*, meaning advice (Mapara, 2018). *Ngano* can also be informally translated to mean stories in general. *Ngano* plays a crucial role in Shona society, serving as both a teaching tool and a means of socialization. It serves as an informal court for judging justice and morality, a classroom for sharing knowledge about survival, medicine, and history, and a safe space for preserving culture during challenging times. By avoiding the usual keepers of written history, who often focus on Western views, *Ngano* keeps the community's laws, values, and history alive and accessible. In this way, storytelling is not just for entertainment but is essential for the community to continue.

Traditionally, stories are delivered in the third person by a *Sarungano* who uses proverbs, parables, imagery, cosmology, and collective memory to pass down values and intergenerational knowledge (Mapara, 2018; Tuwe, 2016). *Ngano* is both performative and participatory. The *Sarungano* uses song, dance, and rhythmic call and response to bring several characters to life, typically supernatural creatures as well as personified animals and plants (Chinyowa, 2004; Vambe, 2001). Wisdom is not only spoken about but felt and acted upon. This broadens the scope of data to incorporate symbolic meaning, emotional resonance, and embodied experience.

*Ngano* is preserved through rituals and repetition, rather than relying on written records. Traditionally, elders, such as grandparents, share knowledge with younger generations during evening gatherings around a fire. Unlike printed texts, *Ngano* is a living archive that changes over time. While the main advice stays the same to keep cultural traditions alive, the *Sarungano* often adjust the stories to reflect current issues in the community. This flexibility helps Shona knowledge stay meaningful for each new generation, allowing cultural identity to grow and change over time.

The *Sarungano* contributes to ethical research by creating relational consent and guaranteeing that knowledge is co-created in a respectful and authentic community setting. *Ngano* serves as both a research method and an ethical guide for African-centered inquiry. By recognizing these dimensions, *Ngano's* approach validates *Ubuntu*, the belief in the sacredness of human experience and the significance of nurturing relationships in the pursuit of truth. It provides an ethically grounded and culturally rooted framework for African-centered research. The relational ontology echoes Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) and Vambe's (2001) assertion that African storytelling is a communal practice through which beliefs, knowledge, morality, and

history are transmitted. The *Sarungano*, frequently an elder, *Ngano*'s relational ontology exemplifies *Ubuntu*'s principle: 'I am because we are'. Knowledge is not an individual possession but a shared, lived experience.

## Three Interrelated Principles of *Ngano* Methodology

*Ngano* methodology advances research through three core principles:

1. ***Epistemology through Storytelling:*** Stories are considered living knowledge repositories rather than anecdotal evidence. They convey moral lessons, historical memory, and community identity. In research, participants become *Sarungano* through their own journeys, anchoring personal experiences within larger cultural narratives. In this relational contract, the researcher enters into a relationship of respect and must be open to participative and embodied forms of storytelling. In this relationship, the participants are knowledge holders instead of subjects. In *Ngano* storytelling, knowledge holders refer to individuals, particularly children, who help preserve, shape, and share cultural knowledge. They do more than just listen; they join in through call-and-response, remember details, and interact with the story. This makes them living keepers of stories, songs, and values. Their involvement helps shape the meaning and style of each story, showing that knowledge is created together, led by the *Sarungano*, and supported by the group. In the community, knowledge holders are expected to listen carefully, learn the lessons, and retell the stories, taking on the role of keeping the culture alive. After the storytelling, they are also responsible for using and protecting this knowledge, making them future guardians of cultural heritage, and helping pass it on to the next generation. This redefines narrative as theory and centers indigenous epistemologies at the heart of research design.
2. ***Relational Knowledge***: Culturally mediated relationships help to co-create knowledge. Totem sharing, ancestral origins, and familial links are examples of protocols used by researchers and participants. Through these cultural protocols, research becomes participatory, identity is established, the researcher is placed within a known relational structure, and obligations of mutual respect and accountability are established. This targets positionality as it answers the question: "Who are you, and what is your place in

relation to this community?" The relational approach is rooted in *Ubuntu* ethics, which emphasizes respect, reciprocity, and interconnection, challenging hierarchical frameworks by highlighting mutuality and cultural accountability.

3. ***Oral, Embodied, and Participatory Practice:*** Ngano methodology privileges oral traditions and idioms. Songs, proverbs, and integrates embodied forms of expression such as gesture, rhythm, and performance. This expands the definition of data to include emotion, imagery, and symbolic meaning. It invites researchers to listen with the whole body and honor the performative dimensions of knowledge transmission.

## The Unique Value of *Ngano* Methodology

The *Ngano* Framework is unique, complete, based on Shona epistemology, emphasizing relationality, epistemology, and embodied practice as well as practical techniques (*Rungano Rwako, Gungano*). *Ngano* creates a structured and reliable structure that combines a rich cultural tradition with African-centered approaches to fill a significant gap. It goes beyond criticism of extractive research and reclaims narrative authority by offering a practical, community-rooted alternative that focuses on local knowledge and lived experience, and at the same time positions communities as knowledge creators instead of subjects of the study. The flexibility and accessibility of the *Ngano* method are its adaptability to diverse literacy levels and contexts. Since *Ngano* is shared orally, it allows for inclusive participation by bypassing barriers related to reading and writing, such as unfamiliarity with academic language, discomfort with written consent, and limited literacy. For people in many communities, reading lengthy documents, expressing themselves in writing, or understanding technical vocabulary may be difficult due to insufficient education or language mismatch. Shame and anxiety could surface when asked to write because of fear of judgment and exclusion. The need for formal education is reduced when cultural familiarity is privileged through voice, rhythm, and connection, whilst building trust through engagement, resulting in research that is more accessible, respectful, and accurate.

## Operationalizing *Ngano* Methodology

*Ngano* methodology is operationalized through two interwoven strategies that center relational and participatory knowledge production:

***Rungano Rwako* (Your Story):** Participants narrate their life histories in Indigenous languages, weaving in proverbs, idioms, and spiritual reflections. The researcher reciprocates by sharing their own ancestry and totems, fostering mutual recognition. This positions participants as *Sarungano (*storytellers) who frame their experiences within broader cultural narratives (Chilisa, 2012).

***Gungano* (The Gathering):** Functioning similarly to focus groups, *Gungano* convenes participants together to share stories communally. Inspired by traditional Shona gatherings such as *nhanga* (women's gatherings) or *dare* (men's councils), it cultivates collective meaning-making while surfacing shared values, tensions, and divergences (Ncube & Tomaselli, 2020).

Together, *Rungano Rwako* and *Gungano* embody *Ngano* methodology's emphasis on relational, participatory knowledge production, grounded in cultural integrity and communal wisdom.

## Conclusion

*Ngano* redefines research as a co-creative, community-driven process anchored in *Ubuntu*. Through its core principles, epistemology through storytelling, relational knowledge, and oral, embodied, and participatory practice, this method is more than storytelling. *Ngano* serves as an epistemic framework rooted in African relationality, ethics, and collective wisdom. It challenges extractive research methods by emphasizing mutual respect, shared meaning-making, cultural accountability, and positioning participants as knowledge holders. As

a decolonial method, *Ngano* promotes equitable and inclusive knowledge practices and respects Indigenous ways of understanding the world, and restores narrative authority to communities that have been historically marginalized.

