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Integrating local cultural knowledge as formal and informal education for young african learners: A Ghanaian case study

George J. Sefa Dei (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto)

Abstract

This paper is about schooling, education and socialization in Africa with a focus on the pedagogic and instructional relevance of local cultural resource knowledge such as the teachings of Indigenous proverbs. Using Ghanaian case material, the paper examines how Indigenous cultural knowledges inform the education and socialization of youth and suggest ways for rethinking schooling and education in African contexts. Among the teachings of Indigenous proverbs highlighted are knowings about self and community, development of self-worth and character, importance of social discipline and collective social responsibility. The discussion also addresses the challenges of integrating local cultural knowledges as part of the formal education of young learners.

Résumé

Cet article cherche à comprendre les processus de scolarité, d'éducation et de socialisation en Afrique en se concentrant spécialement sur la pédagogie des connaissances culturelles locales telles que l'enseignement des proverbes autochtones. Cet article examine comment les connaissances culturelles locales informent l'éducation et les processus de socialisation des jeunes et suggère de ce fait une remise en question de la scolarité et de l'éducation dans les contextes africains. Parmi les proverbes autochtones enseignés, certains font référence au développement personnel du soi et à la notion de communauté, à l'amour propre et à la dignité, à l'importance de la discipline sociale et à la responsabilité collective sociale. En conclusion, cet article discute également des défis auxquels il faut faire face quand il est question d'intégrer les connaissances culturelles locales dans la formation officielle des jeunes apprenants.

INTRODUCTION

A growing number of African educators have been calling for the re-conceptualization of schooling and education to bring about meaningful changes (see Abdi and Cleghorn, 2005; Asabere-Ameyaw, Dei and Raheem, 2012). This paper is about re-introducing local/Indigenous cultural knowledges in African schooling and education. It deals with the importance of local teachings embedded in African proverbs and how such cultural knowledges can be used effectively to teach young learners. Arguably, the utility of local cultural knowledge contained in African knowledge genres has been neglected in educational research (see also Jegede, 1994; Le Grange, 2007; Ogunniyi, 1988;). Yet, Africa has always been an important source of rich information for knowledge production. Traditional African education has utilized a variety of instructional and pedagogic methods, as well as guides and resources to educate youth (Boateng, 1990; Bascom, 1965). Semali (1999) discussed the dilemmas in

integrating Indigenous literacy (e.g., poetry, songs, dreams, life stories, drama and theaters, as well as proverbs) in school curriculum in Tanzania as part of the Tanzania, Education for Self-Reliance (ESR) national efforts to localize the curriculum. Among the obstacles encountered were the lack of political will, over-dependence on international assistance in fiscal planning and policy directives, the use of inappropriate research methods, the absence of an Indigenous African teaching methodology, and the “alienation of African intellectuals from their own culture” (p.112) [see also Semali, 1993, 1994]. Mwadime’s (1999) work called for the deconstruction in African social research, education and educational policy to include Indigenous cultural knowledges teaching in agriculture, health science and the environment. Such educational initiatives will require the development of new teaching methods, research methodology and the documentation and presentation of the Indigenous cultural knowledge in ways to serve the development needs of African peoples. Similarly, Parrish’s (1999) study on the Indigenous post-harvest strategies of local farmers in the Egyptian Western Desert suggests that the existence of safe and well-developed pest management cultural resource knowledge of local peoples could be integrated with Western-influenced Agriculture Extension education programs.

Using primarily a Ghanaian case study this paper will examine how local/Indigenous cultural knowledge contained in proverbs informs education and socialization of youth. Much of on-going debates and discussions on ‘reforming African education’ is located in the dominant paradigms of Western thinking. Alternative ideas and counter perspectives on Indigenous education are not always encouraged in schools. We must begin by developing Indigenous, non-Western concepts and categories for understanding African societies. This requires that we pay particular attention to the production and the social organization of knowledge in Africa, and particularly, to cultural dimensions of schooling, education and development.

