

Transcript- Go Global ED Podcast: Episode 5 – Dr. Diana Chioma Famakinwa, Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad

[Intro] Welcome to the Go Global ED Podcast brought to you by the International and Foreign Language Education Office also known as IFLE at U.S. Department of Education. On the Go Global ED Podcast, we speak with IFLE grant and fellowship recipients to highlight their experiences, discuss issues in international and foreign language education, share advice on the application process, and explore the long-term value and impact of IFLE programs. In celebration of international Education Week 2021 and the 60th Anniversary of Fulbright-Hays, today on the podcast a member of the IFLE team, Amy Marion, speaks to Diana Chioma Famakinwa, the Assistant Director of the Africa Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Dr. Famakinwa was a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Abroad Fellow from 2018 to 2019 and conducted her dissertation research in Nigeria. Let's listen.

[Amy] Thanks so much for joining us on the podcast Diana.

[Diana] It's a pleasure to be here thank you for having me

[Amy] Happy to have you here. So, we are chatting with you today a little bit about your experience as a Fulbright-Hays fellow on the doctoral dissertation research abroad program which we also refer to as DDRA for shorts and we're also hoping to chat a little bit about your experience as a foreign language and area studies fellow and 2015 so we'll talk about your language studies but before we get to that can you tell me a little bit more about your background and your research interests?

[Diana] Sure. So, my background is in education, most of my degrees pretty much all of them have been in education. I have a bachelor's degree in English education a master's degree in educational leadership a second master's degree in educational Policy Studies and my PhD is in educational policy studies with a concentration on comparative and international education

[Amy] Lots of education. I love it.

[Diana] I'm really passionate about education. From a young age, I just knew that that was my calling, so I have been consistent, and I follow through with that calling.

[Amy] Can you tell us what your dissertation title was and what you were looking at?

[Diana] Sure my dissertation was entitled 'Africa's Secret Weapon' Question A case study of diaspora homeland collaborations in Nigeria in higher education. I think the title might be a bit self-explanatory, but I examined African diaspora engagement in higher education in the Nigerian context. I looked at how diaspora scholars and those based in Nigeria worked together for research and teaching collaborations and fellowships such as the Carnegie African Diaspora Fellowship program and the Fulbright as well so there were different there were a few different

initiatives that I that I looked at to examine this phenomenon and happy to chat more about that with them as we continue the conversation.

[Amy] Yeah, I would love to learn more about your time so on the doctoral dissertation research abroad program. I believe it was 2018 is that right?

[Diana] Yes from 2018 to 2019 I was in Nigeria

[Amy] Okay, yeah and you built some connections when you were there. Which universities were you working with?

[Diana] So I was working with the University of Lagos and the University of Ibadan. I spent about four months at each university conducting my dissertation study. There was also another four-month period of my research which was done in US but of course DDRA only funds international research so that was sort of a supplemental part of my research after I came back to US from Nigeria.

[Amy] Right right. So, what do you think of the benefits word to having those connections on the ground? I know that you're from Nigeria originally but maybe you haven't been there as often in recent times so how were those connections with the University of Lagos and Ibadan helpful to your research?

[Diana] So they were extremely instrumental. I traveled to Nigeria frequently, but I hadn't lived there as an adult prior to my Fulbright-Hays DDRA fellowship. Well, going back to the application. Having those connections helped me to be prepared to even apply for DDRA because part of the application is providing a letter of a letter of

[Amy] A letter of invitation....

[Diana] Well, basically you have to provide a letter from your research sites indicating that you have permission to conduct research there and so because I had reached out to folks at the university of Lagos and University Ibadan prior to the DDRA application even opening, I had those documents ready to go by the time the application closed. So, if I had waited for the application to open, it might have been tricky.

[Amy] Okay so the advanced planning is definitely something folks want to consider thinking about applying for the DDRA and making these connections overseas in advance. So, can you, on the same topic of connecting with the universities, is there anything you can you share on the same topic of connecting with the universities, how exactly did you make those connections?

[Diana] So I was able to make those connections really by reaching out to alumni, that I knew. I knew people who had attended the University of Lagos as well as University Ibadan and I asked them 'I'm interested in conducting my research here could you introduce me to someone at that university' and so they did and that's where it started. So, one contact would introduce me to another contact and really that's how I was able to achieve that.