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# Critical Internationalization in Chinese Universities

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**Abstract**

**English Version**

The internationalization of Chinese universities has evolved through many stages since Chinese modernization: through "'being late' and 'catching up', and paradoxes between 'fast and slow' paces" (Xu, 2023, p.375). At the same time, the internationalization of Chinese universities has been heavily influenced by the internationalization of US higher education (Qiu & Sun, 2025). In this paper, I intend to challenge the normative narrative of US internationalization and aim to shed light on the critical and post-structural lens of internationalization that has been practiced and planned in the current internationalization of Chinese universities. I first explored the evolution of rationales of US internationalization of higher education. I then use both critical and post-structural epistemological lenses to challenge and look for alternatives to internationalization. Moreover, I will examine how critical and post-structural epistemological thinking is reflected in the internationalization of Chinese higher education. Furthermore, I will show how potential methodological approaches are situated in both epistemologies. Lastly, I will explore how my positionality reflects my knowledge production process in this study.

**Chinese Version**

自中国开启现代化进程以来，中国高校的国际化历经了多个演进阶段：从"起步较晚"到"奋起直追"，再到在"快"与"慢"的节奏之间所呈现出的冲突（Xu, 2023, p.375）。与此同

时，中国高校的国际化进程也深受美国高等教育国际化模式的影响（Qiu & Sun, 2025）。本文旨在对美国高等教育国际化所构建的规范性叙事发起挑战，并致力于揭示当前中国高校国际化实践与规划中所蕴含的批判性与后结构主义视角。首先，我探讨了美国高等教育国际化背后理据的演变历程。随后，我将运用批判性与后结构主义这两种认识论视角，对既有的国际化模式进行审视与挑战，并探寻其替代性方案。此外，我将探索批判性与后结构主义的认识论思维是如何体现在中国高等教育的国际化实践之中的。另外，我将阐述潜在的方法论进路是如何置身于这两种认识论之中的。最后，我将探讨我的主体位置性如何反映了我在本研究中的知识生产过程。

**Key words**

Internationalization, Critical Internationalization, Decolonial, Post-development, Chinese universities

## Introduction

The internationalization of Chinese universities has evolved through many stages since Chinese modernization: through "'being late' and 'catching up', and paradoxes between 'fast and slow' paces".(Xu, 2023, p.375). At the same time, the internationalization of Chinese universities has heavily been influenced by the internationalization of US higher education (Qiu & Sun, 2025). In this paper, I intend to challenge the normative narrative of US internationalization and aim to shed light on the critical and post-structural lens of internationalization that has been practiced and planned in the current internationalization of Chinese universities. I first explored the evolution of rationales of US internationalization of higher education. I then use both critical and post-structural epistemological lenses to challenge and look for alternatives to internationalization. Moreover, I will examine how critical and post-structural epistemological thinking is reflected in the internationalization of Chinese higher education. Furthermore, I will show how my potential methodological approaches are situated in both epistemologies. Lastly, I will explore how my positionality reflects my knowledge production process in this study.

## The evolution of rationales for the internationalization of US higher education

The rationale behind the internationalization of US higher education can be traced back to World War II. During the Truman administration, the internationalization of US higher education was used to not only build peace around the world but also foster America's knowledge about other regions and nations (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). During this time, the national intention to internationalize was justified by the desperate need to become the ideological and knowledge leader of the world. The academic need to understand other nations was intensified by the threat of national security during the Cold War (Veerasamy & Durst,

2023). However, due to a lack of financial support for internationalization policy after the 1970s, the internationalization of US higher education has rapidly transitioned to a more economic-development rationale (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). This economic development rationale eventually evolved into a competitive rationale in the global economy (De Wit, 2019).

De Wit (2019) analyzed that the impacts of the internationalization of higher education from the competitive rationale are massification, the global knowledge economy, and the reputation and rankings. Massification indicates a shift in access to international education, which was previously exclusive to the elite and wealthy families. To compete in the global economy, emerging economies like China, India, Latin America, and the Caribbean have demanded an increase in the import of higher education from the United States, the United Kingdom, continental Europe, Canada, Australia, South Korea, and Japan (De Wit, 2019). This results in a massification of international higher education with an increasing enrollment of international students from middle-class families from emerging economy countries to developed countries.

At the same time, the global knowledge economy also reinforces the competitive rationale to internationalize US higher education. Technology and knowledge are the essential elements to compete in the global economy. Universities play an increasingly important role as knowledge producers. International research partnerships, scholarly contributions by international students and researchers, and the attraction of top talent are all strategies important for universities to maintain competitive statuses as knowledge production sites. Therefore, De Wit (2019) believed that the global knowledge economy has not only motivated universities to internationalize but also standardize English as the global language of research.

Moreover, De Wit (2019) pointed out that there is a clear relationship among excellence initiatives, rankings, and internationalization. As intercultural competency has become an important skill to maintain competitiveness in the global workforce, internationalization of the program and curriculum has become an important measure of the excellence of higher education. The ranking is part of a mechanism in the game of global economy where it structures a competitive relationship among universities and countries, creates a hierarchical value system with quantitative evaluation methods, and confines performance in a linear and limited understanding of improvements (De Wit, 2019). Internationalization of higher education plays an important part in the national, regional, and global university rankings. Reciprocally, being at the top in these university rankings can also attract an increase in the enrollment of international students with top talent. This will further enhance national competitiveness in the global economy. Therefore, many institutional leaders and national governments have positioned the pursuit of becoming a world-class university as the driving agenda.

Despite the competitive rationale, there is also an increasing need for global cooperation (Hser, 2005). The rationale for global cooperation argues that solving global issues requires working collaboratively across the globe. However, even though many US universities are motivated to internationalize both nationally and institutionally, it is also necessary to acknowledge that not all US universities want to promote internationalization policies. Many US universities faced the obstacles of internationalization due to a lack of financial support, a lack of motivated stakeholders in the administration or faculty positions, and a lack of commitment to promote international education (Hser, 2005). It is also important to highlight that the internationalization policies of US higher education are uniquely influenced by a multiplicity of national actors in the public, private, and voluntary sectors (Veerasamy & Durst, 2023). Instead

of holding a centralized and comprehensive decision-making power, the federal government's influence on the internationalization of US higher education is often ambiguous and fragmented (Veerasamy, & Durst, 2023). De Wit (2019) further invited us to examine the internationalization of US higher education in the context of the current nationalist, populist, and anti-global political climate. Veerasamy and Durst (2023) provide a framework to explore internationalization policies as "a living organism", which emphasizes the "eclectic and expansive" nature of the policy-making process at the national level (p.321).

## Thinking internationalization through a critical epistemological lens

While De Wit (2019) asked to reflect on the internationalization of US higher education under the current anti-global political climate, decolonial scholars re-oriented the focus on the internationalization of higher education through a critical epistemology. Decolonial work specifically focuses on the uneven power dynamics and epistemic inequalities in the process of internationalization. Echoing De Wit's (2019) critique about interrogating the purpose of internationalization itself, the important question in critical internationalization studies is "in whose name, for whose benefit, and to what end they should internationalize" (Stein and McCartney, 2021, p.1). Stein and McCartney (2021) criticized the neutrality and universality of internationalization.