CONCEPTUALIZING INDIGENOUS AND LOCAL CULTURAL KNOWLEDGES

‘Indigenous knowledge’ is knowledge of the Indigenous peoples of a particular land employed for centuries for survival and everyday existence. ‘Local cultural knowledge’ on the other hand, can be possessed by any group (not necessarily Indigenous to the land) who have lived in a particular place/location or space for a period of time (see Warren, 1991; Lebakeng, 2010, p. 25, Purcell, 1998). As argued elsewhere (Dei 2011a), African peoples have an Indigenous knowledge base. Such knowledges are embedded in local cultures, histories, experiences

and within particular identities. Knowledge rooted in local cultures, histories, and experiences can be termed “cultural knowledges”. These knowledges are dynamic in responding to change and the pressures of ‘modernity’. Such knowledges are not frozen in time and space. They are continually relied upon in everyday challenges of human survival and responding to social demands. Similarly, despite foreign/external influences and ever-changing trends of so-called “modernity”, African Indigenous knowledges (rooted specifically in the land base) have remained dynamic and evolved with contemporary challenges. In local communities, such knowledges can be found in story forms, songs, rituals, myths and mythologies, fables, tales, proverbs and folklore. They can also be found in aspects of material culture, such as symbolic ornaments and body ware, and the social meanings and interpretations enshrined in cultural artifacts. They are also in the local cultural resource knowledge and practices associated with traditional pharmacology/plant medicine, farming technologies and agricultural methods, environmental management, soils and vegetation classification, arts and crafts, cultural norms, belief systems, social organization of families and kin groups, cultural festivals, and cultural products (e.g., weaving, pottery, poetry, as well as ritual ornaments creatively fashioned from Indigenous materials, etc). Through oral traditions, we can also witness the flowering of a truly Indigenous literary culture with succeeding generations of Indigenous communities. Furthermore, music, drumming, and dancing have been exceptional communication modes for African peoples (Dei, 2011b).

Conceptually I take up ‘Indigenous’ as local cultural knowledge that draws on the interconnections of society, culture and nature. ‘Indigenous’ also alludes to the power relations within which local peoples struggle to define and assert their own representations of history, identity, culture and place in the face of Western hegemonic ideologies. Implicit in the terminology of ‘Indigenous’ is a recognition of some philosophical, conceptual and methodological differences and relations between Western and non-Western knowledge systems. These differences are not absolutes but a matter of degree. The difference is seen more in terms of cultural logics and epistemologies, i.e., differences in the making of sense as always dependent on context, history, politics and place (see also Agrawal, 1995; Semali and Kincheloe, 1999; Dei, Hall and Goldin Rosenberg, 2000; Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Dei, 2011c).

Culture and language are very central to claiming ‘Indigenous’ for without these the concept of ‘Indigenous’ is meaningless. While today we must be careful to ascribe ‘Indigeneity’ to all knowledge systems, we should also note that Indigenous knowledges are not homogenous. They are demarcated by regional, class, ethnic, gender and religious differences. There are differential

class and community interests when we speak of Indigenous knowledges. All knowledge is made up of social and political creations that can serve specific interests. But we cannot idealize difference. There is interplay and exchange among and between cultures and communities and it is this process that harmonises difference within local communities and their knowledge. While there may be significant intellectual, cultural and political disagreements within communities, nonetheless, important lines of connection can develop across group boundaries and Indigenous communities.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

In the section I present a brief general overview of informal and formal education in Ghana in order to offer the reader insights into the nature of [West] African education. I will specify what is unique and significant about Ghana and bring to the fore factors that might promote or hinder the inclusion of local cultural knowledges in formal schooling and education. Informal education is not synonymous with pre-colonial/pre-contact education. Nonetheless, I draw on the links between informal education and culturalized forms of education as [to a large extent] different from the rigid formalities and processes of [post]colonial education that happens within formal settings (see also Fafunwa, 1974, 1982, Fafunwa and Aisiku, 1982; Sifuna, 1990). Informal education as linked to traditional/cultural education starts in the early years of an individual's life and is approached through a culturalized medium of instruction, such as story sharing, songs, proverbs, apprenticeship, arts and crafts, as well as vocational/trades' knowledge. Informal education is also conducted within communities, homes and families using intergenerational knowledge as contexts passed onto youth from Elders and adults, as well as through experienced artisans and cultural custodians. Through the processes of socialization the young are taught by the extended family unit and the community-at-large. Parents, guardians, adults and Elders are expected to lead by example, teaching society's morals and cultural etiquette, the essence of respect for oneself, peers, and group, the communal sense of individual character building, and social responsibility and peaceful co-existence with Nature/Mother Earth. The medium of instruction is through the local vernacular. Education is seen as a lifelong process which takes place beyond the four-walled classroom. Communities would make a distinction between wisdom and knowledge acquisition by insisting that an educated person is one who understands herself/himself [as a whole person - mentally, spiritually, culturally, emotionally, physically and materially] and is continually guided by the mutual obligations to, and interdependence with the wider community (see also Shizha, 2005). 'Going to school' does not necessarily mean one is educated

