

# African Indigenous Proverbs and the Question of Youth Violence: Making the Case for the Use of the Teachings of Igbo of Nigeria and Kiembu of Kenya Proverbs for Youth Character and Moral Education

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*The historic and contemporary global concern over youth violence and indiscipline/subordination in schools has educators, school administrators and policy makers working hard to ensure that schools are welcoming and safe spaces for learners. Social harmony can only be achieved by understanding and addressing the causes of youth violence and indiscipline as part of a curriculum of values and character education to ensure effective learning outcomes for all. While the engagement of local cultural resource knowledge has not been prominent in discussions on youth violence and learning, it can be an important tool in educational delivery. This paper identifies the teachings of Indigenous African philosophies, such as proverbs relating to the concept of self and the community, responsibility, respect for self, peers and authority, and mutual interdependence and community building, and their place in school curricular, pedagogical and instructional initiatives to enhance youth learning in Euro-American and African schooling contexts.*

*La préoccupation mondiale, historique et contemporaine, concernant la violence, l'indiscipline et l'insubordination chez les jeunes dans les écoles pousse les enseignants, les administrateurs et les décideurs à s'acharner sur des solutions pour que les écoles soient des lieux accueillants et sécuritaires pour les apprenants. Dans l'intérêt de l'harmonie sociale, il serait important de comprendre et de s'attaquer aux causes de la violence et l'indiscipline chez les jeunes et ce, dans le contexte d'un programme d'études visant les valeurs et le développement du caractère de sorte à assurer un apprentissage efficace pour tous. L'intégration des connaissances culturelles locales n'a pas été au premier plan des discussions sur la violence et l'apprentissage chez les jeunes; pourtant, celles-ci peuvent constituer des outils pédagogiques importants. Cet article identifie les enseignements des philosophies indigènes africaines tels que les proverbes portant sur le concept de soi et la communauté, la responsabilité, le respect de soi-même, des pairs et de l'autorité, et l'interdépendance et le renforcement de la communauté, pour ensuite discuter de leur rôle dans les initiatives pédagogiques visant l'amélioration de l'apprentissage chez les jeunes dans des milieux scolaires euro-américains et africains.*

## **Introduction**

The historic and contemporary global concern over youth violence and indiscipline or insubordination in schools has some educators, school administrators, and policy makers working hard to ensure that schools are welcoming and safe spaces for learners (Hoffman, Knox, & Cohen, 2011). Social harmony can only be achieved by understanding and addressing the causes of youth violence and indiscipline as part of a curriculum of values and character education. While the engagement of local cultural knowledge has not been prominent in discussions on youth violence and learning, it can be an important tool in educational delivery.

In this article, I focus on the pedagogic value of African proverbs that relate to: the concept of self and community; responsibility; respect for self, peers and authority; and mutual interdependence and community building. Specifically, I consider their place in school curricular, pedagogical, and instructional initiatives in order to contribute to the debates about how we can enhance youth learning in Euro-American and African schooling contexts. I contend and push for an understanding that local cultural knowledge about social values, moral character, discipline, community responsibility, identity and self and collective respect is both contextual and specific.

Within our global context, Indigenous philosophies express knowledge and ideas that connect communities and their cultures with the land as part of the ensuing relationship between people and their social, natural, and physical environments. (Indigenous is capitalized because it is about a people and their culture). Proverbs are idiomatic expressions conveying ideas about society and people's understanding of the relations between society, culture, and nature. Proverbs are said to be "wise sayings" that reflect social values and cultural teachings within wide range of local contexts. Proverbs convey messages about morality, social conduct, accountability, social justice, and community ethics. They tend to be simple, short sentences that are often witty. A long speech can be given in few words through the use of proverbs. Proverbs not only constitute the mainstay of local "philosophic sagacity," but also reflect the linguistic and cultural vocabulary used by community Elders to affirm their deep knowledge and wisdom of societal affairs. Many have noted the role of proverbs in educating and socializing individuals into accepted patterns of behaviour and validating institutions, attitudes, and beliefs (Bascom, 1965). Proverbs are also a source of social criticism. They carry the conscience and aspirations of a community. As part of the local cultural systems of African people, proverbs educate about culture, politics, ecology, spirituality, local cosmology, and worldview or "world sense."

Proverbs, cultural stories, and mythologies have long been part of the Indigenous knowledge systems in many communities. Proverbs, in particular, constitute a body of knowledge in African communities. Proverbs help African peoples connect understandings of culture, society, land, environment, history, and tradition as valid sources of knowledge. As an educator, I wonder if there are not some relevant teachings of proverbs that can assist youth education irrespective of the cultural context from which such knowledge emerges? In this paper, I bring a broader definition to Indigenous to encompass Aboriginal, African, Hawaii, Australian, South American, Caribbean, etc., knowledge systems. I do realize the limits of invoking the concept of Indigeneity in a way that fails to note, understand, and articulate the differences alongside any similarities in how Indigenous peoples and their knowledges have been colonized. Most cultures can trace their Indigenesness. Borrowing from earlier work, I conceptualize Indigenous knowledge as knowledge developed upon long-standing or "long-term occupancy" of a place (i.e., land) (see

also Fals Borda, 1980) and accumulated on the basis of experiencing the social and natural worlds. It is knowledge that heralds the interface of society, culture, and nature. Such knowledge also draws links between the body, mind, soul, and spirit in one's coming to know. Indigenous knowledge can be found in multiple forms, sites, and sources.

