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Rethinking hair cropping in Ghanaian schools: coloniality, discipline, and the path to reform

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Rethinking hair cropping in Ghanaian schools: coloniality, discipline, and the path to reform

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ABSTRACT

Grooming rules for Black hair are contested as racialised discipline, yet their colonial afterlives in African schooling remain underexplored. This article examines Ghana's compulsory hair-cropping mandate for girls in Senior High Schools as a socio-legal problem of embodied governance, focusing on two flashpoints: the 2025 forced shaving of a first-year student at Yaa Asantewaa Girls' SHS and the 2021 High Court ruling in *Marhuguy v. Achimota School* on locked hair. Using historical scholarship on missionary and colonial schooling, Ghana Education Service codes, constitutional doctrine, case law, and media/social testimony, it traces how 'neatness', 'modesty', and 'discipline' function as an aesthetic regime regulating Black girlhood. Aesthetic governance explains how race-neutral standards encode hierarchies of respectability; reverse discourse captures how publics re-signify natural hair as dignity and rightful presence in school. The analysis reveals that the policy endures less through pedagogical evidence than through a common sense that interprets moral character through visual conformity, with costs associated with belonging and recognition. It concludes with a reform standard: content-neutral, evenly enforced 'neat-natural' guidelines that permit culturally resonant styles and restrict what can be justified on grounds of safety, hygiene, and non-disruption. The Ghana case offers a transferable analytic frame for other post-colonial systems.

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Introduction

Grooming regulations on Black hair have become a prominent site of racialised discipline in schools across the African diaspora and beyond. From the policing of Afros, braids, and locs in the United States and the United Kingdom to bans on 'unruly' hair in South Africa, studies show that apparently neutral appearance codes disproportionately target Black children and young people (Dumas 2014; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Rajan-Rankin 2021). These codes position natural Black hair as unruly and in need of correction, turning it into a corporeal site where 'political racism serves as a tool of governmentality and regulation of bodies' (Rajan-Rankin 2021, 154). In doing so, they extend colonial hierarchies of aesthetics and respectability into contemporary schooling,

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marking certain textures and styles as inherently incompatible with academic seriousness and good behaviour.

In Ghana, the long-standing requirement that girls in public Senior High Schools (SHS) must wear closely cropped hair is often defended as a pragmatic measure to promote neatness, hygiene, and equality. Headteachers and officials argue that short hair prevents distraction, reduces costs for parents, and symbolises a disciplined school ethos. Yet, as this article seeks to argue, these practices are not simply contemporary responses to resource constraints or modern anxieties about youth. They are relics of colonial governance and a genealogy of cultural erasure and bodily control that remains under-explored in current scholarship. Historical records trace the origins of hair-cropping mandates to missionary and colonial schools, where cutting African girls' hair was integral to producing the image of the 'good schoolgirl': modest, respectable, and visibly separated from 'pagan' or 'backward' communities (Bizimungu 2021; Essel 2021). What was framed as a unifying national policy after independence, in fact, perpetuated a colonial norm across countries such as Togo, Kenya, and Uganda, where schoolgirls were required to cut their hair to present this same ideal, reinforced by decades of missionary and government messaging. Its post-independence survival lay in the fact that colonial grooming norms were not abandoned but bureaucratically normalised, folded into the administrative management of mass schooling and re-legitimated as neutral indicators of discipline and equality.

Recent controversies have brought these legacies to the surface. In October 2025, a viral video of a first-year student at Yaa Asantewaa Girls' SHS in Kumasi weeping as her long natural hair was shaved off as a condition of admission reignited controversy over Ghana's short-hair rules in public SHSs. Public debate quickly polarised between those who defended the rule as essential for discipline and those who condemned it as abusive and degrading. Earlier, the 2021 *Marhuguy v. Achimota School* litigation over a Rastafarian student's locs had already exposed the fragility of claims that school policies are neutral tools of order rather than mechanisms of religious and racial exclusion. Together, these flashpoints position hair policy as a litmus test of Ghana's ability to reconcile discipline, equality, and cultural identity within a postcolonial education system.

Senior officials have defended the rule as discipline, warning that relaxing hair rules would weaken standards across school life. According to the education minister, school is 'not a place for beauty contests', and any challenge to grooming codes is read as moral decline rather than a legitimate claim to dignity or cultural expression. Such arguments echo what Bonilla-Silva (2018) terms 'colour-blind' racism: policies are framed as universal and necessary for standards, while the racialised and gendered assumptions underpinning them remain unspoken. Empirical reports that exemptions are quietly granted for some foreign or white students in Ghana while Ghanaian girls with natural long hair are disciplined underscore how a colonial aesthetic hierarchy persists in practice (Asaase Radio 2021; MyJoyOnline 2019). European textures and styles become the unmarked norm of neatness, while Black natural hair is recoded as vanity or deviance rather than a valid mode of Black self-presentation (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Rajan-Rankin 2021).

This article interrogates the rationale for compulsory hair-cropping in Ghanaian public SHSs and the wider discourse that presents it as necessary for discipline,

character formation, and equality. While taking seriously official concerns about order, cost, and safety, it traces the practice's colonial genealogy and examines its consequences for students' dignity, belonging, and access to education. I argue that the short-hair mandate functions as a form of aesthetic governance through which colonial norms of respectability regulate Black girlhood, rendering some bodies and styles only conditionally admissible within school space. More specifically, the mandate endures through a dispersed governance chain in which ministerial and GES discourse authorise norms of neatness and discipline, school authorities operationalise them through admission and routine enforcement, and public moral discourse normalises them as common sense, even as courts and rights-based actors intermittently contest them.

Framing hair in this way shifts attention away from the supposedly 'bad' or 'stubborn' girl and towards the institutional and historical logics that make forced cutting appear legitimate. Analytically, the article treats compulsory hair-cropping as a disciplinary regime of embodied governance: a mode of school power that does not merely regulate appearance, but links bodily conformity to admission, moral evaluation, belonging, and educability through routinised practices of inspection, correction, and exclusion.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative socio-legal and interpretive design to reconstruct the socio-legal life of Ghana's hair rules across four linked source domains. First, it draws on historical and sociocultural scholarship on missionary schooling, colonial education, and Black hair politics to trace the genealogy through which cropped hair became normalised as a sign of civility, discipline, and respectable schoolgirlhood. Second, it examines policy and administrative materials, especially Ghana Education Service codes, reported ministerial and school-authority statements, and reform-oriented commentary, to reconstruct the official logic through which hair regulation is justified in terms of order, uniformity, hygiene, and character formation. Third, it reads constitutional doctrine and case law, most centrally *Marhguy v. Achimota School*, as jurisprudential sites in which hair becomes legible in relation to dignity, education, equality, and religious freedom. Fourth, it uses publicly available media materials, including televised vox pops, news interviews, and verified social media reactions to the 2025 Yaa Asantewaa incident, alongside hair-related statements reported in the Achimota litigation record, to recover student and civic interpretations of humiliation, belonging, discipline, and resistance. These materials are purposefully selected to trace how hair rules are justified and contested.