and the distinction between “schooling” and “education” would be made clear to the learner who forgets her/his culture, traditions, customs and social expectations after acquiring mere ‘bookish knowledge’. In effect, informal forms of education emphasize such teachings as traditions of mutuality, group solidarity, collective responsibility, the connections of the individual to the group, respect to the aged/Elderly, spirituality and aesthetics. These teachings are steeped in the sophisticated Ghanaian [and African] systems of thought and practice found in Indigenous folklore, music, child rearing practises, religion, language, family structures, as well as the much noted traditional African generosity, hospitality and respect for humanity. And, of course embedded in these teachings are also tensions and contestations about power, injustice, coercion and oppression (see also Dei, 1993).

In contrast, formal education happens in institutional settings like schools, colleges, vocational and technical institutes, and universities. In most pre-tertiary institutions (pre-college/university) both trained and untrained teachers are employed to follow specific curriculum and instructional guidelines developed by accredited bodies (e.g., state government and non-governmental organizations). Most schools are government-run but we do have an increasing emergence of private schools in the country set up by individuals and other non-governmental organizations. The question of resources for educational delivery is not always easy to address as many times students have limited access to educational material. Notwithstanding the admirable efforts of many educators and school administrators, formal [public] education has been noted to suffer from the lack of retention of teachers and, consequently, a shortage of human power; shortage of textbooks/teaching and reading materials and learning aids for students; questions of inappropriate curriculum; weak school physical infrastructure (e.g., poor conditions of school buildings, overcrowded classrooms, lack of furniture, blackboard); ineffective professional staff development, and poor working conditions (including very low and delayed/unpaid salaries for teachers and administrators) [see also, Azeem and Sam, 2008; Maikish and Gershberg, 2009].

It is also a fact that formal education in Ghana has witnessed a series of policy reforms since the post-Independence era. The problem though is that while a number of these policy reforms are well-intentioned the political will and resource commitment to see educational initiatives through have either been lacking or these policy reforms have been subjected to a sort of ‘political footballing’.² Certain aspects of formal education may be noted for the specific

² For example, in 1987, the then military government of Jerry Rawlings [under the auspices of the World Bank/IMF educational sector adjustment] implemented broad reforms that touched all levels of the Ghanaian

objectives of this paper. Several methods of discipline/punishment are used in schools when students misbehave ranging from corporal punishment, suspensions and expulsions and hard labour. Most schools ensure that students are supported emotionally, psychologically by engaging local communities, families, and Elders through mediation processes. In other cases, counselors and social workers may be employed in wealthy schools to attend to the social needs of learners. Also, in Ghana, English is the main language used in classrooms although in recent years there has been a conscious attempt to teach local vernacular and Indigenous languages.³

Parents are heavily involved in the activities of schools through school councils, parent-teacher associations and other representation of school governing bodies. Among the extra-curricular activities available in schools are sports and recreational activities, non-academic competitions. Most schools are located within the vicinity of local communities but it possible for students to be attending schools not located in their neighborhoods of birth either as boarding or day students. Class sizes do vary and are normally high, and in the pre-tertiary institutions a teacher is expected to be responsible for the good of students in a given class. Most classes are mixed with students of both genders, different ethnicities, age, religious and class backgrounds. But there are gender segregated schools as well as schools (especially private schools) known to cater to wealthy families. Theoretically, all students have access to higher education but in reality the rising cost of education and the existence and mushrooming of well-financed

education system and attempted to address the recurring educational issues and problems. The reforms reduced pre-university education in the country from 17 years to 12 years (six years of primary, three years of junior secondary school [JSS], and three years of senior secondary school [SSS] education), not counting the two years of Kindergarten. The subsequent NPP government under President Kufour when voted into power in 2000, also initiated new changes in the system and increased the duration of SSS from 3 years to 4 years. The present NDC government under President Mills while continuing with some changes supported by the international donor funds (e.g., decentralization to ensure educational resources get to the ground level, and making sure local stakeholders manage their own education, resource distribution through allocation in a Capitation Grant Scheme, and a School Feeding Programme for pupils in the JSS) recently reverted the duration of Senior High School (former SSS) education from 4 years back to 3 years (see also Osei, 2006; Maikish and Gershberg, 2009).