This study highlights how African Indigenous teachings contained in Nigerian and Kenyan proverbs may be useful for youth education in multiple contexts. It builds on Indigenous scholarship connecting oral traditions with specific cultural contexts and the wider implications for educational practice and development (Archibald, 2008; Assimeng-Boahene & Baffoe, 2013; Battiste, 2002; Dion, 2004; Piquemal 2003;). While noting the particular and perhaps unique contexts in which proverbs are spoken, I enthuse that African proverbs allow for both an interpolation and extrapolation of meanings that serve the wider purpose of education. Thus, in the context of Canadian education, this article is contiguous with Aboriginal Studies on oral tradition and storytelling in bringing a unique contribution to educational studies (see Dion, 2004; Friesen & Friesen 2002, 2005; Kanu 2005, 2007, 2011; Manitoba Education & Youth, 2003). These studies have always noted the critical link of culture and pedagogy.

Proverbs, like cultural stories, are part of the grounded theory for local knowledge production. Such knowledge can appropriately be applied outside of their given contexts. Indigenous peoples have never maintained exclusive ownership of knowledge. I argue, then, that African proverbs are useful for the education of all youth irrespective of the African, US, Canadian or European contexts. In connecting Indigenous cultural knowings and educational change across multiple contexts, I am also suggesting that teaching and learning needs to be culture-based and culturally-relevant in order to address the social, economic, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and political realities of learners. Educational research needs to direct more attention to the ways in which cultural knowledges (including oral traditions, proverbs, and stories) are taught and passed down to young learners within local communities (see Archibald 2008; Battiste 2002; Boateng 1990; Assimeng-Boahene & Baffoe 2013; Kanu 2005, 2011; Lanigan, 1998)

Storytelling, for example, has long been established as fitting with "Aboriginal epistemology—the nature of their knowledge, its foundations, scope, and validity" (McKeough et al., 2008, p. 148). McKeough and colleagues have discussed storytelling as a foundation to literacy development for Aboriginal children, pointing to significant culturally and developmentally appropriate practices for youth education. They insist "there is substantial evidence that Aboriginal youth face serious challenges in schooling, in general, and in literacy development, specifically... [and that] it is essential to design early literacy programmes that engage Aboriginal children and produce positive outcomes" (p. 148) using local cultural knowledge. They propose that educational programs must include "oral storytelling by teachers and students because it is a precursor to reading and writing across cultures and a traditional Aboriginal teaching tool" (p. 148).

Lewis' (2011) study on the power of stories in healing the mind and body points to the ways we educate (i.e., teaching and learning) as a sacred activity to engage youth. In the work on "Storytelling as Research/Research as Storytelling," Lewis (2011) stresses that stories are sacred; they honor relationships, our being, and listening. Stories and storytelling are "simultaneously cognitive processes and products of cognition," with their "own potential for making meaning," and "humans are drawn to [stories] through our residence in narrative life" (p. 505). It is opined that "we take in stories, our own and others, and tell them back to our self and to others in a recursive process that augments our understanding." This raises the question, "if story is central

to human existence and understanding why, in the research world, is there not more storytelling, particularly in the social sciences?” (p. 505). The sharing of stories is important in that, “when we share our stories, they come to life through the telling, however, the story has a life of its own and that life is given through the spirit of story and the storyteller” (p. 507).

In her examination of Aboriginal research methodology, Baskin (2005), finds that the storytelling circle- exemplifies key elements: “the direct involvement of participants and the community; the reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants; the goals of self-determination, decolonization, and direct benefit to the community; and the potential for learning and healing” (p. 171) (see also Smith, 1999). She points out that “the storytelling circle, as a methodology, reflects the cultural and ethical protocols of Aboriginal research” (p. 172), and that “the storytelling circle also makes room for the healing component of a research project... [while] Aboriginal world views centre on holism—addressing all for components (physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual) of a person” (p. 184).

Aboriginal educational research has long highlighted the importance of teaching youth about their Indigenous culture and language when seeking to address community problems. It goes beyond researchers drawing the cursory link between the preservation of Indigenous cultures and their Indigenous language. There is a broader concern that, unless care is taken to teach Aboriginal youth about their Indigenous languages, the consequences can be severe in terms of a failure to build a strong sense of identity and purpose in younger generations. Research has shown that Indigenous knowledge and language offers identity and a collective sense of purpose to community members (Battiste, 1998; Canada Task Force on Aboriginal Languages & Cultures, 2005). Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde (2007) point to Indigenous languages “as a maker of cultural persistence, ...a strong predictor of health and wellbeing in Canada’s Aboriginal communities” (p. 398). Their study offers important insights into a preliminary investigation of the ways in which community-level variability of Aboriginal languages relate to “band”-level measures of youth suicide. It was revealed that “youth suicide rates effectively dropped to zero in those few communities in which at least half the band members reported a conversational knowledge of their own Native [Indigenous] language” (p. 392). The authors conclude that language can be “one of the most tangible symbols of culture and group identity, a link which connects people with their past, and grounds their social, emotional, and spiritual vitality” (p. 393).

In an equally important work on healing the mind through the power of story, Mehl-Madrona (2010) shows the role of cultural stories in Indigenous communities. Stories, Mehl-Madrona claims, “contain information about the meaning of our lives, what value we have, what is responsible and what is not, what is ethical and what is not, and how behave in all the situation we encounter” (p. 3). In fact, the author goes further to argue that “stories (and the social relationships in which they are told) shapes our brains ... [and that stories are] the social milieu that forms the brain of a young child” (p.3).

Cultural stories constitutes a basis for life and living. In similar vein, Atleo’s (2009) work with Nuu-chah-nulth Elders examining a Nuu-chah-nulth story as learning is very interesting for its focus on how a “network of eight learning archetypes inhabited the story to demonstrate a range of learning strategies” (p. 453). Arguing that “Western schooling has not satisfied Aboriginal learning needs generally and that Nuu-chah-nulth learning needs specifically for transformative learning and strategic knowledge” (p. 465), an Indigenous learning theory is articulated in a storywork framework that permits the identification of Nuu-chah-nulth ideology about teaching and learning” (Atleo, 2009, p. 464). The author notes that “absence of theorizing

about the learning concepts of Indigenous people in current educational literature is a problem for the educational participation and achievement of Aboriginal student” (p. 453). For the cultural survival of Aboriginal peoples, Atleo suggests “identifying and understanding Indigenous learning orientations and ideology such as those of the Nuu-chah-nulth that would provide emancipatory insight for Aboriginal learning in contemporary educational settings” (p. 454). He concludes that an “understanding the learning ideology of individuals and institutions is central to the strategic administrative functioning of educational system and nations” (p.454).