Mignolo (2002) traced the neutrality and universality of Western epistemology back to the origin of capitalism, coloniality, and modernity. The Western epistemology was co-constructed with capitalism since the European Renaissance (Mignolo, 2002). As capitalism expanded from the Mediterranean to the North Atlantic and eventually to the Atlantic commercial circuit, the establishment of the modern world system was also expanded (Mignolo, 2002). Mignolo (2002) distinguished the concept of modernity from the modern world system:

"modernity is associated with literature, philosophy, and the history of ideas, whereas the modern world-system is associated with the vocabulary of the social sciences" (p.60). Therefore, even though modernity created a sense of illusion that Western civilization originated from Greece and continued to develop to eighteenth-century Europe, it is important to be clear that it is the modern world-system that began in the fifteenth century. Through the Atlantic commercial circuit, under the capitalistic operation, the modern world-system brought in coloniality. Mignolo (2002) introduced the concept of "geopolitics of knowledge" to explain that the knowledge created in Western civilization has been universalized, which excludes and illegitimizes knowledge production situated in other civilizations. The Western epistemology has been universalized through a hegemonic discourse, maintaining certain privileged time and history situated in a particular geopolitical space. Therefore, as the world has been globalized, the time and history situated in Western civilization were constructed to contain the universal value across all time and spaces.

Following Mignolo's (2002) critique of Western epistemology, Stein and Andreotti (2016) created a conceptual approach, "a dominant global imaginary," which emphasized that the colonial/ modern world is structured in a linear way of progress where Western higher education has been positioned at the top of the hierarchy. Through this global imaginary, internationalization reproduces uneven global power relations where higher education in the Global North maintains the dominant position (Stein and McCartney, 2021).

Bamberger and Morris (2024) criticized that one of the limitations of the decolonial theory is rooted in Occidentalism, "promoting the West as inherently a more morally corrupt actor than those elsewhere" (p.135). I partially agree with Bamberger and Morris (2024) that it is also important to pay equal attention to how the Global South helps to promote and reproduce

the coloniality of power. But I also want to argue that decolonial scholars do understand the complexity of colonial power beyond the West and East binary. Mignolo (2002) reminds us that there is a Global North within the Global South. I believe that Bamberger and Morris (2024) failed to acknowledge the origin and history of settler colonialism, which produced Western hegemony. At the same time, they not only went too quickly to point out other "bad" players with the colonial power but also abused the word without differentiating the uneven levels of participation and complicity between the Western and non-Western players.

In summary, it is important to understand how colonial epistemic power has played by US in defining what is internationalization of higher education, how to internationalize and for whom to internationalize. At the same time, it is also important to reflect one's own positionality and context about the complex engagement with this colonial epistemic power in the field of internationalization of higher education.

## Thinking internationalization through a post-structural lens

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 presented a hard stop in internationalization, especially in international student mobility. During this uncertain time, with difficulty in crossing national borders, internationalization faced a hard stop. The dominant narrative of internationalization is being challenged. Through the post-structural epistemological lens, scholars began to think about internationalization otherwise (Stein and McCartney, 2021; Beck, 2021). Stein and McCartney (2021) invite scholars to reflect on our complicity as academics in the knowledge production economy. For Canadian universities, the salaries earned by the employees are heavily dependent on international student tuition (Stein and McCartney, 2021). Therefore, it is important for us as scholars to understand that our work is never innocent or exempt from colonial power. We need to interrogate our complicity with deep reflectivity.

Another post-structural epistemological lens drew from post-development theories, which ask to "reset" internationalization (Beck, 2021, p. 135). Resetting the internationalization field means critically reviewing and interrogating the history and evolution of internationalization and then re-orienting and inviting paradigmatic change to "internationalization otherwise".

Post-development theories criticized development thinking, which framed non-Western and non-industrialized societies as underdeveloped. Through the binary thinking of developed and underdeveloped, Western epistemologies and ontologies are elevated and universalized as the standard that should be looked up and caught up for all societies. Because development thinking has been deeply rooted in the logic of world systems building, thinking beyond the framing of development means denying development as the only way to exist in the world and inviting diversity of existence.

Beck (2021) believed that the main inspiration of post-development theories for internationalization is to allow communities to "have agency in being able to determine their direction" (p. 140). It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of post-development theories. Beck (2021) believed that thinking beyond a development framing can be unrealistic for many communities in both the Global North and Global South because they are still struggling on a basic level of survival. However, many Indigenous scholars may disagree with Beck (2021) by arguing that even on the basic level of survival, there are still opportunities for co-existence (Corntassel, 2012). I would like to further challenge Beck (2021) by arguing that the very situation of some communities that are struggling to survive is proof that the development framework is successfully implemented. I think it is important for us to question why they do not get enough resources to survive. Who is benefiting from their suffering? And, what can it be like

for communities that want to live beyond the linear progress of development by creating their own agency and direction?

Applying post-development theory to internationalization, Beck (2021) introduced the concept of post-internationalization, which is a proposal for aspiration and hope to imagine what can happen after or other than internationalization. One is thinking of student mobility beyond the current framing of internationalization. Post-development scholars believe that international student mobility from the Global South to the Global North is a form of treating international students as objects of development (Beck, 2021). Internationalization promises international students with intercultural competency and a cosmopolitan accumulation of social and cultural capital. However, from a post-development view, it is important to question the purpose and step back to reflect on the assumptions behind the seemingly benign accumulation of social and cultural capital through internationalization (Beck, 2021). It is important to reflect on what and whose social and cultural capital is considered valuable and desirable, and whose gaze on internationalization we are holding. Therefore, to think about internationalization otherwise, the first step we need to do is to "clean our gaze" (Beck 2021, p. 143, as cited in Esteva, 2014, p, i147).

Another critique of internationalization from the post-development perspective is in the economic dimension. Development thinking demands unlimited growth with an unrealistic assumption that there are infinite resources. Beck (2021) believed that imagining what degrowth can be like might open up new possibilities for paradigmatic change for post-internationalization. Internationalization is so dependent on operation as an economic model that it is extremely hard to imagine internationalization without the business part of it.

## Chinese higher education

Many universities in the Global South have built their higher education system by learning from Western universities. Instead of framing universities in the Global South simply as the receivers of help and benevolence from Western universities, it is also important to emphasize their agency and active reflections on their participation in building their higher education system both locally and internationally. Therefore, I will use Chinese higher education as an example to represent the constant negotiation between Westernization and de-colonial work in the Chinese context.

### History of internationalization of Chinese higher education

Xu (2023) talked about how the Chinese internationalization process has been through various temporal phases: "'being late' and 'catching up', and paradoxes between 'fast and slow' paces" (p.375). The history of Chinese modernization can be traced back to 150 years ago during China's last Qing dynasty. The isolationist policies were implemented in the early period of the Qing dynasty, which stopped any interaction, trade, or communication outside of China. Yet, Western countries used military forces to open the Chinese economy to the world. The great difference in military power between the Qing government and the Western countries forced China to realize the need to modernize. Sending Chinese students abroad to learn Western knowledge was one of the important policies for Chinese modernization. This logic has been passed down to the current policy of the Chinese internationalization process. Through the process of Chinese modernization, China aims to catch up with the West and become an equal player in the international community of higher education (Liu, 2021).

At the same time, Chinese universities were established through this modernization process. To become world-standard universities is one of the institutional goals for Chinese universities, which will fulfill the national purpose to enhance China's national competitiveness and international influence. While sending Chinese students abroad is one of the main strategies for Chinese internationalization, the internationalization of Chinese universities also occupies an important role, which is defined as internationalization at home (Gun et al., 2022). Recruiting professors with foreign degrees, encouraging professors and students to attend international conferences and publish in international journals, and using English as the medium of instruction are all examples of internationalization at home in Chinese universities.