In doing so, the article makes three linked contributions. First, it theorises compulsory hair-cropping as part of the coloniality of schooling in Ghana, connecting contemporary grooming codes to wider projects of disciplining African bodies and sensibilities. Second, it demonstrates how hair disputes crystallise tensions between competing policy goals of discipline, equality, religious freedom, and cultural identity, challenging colour-blind narratives that present grooming rules as neutral. Third, it advances a reform agenda that moves beyond a simple abolitionist demand by proposing a content-neutral grooming standard I term operationally neat-natural: Afro-textured hair and culturally resonant styles such as low afros, braids, and cornrows are permitted, provided they are clean, non-obstructive, and restricted only on demonstrable grounds of safety, hygiene, or material disruption. Here, 'neat' does not preserve a colonial aesthetic ideal; it is re-specified to mean even-handed maintenance rather than racialised conformity.

The article first traces the colonial and racial roots of Ghanaian school hair codes, then examines cultural identity, student experience, and the ‘discipline argument’. It next centres students’ voices and agency before developing a decolonial reform orientation around ‘neat-natural’ grooming standards that safeguard order while affirming Black girls’ dignity, cultural identity, and constitutional rights.

Colonial and racial roots of school hair codes in Ghana

At stake in the hair-cropping debates is a racialised aesthetic order that codes Black hair as intrinsically incompatible with ‘professionalism’ and discipline (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Sini 2016). In Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly’s terms, school hair regulations are not neutral but part of a broader apparatus of social control that disciplines Black bodies, valorising whiteness, and pathologising Black aesthetics, a dynamic Graham (2016) shows is reinforced by wider disciplinary practices that cast Black students as especially in need of surveillance and correction. These rules sediment longer histories of enslavement and colonialism in which Black hair is constructed as messy, unruly, and incompatible with the ‘successful’ student subject (Rajan-Rankin 2021; Sini 2016). In Ghana, this coloniality is visible in the Education Minister’s insistence that long hair has no place in a serious school environment and in disciplinary standards that translate racial hierarchy into ostensibly neutral norms of ‘respectability’ and ‘hygiene’, which continue to organise the regulation of student hair (Darkwa 2021; Foucault and Sheridan 1977; Ghana Education Service 2024, 9; Mercer 2003; Quijano 2000; Rooks 1996).

Conceptually, I frame Ghanaian school hair rules as a form of aesthetic governance. Drawing on Foucault’s account of disciplinary power and on work on ‘rule by aesthetics’ in urban and institutional contexts, I use this term to describe modes of regulation that operate through race-coded norms of appearance rather than through formal sanction alone (Foucault and Sheridan 1977; Ghertner 2010). Complementing this, I mobilise the notion of counter-discourse, following Foucault’s idea of ‘reverse discourse’ in which subordinated groups re-signify stigmatised traits from their own standpoint, to read Ghanaian girls’ and commentators’ affirmations of natural hair as a source of dignity and glory as challenges to the school’s authority to define respectable Black femininity (Foucault and Sheridan 1977; Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Rajan-Rankin 2021). Together, these frameworks allow me to analyse hair-cropping in Ghanaian senior high schools as a site where colonial aesthetic hierarchies are both enforced and contested in the everyday governance of Black girls’ bodies.

Recent critical and decolonial analyses of Ghanaian school hair policy trace compulsory shaving to colonial-era mission and state schools, where Afrocentric and locked styles were cast as ‘unsightly’, ‘ungodly’, or ‘untameable’ and closely cropped hair was enforced as a visible marker of hygiene, Christian conversion, and ‘civilisation’, rather than as an evidence-based educational requirement (Essel 2021; Antwi and Bonsu Assibey 2024; Bizimungu 2021; Manfo 2018;). Mission schools, embedded in colonial power structures, explicitly sought to cultivate ‘Christian civility’ through regimes of uniformity, bodily discipline, and hygiene. Within these structures, students’ appearance, and particularly girls’ dress and grooming, was tightly regulated as a central technique of

moral training and the production of ‘respectable’ Christian womanhood (Leach 2008; Sill 2010; Wiafe 2021).

After independence, public secondary schools largely retained missionary grooming norms, recoding them as neatness, modesty, hygiene, and equality. Contemporary hair policy can, therefore, be read as a ‘colonial attachment’ to mission and castle-school practices that framed African girls’ hair as difficult to manage, morally dangerous, and in need of control, rather than as the product of any formal statutory requirement by the Ministry of Education or the Ghana Education Service (Antwi and Bonsu Assibey 2024; Bizimungu 2021; Darkwa 2021; Essel 2021). Drawing on Arkorful’s decolonial reading, Ghanaian hair codes can be understood as redeploying hierarchies rooted in European sumptuary traditions: legal and cultural regimes that historically regulated social rank and ‘proper’ bodily presentation in Europe and its colonies (Arkorful 2025; see also Kuper 1973; Ross 1983). In Ghana, these aesthetic hierarchies and regimented school cultures were first institutionalised in castle schools at Christiansborg and Cape Coast, established primarily to educate Euro-African children of European men and African women, and were later generalised across public education (Adick 2023). The contemporary GES Code of Conduct, with its requirement that students’ hair be ‘clean, neat and modest’ and avoid unspecified ‘extremes’, exemplifies how colonial aesthetics of civility have been translated into an ostensibly race-neutral vocabulary of hygiene and discipline (Ghana Education Service 2024).

The endurance of these policies after independence is thus explained less by pedagogical evidence than by postcolonial institutional inheritance. Mission-school grooming norms were nationalised rather than meaningfully reworked, retained as administratively convenient techniques for governing expanding student populations, and recoded in ostensibly neutral terms such as neatness, modesty, hygiene, and equality. Once reframed through the common-sense language of discipline, these rules ceased to register as colonial residues and were instead reproduced through policy routines, headteachers’ discretionary authority, and the everyday professional socialisation of educators.