[Amy] The power of networking.

[Diana] Exactly

[Amy] It's all about, well, it's not all about who you know but it is important sometimes just thinking through who you know, or who you could know if you just kind of work that network a little bit more. So, I know you've traveled to Nigeria, you were born there, and you identify with the African diaspora, which is part of your research, as well. Do you have any advice for researchers or students who are traveling to Africa for research or their studies also identify with African diaspora? Any sort of challenges that they might encounter or tips for traveling to Africa?

[Diana] Well, yes. I would say that they should take note of how their positionality influences their research and their access to people, resources, and data. For me, my insider/outsider positionality was one that I had to learn to mobilize effectively because in some situations it was helpful to present yourself as an insider and in other stations being seen as an outsider might have been more helpful.

[Amy] Very interesting, good points. So you're conducting your research with the support of the two universities and I also know that although the official language of Nigeria is English there are many many languages that are spoken there. I mentioned previously that you were also a foreign language and area studies or FLAS fellow in 2015 and that involves some language training so could you share a little bit more about your language training and how that impacted your time abroad? And how it might have supported your research or anything else that might have impacted?

[Diana] Sure. I am a heritage speaker of Igbo which is one of the three major ethnic languages of Nigeria. And in 2015, I won a foreign language and area studies, or FLAS fellowship, to study Yoruba at the University of Wisconsin Madison. That language course was quite immersive, and the small class size also allowed me to get tailored instruction which enabled me to achieve intermediate language skills in a year.

[Amy] Wow, impressive. And when you were abroad in Nigeria you were speaking with people from different ethnic groups right? So, were you able to use those language skills to support your research?

[Diana] I was able to use my language skills to mostly build rapport. Because English is the official language spoken in Nigeria, it wasn't necessary that I speak Igbo and Yoruba while conducting research, but it was certainly useful in terms of building relationships with people because I just think there's a different connection that you can make the people when you speak their mother tongue.

[Amy] Yes, I totally agree. Are you still in contact with any of the people that you interviewed when you were in Nigeria?

[Diana] Yes, I'm still in contact with a lot of people from my research.

[Amy] Great. And I think we had chatted before a little bit about your name actually and how that or when you're in Nigeria your name kind of made some people there a little bit confused?

[Diana] Correct, yes. So, my is my middle name is Chioma and last name is Famakinwa. Chioma is an Igbo name and Famakinwa is a Yoruba name. And so, when people would see my name, some would guess correctly, and others would just want me to tell them exactly what's going on there like do I have parents from the different ethnic groups or am I from one group and married to someone from the other group which is the case. So, it sometimes made for a conversation starter or an icebreaker when I would meet people.

[Amy] Yeah, I guess that also goes along with building rapport. It's a good way to get to know someone just talking about names.

[Diana] Right. And names are huge marker of identity in Nigeria.

[Amy] So do you have any favorite experiences when you were in Nigeria or any memories that you think about?

[Diana] It's really difficult for me to identify one moment that was my favorite but I will say that oftentimes when I travel as I am driving away from the airport upon arrival, I can tell whether I will return to that place or whether I won't and one of my favorite scenes within Nigeria is driving away from the Murtala Muhammed airport in Lagos because just the amount of color and the scenery with the palm trees and everything in Lagos is just so inviting to me. Anyway, it's just such a warm enveloping feeling.

[Amy] Well, hopefully as we get through the pandemic globally, you'll be able to go back and see all the beautiful colors and palm trees and reconnect with some of the folks that you're staying in contact with.

[Diana] Yes, absolutely and I look forward to presenting my research findings at my research sites.

[Amy] Oh, yeah that would be a really great opportunity to come full circle and share what you learned. So, going back a little bit, you know, to your actual research what were some of the key findings? We are celebrating international Education Week through the podcast so if there's anything that relates specifically to international education or comparative education...