In many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, storytelling is considered a fundamental way in which people make sense of their lives. In a study with 14 clients in therapy sessions Rennie (1994) showed how storytelling is primarily a way of dealing with inner disturbance. Rennie argues that the activity of telling a story is often more powerful than its representation in dialogue would suggest and that the subjective experience of storytelling assisted clients to “experience catharsis, self-reflect extensively and often silently, and frequently contact the inner disturbance whether they intend to or not” (p. 234). The argument is made that working with “schema storytellers establish a sense of coherence and meaning in their lives through focusing selectively on the events of their lives, rearranging the order in which the events occurred, and interpreting them idiosyncratically” (p. 241). Rennie concludes that “clients’ stories are not “simply” stories for mere consumption. They are rich, dynamic manifestations of clients’ struggles with disturbing feelings. Storytelling by clients involves both defensive and therapeutic processes and to a varying extent” (p. 242). I have taken pains to point to a few of studies in the Canadian contexts that hammer home the link between culture, pedagogy, schooling, and education. I contend that African proverbs offer similar insights for educational change in pluralistic contexts—especially in the current moment when youth are contending with serious social challenges.

### **Youth Violence**

There has been much discussion attempting to understand and counteract violence in society, particularly among youth (see Bania, 2009 for exhaustive references that touch on the individual, societal, and structural dimensions and extent of the problem). What is clear is that, in its myriad forms, violence is an act of destruction that dehumanizes both the perpetrator and those acted upon. Violence impacts our psyche while robbing us of our humanity. Historically, the colonizer has used violence to achieve the aims and goals of colonization. Much like larger scale colonization, classroom violence also changes the learner. Through violence manifested in school curricula, for example, the educational system can destroy the language, culture, and tradition of the colonized (see wa Thiong’o, 1986 on the case of Africa). This cultural, linguistic, and traditional destruction explains the perception on the part of some youth that “education sucks” (Dei, Mazzuca, McIsaac & Zine, 1997). In such contexts, nihilism, despair, and perpetual hopelessness grids a number of youth, which has resulted in a sense of living a “dead-end existence” with “lost or stolen dreams” and a feeling of social exclusion from what is perceived as systemic neglect (see Lewis, 1992 on the Stephen Lewis Report, 1992 on Toronto’s Black youth).

In circumstances of oppression, however, violence can also be viewed as resistance and as in response to this perpetuation of inferiority. In this context, the analysis of violence lies in understanding the dynamics and consequences of economic, material, and socio-political exclusions and estrangement (e.g., unemployment, poverty, miseducation, alienation, marginalization) that fosters this sort of violence (i.e., social and psychological ills). Contrary to

commonly held understandings, Fanon (1990) was not valorizing violence when his work was tailored to a diagnosis of colonial violence; yet he rightly argued that “violence can heal the spiritually wounded” (Austin, 2006). For the minoritized, colonized, or oppressed, violence can arguably be a necessity, not just simply to win liberty and freedom, but to cure the inferiority complex created by dominance and false images of superiority. In effect, such violence can be conceptualized as a form of “counter violence,” a reactive violent expression toward the oppressor that may be a prerequisite to achieving total liberation from oppression. As violence within the school setting can destroy the language, identities, culture, and traditions of the colonized or oppressed subject-learner, the oppressed subject then embraces violence as resistance—a response to the perpetuation of marginality in the search to free oneself.

Touching on the Algerian Revolution, Fanon (1990) further argued that the only antidote to French brutality and violence was that the brutalized themselves take matters into their own hands by fighting and resisting their oppressor. Fanon depicts fratricidal violence as one that is turned inwards. He explains that the Algerians unleashed their pent up anger, frustrations, and anguish not on the oppressor-colonizer but instead onto themselves. The purpose of such violence was to restore the subject’s humanity, self-worth, and respect, to deal with the inferiority complex, and to cast away any repressed anger and resentment of the oppressor-settler (Fanon, 1990). Yet, it is the consequences of violence for both the perpetrator and the victim that raise the concern for youth violence in institutional settings such as schools. It forces us to seek answers on how to avoid such violence altogether. In other words, we must flesh out the ways in which critical education may teach about social values and the very notion of humanity. This means going back to the basics of education: to teach about community, social responsibility, ethics, accountability, moral values, respect for the sanctity of life, and self and collective discipline, including respect for authority and reciprocity (Boateng, 1990; Dei 2014a, b, c). This is relevant in the Toronto context and, in fact, to most North American inner cities where there are constant reminders of youth violence and what may be perceived as a disregard for human life.

Not many would dispute that education (broadly conceived) has a critical role to play in addressing the challenge of youth violence and indiscipline. I also argue that there are pertinent lessons to be found in culture and local cultural knowings such as Indigenous proverbs, folktales, riddles, cultural stories and songs. They can both inform and frame curriculum, instructional, and pedagogical practices around what is generally considered as “moral and civic education” (Schwartz 2008; Schweder, Mahapatra & Miller, 1990). These lessons also have educational policy implications as educators and administrators search for ways to promote inclusive, healthy, and sustainable learning spaces for youth to develop a sense of connectedness and responsibility to their communities. Through its emphasis on the role of Indigenous knowings in civic, moral, and character education, this article is intended to provoke critical thought about the mission of schooling and education in contemporary contexts. For example, how do we (as educators and administrators) provide education to young learners in ways that allow them to develop a strong sense of identity, self and collective respect, and empowerment to community building? How do we empower young learners to make their school learner-friendly? How do learners in schools cultivate an understanding of “schooling as community” or work to create schools into healthy, working communities? How do we collectively subvert colonial (defined as anything imposed and dominating) relations, hierarchies, and agendas of schooling beyond concerns about managing discipline and empowering the learner of today to be socially responsible to their communities?