As Gillborn (2006, 89) reminds us, ostensibly progressive race-equality policies can sediment rather than unsettle racial hierarchies. A similar dynamic is evident in Ghana, where the end of formal colonial rule and the emergence of an independent state did not secure substantive local sovereignty over educational norms or dislodge ‘civilising mission’ logics inherited from empire. Instead, colonial practices of bodily regulation were codified into post-independence school regulations and internalised by educators. Strict grooming and uniformity, most notably the requirement that girls keep their hair short, continue to be treated as indispensable to discipline, reproducing what Nyamawero Navei (2025) terms a ‘colonial shave-hair legacy’.

Alongside these Ghana-focused accounts, scholarship in the Global North has examined Black hair as a site through which racialised power is enacted in schools and everyday institutional life. Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) show that colour-blind hair regulations can operate as ‘post-racial’ social control that valorises whiteness and pathologises Blackness, while Rajan-Rankin (2018, 2021) and Yancy (2017) show how Black embodiment is rendered hypervisible and disciplined through a normative gaze. The Ghanaian hair code materialises this dynamic within schooling: under colour-blind standards of ‘neat’, ‘modest’ hair that avoids unspecified ‘extremes’ (Ghana Education Service 2024), school authorities mandate Black girls to conform to

a narrow, respectability-coded presentation. At the same time, media reporting documents exemptions for foreign, often Caucasian, students who are not held to equivalent cropping requirements (Asaase Radio 2021; MyJoyOnline 2019). Schooling in Ghana is, therefore, a pivotal site of coloniality because it regulates appearance pedagogically and routinely: through admission, inspection, conduct codes, and sanctions, schools translate inherited colonial aesthetics into ordinary judgments about which bodies appear ‘neat’, ‘serious’, and educable.

Crucially, there is little persuasive pedagogical justification for these regulations. Essel’s analysis of visual culture in Ghanaian schools notes that Afrocentric hairstyles are routinely prohibited despite ‘no substantial scientific evidence’ that afros or locs hinder ‘creative and innovative thinking’, academic progress or students’ ‘socio-moral and cultural wellbeing’ (Essel 2021). Taken together with historical and decolonial work on colonial-era schooling, this suggests that contemporary hair codes function less as neutral instruments of discipline than as a residual technology of colonial governance over Black bodies, naturalised as ‘ordinary’ school regulation even as Ghanaian society more broadly seeks to reclaim African aesthetic pride and postcolonial autonomy (Antwi and Bonsu Assibey 2024; Bizimungu 2021). On this disjuncture between the absence of credible educational evidence and the persistence of a colonial aesthetic regime, the remainder of the article reads hair-grooming codes in Ghanaian senior high schools as a racialised technology of postcolonial discipline. It shows how coloniality is reproduced through ostensibly ‘neutral’ standards of neatness and respectability, an architecture of aesthetic governance, while also tracing how students and publics contest these norms through reverse discourse that reclaims Black hair as dignity, culture, and rightful presence in educational space. The next section grounds this argument in students’ lived experience, examining how the hair-cropping policy shapes cultural identity, belonging, and participation, drawing on school policy texts and public reactions to the viral video to move from regulatory rationale to embodied consequence.

Cultural identity and student experiences

Building on that decolonial analysis which treats Black hair not as a cosmetic detail but as a dense cultural signifier (Essel 2021; Arkorful 2025; cf. Foucault and Sheridan 1977), this section clarifies why compulsory hair cropping is experienced not as minor grooming but as humiliation, identity threat, and contested personhood (Antwi and Bonsu Assibey 2024; Banks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2014).

Work on school belonging among minoritised youth reinforces this reading. Goodenow (1993) and Allen et al. (2018) show that when institutional practices delegitimise valued aspects of self-appearance, language, and religious expression, students report reduced belonging, diminished self-worth, and downstream disengagement from school life. Read through this lens, public descriptions of the haircut rule as ‘archaic’ or ‘humiliating,’ together with testimonies about respectability demands and differential enforcement, show how grooming codes translate abstract appeals to ‘discipline’ into lived experiences of cultural alienation (Bizimungu 2021; Essel 2021).

Fanon helps sharpen this point by showing that colonial domination operates not only through coercion, but through psychic injury: it makes the colonised subject experience embodied aspects of the self as deficient, excessive, or in need of correction (Fanon and

Philcox [1952] 2008). Compulsory hair-cropping is, therefore, not merely a rule of appearance, but a disciplinary practice that marks Afro-textured hair as unfit for respectable school presence, exposing girls to shame, misrecognition, and the affective reproduction of inferiority. What is at stake, then, is not simply compliance with a grooming code, but the reproduction of colonial aesthetic hierarchy as common-sense discipline through schooling. In what follows, I draw on Ghanaian girls' narratives to trace how hair regulation is woven into everyday identity work and negotiations of belonging, and argue that a shift toward 'neat-natural' standards (braids, cornrows, low afros) is necessary to align school discipline with constitutional protections and emerging equality guidance (High Court of Ghana [Human Rights Division] 2021; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2022).

In Ghana, as in many African contexts, Afro-defined hairstyles such as braids, cornrows, locs, and natural afros carry dense social meaning, signalling age, social status, life-course transitions, and gendered respectability (Antwi and Bonsu Assibey 2024; Banks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Quagrainie, Dankwa, and Kabalan 2021). Antwi and Bonsu Assibey (2024), for instance, argue that from an African ontological perspective hair symbolically marks phases of womanhood and constitutes a 'vital part' of the body with spiritual, sociocultural, and aesthetic significance, a view echoed in contemporary commentary such as that of Love Osita, a social commentator and digital content creator, who describes natural hair as 'a vital part of the making of a girl's identity and womanhood' (Osita 2025). The Black natural hair is, they maintain, 'not simply a cosmetic choice but an affirmation of African cultural identity and pride.' The haircut rule severs girls from these embodied traditions. In their post, Osita further describes natural hair as 'our beauty and glory; our identity as African women,' asking why we should be forced to renounce 'such elegance' only to later 'hide our short hair under wigs out of shame' and warns that the elevation of 'foreign hair' can foster an inferiority complex among women (Osita 2025). Echoing this critique, acclaimed Ghanaian digital creator Wodemaya foregrounds the racialised asymmetry of school hair regulation: 'So it's okay for a "white" kid to keep her hair in our schools, but that of the "black" kid is tagged waywardness?' He extends this to the temporal arc of girls' lives: 'Our hair is our glory, so why do we cut it from a young age until we finish school, then later replace it with big wigs because we feel shy of our short hair?' (Wode Maya 2025).