It is also important to mention that there are many challenges to this internationalization process in China. Different from the non-differential model in Western universities, where international students are managed in different departments with domestic students, international students in China are managed in a single program of international education, where they will take courses aligned with their major but taught by faculty members who are specifically assigned to this international education program. The reason for not having a non-differential model like Western universities is that not all Chinese professors are equipped with English teaching ability, and not all international students in China are capable of taking classes in Mandarin. At the same time, there is a lack of consensus and senior administration for international work among Chinese universities (Liu, 2021). Many Chinese professors and administrators believe that the internationalization of Chinese higher education is a great bonus, but not a central part of the institutional goals (Liu, 2021). Therefore, sometimes, the department of international education is left alone to face international work.

Compared to the universities in the West, the Chinese institutional policies for internationalization are strongly tied to the national strategy in international diplomacy (Liu, 2021). As Western universities become more neoliberal and economically driven, the Chinese universities are "more after soft gains on the diplomatic front" (Liu, 2021, p. 240). It is still unclear if Chinese universities are aiming to transition to a neoliberal, economically driven model, but China is using scholarships to attract international students to study in China without making money out of international education (Liu, 2021). At the same time, different from the decentralized administration power in Western higher education, the Chinese universities are under a centralized national higher education legislation, which is governed by the national Ministry of Education. Under the Ministry of Education, the CPC (The Communist Party of China) Central Committee and the State Council issued the Outline of the Plan for Building a Powerful Nation through Education (2024-2035).

In the outline, it specifically includes to "enhance global talent training and aggregation capabilities", "expand international academic exchanges and educational and scientific research cooperation", and "actively participate in global education governance" (Xie, 2025). The language used in this latest version of the outline reveals how the definitions of internationalization from the Ministry of Education have become "more on openness, equal exchanges and cooperation" (Xu, 2023). Therefore, according to this outline, the motivation of internationalization of Chinese higher education changed from a unidirectional learning from the Western world to an active reciprocal participation which emphasizes internationalization with Chinese characteristics (Guo, Guo, Yochim & Liu, 2022).

**Critical internationalization in Chinese universities**

The narrative of internationalization with Chinese characteristics derives from an evolving critical reflection of the Chinese modernization and internationalization process. The current internationalization model is heavily dependent on a hegemonic Western definition, which initially was and still is developed as an ideological influence from a unilateral flow of knowledge from the Global North to the Global South (Xu, 2023). Many scholars criticized the process of internationalization in China as equaling westernization (Liu, 2021; Guo et al., 2022; Xu, 2023). As Chinese universities were catching up and learning from Western higher education, concerns were raised that the "foreign transplants" of Western higher education may threaten the Chinese epistemologies and ontologies (Liu, 2021; Guo et al., 2022). Therefore, scholars are looking for alternative definitions of internationalization in the Chinese context (Xu, 2023).

To justify the motivation for internationalization in China, collective memories of China's past are an influential factor in defining Chinese characteristics in internationalization. Xu (2023) talked about the "chosen glories", "chosen trauma", "living (post-) memories", and "chosen amnesia" of different periods of Chinese history. The "chosen glories" emphasized that the foundation of China is inherited from a 5000-year history of continued civilization. The "chosen trauma" was the 100 years of humiliation in the 19th and 20th centuries from Western colonization and Japanese invasion. The "living (post-) memories" started from China's economic reform and reopening in the late 1970s. The "chosen amnesia" justifies how the chosen collective memories were constructed in a specific way, which highlights "a collective sense of nostalgia and sense of victimization" (Xu, 2023, p.379). Through both the chosen memories and amnesia, internationalization with Chinese characteristics is constructed in a

unifying national definition and is independent from the hegemonic definition dominated by the Western internationalization process.

As decolonial scholars are interrogating the power dynamics and epistemic inequality in the internationalization of American higher education (De Wit, 2019; Vital & Yao, 2021) through critical epistemology, many scholars in China are also critically reflecting on how Chinese universities have been internationalized under Western influence (Guo et al., 2022). Through interviewing Chinese students in elite Chinese universities, some students reflect on how internationalization is unidirectional and solely mimics the developed countries (Guo et al., 2022). At the same time, some students reflected on their internationalization of the hierarchy of knowledge production, which positioned Western knowledge as superior to the Chinese one. This preference for Western academic sources echoed a similar pattern of the colonial theorization of East and West and the concept of development, where the first world has knowledge and the third world has culture (Said, 1979; Mignolo, 2002). Therefore, "true knowledge now resides in the forms of an imported, scientific mode of knowledge production that is decidedly non-Chinese" (Guo et al., 2022, p. 444).

Moreover, the dominance of English as the medium of instruction for internationalization in Chinese universities is also criticized by many critical scholars (Guo et al., 2022; Qiu & Zheng, 2023; Zheng & Qiu, 2024). The use of English to teach is a contributing indicator of the status of a world-class university in international education. However, students reflected on the absurdity of using English to instruct in a classroom where all the students and the professor are Chinese (Guo et al., 2022). Instead of using English to enrich students' understanding of the knowledge itself, English becomes a barrier for students to learn about the content of the class (Guo et al., 2022). Moreover, English medium instruction creates an epistemic injustice that may

cause non-native English speakers to become less motivated to share their opinions and lower their confidence in their ability to generate knowledge (Zheng & Qiu, 2024). At the same time, because students may not be able to share their ideas in English in a sophisticated format, their credibility of the knowledge that they shared may also be put into question (Qiu & Zheng, 2023). As a result, the use of English is only for the sake of being international, despite the ineffectiveness of instruction, the exclusion of local context, and unevenly distributed English abilities among Chinese students.

### Post-structural strategy in China

Through a post-structural epistemology, China has developed various strategies that intend to break the influence of Western domination. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China developed a coalition and partnership with countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa in order to create a different path in international relations, which has been defined by the US (Shan, 2023). Moreover, in response to the Western oppression of Chinese development through the geopolitical tension between the US and China, China developed a “double circulation strategy”, which can not only keep the independence of the domestic economy but also promote international economies at the same time (Yu, 2023). Having said that, the internationalization with Chinese characteristics may be an initial sign of post-structural epistemological thinking. However, institutional policies are missing in the discourse of “internationalization otherwise” for Chinese universities.

## Possible Methodological approach in future research

In the potential future research, I intend to use critical narrative analysis and participatory visual methods. I am curious to understand what are the relationships between Chinese national

and institutional policies of internationalization, and everyday students' and professors' understanding of internationalization in the Chinese classroom. The Chinese national and institutional policies of internationalization represent a macro discourse of internationalization, which defines how Chinese universities function, for example, the design of the curriculum, language of instruction, etc. Narratives of internationalization equal westernization, or Englishnization equal to internationalization, by students and professors, showed a micro and everyday understanding of internationalization in the Chinese classroom (Guo et al., 2022).

Therefore, through a critical narrative analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014), I intend to bridge the macro national and institutional discourses of internationalization with the micro everyday narrative of internationalization from students and professors. Through the critical narrative analysis, I am curious to see how the everyday understanding of internationalization from students and professors in Chinese universities reflects or deflects the national and institutional discourses. At the same time, through questioning where they learned those narratives, I am curious about how students and professors understand what their roles are in the national and institutional discourses of internationalization and how they construct their knowledge of internationalization of Chinese universities from the discourses.