Given their different emphasis, it is important not to conflate civic education (citizenship participation, responsibility), moral education (teaching ethics, morality, and reasoning) and character education (teaching about practices that constitutes good citizen and individual or self-discipline). However, I would point out that these areas do overlap, and my argument is to place concerns about school violence and [in]discipline as significant within the educational discourses of transformation and change. This is because violence creates an unhealthy space for learning to take place. It is also noted that there is a wide literature on cultural variations in moral systems and beliefs (Haste, 1993; Iwasa, 1992; Miller & Bersoff, 1998; Schwart, 2008; Shweder, Mahapatra & Miller, 1990), which all help provide a framework of analysis within which questions of school [in]discipline, violence, moral education, and character education might be addressed. Local cultural knowings highlight the power of culturally-contextualized discourses to transcend geographical and physical borders and boundaries in the delivery of effective education to young learners. New Indigenously or culturally informed pedagogical approaches and classroom instructional practices have the potential to address school and youth [in]discipline, violence, and educational resistance to ensure safe, secure, and healthy learning environments.

### **Study Context and Method**

A descriptive and analytical discussion on Indigenous African proverbs drawn from Nigeria and Kenya offers some useful directions for key attitudinal issues: [in]discipline and violence, respect, and character building among youth. While prominence is given to violence, it is not to create the impression that violence and indiscipline can be used interchangeably. Youth—and in particular, school—violence appears in varied forms. Yet violence is simply understood as an aspect of the broader issue of youth indiscipline. All over the globe, current school curriculum and instructional reform initiatives are confronting such challenges in diverse ways. For example, in Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Kenyan contexts, the teaching of existing subjects such as social studies, citizenship education, and religious and moral education in schools tend to address the issues related to respect and character education (Assimeng-Boahene & Baffoe, 2013). There are existing co-curricula interventions such as those focusing on creating child-friendly school environments; the involvement of the youth in school policy dialogues through practice of school prefectorial board system (in basic or primary schools) and on governance and leadership issues such as student representative council (in secondary and tertiary school levels) is intended to create a sense of inclusiveness. Institutional mechanisms have been put in place to promote and enhance the “voice” of youth and to help create safe learning spaces for everyone. However, much can be learned from how local cultural resources knowings, as curricular, pedagogic, and instructional interventions in schools may impact youth indiscipline and school violence as they build character and may become moral backbones for young learners.

Euro-Canadian and American educational systems must find ways to address the alienation of young learners in the Fanonian sense of marginalization and exclusion from within the student population as imbued through the internalization of colonial hierarchies. In other words, we need to strengthen the current educational practices and interventions that are already in place and, at the same time, promote new educational initiatives (curriculum, pedagogy, and instruction) to ensure a genuine inclusiveness of all youth if we are to comprehensively address the problem of youth violence and alienation. After all, we know that

simply adhering to and implementing current educational policies on school punishment have not always succeeded in addressing the challenge of youth indiscipline and violence (Adentwi, 1998; Appiah, 2007; Haller, 1992; Gyamera, 2005). Foregrounding local cultural knowings may be an important key for tracking the effectiveness of educational teachings about respect, self-worth, and discipline methods, including those derived from local Indigenous philosophies focusing specifically on values and character education.

Since 2007, I have been working with graduate students from the University of Toronto and local African undergraduate assistants in a longitudinal research project in Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya examining Indigenous African proverbs, songs, folktales, and story forms for their pedagogic and instructional relevance in youth education, specifically in the areas of character and moral development of the young learner. The initial 2007 study was funded through a contract grant from the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat (LNS) for a study on “Moral and Character Education in Ontario” (Dei, 2010). The study was later extended with Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funding for a longitudinal and more comprehensive study involving Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya, focusing not only on the actual documentation of the proverbs, but also on African Indigenous knowledge systems in general. The on-going study has extended its initial focus on ways of teaching discipline, morality, and character education (from the perspectives of youth, teachers, school administrators, parents, and communities) to examine the instructional, pedagogic, and communicative guidelines for using Indigenous African philosophies (conveyed in the documented proverbs, riddles, fables, folktales, myths, songs, and story forms etc.) and how these can enhance learning for African and North American youth. A major learning objective in the initial study has been to understand youth violence from the vantage point of learners and educators, and how a local cultural resource base constitutes important knowledge for educating youth about strong character and moral and civic responsibilities.

Between 2007 and 2009, approximately a dozen (12) focus group discussions were conducted alongside workshop sessions with student-educators, field practitioners and educators. There was a total of over eighty-five (85) individual interviews conducted with twenty-five (25) educators; twenty (20) Elders or parents; and forty (40) students drawn from the local universities, secondary schools, and community colleges, as well local ethnic communities in Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya. The focus of the interviews was to understand the use and meanings of local proverbs and their instructional, pedagogic, and communicative values, especially in reference to teachings about identity, self-worth, respect for self, peers and authority, and the obligations and responsibilities of community belonging. The entire research has provided an opportunity for me as Principal Investigator (PI) to network with Canadian educators and academic researchers on current directions in moral and character education research.