These interventions can be read through two linked lines of thought: counter-discourse and aesthetic governance. Following Foucault's account of 'reverse discourse,' I use counter-discourse to describe moments when those who are governed re-signify stigmatised traits from their own standpoint (Foucault and Sheridan 1977, 101). In Ghanaian schools, official discourse codes cropped hair as 'neat' and 'disciplined,' while natural Black hair is framed as unruly or excessive; Wodemaya's insistence that natural hair is a source of dignity and African womanhood reverses this valuation: it refuses imposed shame and repositions Black hair as culturally authoritative within the school's moral economy. At the same time, drawing on Ghertner's notion of aesthetic governmentality, rule through codes of appearance (Ghertner 2010), and on debates about aesthetic governance and beauty politics (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017; Kukuczka and Liebelt 2024), aesthetic governance is used to name how Ghanaian school rules, written in race-neutral language, nonetheless privilege Eurocentric hair norms. Wodemaya's comparison, 'it's okay for a "white" kid to keep her hair . . . , but that of

the “black” kid is tagged waywardness’, makes visible this mode of rule by appearance, in which Black girls are disciplined into internalising Eurocentric standards under the banner of ‘discipline’ and ‘school rules.’

These public reactions are not mere registry of personal discomfort; they name hair-cropping as part of a longer colonial project of governing Black appearance and aesthetic. On this reading, Ghana’s hair-cropping policy crystallises a wider regime in which Eurocentric beauty norms are internalised and reproduced through the everyday routines of schooling. Drawing on Foucault, I read the school grooming codes in the Ghanaian SHSs as disciplinary technologies through which institutions not only constrain bodies but train subjects to internalise particular norms (Foucault and Sheridan 1977). Mary Conyers Taylor, another social commentator and digital content creator, captures this dynamic in vernacular form, arguing that young women in Ghanaian SHSs are ‘disciplined into believing that their God-given hair is untidy or unclean’ (Taylor 2025). This experiential account speaks directly to what Tshiki (2021) theorises as a ‘colonial mentality’: the internalised belief, derived from colonial histories, that African traits and aesthetics are inferior to Eurocentric ones. On this reading, everyday grooming rules in Ghanaian schools do not simply ensure neatness; they habituate students into seeing natural Black hair as a problem to be corrected, thereby reproducing a racialised hierarchy of appearance under postcolonial administration. In this regard, compulsory cropping is not a neutral efficiency measure but a residue of the civilising project, aimed at erasing African subjectivities and normalising Eurocentric aesthetics in the guise of discipline (Tshiki 2021).

From a decolonial standpoint, these reactions can be read as acts of epistemic disobedience, the rejection of colonial ways of knowing and being against the aesthetics imposed by coloniality (W. Mignolo and Vázquez 2013; Quijano 2000). For W. D. Mignolo (2009), epistemic disobedience names a refusal to accept Eurocentric ways of knowing and valuing the world as universal. It is a deliberate ‘delinking’ from colonial classifications of what counts as clean, civilised, or beautiful. Applied to Ghanaian schools, the public protest and students’ insistence that natural Black hair is neither ‘untidy’ nor ‘unclean’ rejects the epistemic authority of school codes that mark Afro-textured hair as a problem. In Quijano’s (2000) terms, this resistance confronts the coloniality of power, while W. Mignolo and Vázquez’s (2013) notion of the coloniality of aesthetics draws attention to how colonial rule installed Eurocentric hierarchies of taste as common sense. Ghanaian grooming rules that treat cropped, straight-coded hair as ‘neat’ and Afrocentric styles as excessive or improper exemplify this aesthetic order within schooling.

When Wodemaya calls on Africans to ‘unlearn that colonial script and have hair honoured, not policed’ (Wode Maya 2025), he effectively reimagines classrooms as spaces of counter-pedagogy: rather than reproducing colonial social conditioning, schooling becomes a site for cultivating pride in Black embodiment (Fanon and Philcox 2008; hooks 1992). Kwandile Shongwe’s insistence that Black hair ‘is not hard’ and ‘does grow’ pushes this further by contesting deficit myths tied to the coloniality of gender (Lugones 2007), in which Black women’s bodies and beauty are constructed as inherently lacking, and by challenging longstanding racialised beauty hierarchies that privilege straight, Eurocentric hair (Rooks 1996; Thompson 2009, 2019). Taken together, these statements operate as decolonial counter-narratives: they

normalise natural hair, refuse the school's aesthetic misrecognition, and reposition Black embodiment in Ghanaian classrooms as a locus of dignity, continuity, and cultural authority rather than a problem to be managed (Fanon and Philcox 2008; hooks 1992).

Forcing young women to crop their hair as a precondition for accessing their right to education constitutes, in effect, the denial of a core dimension of embodied identity. From an African ontological perspective, hair symbolises phases in girlhood and womanhood and functions as a visible marker of cultural identity (Antwi and Bonsu Assibey 2024). Policies that mandate hair cropping, therefore, disrupt this cultural continuity and deny girls an important part of who they are. They also communicate a troubling message: that a girl's natural Afro-textured hair is incompatible with being a 'decent' or 'serious' student. Research on Black hair politics suggests that many young women internalise judgments about their hair and have come to experience their natural hair as a problem to be managed rather than a valued part of themselves (Banks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2014; Rooks 1996). In Ghana, former students describe how, after years of compulsory cropping, they struggled to appreciate or care for their natural hair, often turning to wigs or chemical straightening as the most familiar options (Adutwumwa 2025). These experiences not only sit uneasily with, and arguably undermine efforts to nurture pride in African aesthetics, but also reinscribe colonial-era prejudices about which bodies and styles are deemed acceptable (Essel 2021; Robinson 2011). When a Black girl is told her natural hair or braids are not acceptable for school, the implicit message is that something about her authentic self is not welcome in the education space (Arkorful 2025). As Ghana and other African nations work to 'decolonise' their curricula and school environments, hair policies have become a symbolic battleground. The persistence of these rules, 'with or without the presence of white bodies,' decades after independence, shows how colonial mindsets have become embedded in the societal psyche. Reforming them is, therefore, part of the unfinished business of educational liberation. Yet their durability is sustained not only by institutional habit, but also by the official language through which hair cropping is defended as a matter of order, uniformity, and practicality.