The choice of using critical narrative analysis reflects my critical epistemological paradigm, where I am curious about how the power dynamics of national and institutional discourse play out in the everyday lives of students and professors in Chinese universities. The critical narrative analysis not only connects the "dividing line between the particular (personal) and the general (social or institutional), the parts (micro) and the whole (macro) in research", but also addresses theoretical abstraction, which is often criticized for critical discourse analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014, p.163). Through critical narrative analysis, individual narratives become

a powerful tool that can challenge the monologue of national and institutional discourses of internationalization.

Moreover, to gain a deeper understanding of how students and professors interpret their understanding of internationalization in Chinese universities, I aim to use participatory visual methods to collect data. I will ask participants (students and professors) to take photos on a daily basis, which shows what they see how internationalization is reflected in their daily lives. I will schedule a month for them to take pictures. Then I will have a one-hour one-on-one interview with each participant to talk about their pictures. Through this participatory visual method, I intend to reorient the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants. Through a post-structural epistemological lens, instead of imposing my interests in internationalization on my participants, I want to position my participants to be the central part of this knowledge production. “Photography is a technology with tremendous power in directing the gaze” (Luttrell, 2010, p.224). As participants are taking pictures from their perspectives, the gaze of the research will be redirected to the participants rather than the researcher’s gaze.

## Positionality Reflection and Acknowledgment

Learning through both critical and post-structural scholars above, I will explore how my positionality reflects my knowledge production process in this study.

I identify myself as a Chinese international student from a middle-class family, growing up in an elite education in Beijing, and a scholar who is trained by the Western academy. My K-12 education is situated in a district that provides the best quality of education in China. The educational environment was not only competitive but also kept me in a bubble of elite education, where I internalized the idea of orienting my life with learning. I decided to study in the US when I was in a summer debate camp at Cornell in my last year of middle school. I was

overwhelmed by the highly competitive and high-pressure environment of the Chinese high-school entrance examination. At the same time, I was attracted by the liberal environment in the US higher education that I witnessed at Cornell. Therefore, my identity as a Chinese international student reflects both my privilege and the subjectivity in the internationalization of higher education. Through my experience studying in the US, I gained intercultural competency, where I had the chance to understand both the American and Chinese worldviews.

At the same time, as a scholar who is trained by the Western Academy, it is undeniable to acknowledge that my preference to use English as my primary language for academic writing and my credentials from various American universities have already positioned me complicit in the intellectual imperialism role (Vital, & Yao, 2021). Being intellectually imperialistic means that, as a scholar trained in the dominant Western epistemologies, I am ignorant of and unfamiliar with other non-Western academic epistemologies. Even as a Chinese national, I had never received any training in the Chinese academy, and I do find myself having a bias of being skeptical about the credibility of the scholarship in Mandarin compared to the ones in English. This skepticism towards the quality of scholarship in Chinese reflects partially the true reality of the current Chinese academia and reproduces Western exceptionalism and hegemonic thinking of what counts as knowledge. At the same time, this skepticism also reflects that I share a similar negative view of Chinese knowledge, which I internalized in the Westernization of Chinese education and American higher education (Guo et al, 2022). Therefore, as I slowly learned and became critical about my positionality as a Chinese scholar being trained in the Western Academy, I intentionally selected multiple Chinese scholarships in this paper to break the possibility of reinforcing the dominant narrative by Western scholars on internationalization.

Additionally, as a Chinese national scholar, I am struggling to construct my scholarship within the context of a biased dominant narrative about China in Western academic writing. In the process of building my understanding of internationalization in English academic writing, it is inevitable to encounter scholarship that considers Taiwan as a country or language like Chinese "machination" or Chinese "imperialism" without any further explanation (Kapfudzaruwa, 2024). I feel the discomfort of encountering these terms when they were used as a tautological argument rather than to provide concrete arguments to sustain their simplistic oppositional attitude. However, despite the biased anti-China sentiment revealed in their scholarship, I still had to use their scholarship in conversations with other scholars. Therefore, it is also an implicit connotation of voices influenced by the dominant Western narrative of China that do not necessarily represent my beliefs or values.

Moreover, the geopolitical tension between China and the US has shaped not only my understanding of my positionality and my choice of being a scholar using critical internationalization, decolonial, and post-development theories. As a Chinese international student, I have been navigating through two distinctive ways of ontologies and epistemologies between China and the US. Because China banned and censored various social media and information sources, I have had the chance to compare and contrast how both China and the US construct and present reality. This distinction of the narrative construction of reality between the two countries has become explicitly obvious to me, starting with the news about the Hong Kong protests in 2019, the constant debates about the sovereignty of Taiwan and Tibet, the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and the visa revocation in 2025. Being able to see various narratives constructed around the same event between the two countries made me aware of the importance of questioning the dominant narrative and how the dominant narrative has a powerful influence

on people's sense-making towards an event. Furthermore, as a Chinese who was educated in Chinese public education until ninth grade, an essential part of my Chinese national identity is closely influenced by the Chinese patriotic education of the history that China was partially colonized by Western countries from 1840 to 1949. During the period of partially colonized China, different waves of Chinese international students were sent or willingly chose to study in the US for the sole purpose of learning Western knowledge to decolonize China (Cheng, Lin, & Fan, 2020). Therefore, my choice of using critical epistemology and decolonial theories can be seen as a continuation of this train of thought of decolonizing China from the West colonization in the recent context of being critical of the coloniality of power in American higher education.

As a result, being a Chinese international student and a scholar trained in the Western Academy, I am aware of my complicity in reproducing the colonial power in my knowledge production process. Instead of trying to seek a quick solution for or absolve me from my "implication in the colonial patterns and practices that we reproduce systematically and interpersonally", I am committed to continuing to practice a deeper self-reflexivity and develop my own "radars for when we are reproducing these patterns and habit ourselves" (Stein, & McCartney, 2021, p.8).

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# Bridging the Silence: LGBT/Queer Asian/American Collegians and the Politics of Belonging on and off Campus, 1970s-1990s

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**Abstract**

**English Version**

The histories of LGBT/Queer and Asian/American student movements in U.S. higher education have largely been written separately, resulting in a shadowing of the history of queer Asian/American students' experiences. This paper addresses this missing history through a historiographical review of scholarly literature and published autobiographies from the 1970s to the 1990s. The analysis reveals several key patterns of experience for these students: (1) a double marginalization within both queer and Asian/American campus organizations; (2) a corresponding reliance on off-campus groups for a sense of belonging; (3) the strategic fragmentation of identity as a means of survival; and (4) the eventual emergence of dedicated queer Asian/American student groups in the 1990s, which faced their own internal tensions over purpose and identity. By bridging this historiographical silence, this study not only recovers unheard voices from the past but also offers critical insights for contemporary efforts to build genuinely inclusive university environments for students with intersecting identities.