From 2009 to 2012, the research continued in Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. The study has consisted of the examination of library documents and archival collections on Nigeria, Kenya, and Ghanaian Indigenous cultural knowledge systems (e.g., parables, proverbs, riddles, songs, folktales and other folkloric production). In July 2010, I worked in Nigeria with local undergraduate assistants and research consultants to undertake extensive interviews with at least 10 Elders (as cultural custodians), 20 educators, and 20 students at the Adeniran Ogunsanya College of Education in Otto/Ijanikin, Lagos State, and Lagos State University, Lagos, Nigeria. This research also involved classroom observations of at least five (5) educators at the two institutions aforementioned. These educators were later selected for interviews. There

were three (3) additional focus group discussions that were held with educators and students at these institutions.

During the summer of 2012, the study continued in Kenya, concentrating on basic and elementary education, vocational training and polytechnic, and community-based cultural activities and their contribution to the local cultural socialization and education of youth. This phase of the research concentrated on an initial examination of the literature on local proverbs, folktales, songs, and other folklore at The University of Nairobi and Egerton University in Egoro, Nakuru district. In addition, with my student researchers, I conducted interviews with over 30 community Elders and parents as well as 10 students at the basic and elementary school level, and 10 students at a vocational and polytechnic training institute in the Embu district of Kenya. I also conducted interviews with over a dozen educators at the University of Nairobi and Egerton University in Egoro, Nakuru district. These interviews included focus group discussions and workshops with study participants. I was fortunate to have trained research assistants who documented the proverbs, riddles, and folktales shared by the Elders in the local languages and then provided English translations. The central focus of this work has been to understand the use and meanings of local proverbs and their instructional, pedagogic, and communicative values, especially teachings about identity, self-worth, respect for self, peers and authority, and the obligations and responsibilities of community membership.<sup>1</sup>

Proverbs go beyond their literal meanings. They have metaphorical meanings that are deeper reflections on life and speak to broader concerns indirectly. These metaphorical meanings have to be deciphered through intellectual wit. While the literal interpretations may assist in communication, it is an art to decipher the deeper, embedded meanings (metaphorical) of proverbs to understand the importance of these knowledge systems. It is also important to understand the context in which the proverbs are spoken. Proverbs are appropriate in select contexts and situations. Society bestows wisdom, knowledge, and intelligence on one whose speech is laced with proverbs, but also easily frowns upon someone who shows arrogance and pomposity in their display of knowledge of these wise sayings. Traditional Elders and cultural custodians are generally expected to be wise people who lace their speeches with proverbs, as illustrative of the key messages they want to get across, without being long winded.

Through the individual in-depth interviews (including focus group discussions) with Elders and cultural custodians well-versed in proverbs, we have been able to document the proverbs and to seek explanations and deeper meaning of these proverbs, contexts of their usage, embedded cultural teachings, as well as how proverbs can be used in schools to promote the education of learners. We also discussed with local educationists broader practical and philosophical questions about the proverbs, riddles, folktales, cultural stories, and songs as epistemologies and their practical relevance and application in schools. We also interviewed (individual and focus groups) parents, school teachers, and college and university students on their knowledge and understandings of proverbs, riddles, and folktales in their communities and what they saw as their relevance to teaching about culture, society, and youth education. We asked study participants for their own translation of these proverbs and proceeded to process their meanings by working in close collaboration with Elders and cultural custodians. Inferences drawn from the proverbs, riddles, folktales, cultural stories, and songs have been arrived through a dialogic process of working with cultural custodians as knowledge producers and the listeners as researchers. This is important because in discussion with Elders and cultural custodians they stress how it is the responsibility of the listener to take the embedded meanings of the cultural sayings (proverbs, riddles, and folktales) and apply their teachings to suit the

everyday lessons of society and what a listener wants to take away with. This flexibility of knowledge application explains why proverbs are said to be the palm oil with which words are eaten. The simple idiomatic expressions or short sentences carry more teachings that meet the eye. The meanings of these cultural sayings have come from the long associations of local peoples with their cultures, environments, and nature. These meanings and the interpretations of these proverbs are dynamic. For example, they move with the times, yet their authenticity—in terms of remaining true to the embedded understandings—can never be compromised. Working with proverbs is bringing responsibility to knowledge.

In our interpretations and educational applications of these Indigenous philosophies, we have sought to understand the primary teachings of African cultural values. We have analysed the cultural expressions with the broad terrain of the African Indigenous knowledge systems, their main principles and philosophical tenets, and why local people use such a medium of communication, including the power of oral culture. We worked with the interpretations of proverbs from cultural custodians, educationists, teachers, parents, and students, particularly in the ways the knowledge system addresses specific instructional, pedagogic, and communicative values and challenges about moral and character development of young learners. We have reflected on the ways such local cultural knowledges can be used in schools to enhance learning for a diverse group of students and to promote inclusive education. Consequently, for the uninitiated reader of the proverbs without being engrossed in the local culture, it tempting to claim one is attributing more meaning to a proverb than is intended. Local Elders and cultural custodians will literally tell you, “now that you have understood the proverbs work with it” (meaning show some responsibility for the knowledge). In Indigenous ways of knowing, we cannot always strive to affix particular and specific interpretations to words. Local cultural knowledges show remarkable degrees of flexibility. Such flexibility is not to be confused with a loss of content or authenticity defined as remaining true to its intended meanings.

### **Selected African Indigenous Proverbs**

In this section, I have selected Indigenous African proverbs of only the Igbo cultural group of Nigeria and the Kiambu of Kenya to highlight the relevance of teachings such proverbs with a specific consideration as to their application for youth character development and moral education. These teachings primarily highlight individual responsibility to the community and the relevance of knowing oneself and one’s relationship with peers, adults, and the wider community members. The teachings of such knowledge are intended to help and guide the individual in everyday interactions whether in schools, off-school sites, and in the wider community. Generally, youth are taught such proverbs by adults in their early formative years to instill a strong sense of self-worth, purpose, pride, and community. It is such teachings that help mold individual character and guide the actions of a community member.