³ In fact, while the idea has always been on the books for some time now it was not until 2008 that the use of local/Indigenous languages as part of medium of instruction in the basic level, specifically, the two years of Kindergarten to Primary Level 3 is being enforced/implemented. School teachers in these levels are expected to use a local language alongside English in classroom instruction. The early years have more time for local language as the medium of instruction. From Primary 4 though to third year of junior high school [JHS3] local language is offered as part of the subjects on the timetable and teachers are expected to devote some hours to teach such language to all students. At the senior high school [SHS] levels local language may be taken as an elective by only the General Arts students. Besides, local language is not considered a core subject like English, Science, Mathematics and Social Studies.

and resourced private schools end up creating class, gender, ethnic differences in schooling populations at the tertiary levels.

CASE STUDY OF LOCAL CULTURAL RESOURCE KNOWLEDGE AS INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

While informal (Indigenous) education has been a prevalent aspect of pre-colonial times, today it still plays a role in the socialization of youth. Indigenous forms of learning and socialization have persisted and are being transformed to offer knowledge, skills and capabilities to youth in many communities. The challenge is for schools to tap into such wealth of traditional and Indigenous forms of education in the service of educating the contemporary learner. One possible area for such integration of Indigenous local cultural resource knowledge into schooling is the teachings of Indigenous proverbs. Since 2007, I have been involved in a longitudinal research in Ghana [now extended to 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.⁴ 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.

To give a general overview of the fieldwork, between 2007-9 at least a dozen (12) focus group discussions had been organized together with workshop sessions with student-educators, field practitioners and educationists. There had been a total of over eighty-five (85) individual interviews conducted with twenty-five (25) educators; twenty (20) Elders/parents and twenty-five (40) students drawn from the local universities, secondary schools and community colleges, as well local communities. The focus of the interviews was understanding 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

⁴ This 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'. The study has since been 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 highlighting, the values of Indigenous stories, story forms, songs, folktales and riddles in youth education. The on-going study has extended the initial focus on ways of teaching discipline, moral 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, fables, folktales, myths, songs and story forms etc.) and how these can enhance learning for African and North American youth.

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.

In African contexts there is a growing body of works dealing with the broad theme of 'Indigenous knowledge'. We also have a number of texts that have documented African proverbs, fables, parables, tales, mythologies and their cultural meanings and interpretations (see, for example, Kudadjie, 1996, Yankah, 1989; 1995; Opoku, 1997, 1975; Ogede, 1993; Kalu, 1991; Pachocinshi, 1996; Abubakre and Reichmuth, 1997). So far much of the focus has been on proverbs. Many Indigenous communities elsewhere also utilize proverbs, parables, folktales and mythologies to convey meanings of society, nature and cultural interactions (see Abrahams 1967, 1968a, 1968b, 1972; Dorson, 1972; Taylor 1934; Wolfgang and Dundas 1981). We know that Aboriginal traditions focus more on storytelling than proverbs and fables. Yet, in Aboriginal epistemology we see how story telling conveys powerful meanings similar to those encoded in proverbs, parables, fables, and tales in other Indigenous contexts (Firth, 1926). Within the stories a critical learner can get a powerful sense of the pedagogic, instructional and communicative relevance of such cultural knowledge. For example, Johnson (1993, 2003) shows Ojibway mythology as rich, complex and dense in meaning and mystery. His works provide readers with a succinct understanding of Ojibway people's life, legends, and beliefs. Like stories and mythologies, proverbs when told often evoke an act of self-reflection from the learner/listener. As powerful knowledge forms, proverbs, folktales, and stories offer a deeper level of understanding and appreciation of the community's place in the larger social, physical, and cultural realm of life. As the writings of Chamberlain (2003), Eastman and Nerburn (1993) and Stiffarm (1998), among many others, point out in the current globalized and transnational world where 'migration, Diaspora, and resettlement are everyday affairs' and where we continually encounter competing claims to land, resource, knowledge and power, proverbs, tales, folktales and mythologies [even when contained in stories] can be helpful to all learners in appreciating the common thread of human existence.

STUDY FINDINGS

In this section I present some of the narrative accounts of Ghanaian educators, student-teachers, and parents as they speak of the significance of local cultural knowledges embedded in the teachings of proverbs.