The discipline argument: order, uniformity, and practicality

Drawing on the sector minister's recent statement and pro-policy commentaries, official justifications for the haircut rule can be understood through three recurring themes: order, uniformity, and practicality (Haruna Iddrisu, cited in Graphic Online and ModernGhana; Armah 2025). The appeal to 'order' is articulated through the familiar discourse of discipline and character formation: cropped hair is cast as a visible marker of schools as tightly governed spaces where students learn self-control and obedience. It becomes a moral signifier, as the refusal to submit to cropping is read less as principled disagreement with policy than as evidence of latent disobedience or poor upbringing. This resonates with Dumas's (2014) argument that Black children are routinely constructed as 'the problem' within school discipline regimes, such that their bodies appear perpetually in need of correction. The order claim, therefore, does more than describe a grooming preference: it converts the management of Black girls' hair into a test of

docility, allowing disciplinary authority to be exercised at the level of appearance while disavowing its racialised character.

The trope of ‘uniformity’ ostensibly addresses equity, positioning standardised short hair as a device to minimise status display and peer competition: girls are said to be protected from pressures to signal class or fashion through braids, extensions or elaborate styles, and poorer families from the cost of ‘keeping up’. Yet, as Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) demonstrate in English schools, hair regulations framed in these terms are not neutral equalising mechanisms but forms of ‘post-racial’ social control that valorise whiteness and pathologise Black aesthetics. When read through this lens, Ghanaian appeals to uniformity moralise structural inequality as a problem of taste and restraint, while treating Afro-textured hair itself as a latent disturbance to the fiction of sameness. The language of parity thus masks the fact that what is being standardised is not ‘hair’ in the abstract, but Black hair brought into conformity with a narrow, racially coded aesthetic of respectability (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Rajan-Rankin 2021).

Finally, ‘practicality’ is invoked through references to large class sizes, limited staff capacity, and constrained budgets: short hair is presented as administratively efficient, easier to inspect, easier to keep ‘neat’, and less time-consuming for girls to manage before school, thereby translating institutional underfunding into a rationale for regulating Black girls’ bodies. In this framing, the logistical burdens produced by austerity and overcrowding are displaced onto students’ appearance, as if the problem were excessive hair rather than inadequate educational investment. However, the wider school-uniform literature finds little consistent evidence that strict grooming regimes enhance academic focus, behaviour or school climate (Ansari, Shepard, and Gottfried 2022; Brunsma 2006). Taken together, these justifications appear less as evidence-based pedagogical reasoning than as a postcolonial common sense of aesthetic discipline, in which the efficient management of under-resourced schools is achieved through intensified control over the racialised body.

Together, these appeals to order, uniformity, and practicality recast compulsory cropping as institutional common sense: authorities present short, ‘neat’ hair as a way to secure attention to study, pre-empt broader non-compliance, and reduce the time and cost associated with elaborate hairstyling (Graphic Online 2025; ModernGhana 2025; MyJoyOnline 2025). Yet this justificatory logic closely echoes wider claims that strict uniform and appearance codes improve school culture, reduce peer pressure and misbehaviour, and enhance learning conditions, even though the empirical support for such claims remains uneven (Ansari, Shepard, and Gottfried 2022; Brunsma 2006).

Media defenders of the 2025 haircut directive, such as broadcaster Gloria Akpene Nyarku (‘MzGee’), reframe the controversy in logistical rather than ideological terms. Speaking about public boarding schools, she invokes overcrowded dormitories and irregular water supply, ‘Have you seen the conditions in some schools? Some of them don’t even have water. You expect these girls to wash and braid their hair every week? Who will braid 700 girls’ hair in a boarding house?’ (Nyarku 2025). This ostensibly pragmatic line of defence dovetails with a longer-standing official justification in Ghana’s debates on proscribed Afrocentric hairstyles: that short, standardised haircuts are an efficient way to maintain hygiene, visual uniformity, and discipline in mass schooling systems with limited resources (Antwi

and Bonsu Assibey 2024; Essel 2021). In this discourse, infrastructural neglect and underfunding are translated into a problem of girls' hair, such that regulating Black bodies appears as a rational response to austerity rather than a continuation of colonial grooming codes. For MzGee and like-minded commentators, requiring short, 'neat' hair is presented as a practical equaliser that puts all students 'on the same footing,' removing a putative source of social competition: if varied hairstyles were permitted, she argues, a girl might 'sit behind a classmate with big, voluminous hair blocking her view,' or face comparisons over 'who has better hair or who can afford nicer styles,' distractions that, on this view, have no place in schooling (Nyarku 2025).

The Minister of Education's assertion that senior high schools are 'institutions for discipline and character formation, not beauty contests' recasts grooming regulations as instruments of institutional coherence within an overstretched, publicly funded school system (Haruna Iddrisu, cited in Graphic Online 2025; ModernGhana 2025). For decades, public schools in Ghana have pursued visibly uniform, low-cost standards as a means of managing large and socioeconomically diverse student populations, and within this administrative frame, compulsory hair-cropping is presented not as an aesthetic imposition but as a practical device for simplifying oversight and promoting equality. Yet while such reasoning appeals to functionality and rhetoric of equality, it conflates uniformity with fairness and renders culturally significant forms of self-presentation suspect, thereby narrowing the space for Black girls' embodied identities. Both jurisprudence and scholarship have begun to unsettle this logic. In *Marhuguy v. Achimota School*, the Human Rights Division of the High Court held that hair-based exclusion of Rastafarian students amounted to an unconstitutional infringement of their rights to education, dignity, and freedom of religion. Similarly, Essel (2021) reads the proscription of Afrocentric hairstyles as a remnant of colonial schooling logics that pathologise African aesthetics and fail to accommodate Ghanaian students' claims to cultural belonging.

Debate over Ghana's hair-cropping rules is often framed as a tension between administrative pragmatism and rights-based critique. Supporters argue that uniform grooming standards reduce distraction, foster group identity, and simplify oversight in large, under-resourced schools; visible uniformity becomes a proxy for maintaining order where student populations are high, and adult supervision is thin (Ghana Education Service 2024). Administrative defences of compulsory short hair thus present the policy as a neutral, functional response to infrastructural constraints rather than an aesthetic imposition. Yet, as decolonial and critical sociological work reminds us, such a functionalist frame obscures the long-term costs of disempowerment and cultural alienation. Essel (2021) and others show that these rules are not empirically necessary for learning but operate as disciplinary technologies inherited from missionary/colonial schooling, through which Black bodies and aesthetics are regulated in the name of hygiene, civility, and control (cf. Foucault and Sheridan 1977). The key question is not whether discipline matters, but whether it must be secured through practices that disproportionately target Black girls' hair and foreclose culturally significant modes of self-presentation. In the next section, I turn to Ghanaian students' own narratives

to examine how they live with, negotiate, and contest these regulations in their everyday school lives.