**Japanese [日本語要旨] Version**

米国高等教育とその内部における学生運動における歴史研究は、LGBT／クィア学生と、アジア系アメリカ人学生とを別々に切り離して蓄積されてきた。このようなシングル・イシュー型の歴史記述は、LGBT／クィアのアジア系アメリカ人学生の存在を後景化する。本稿は、人種民族的構造とシス異性愛的規範の交差点に立つ、このような学生たちに係る1970-1990年代の「沈黙させられた歴史」に焦点を当てることで、交差的な歴史の掘り起こしに取り組む。本稿の分析からはLGBT／クィアのアジア系アメリカ人学生の歴史に関する4点の重要な知見が得られた。第一に、LGBT／クィア学生組織とアジア系アメリカ人学生組織の両方への障壁という二重の周縁化経験である。第二に、二重障壁を理由とした、学外組織への居場所の追求という経験である。第三に、生存戦略としてのアイデンティティの断片化というストラテジーである。第四に、1990年代の複合的アイデンティティに基づく学生組織登場と、その内部における目的やアイデンティティにまつわる緊張関係である。交差性のただなかに置かれた歴史記述の沈黙に橋をかけることで、本レビュー研究は、耳を傾けられてこなかった過去の声を聞くのみならず、現代の大学環境をインターセクショナルでインクルーシブなものにするための示唆を提供する。

**Key words**

Queer, Asian/American, History of Higher Education, Intersectionality, College Students

## Introduction

The history of student movements in U.S. higher education evolved in tandem with the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. Within this landscape, the history of LGBTQ+ student organizing and the history of identity-based activism by Asian/American students have each been established as distinct fields of study. However, these historical accounts have tended to center the experiences of white students or, in the case of Asian/American history, implicitly cisgender-heterosexual students. As a result, the experiences of "Queer Asian/American students," who exist at the intersection of these identities, have been doubly erased from the historical record.

This paper aims to illuminate this missing history. To do so, it undertakes a historiographical review of existing scholarship and autobiographical accounts by queer Asian/Americans to answer two central research questions: First, what were the organizational and personal experiences of queer Asian/American students on and off campus from the 1970s through the 1990s? Second, why has this specific history remained missing from dominant historical narratives to this day? To explore these questions, this paper employs intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), as a critical lens to make visible the unique experiences born at the nexus of multiple oppressions, namely race and sexuality. Furthermore, drawing on queer theory, which is influenced by Michel Foucault (1978), it attempts to deconstruct normative historical narratives and recover marginalized voices

## Background

Higher education institutions, including universities and colleges, have served as a site for students' political engagement and voice for social betterment. Across the almost entire history of higher education in the U.S., college students have organized, gathered, discussed, and

worked to change their campus as well as society. One of such student groups is identity-based student organizations of the minoritized. With the history of the civil rights movement, students with "non-traditional" demographic features, including, though not limited to, female students, African American students, Chicano/a/x and Latino/a/x students, and LGBTQ+ students, have tackled inequality surrounding them on and off campus and created identity-based organizations for each.

LGBTQ+ student organizations have been a powerful catalyst for the off-campus social movements advocating for the rights of those who have been seen as "deviant" or "unethical" in terms of gender and sexual identities and behaviors. The history of such students, although many of them in the early phase often refer to themselves as somewhat exclusive terms such as "homosexual" or "gay and lesbian," has been delved into and talked about either in or out of academia. However, there remains a specific history relatively missing to have seldom been talked or heard in the history of LGBTQ+ college students. That is, Asian/American students engaged in such organizations.

According to Rivero (2022), previous literature in Asian/American studies has repeatedly critically indicated that Asian/American people in the U.S. are, regardless of their gender and sexual characteristics, stereotyped as being "castrated" and "desexualized" race. With such an understanding, more scholars have attempted to delve into the history of intimate relations and sexual behaviors of Asian/American migrants and diasporas; nonetheless, the history of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students in the U.S. higher education remains under the soil.

Thence, this paper explores the not-too-often-spoken-or-heard history of LGBT/Queer students; that is, the history of "queer Asian/American students in the U.S." by reviewing the literature on the histories of queer students, Asian/American students, and the intersection of

them. The following chapter explains the literature on the history of LGBTQ+ students' campus organizing in the U.S., mostly focused on students with "non-labeled racial identities," which is white (and in most cases, male) students. The third chapter explores the history of Asian/American students' campus organizing. The fourth chapter discusses the history of LGBTQ+ Asian/American people regardless of their higher education affiliation, which is followed by the brief conclusion of this work.

In this paper, the terms to refer to queer and trans community, such as LGBT, LGBTQ+, and queer, are used by reflecting each historical description and existing literature. To include all of these different terms, the paper uses the word "LGBT/Queer" when it is necessary. The term "Asian/American" is employed to express the postmodern understandings of the identity enactment of this racial group. As Palumbo-Liu (1999: 1) explains, "'Asian/American' marks both the distinction installed between 'Asian' and 'American' and a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement." When citing specific names of movements, groups, and events, the paper uses similar terms, such as Asian American, Asian-American, or Asian, depending on the documents.

## Methodology

This review paper employs a historical review method. Specifically, it involves two steps: first, critically examining the scholarly literature on the history of both LGBT/Queer student movements and Asian/American student movements in the U.S. to identify the gaps, namely, the absence of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students. Furthermore, as a preliminary step to fill this void, this paper analyzes published autobiographies, essays, and anthologies written by LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans. While not traditional archival documents, these narratives represent the most valuable available sources for tracing the personal experiences and emotions

that have fallen through the cracks of institutional records. The selection of these texts focused on those containing specific mentions of U.S. college life during the period from the 1970s to the 1990s.

## Historical Review

### *The history of LGBT/Queer students and campus organizing*

U.S. higher education was originally designed for white male upper-class able-bodied youth, and had not seen the diverse sexuality and gender identities as its constituents, though the non-heterosexual practices and crossdressing/non-cisgender expression existed in such an early era[3] and the collegians engaged in such acts were often purged from higher education institutions[4], until the 1960s. Inspired by the upward momentum of rights advocacy for civil rights and anti-war movements, universities and colleges began to serve as a site for political and social organizing for historically marginalized students, including LGBT/Queer students.

The U.S.-first student organization themed at non-normative sex and gender issues is the Student Homophile League (SHL) of Columbia University, established in 1966. A bisexual identifying sophomore student, Robert Martin, founded the organization, gaining support from Columbia and Barnard representatives, religious advisers, and two national leaders for gay/lesbian rights, Frank Kameny and Barbara Gittings (NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, n.d.). According to D'Emilio (1992), in the early stage of this organization, all of the students had to use pseudonyms, considering the hostile social setting at that moment. One thing putting

[3] Not only the lack of record, but also the erasure and ignorance of same-sex desire and passionate relationship were/are pervasive. Particularly, the romantic and erotic relationship between female figures are often overlooked as "friendship" rather than the history of "lesbianism." Look at Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and Oram & Turnbull (2001)
[4] During Cold War, not small number of people labeled as "homosexual" as well as conceived communists were purged. One of the most well known events is John Committee's investigation in Florida, which was described as "Florida's homophobic witch-hunts" by Schnur (1997: 156)

the organization in an arduous situation was that Columbia University and its Administration's Committee on Student Organizations (CSO) required all the student organizations to submit a member list to be approved as officially recognized organizations (Martin, 1992). One year after SHL had begun the activities, Robert Martin asked "the most prominent student leaders" to "become pro forma members." (1992: 259), and submitted the list, including Dotson Rader and John Ward, which made their history as the first recognized LGBT themed student organization in the U.S.

Contrary to the first assimilationist attitude of the Student Homophile League following the political stance of the Mattachine Society, the group made itself a more confrontational one in 1970, renaming the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which reflected the militancy of the gay liberation and other racial activism on and off campus (Beemyn, 2003). At this time, other SHL came up at Cornell University and New York University, as well as the LGBT student organizing at Boston area colleges, Rutgers, and the University of Minnesota (Garves, 2012). Two students at the University of Minnesota, Stephan Ihrig and Koreen Phelps, with another undergraduate student member, Robert Halfhill, established a student political organization for gay and lesbian liberation as the Fight Repression of Erotic Expression (FREE) in 1969. Their first stance was political oriented and organized educational activities ("teaching misinformed straight about sexuality"), social activities ("dances, parties, happenings, [and] dinners"), and political activities ("petitions, peaceful demonstrations, [the] ACLU, Peace and Freedom Party, legislators, and the church") (Dilley, 2019: 15-19). Reichard (2024) mentioned in the book documenting the history of LGBT student organizations in California that the main activities of those student groups from the 1960s to the 1970s include discussion groups, dance events, and peer counseling. He found the meaning of social events, even dance events, in relation to the politicization of the student

organization; that is, those events functioned to raise awareness of the anti-gay activism and to create communities to collectively tackle such backlashes (Ibid., 2024).