#### **Igbo of Nigeria Proverbs**

***Dibia n’agwo otoro, o kobere ike ya n’elu?*** (The medicine [wo]man who claims that s/he cures cholera, could s/he be hanging his/her anus in the sky?). The possession of knowledge comes with consequences. This proverb teaches the young that claiming mastery over a chaotic situation does not extricate one from the impact of the situation. There is more to acquiring knowledge than simply coming to know, thus highlighting the

importance of humility in knowledge acquisition or embodiment. Thus, it not only about having knowledge, but also having wisdom; that is knowing how to use our knowledge to act responsibly. In this proverb, the notion of knowledge is seen as leading us to wisdom, thus stating that when we acquire knowledge it is not the knowledge itself that transforms how we act but it is the wisdom used to apply this knowledge. Moreover, as all learners are in a “community of learners” we are all affected by what happens to the community. There is the moral imperative to bring questions about [in]justice, equity, community belonging, the power the creation of communities, and the like to the forefront. If we fail to do so, we do not escape the chaos, violence, and conflict that ensues in the absence of justice and fairness.

This proverb, therefore, is spoken to highlight the importance of collective responsibility and that as members of a collective it is our responsibility to ensure that knowledge is used for the betterment of all. Furthermore, the proverb teaches about social responsibility; that is, the one who manipulates others to cause social disorder should know that she or he will not escape its consequences. Therefore, this proverb teaches that we are held accountable for our actions and deeds. In the long run, what we do catches up to us. It is, therefore, important to act in ways that benefit ourselves and others. This is a lesson in probity and accountability. It is also about responsibility towards others and the community at large. Pedagogically, this proverb teaches the importance of self-reflection and self-analysis. As learners, we must continually examine the ways in which the knowledges and wisdom we acquire (or embody) may benefit ourselves, our community, and larger questions of equity and peace. Furthermore, as this proverb also teaches of social responsibility, it not only speaks to our individual responsibilities but also of our collective responsibilities.

***Onye ajuju adighi efu uzo. (One who asks questions does not miss her or his way).*** This proverb is about the pursuit of knowledge as a search for answers. Critical questioning on the part of the learner is part of the search for knowledge. Therefore this proverb teaches that we should not be afraid to question and to ask the whys, hows, and whens. Instead, we should be encouraged to ask such questions as they are integral to the search for knowledge. The learner must not accept or take anything for granted, but must actively come to know through critical and inquisitive analysis. We cannot be complacent in our learning; we must resist closure and develop an inquisitive mind. Pedagogically, this proverb teaches that those who make persistent searches, critical investigations, and/or attempts in a project is more likely to achieve their end goal. This proverb also speaks to relationships to authority, teaching that anyone who constantly consults authority for information would not disobey rules. In having respect for authority and developing humility of not knowing, one comes to know more because one is open to learning. Therefore, this proverb, as a pedagogical tool, speaks to the importance of maintaining a positive and humble relationship with those in positions of authority. This proverb may be of particular importance for students who may have struggled with authority or may disrupt the classroom, although this does not mean dismissing the need for a critical pedagogic engagement of the power and structure involved in classroom learning.

***Ihe agba n'ata agwughi nti adighi ezu ike. (As long as the jaw has food remaining to masticate the cheek does not take its rest).*** This proverb has a powerful educative relevance for learners of today. One does not enjoy the reward of an achievement when one fails to accomplish a project. Success does not come easy. We must work for it. It requires hard work, personal and collective effort, perseverance, deep focus, and strong determination. Creating success is about continuous work. But such work is also collective undertaking. Just as a teacher's work is not done until her or his students learn, the learner can

also not accomplish success [i.e. learning] without listening to the guidance and counseling of the teacher. Therefore, teachers and students have complementary roles. Educationally, this proverb could be used to suggest that teachers may be more interested (better equipped) in teaching students who are willing to put effort in their education. While the proverb is certainly note-worthy and greatly applicable to African educational systems, it also places a great deal of the responsibility for success on the student's shoulders. A critical pedagogic engagement of this proverb requires the classroom teacher to ask some questions: Are all students equally equipped to put their best efforts into scholarly matters? How do we account for differences in access, abilities, and learning styles? Should teachers only be motivated to teach students who are motivated to learn?

***Onye ndidi n'eri azu ukpo.* (A patient angler eats fish from the fishing hook).** The important message being conveyed in this wise saying is that the one who reaches her/his goal is the one who is patient in his/her duty. One can infer from this proverb that no matter what adverse conditions we may find ourselves in, it is best that we address the situation and attempt to make the most of it. In other words, one is advised not to complain and lament over a difficult situation, but to make the most of what is given to us in life. In relation to education, this proverb calls for patience and positive thinking with hope and action on the parts of students who may find the school curriculum or student-life too difficult to handle.

***Anu buzo n'anwu mmiri oma.* (The first animal to arrive in the stream drinks clean water).** This proverb is about how punctuality affords one the best opportunities in life. One must be present "somewhere" to take advantage of the opportunities that comes one's way. In effect, this proverb suggests that it takes patience and dedication to achieve one's goals. Being first to arrive at a place has its benefits including the privilege and knowledge of history. Such knowledge is about power. When this proverb is related to Indigenous views about social responsibility, it can be inferred then that those who have the benefit of history and past knowledges (i.e., being there before) must utilize this knowledge to work and create better conditions for the generations to come.