Students' voices and agency

The Foreign Affairs Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa's intervention at PRESEC-Legon's 87th Speech and Prize-Giving Day, where he derided the 'weird correlation between short hair and disciplined students', signals that discomfort with Ghana's hair-cropping rules is not limited to parents, activists, or social-media commentators. His critique, that such controversies deflect attention from deeper structural failures in Ghana's education sector, implicitly questions the moral and pedagogical weight attached to girls' hair. Yet even in this more sceptical register, the debate remains largely a conversation among political elites, school authorities, and media figures. The students most directly affected by these regulations appear primarily as objects of concern or discipline, rather than as speaking subjects who interpret, negotiate, and contest the rules that govern their bodies.

In this section, I foreground students' voices and agency, drawing on youth studies and critical education research. I understand agency not as unfettered individual freedom, but as a socially and institutionally situated capacity: the ability of young people to interpret rules, improvise within them, and sometimes quietly subvert or redirect them in the course of everyday life (Ahearn 2001; Swartz et al. 2012). Applied to the Ghanaian school context, this shifts the analytic focus from whether students simply comply with hair-cropping rules to how they make sense of those rules, negotiate them in classrooms and dormitories, and pursue dignity and cultural affirmation within, and at times against, the disciplinary regimes that govern their bodies. Drawing on student statements and reflections as they appear in news reports, the *Marhguy v. Achimota School* litigation and social-media posts, I centre Ghanaian students' accounts, particularly Black girls subjected to compulsory cropping alongside Rastafarian boys challenging dreadlock bans, to examine how they live with hair regulation and attach meaning to hair rules in relation to identity, faith, and friendship. Their narratives complicate official claims about order, uniformity, and practicality, showing that hair regulation is not an administrative detail but a site where belonging, respectability, and cultural pride are actively worked out.

From the standpoint of youth agency and school belonging, Ghanaian students' responses to the haircut policy position them not as passive recipients of regulation but as active interpreters of it. As the belonging scholarship already noted above indicates, when schools delegitimise valued self-appearance and religious or cultural expression, students' connectedness and self-worth can erode, with downstream disengagement. A similar pattern is visible in Ghanaian students' accounts. In vox pops and social-media reactions to the Yaa Asantewaa student haircut incident, some current students reproduce the official discourse of order and equality, accepting the rule as 'how school works' and treating cropped hair as the price of a disciplined, 'level' school environment. Others name the policy as humiliating and identity-erasing and emphasise how difficult it is to contest within hierarchical school cultures. 'It's our hair, why should it be a problem if we keep it neat?' one student asks in a televised reaction, reframing natural hair care itself as a valuable life skill rather than a distraction (ModernGhana, October 2025). Another remarks that it feels like 'they don't trust us to look decent, no

matter what we do . . . it's like they think being a girl with hair means you'll misbehave,' casting the rule as an insult to students' self-discipline and maturity (MyJoyOnline, October 2025). These are not idiosyncratic outbursts but recurring themes across street interviews, broadcast segments and online threads: some students align with the disciplinary common sense; others analyse it as a form of moral distrust directed at Black girlhood.

Social media amplifies these student voices and helps constitute what can be read as a digital counter-public around policy. In the wake of the viral Yaa Asantewaa student's video, Ghanaian youth used Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to narrate their experiences: the shame of having hair forcibly cut in front of peers, the shock of watching a defining feature of their appearance fall to the floor, and the lingering sense that their bodies are a subject for public discipline. These accounts recast the haircut not as a neutral grooming routine but as a ritual of humiliation that attaches moral judgment to Black girls' hair. They also suggest that, contrary to official claims, such practices can foster affective disengagement and low-level resistance rather than compliance. 'I kept my hair low, but my anger high,' quips one user, explaining that she began breaking other school rules as a form of silent protest, an illustration of how students may outwardly conform while cultivating oppositional stances beneath the surface. Student advocates on these platforms argue that if given meaningful agency, such as being allowed moderate, 'neat-natural' hairstyle choices, most girls would still adhere to reasonable guidelines without adverse effects on discipline. They invoke examples of Ghanaian girls in international schools and in schools abroad who manage their own hair, maintain academic excellence and adhere to basic standards of presentation, using these comparative cases to contest the presumed link between compulsory cropping, order, and educational success.

The Achimota dreadlocks case of 2021 marks a further articulation of student agency, this time mediated through law. In *Marhguy v. Achimota School*, two Rastafarian students challenged their exclusion on the basis of locked hair; the Human Rights Division of the High Court ultimately ordered their admission, holding that grooming rules could not trump rights to education, dignity, and religious freedom without compelling justification (Human 2021). The case was propelled by the students' own insistence on their religious identity, supported by their parents and civil-society actors, and it demonstrates how youth claims can travel from the school gate into constitutional argument. The ruling signalled that hair-based exclusions are subject to rights scrutiny and emboldened advocacy groups, and some within the educational establishment, to press for policy review. It subsequently urged the GES to issue clearer, more inclusive guidelines on student grooming. Yet, meaningful reform has lagged because the Achimota ruling was case-specific, while GES and CHASS continue to defend strict hair rules as administratively useful proxies for discipline in under-resourced schools. This hesitation illustrates how institutional inertia and entrenched hierarchies can blunt decolonising pressures even when students' legal claims succeed; the symbolic victory of the Achimota boys has not yet translated into systemic protection for girls' natural hair in public schools.

Student perspectives from other African contexts further weaken the assumption that strict hair-cropping is a pedagogical necessity. In southern Nigeria, public secondary-school girls are generally permitted to grow and style their hair, often in braids or cornrows that combine cultural preference with practicality, without a uniform

requirement of complete cutting, and yet academic outcomes in leading schools remain high (Adedina and Adedina 2024; Omiunu 2020). While systematic research on grooming norms and academic performance is limited, the central problem with compulsory cropping is not only that its pedagogical benefits remain unproven, but also that the standards through which such benefits are imagined are themselves culturally narrow and secured through the suppression of embodied identity. Nigerian students' everyday negotiation of tidy, culturally resonant hairstyles offers an implicit counter-example to Ghanaian claims that only severe cropping can secure order and excellence. Rather than demonstrating the necessity of rigid codes, these cases suggest that students can manage their hair responsibly when given structured but flexible guidelines.