Dilley (2019) summarizes the changes in the purpose and stance of LGBT campus organizing from the 1980s to the 1990s. In his investigation, the 1980s were the age when non-heterosexual students organized activism to call for "campus recognition, protection, and funding" (119). During the HIV/AIDS pandemic, students fought for funding for medical care and sexual health education, and protection from discrimination and physical threats. Inspired by the forms and strategies employed by ACT UP and Queer Nation, students in the 1980s enhanced their visibility through interactions in public spaces and acting more openly, which led them win the creation of non-discrimination statements and statutes on campus.

Coming to the 1990s, gay, lesbian, and increasingly bisexual students aimed to assimilate into campus. "An abject approbation turned into acquiesce, at least if the non-heterosexuals accepted the structures and values of the campus. In other words, if the non-heterosexual students accepted the minority role (which the campus might begrudgingly grant), even in how they thought of their personal identities, non-heterosexual students could, by the 1990s, engage in campus activities and cultural events. Non-heterosexual collegians could do so as long as they stressed how similar to heterosexuals they were, as long as they were not "too gay" in their self-identities or their campus activities, as long as they were not too outlandish in their affect or behavior" (Dilley 2019: 233). In this decade, the main political discussions were developed about the prohibition of non-heterosexual students from the military service and campus housing policies, which did not equate marriage with same-sex partnership. However, this established narrative of LGBT/Queer student organizing, implicitly centered on white student experiences,

begs the question: where were students of color, particularly Asian/American students, in this history?

***The history of Asian/American students***

The history of Asian/American students in higher education has been overlooked (Lee, 2010). To grasp the history of them in detail, it is vital to understand two big waves of immigration of Asian descendants to the U.S.: from the 1840s to the 1930s, and after 1965. Museus (2014) summarizes the milestone events of Asian/American immigration and the higher education-related events with huge impacts on the Asian/American community. According to him, in the first wave of the mass immigration from Asia to the U.S. were mostly labor immigrants who contributed to the development of American urban planning.

Despite their huge contribution, they were daily oppressed due to racial discrimination and economic exploitation, and specific ethnicities were discriminated in more explicit ways according to the political situations, such as “the Chinese Exclusion Act” in 1882 which is the first law banning ethnic-based immigration and the incarceration of Japanese/American in 1942 to 1945 for the racial antagonism towards Japanese American community after the Japanese military attacks Pearl Harbor. Approximately three months after the beginning of the mass internment, the director of War Relocation Authority (WRA), Milton Eisenhower, founded the Japanese American Student Relocation Council and moved around 4000 Japanese American students to college in West Coast. Those relocated to college had pressure to take responsibility to serve as “ambassadors of goodwill” who have a positive impact on society by gaining access to college education. Museus diagnoses that this might cause the emergence of the model minority myth of Japanese Americans in the U.S. higher education.

In 1965, the Immigration Act, which repealed the racially based immigration restriction, and the war in Southeast Asia, including the Vietnam War, led to a huge number of refugees from the Indochina area to the U.S., which is the second huge wave of Asian immigration. In the mid-1960s to 1970s, college students often organized political and social activism to fight for African American rights, women's rights, gay and lesbian rights, and to stop the Vietnam War. According to Nguyen & Gasman (2015), the Asian/American movement was tremendously inspired by the Black Power ideology. Contrary to the mutually isolated relations among the Asian/American community prior to World War Ⅱ, the pan-ethnic Asian/American community emerged in the 1960s due to the common language and common racial experiences as resources to build pan-Asian/American identity.

At the San Francisco State University, Chinese students founded the Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action (ICSA) in 1967, Filipino American students established the Philippine-American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE), and students at the UC Berkley built the Asian American Political Alliance (AAPA) in 1968. These three student organizations joined the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), which had been working on racial justice in 60s, and collaboratively acted to call for increasing Asian/American faculty and ethnic study programs reflecting the needs of the Asian/American community (Museus, 2014). The students at UCLA also founded Gibra, a local newspaper which disseminates the information on Asian/American movements mainly to college students to encourage them to join activism and vent out feelings and thoughts (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015). On the one hand, students in this era attempted to dismantle the myth surrounding Asian/American, including the model minority discourse; however, on the other hand, some of them take advantage of their relatively privileged

racialization compared to Latino and African American students as an honorary white race (Nguyen & Gasman, 2015).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Asian/American college students organized collective movements for the tenure battle of Dr. Don Nakanishi, who was denied promotion to tenured faculty because of his race at UCLA, and for the murder of Won-Joon Yoon killed by a White supremacist, Benjamin Smith (Museus, 2014). Interestingly, a survey conducted in 1992 about Asian-American students' perceived roles of ethnic-identity-based student organizations on campus shows that although they admitted the importance of such groups in ethnic identity development, many did not have time to join them and the tendency to be a member of those groups can be subject to their feeling of isolation on campus; the US-born students are more inclined not to join it than foreign-born students (Wang, Sedlacek, & Westbrook, 1992).

While Asian/American students forged a powerful political identity on campus, the historical literature rarely addresses the internal diversity within these movements, particularly concerning sexuality and gender identity. The following section will bridge this gap by exploring the specific experiences of students living at the intersection of these identities.

### *LGBT/Queer Asian/American students in the history of the U.S. higher education*

Amy Sueyoshi (2016a), a pioneering scholar of queer Asian American study indicated that the academe has hardly focused on the history of queer Asian Americans. Although she and other leading scholars have accumulated historical writings about those with the interlocking identities, the history of college students at the intersection has not been shed light on, whereas the research on their experiences in current higher education has been gradually accumulated (Masamitsu, 2023). In this section, I peruse the autobiographies, essays, and an anthology written by LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans, all of which are not limited to, but including the information

of their college life, and try to track their college lives and campus organizing from the 1970s to the 1990s.

In Kumashiro's (2004) edited book, *Restoried Selves: Autobiographies of Queer Asian/Pacific American Activists*, documenting LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans' autobiographies, some people revealed their engagement in political and social organizing on and off campus. Nur-e-alam S. Chisty, who is from Bangladesh and was a student at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie at the time this book was edited, participated in both the Asian Students' Alliance (ASA) and the Queer Coalition. They write, "I remember sighing with relief when I learned that there were other queers of color in this world and that the term, 'Asian activist,' was not just another oxymoron!" (p. 11). Having said that, they also admitted the lack of a sense of belonging due to double barriers both in ASA and in Queer Coalition. They say, "While I enthusiastically devoted my energy to both, rarely did I feel my identities as a person of color and a queer person matter simultaneously." (p. 11). After they sought out queer-of-color organizations, they seemed to find the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association of New York (SALGA NYC) as one of the spaces for their identities to coexist. SALGA NYC is "a social, political and support group for queer and trans people who trace their descent from the South Asian region from the countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma (Myanmar), India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Tibet as well as people of South Asian descent from countries such as Guyana, Trinidad and Kenya" (SALGANYC, n.d.). This shows that there was no queer Asian student organization at the Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, and they needed to find their space to belong as a queer Asian/American outside the campus.