### **Kiambu of Kenya Proverbs**

***Yururaga iramukagia ivutia.* (He who loiters aimlessly can get a misfortune).** When a person has no purpose in life they are likely to falter. People must stand for something or else they will fall for anything. This proverb is about courage and having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. It is about understanding oneself, one's identity, and what it means to be human. It is about having a goal and purpose in life and not wandering aimlessly. To wander without a sense of purpose and meaning in life is not inconsequential. One reaps what one sows. Thus, this proverb teaches about self, identity, purpose, life, and responsibilities. It exhorts the young about consequences for their actions or inactions, encouraging youth of the importance of having goals to accomplish while warning them of the dangers of a meaningless life. Elders and adults can also use the proverb to educate youth about ethics and the importance of working to bring about change. It can be used to engage youth in a spiritually-driven approach to life and to highlight the importance of remaining true to oneself, identity, and social existence. Therefore, this proverb can be used to encourage grounding and self-knowledge, as youth understand themselves, their communities, their culture, and their families, they will have a greater understanding of what they seek and hope for in their own lives, thus building a stronger sense of identity.

***Wi kirira nwa wigiake.* (Listen to the advice but decide according to your reasoning).** This Kiambu proverb exhorts youth to listen to good advice but to realize that how they choose to interact with such advice is up to them. The proverb calls for the youth to use their own intellectual, wisdom, knowledge, creativity, and resourcefulness to make the right decisions. Elders can simply advise, but it is up to the youth themselves to listen and act upon good advice in ways that may serve their sense of purpose and direction in life. Therefore, the proverb encourages being responsible for one's actions and decisions and not blaming others when things fail. The proverb can also be used in classroom teachings to stress the importance of knowledge as power. For youth, listening to friends, peers, and family is equally important, but they must also remember that they have the ability to make the right decisions when advice is offered. One can only make intelligent choices when one is duly informed and when one trusts one's own intuition and judgment. Therefore this proverb also encourages youth to trust their own intuition and self-knowledge in the face of challenging circumstances.

***Murimi tike murii.* (Workers are few but beneficiaries are many).** This is a proverb about morality and sacrifice. Those who enjoy the fruits of hard labour are not always those who have made the initial sacrifices. In fact, many of those who seek enjoyment show up later to enjoy the fruits of others' sacrifice. The proverb is not meant to discourage sacrifice or hard work, but rather to encourage youth to embrace community service and work and to contribute to building their communities. It teaches that there are many who will benefit from the work we each do today and that making sacrifices is not only for our individual benefit but may also benefit those around us. It also presents a lesson in morality to those who may simply turn out to reap the fruits of others people's labour when they could have participated in the work that made the successes possible in the first place. The proverb cautions one to not simply look for immediate gratification from their sacrifices but to continue to work for the benefit of others. The classroom teacher can use this proverb as an instruction in community building, responsibility, hard work, respect, morality, personal integrity and character, and personal sacrifice. It is a proverb that stresses that the little we each do today stands to benefit many in the future, and similarly that we can only succeed if we collectively become part of the process required to make that success possible.

***Ngugu ndiumaga vndu vega.* (A precious thing is never received too easily).** To attain success one must be prepared to work for it. One must also continue to have passion, curiosity, and interests in what she or he is doing. Success is precious and cannot be handed to one on a silver platter. It requires devotion, sacrifice, hard work. The proverb thus stresses the importance of studying hard, doing homework and assignments, and respecting peers, teachers, and authority figures if one wants to be a successful learner. Possessions not acquired through strenuous efforts sometimes disappear quickly and without one being aware of it. One is likely to hold onto something dearly if one has had to work very hard for it.

***Ngii imwe niyo yoragia nyama.* (One word can spoil the whole speech).** Life is a long journey filled with trials and tribulations. The mark of having a good life is the ability to navigate life's treacherous paths and avoid transgressions. Pedagogically, this proverb speaks about bringing responsibility to knowledge and knowledge production. It can be used to teach about knowledge, responsibility to knowledge, character, accountability, and transparency. For example, the proverb teaches that we must all be accountable for what we say and be mindful that just as knowledge is power words can also wound. One must be cautious of what comes out of one's mouth as words tend to be consequential. One little mishap, mistake, or bad deed can damage one's good reputation. One can be forgiven for past transgressions, but it puts a dent in

one's achievements. This proverb can be used to encourage youth to be on their good behaviour at all times and watch with whom they keep as company. In the classroom setting, the teacher can use the lessons of the proverb to explain to young learners why it is important to produce knowledge responsibly and not allow our search for knowledge even in the spirit of academic freedom to avoid discussions of responsibility, ethics, and accountability.

### **Discussion and Analysis**

This paper has sought to draw upon both the literal and metaphoric meanings of these proverbs and their teachings as way to highlight the pedagogic and instructional implications of African Indigenous philosophies. I have presented some of the common proverbs that teach about community belonging, social responsibility, self-discipline, and moral conduct for the development of a strong character and personhood. These teachings primarily highlight individual responsibility to the community and the relevance of knowing oneself and one's relationship to peers, adults, and the wider community members. The purpose of such knowledge is to give individuals guidance for their everyday lives whether in schools, off-school sites, or in the wider community. Adults share these proverbs with young learner in their early formative years so that youth can develop a strong sense of self-worth, purpose, and community. It is such teachings that help mold individual character and guide the actions of a community member (Opoku 1975, 1997; Pachocinshi, 1996; Yankah, 1989, 1995).

This study has worked specifically with local cultural knowings relating to morality, discipline, character building, and social responsibility (see also Dei, 2011, 2014a). Many of these cultural knowings and sages shed light on community, responsibility, and interdependence. Great emphasis is placed on acceptance, helpfulness, and encouragement of one's peers in order to overcome obstacles collectively, rather than through cut-throat competition and winning. These proverbs impart teachings that can be practically applied within classrooms to help students within pluralistic educational contexts. Such cultural knowings also bring to the fore some of the contestations about the production, interrogation, and dissemination of knowledge in the school system. Proverbs offer a counter stance and an Indigenous narrative to interrogate and challenge the dominant Western way of knowing. Proverbs have a direct bearing on how communities use knowledge to respond to immediate challenges and obstacles in life. Proverbial sayings subvert hegemonic ways of knowing in the call for multiple readings. African proverbs offer important lessons to all learners (not just African youth). Educators can work with young learners by instructing them as to how African proverbs teach about community, social responsibility, ethics, and social justice as a way to create schools into "healthy, working communities."