Ghana's situation is not unique; across Africa, students have begun to contest similar hair rules in ways that foreground youth agency and rights. In Kenya, a 2019 High Court judgment in *JWM (alias P) v. Board of Management of O High School* held that requiring a Rastafarian student to shave her 'rastas' as a condition of remaining in school violated her constitutional rights to religion, equality, and education, and ordered the school to readmit her with her hair intact (Mwita 2019). In South Africa, Black girls at Pretoria High School for Girls organised protests in 2016 against a code of conduct that effectively banned natural Afro hairstyles and pressured learners to chemically straighten their hair; the protests, widely covered in national and international media under the hashtag #StopRacismAtPretoriaGirlsHigh, led the Gauteng education authorities to suspend the contested rules and review the school's policy (Vilakazi 2016; Tanis 2016; Nicholson 2016, August 29). These cases illustrate that students across the continent are increasingly framing hair regulation as a question of equality, cultural expression, and decolonisation, and that their collective action, whether through litigation or protest, can force school authorities and education departments to revisit ostensibly 'neutral' grooming codes.

Decolonial reform: balancing the discipline and identity policy divide

The reform question is not whether schools may pursue discipline, but whether discipline must continue to be secured through a colonial aesthetic code. If the central problem is the conversion of Black hair into a proxy for order, seriousness, and moral worth, then reform must separate legitimate institutional concerns such as hygiene, safety, visibility, and cost from inherited judgements about what Black hair should look like. The task, therefore, is to specify a grooming standard that protects school order without making cultural erasure a condition of educational membership.

Speaking at Mawuli SHS, Ho's 75th anniversary, the education minister sought to settle the controversy sparked by the first-year student's viral video. He insisted that schools 'will not tolerate' challenges to hair rules and that once hair is conceded, shoes, dress, and other markers will follow, concluding that school is 'not a place for beauty contests' and that headteachers are 'empowered to take full control' of student behaviour (Adjadeh 2025). Framed as a defence of discipline and character, this is a postcolonial example of what Bonilla-Silva calls 'colour-blind' racism (2018): hair rules are cast as universal, ostensibly applying to all, and justified as necessary for standards, while masking underlying racialised aesthetics (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018). Empirical reporting from Ghana shows that these 'universal' rules are selectively enforced. Achimota School's PTA acknowledged hairstyle exemptions for foreign

exchange students, and teacher-union officials have defended non-enforcement for white students on aesthetic grounds (Asaase Radio 2021; MyJoyOnline 2019). Set against the minister's rhetoric of 'moulding character', these practices reproduce a colonial aesthetic hierarchy in which European textures function as the unmarked norm of neatness, while natural Black hair is cast as 'unruly and messy' and recoded as vanity or deviance rather than a legitimate mode of Black self-presentation (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018; Rajan-Rankin 2021).

By urging heads to 'take full control' of students' bodies, the minister reprises colonial logics in which Black bodies (and hair) are objects of policing and taming (Rajan-Rankin 2021). In this script, Black children are imagined as 'lacking discipline in and of themselves', such that when they are punished for wearing natural hair, it is ultimately their Blackness that is problematised (Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly 2018). The haircut rule thus participates in what Antwi and Bonsu Assibey (2024) call a 'colonial attachment': the enduring grip of colonial rationales and aesthetics on contemporary policy and a de-Africanising project that uses discipline codes to strip away cultural markers. In Dumas's terms, this reflects a wider anti-Black logic in which the Black child is constructed as an 'always already problem', inherently unworthy of education unless remade through subtractive discipline (Dumas 2016). Hair policing becomes one mechanism through which that logic is lived in school life.

Public commentary has largely situated the short-hair mandate as colonial residue rather than neutral hygiene. Essential Ylno, for example, traces grooming codes to British rule as 'a means of control and racial differentiation' (Essential Ylno 2025); Okyeame Kwame asks what 'Ghanaian character' cropping has built since colonial orders to cut girls' hair (Kwame 2025); and Naa Angerley urges schools to abandon rules that 'rein-scribe hierarchy by effacing identity' (Angerley 2025). These interventions reflect what decolonial scholarship argues, that hair governance is a disciplinary technology that racialises difference, calibrates respectability, and subordinates African aesthetics (Byrd and Tharps 2014; Foucault and Sheridan 1977; Mercer 2003; Quijano 2000; Rooks 1996). Importantly, the insistence that hair codes are colonial holdovers, the questioning of their moral claims, and calls to revoke rules that erase identity together also reflect what W. D. Mignolo (2009) described as epistemic disobedience against the coloniality of aesthetics in schooling. Yet the discourse is not monolithic: a minority cautions against treating colonialism as a sufficient explanation in itself and argues that, whatever the rule's colonial genealogy, its continuation or reform remains a matter of present-day institutional choice (Mbembe 2001). In other words, while the rule has a colonial genealogy, its persistence is also a matter of present-day institutional choice and responsibility.

Building on this analysis, I outline a reform approach that protects institutional order while removing colonial aesthetic penalties from the terms of school membership. Crucially, however, such reform cannot retain 'neatness' as an open-ended aesthetic judgment, since that would preserve the very discretionary terrain through which colonial norms of respectability continue to operate. Rather, any defensible 'neat-natural' standard must treat neatness in a narrow, operational sense, limiting regulation to objective and reviewable concerns such as hygiene, safety, visibility, and non-obstruction, rather than subjective judgments about what looks 'proper,' 'modest,' or 'disciplined.' First, policy reform should be grounded in research and structured

stakeholder input rather than ad hoc exemptions. Arkorful (2025) sets an important precedent by urging a reconceptualisation of school hair policies as ‘critical sites of cultural resistance and personal empowerment’ rather than inherited colonial routines. The GES could convene review processes that bring together educators, students, parents, cultural experts, and child-rights bodies to co-produce grooming standards that are reasonable, non-discriminatory, and culturally affirming. This matters because ‘neatness’ is not self-interpreting: without explicit anti-discrimination criteria and critical historical scrutiny, school officials may simply reproduce colonial aesthetic judgements under a new label. Comparative experience suggests this is feasible. In 2023, Trinidad and Tobago’s Ministry of Education adopted a National School Hair Code following consultations with denominational boards, principals, unions, and parent bodies; the code explicitly permits locs, twists, plaits, afros, and cornrows for all students, while still requiring hair to be ‘neat and clean’, tied back when long, and not obstructive for safety. Similarly, the UK Equality and Human Rights Commission’s (2022) guidance on ‘Preventing hair discrimination in schools’ advises governing bodies to revise policies so that Afro-textured hair and associated styles are not singled out, while maintaining expectations of tidiness and hygiene. Drawing on these examples, a Ghanaian policy that permits low natural styles, simple braids, or cornrows, kept clean, off the face and, where necessary, above the collar, would continue to secure neatness and uniformity while avoiding forced cutting that nullifies cultural expression. Schools could retain limits on genuinely extravagant or costly styles during term time to protect poorer families from status competition, but the organising principle would shift from erasure to the equitable management of hair.