You Yun, a Chinese American activist, also joined the off-campus group "coming-out group" in 1994 and met the first Chinese lesbian in Minneapolis when she was a graduate

student. The two joined a group, PALs (Pacific Asian Lesbian and Bisexual Women Network), as well as "the first Midwest Asian lesbian and bisexual women's retreat in Minneapolis" in 1995. In an anthology by the Pacific/Asian Lesbians of Santa Cruz. California (Chung, Kim, & Lemeshewsky, 1987) "Between the Lines," a short essay by Japanese American lesbian college student – Akemi –, is contributed. Sharing her own experiences of suppressing her lesbian identity for the sake of Asian identity, she concluded her essay with hope for this growing group, "many of You could relate to my experience. That's the beauty of this new community. I find myself having to explain or teach people about myself and what it's like to be a minority within a minority. It gets very exhausting. With You I feel that the need to explain is gone. With You I can share my experiences. Whether You realize it or not, there is a connection or bond between us, and I plan to use it." (p. 18). Overall, The off-campus communities seemed to serve the queer Asian/American students as the space for belonging and social gathering to find the people who can share the experiences derived from the intersectional identities.

Another person in *Restoried Selves*, Roland Sintos Coloma, who was a doctoral Filipinx/American student at the Ohio State University, shared his participation in fraternity yearning for belonging and ironically having emotional and physical distance between and among men due to his sexuality/gender (Kumashiro, 2004). As to their identities, they write "I learned to clearly demarcate my interactions with straight male friends and classmates from my interactions with baklas. Lines were drawn, and my worlds separated. I even learned to lead separate home and school lives, a conscientious practice that carried over in the United States." (p. 23) and continued "Joining a fraternity and conforming my behavior, appearance, and language to the dominant majority were my strategies of straightening up and e-race-ing whatever made me different." (p. 24). Interestingly, their participation in "Greek life" let them

engage more in social justice oriented organizations on campus. They write reflecting back to the encounter with queer Asian American and Pacific Islander students through such organizations, “these Asian American and Pacific Islander queer and queer-positive radicals raised my critical consciousness; they represented a strong political voice articulating the concerns of Asian American and Pacific Islander students and other communities of color” and “it also profoundly shaped my racial and sexual identities” (p. 24-25). This shows that queer Asian American students did not necessarily organize the intersectional student groups, instead work on political and social issues through Greek system and other-issues-oriented student groups.

Kumashiro (2004) also shared his own journey in the graduate school, where he and his friend founded the group named “LGBT Asian and Asian Americans,” which was “a social and support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer Asians and Asian Americans that meets monthly” (p. 68) Despite his original purpose, many participants have more interests in dating with White people and more social gathering, the group went into a confliction among the members, leading to many people’s left. This case shows that different people have different motivations to join the groups, which is not limited to political or social justice-oriented actions. Kumashiro submitted his doctoral dissertation in 1994 at Harvard University, so it is thought that he made the group in 1980s to 1990s. This shows There seemed to be no student organizations for such intersectional identities or any social groups even off-campus near the area, or if any, they seemed to operate low-ley.

The autobiographical accounts and essays examined, though fragmented, reveal several common patterns in the experiences of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students from the 1970s through the 1990s. First, many students experienced a "double marginalization", feeling that parts of their identity were ignored in both Asian student groups and LGBTQ+ student groups on

campus. As a second pattern, this often compelled them to seek a sense of belonging in off-campus communities, such as SALGA NYC or PALs, where their intersectional identities could be fully embraced. Third, as Roland's case illustrates, some adopted the "fragmentation" of their identity as a survival strategy to navigate normative university environments. Finally, while student groups specifically for LGBT/Queer Asian/Americans began to emerge in the 1990s, this nascent stage was also marked by internal diversity and tensions regarding the group's purpose (political versus social), as seen in Kumashiro's experience. These patterns demonstrate how LGBT/Queer Asian/American students navigated an institutional void to forge their own communities and identities.

As Sueyoshi (2016b) mentions, queer Asian American student groups started to be formed in the 1990s, such as Cal Q&A at UC Berkley and Q&A at Stanford University. The number of those groups is still limited and relatively new. At the University of Pennsylvania, the first queer and Asian student group, Penn Q&A, was founded in 2014. It is the time to start to see the beginning of the history of those campus organizing across the world. More archiving and historical researchers should be needed to track the new movements of LGBT/Queer Asian/American students' campus organizing.

Revisiting the findings through an explicit theoretical lens further clarifies the significance of these historical patterns. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, the experiences documented in this review cannot be understood as the simple accumulation of racial marginalization and sexual marginalization. Rather, LGBT/Queer Asian/American students encountered a qualitatively distinct form of exclusion produced at the intersection of racialized and heteronormative institutional structures. Their double marginalization within both Asian/American student organizations and LGBTQ+ student

organizations exemplifies how single-axis frameworks of identity-based organizing rendered intersectional subjects unintelligible within dominant campus narratives. The key themes identified in the literature and autobiographical accounts—double marginalization, reliance on off-campus communities, identity fragmentation as a survival strategy, and internal tensions within emerging organizations—can be read as historically situated responses to intersecting regimes of power. From a queer theoretical perspective, informed by Foucault (1978), these strategies illuminate how universities functioned as normative spaces that disciplined sexuality through both visibility and silence. The fragmentation of identity described by several narrators was not merely an individual choice, but a tactical negotiation with institutional expectations that demanded racial legibility and sexual respectability to remain separate.

## Conclusion

Graves (2012), argues that the history of queer in education was not welcomed in the college of education while reflecting back on her career in the 1990s and 2000s. Although the last two decades have seen more scholars working on queer history in (higher) education, the intersectional lenses seem to be often left out. Intersectionality lets researchers to look at the unseen and unheard histories which are not to be compensated with other voices as Crenshaw (1989) theorized as “the greater than the sum.” The first job for us as researchers is to ask ourselves, “What is missing?,” but this is not the goal of the exploration. The question which we should ask further is “why is it still missing?” The history of Asian/American students in the U.S. higher education has been marginalized and downplayed in the academe (Lee, 2010), and the same thing can be said for the history of queer people. In the time when the number of tenured-faculty is decreasing and more scholars with advanced degrees are working in an unstable work environment (Altbach, 1999), the structured epistemological injustice as to what

themes in scholarships are valued and what are not has been perpetuated. This paper attempted to come closer to the missing voices and memories about LGBT/Queer Asian/American students in the U.S. so that it can grapple with the injustice. The limitation is that this paper does not cover the historical materials, and instead focus on the literature. This point needs to be made up by the future research by analyzing the historical materials and archival data across the nation.

By explicitly situating these historical experiences within intersectionality and queer theory, this study demonstrates that the silencing of LGBT/Queer Asian/American collegians was not accidental, but structurally produced through the epistemological boundaries of both higher education institutions and academic historiography itself. Attending to these intersectional absences challenges us to reconsider how histories of student movements are written, whose experiences are rendered legible, and whose remain unheard.

Unearthing this history is not merely an act of correcting the historical record. The challenges these pioneers faced—navigating dual marginalization, identity fragmentation, and internal debates about their organizations' purpose—resonate with the experiences of queer students of color on campuses today. Listening to their unheard voices offers critical insights for contemporary universities striving to build genuinely inclusive environments.

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