The question is can Euro-Canadian and American educational systems learn anything from such African cultural knowledges? As argued elsewhere (Dei, 2014a; b) contemporary Euro-Canadian and American education espouses values of individualism, competition, personal responsibility, and discipline. To some, these teachings may have merits in promoting competitive, high-driven individuals who aspire for high personal success, growth, and individual freedom. But given some of the challenges that such values also present (e.g., neo-liberal economic values of competitive individualism, consumerism, greed, hierarchies, and learners who can be self-centred so as to think of only themselves and perceiving success simply as an individual achievement on test scores etc.) we need to bring into the education of youth other social values that can contribute to building healthy, sustainable communities. For

example, we need our schools to create “communities of learners” with collective responsibilities to each other, building reciprocal relations, sharing knowledge, defining educational success broadly as beyond the individual and academics to social success to fight questions of social justice, fairness and equity for all. The point here is not to pass evaluative judgments, but rather, to argue that there are multiple ways of reading our worlds and these readings must be on the table for critical engagement in school systems. As already alluded to, youth truism and the lack of discipline and respect in schools is a problem. We must teach discipline and respect rather than simply enforce discipline and respect. Clearly, the African cultural knowings discussed in this essay are about creating a disciplined learner and such understanding of discipline is not about a power dynamic. Some of the teaching of the African proverbs can be invoked to help inculcate in youth individual and collective agencies to create a collective future.

Our philosophies of education must tap into other ways of knowing for their contributions to the education of a more holistic learner. There are limitations of Western humanism when presented as a universal model. A multi-centric or polycentric education model that recognizes the existence of diverse learners, each coming to schools with complex identities, cultural knowledges, lived experiences, histories, and cultures help create multiple knowledges with which the school system can work. For example, spirituality is an important aspect in the lives of many non-Western and Indigenous peoples. In a diverse school system we should expect educators to critically engage multiple learning communities, including the understanding of the role and place of “spirituality” and “community” in schooling and education. As the teachings of some of the African proverbs show educators can help young learners work with their spiritual identities as understood as the relation people have with to the land. They may also use the proverbs to teach about the link between one’s self and the collective and to foster an appreciation for developing a purpose in life and for social existence. African spirituality eschews concepts of relationality, sharing, reciprocal responsibility, and other social values oriented to Indigenous humanisms. To most Indigenous cultures, the understanding of spirituality is fundamental to developing personal and communal worth and social resistance. Learners needs spiritual to offer an emotional backbone to struggles of personal dignity, social justice, fairness, equity, fairness, and resistance to social oppression. Should this be among the key teachings of moral and character education?

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to go back to a proposition that informed the framing of this paper. In order to stem the tide of youth violence in schools this study has asserted a place for the pedagogy of African Indigenous proverbs. It entails engaging culture as a site of pedagogy. As I have noted elsewhere (Dei, 2012), culture and pedagogy are critical to knowledge production. Cultural paradigms shape the construction of particular knowledges. As a matter of fact, Indigenous philosophies point to the salience of culture in producing understanding and frames of reference, including multiple ways of knowing. While it can be argued that the advancement of any one cultural perspective cannot be universally and unproblematically applied to and/or privileged over other perspectives, it is relevant for us to interrogate the cultural groundings of knowledge systems. There are cultural continuities and cultural discontinuities.

In Indigenous African philosophies (which is also shared with other [Indigenous] communities), there is an entrenched understanding that the elements of the universe are interrelated and intertwined (e.g., mental, physical, and spiritual, material, political, economic

interrelations, etc.). If we accept the role of culture in knowledge production and making sense of our world, we must further reiterate the need to work with the notion of a “culture-centredness” of the learner in her or his own learning in order to engage knowledge. Consequently, a culturally grounded perspective that centres African/Indigenous peoples’ worldviews helps learners resist and challenge the dominance of hegemonic perspectives. When the experiences and histories of marginalized groups are denied or devalued in schools, there is the need to centre the agency of the marginalized so that learners themselves become subjects of their own histories, stories, and experiences. A culture-centred paradigm provides a space for marginalized students to interpret their experiences using their worldviews. In this study, the focus on Igbo and Kiambu proverbs (in particular but not exclusively) as examples of African Indigenous philosophies offer some important philosophical, pedagogic, and instructional lessons for all learners. An important lesson is the idea of community of learners that emerge from a working knowledge of “community belongingness” and “the essence of social interpersonal and group relations.”

Respect for Elders, parents, and authority have a key message contained in African proverbs. Gerontocracy in the African context is the traditional respect for authority and elderly persons for their wisdom, knowledge of community affairs and “closeness” to the ancestors/ancestresses (Bascom, 1965). As African Elders theorized and taught oral literatures that included fables, folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, and storytelling, African youths received their socialization and education. The youth also learned about traditions, power and authority, and the relationships and responsibilities of the individual to his/her wider society and to nature (Boateng, 1990). Parent-child teachings and interactions in traditional African communities revolved around letting the child, adult, and the community see the world from viewpoints that ensured that community issues became the primary concern of all.

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### Notes

1 At the close of the study in 2013 we had collected 402 proverbs from Ghana; 251 proverbs, 12 cultural stories, 87 riddles, 10 songs and 5 folktales from Kenya; and 332 proverbs from Nigeria-all from different ethnicities in Africa. Currently I am working with teachers from selected Toronto elementary and secondary schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who are also enrolled in my graduate course at the University of Toronto, SES 1921Y Principles of Anti-Racism Education graduate course at OISE/UT to field test the draft of lesson plans and curriculum units.

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