[Diana] OK I'm going to try to keep it brief because I could go on and on about my research findings. My main findings were -homeland scholars, that is the scholars were based in Nigeria, their primary motivating factor for participating in diaspora homeland collaborations was the prospect of improving their global competitiveness and visibility and that of their institutions. Diaspora scholars on the other hand, were motivated by the desire to “quote unquote” give back to their place of origin and to a certain extent the desire to gain access to homeland scholars local expertise as well as recruit international students. In one of my chapters I touch on social capital theory to highlight the role of the diaspora and connecting Nigerian institutions to various

resources and how perceptions of social capital and proximity to power often linked to diasporas outsider positionality can influence the participants experiences in the collaborations. And lastly, one of my findings indicated that actors and stakeholders' high hopes of achieving sustainable educational development through diaspora engagement may be overly optimistic. In one of my chapters I discussed the ways in which financial infrastructural and relational challenges shape the collaborations and the expense of which diaspora engagement initiatives can address or potentially exacerbate them.

[Amy] Lots of very interesting findings and I feel like really important information to get out there as education is internationalizing.

[Diana] It's really helpful for us to examine the idea of development and who has the agency to develop because a lot of times those in countries like US are framed as having the agency to in act development upon countries like Nigeria and I think we need to flip the script a little bit and also think about how these people who are now members of the diaspora also helped to develop this country the United States. Development is not, it doesn't have to be, a one way and street think we need to think about how countries like Nigeria also contribute to developing places like U.S.

[Amy] Yeah, that's a really good point. Thanks for sharing all of that, I know you had a lot of research findings so it's really interesting to hear a little bit about what you uncovered although I know there's so much more.

[Diana] Yes, I have almost 300 pages, so I tried to keep it short.

[Amy] Yes, thanks so much for sharing. Now I know that you're serving his Assistant Director of the African Studies program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison which is also where you completed your PhD, so your background is full of education and all your degrees and I know the international aspect is really important to you. So, I was curious, how some of your experiences have impacted the way that you do your job and you're working with students and I know you're also advising students on like the FLAS program that we also discussed so how have these experiences impacted your role as the Assistant Director of African Studies Program?

[Diana] My experiences have been helpful because I can relate to students who are applying for programs like FLAS I can draw on my own experience going through the application process as well as my experience in the program during my FLAS fellowship so that's always helpful to be able to draw on prior experience in order to advise students. I would say that my time abroad conducting research in Nigeria has also made me more confident to pursue an international career. I've always been internationally oriented, but my experience conducting research in Nigeria has helped me picture what life would be like living and working there or in another African country in the future.

[Amy] That's great that you're able to infuse some of that into your work with students for their grateful to have someone who has so much varied experience helping them while they're figuring

things out, as well. Earlier we were chatting a little bit about your connections with the universities and how you established those early on that helps with the application process and making sure you had everything to submit on time for the DDRA any program and we were just discussing higher experiences abroad have been helpful as you're advising students. Do you have any other suggestions for anyone applying for the Fulbright Hays DDRA or the FLAS program? Is there anything that you would recommend to folks who are considering submitting applications for these programs?

[Diana] Yes, I would advise prospective applicants to begin their applications as soon as possible at soon as possible, attend information sessions, and connect with the Fulbright program advisor or the FLAS coordinator because they have been through the process with many applicants before and can advise you. They might be willing to read your application and give you feedback to help you revise it and make it stronger so those people are key to succeeding and if you can reach out to them early on in the application process that would be helpful

[Amy] Alright, yeah those are three really great tips. Definitely planning is important, having communication established, and just figuring out those next steps. So, thanks so much for sharing. Alright my last question for you is, is there anything else that you'd like to add? I really enjoyed chatting and learning more about your experience on the DDRA and FLAS fellowships and learning about higher education in Nigeria. So, if there's anything else you'd like to add?

[Diana] I think that's all I've got for now.

[Amy] Alright thanks Diana

[Diana] Take care, thank you.

[Amy] Bye.

[Outro] Thanks for listening to the Go Global ED podcast a production of the international and foreign language education office at EU S Department of Education be sure to follow us on Twitter and Go Global ED Podcast and subscribe to our newsletter to learn more about upcoming podcast episodes and receive IFLE updates

Guest Biography: Dr. Diana Chioma Famakinwa

Dr. Diana Chioma Famakinwa currently serves as Assistant Director of the African Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin (UW), Madison. Dr. Famakinwa recently completed her PhD at UW–Madison's School of Education in Educational Policy Studies, with a concentration on comparative and international education and African studies. In 2018, she was awarded a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) Fellowship that supported her dissertation research in Nigeria. Dr. Famakinwa was also a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellow in 2015, with a focus on Africa and African Languages.