Second, school authorities need targeted capacitation to engage critically with the colonial genealogies and psychosocial implications of hair cropping. The preceding analysis shows that the haircut rule is not a neutral hygiene measure but part of a longer project in which Black bodies are governed through aesthetic and moral codes. Essel (2021) and Antwi and Bonsu Assibey (2024) argue that compulsory cropping undermines cultural continuity by enforcing colonial beauty standards that sit uneasily with Ghana’s constitutional commitments to cultural identity, dignity, and educational inclusion. Workshops and in-service training for heads and teachers, modelled on resources such as the UK EHRC guidance for school leaders, could use this scholarship to reposition the hair rule as a revisable policy that must be justified against contemporary rights frameworks and evidence on student wellbeing. Emphasising Essel’s conclusion that GES and CHASS ‘must work together to review the hair policies for students, so that it will not be a bottleneck for students to have access to education’, situates reform within Ghana’s own legal and policy obligations rather than as an external imposition.

Third, a comparative and multidisciplinary lens can show that more flexible policies are compatible with, and may support, schools’ legitimate aims. Research on uniform and grooming policies indicates that strict standardisation has, at best, modest and inconsistent effects on attainment and behaviour. Brunsma’s work on U.S. school uniforms, for example, finds little evidence that uniforms improve achievement, self-esteem, or conduct, and notes that perceived benefits for climate are often confounded by other factors. At the same time, legal and policy reforms elsewhere show that ‘neat-natural’ standards can uphold discipline without cultural erasure. In England, the High Court has held that a blanket ban on cornrows constituted unlawful indirect racial discrimination where it

failed to accommodate a Black student's cultural tradition, while affirming schools' authority to require tidy hair and prohibit genuinely disruptive styles. In Trinidad and Tobago, the National School Hair Code permits a wide range of natural Black hairstyles but still mandates that hair be clean, non-obstructive and, when long, tied back, thereby balancing safety and order with cultural expression. Nigerian experience, though less systematically documented, suggests that many schools have long allowed neatly braided or cornrowed hair without evident detriment to discipline or academic performance; public debate similarly questions colonial-era cropping rules as unnecessary for maintaining standards. Together, these examples support piloting 'neat-natural' policies in Ghana, allowing braids, cornrows, and low afros within clear, consistently enforced guidelines and empirically monitoring impacts on conduct and performance. The likely outcome, consistent with global evidence, is that discipline and attainment are driven less by hair length than by teacher quality, classroom climate, and meaningful student engagement.

Finally, emerging scholarship positions hair governance as a microcosm of wider attempts to decolonise education in ways that hold discipline and identity together. Work on the natural hair movement and on Afro-hair discrimination in schools underscores that hair is a site where racialised power, self-worth, and cultural continuity are negotiated. Decolonial and critical pedagogical perspectives suggest that discipline is most educationally productive when co-produced with students and oriented towards cultivating self-discipline, rather than enforced through regimes that symbolically devalue Black embodiment. Allowing girls to care for their own hair within agreed 'neat-natural' parameters would give substance to rhetoric about 'character formation': students learn responsibility, hygiene, and respect for shared norms while also learning that their African identities are compatible with academic seriousness. The claim that 'our hair is our glory' can be read as a call for schooling that channels, rather than crushes, youthful spirit. Hair policy reform thus becomes a concrete test of whether Ghana's education system can hold together two legitimate aims, orderly, safe learning environments and the affirmation of Black girls' dignity and cultural identity, without reverting to colonial solutions that treat those aims as mutually exclusive.

Conclusion

The debate over hair cropping in Ghanaian secondary schools crystallises tensions between institutional order and colonial moralities of hygiene, civility, and respectability, through which Black hair is recast as a problem to be corrected. The rule thus functions not as a neutral grooming convention but as an institutional practice with psychosocial and cultural costs, communicated through humiliation, misrecognition, and the narrowing of acceptable Black girlhood within educational space. The Ghanaian case shows how discipline can be operationalised through the racialised regulation of embodiment, even within a Black-majority school system. This article has: (i) theorised Ghana's compulsory hair-cropping rule as aesthetic governance within a colonial genealogy of discipline; (ii) traced how that governance is reproduced through contemporary policy, public discourse, and jurisprudence; and (iii) specified a decolonial reform orientation that protects institutional order while affirming Black girls' cultural identity and agency.

Empirically, the paper shows that hair-cropping is sustained less by demonstrable educational benefit than by a durable common sense in which ‘neatness’ and ‘character’ are made legible through visual conformity, producing a routine, embodied site of contestation where students, families, and publics negotiate dignity, belonging, and authority. Theoretically, the analytic of aesthetic governance clarifies how power operates through apparently race-neutral vocabularies (‘modest’, ‘clean’, ‘avoid extremes’) that nonetheless enact a racialised hierarchy of respectability, disciplining Black girls’ bodies by regulating what forms of Blackness may appear as ‘serious’, ‘decent’ or ‘educable’ in school. Policy-wise, a defensible reform standard is not the abandonment of discipline but its re-specification: schools should adopt clear, content-neutral, and evenly enforced guidelines that permit Afro-textured and culturally resonant styles as a matter of course and restrict hair only where justified on transparent grounds of hygiene, safety, visibility, or non-disruption. Such a standard is defensible only if ‘neatness’ is not left to administrative discretion but is defined through explicit anti-discrimination criteria and critical engagement with the colonial genealogies that have historically coded Black hair as disorderly, thereby shifting justification away from aesthetic suspicion and towards proportionate rules aligned with dignity, equality, and the right to education.

Read in this way, the argument does not offer a universal template. Rather, it proposes a transferable analytic frame for examining how postcolonial schooling can reproduce colonial aesthetics through everyday disciplinary routines and suggests considerations for other education systems confronting comparable tensions between institutional order and cultural self-presentation.

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