Schooling and Colonial Education: The Place and Relevance of Local Culture and Traditions

We start with the narrative of critique. Arguably, not every problem of contemporary or post-colonial education in Africa can be laid at the doorstep of colonialism. Nonetheless, we must critique colonial education for its role in the current failures of schools systems in helping communities think through home-grown creative solutions. The negation of the positive (solution-oriented) aspects of traditional cultures is a case in point. There is a need to start by reclaiming positive traditional cultural values. In a focus group discussion with final year student teachers specializing in Social Studies at the University of Education in Ghana the students offered a poignant critiques of colonial education and its impact on culture. They speak at where to begin; that is, having the courage to teach local/traditional culture in schools:

Student: But you see, the thing is somebody must start it. So if you say it is like that then there will be no change. But somebody must realize it and start something and in the process somebody will be used as a scapegoat but if what our forefathers did for us to attain independence; they sacrificed themselves..... So if we want to bring things back then some people will have to sacrifice themselves, fight for it because we will meet opposition on the way. We need to sacrifice and stand up and fight it so that when you pave the way somebody else will come and continue and by so doing our culture can also come back. That will be the way. **[File 20: Text Units 1495-1510].**

‘Return to the source’ (local culture) is critical. It is laced with risks and the need for sacrifices beyond individual interests. The marginalization, devaluation and perhaps total negation of African traditional culture and social values and their place in schooling and education of youth is disturbing. In our discussion the student asks for a cultural reclamation that recognizes the vitality of some of the knowledges and ideas of previous generations as embedded in local cultures. A female colleague in the focus group discussion suggests the way forward in bringing ‘culture back into African education’:

Student: For me, one way of putting culture into our education is enforcing national schools and colleges’ cultural festivals, where the students will be organized and made to address the cultures which they come from and they come to compete. Now where there is competition people are always moved. First, competition is a form of motivation for people. Where there is competition and most likely awards will be given the students are to compete for something; then they will be forced to learn something about the culture that they come from so that at the competition level

they will be able to perform. I think that is one way of putting culture in education. **[File 20: Text Units 1517-1550]**

The celebration of cultural festivals offer teachable moments. There are many cultural festivals in local communities that schools can celebrate and use such events to teach about cultures, social values and traditions. Many Ghanaian societies, for example, celebrate their histories through annual cultural festivals and in some cases through yearly calendar events (e.g., Akwasidae and Awukudae among the Asante). These cultural events have particular histories and teachings associated with them. Such cultural teachings and social values are significant in instilling in youth a sense of discipline and social responsibility to community and the larger citizenry. By rewarding teachers and youth who embrace such positive cultural values, learners can emulate their examples and use such local cultural knowings to guide and guard their path to social and academic success.

While some student teachers and educators may lament about ‘lost culture’, they also recognize that questions of whose culture/tradition, how and why are significant. The students do not bring an unquestioned faith to the reclamation of culture. Every culture is dynamic and culture moves with the times. The call to ‘bring back local culture’ is grounded in a firm believe that some aspects of traditional cultures have been helpful in socializing learners into responsible adults. No particular culture is an island unto itself. Cultures influence each other but one cannot discard their culture and traditions simply in favour of an alien culture. What learners can be assisted to do is to integrate values and ideas that have proven to work effectively in the socialization and education of youth in their own culture and cultural practices. The critical teaching of culture and cultural studies may be a good starting point. Teaching respect for oneself and group and local culture is integrated practice. If one knows about their local culture and its values such knowledge cannot be separated from everyday educational practice. Such knowledge is grounded in everything one does. Local cultural knowings can be infused in school/classroom teachings as educators go about their everyday teaching. If socialization and education is to proceed the way African communities have impacted knowledge then it will be seen that local cultural knowings are infused in the very processes of knowledge production, validation and dissemination. The use of proverbs is seen as one way of teaching culture and cultural knowledges in schools.

Proverbs as Local Cultural Resource Knowings

Proverbs constitute part of local Indigenous knowledge systems. They are organized systems of thought that reveal deep meanings connected to history,

culture, tradition and societal norms and expectations. Bafoah who has been teaching mathematics for the past six years in a Senior High School has great familiarity with local proverbs. According to him he came to know and learn about proverbs through "...his parents, at home with his grandfathers and mothers and even on television"....."and sometimes you hear people use it a lot in society". When asked about the significance of proverbs, he notes:

I think that it [proverbs] teaches us. Every proverb has a meaning and it is like sometimes it is not everything that we need to say openly. And sometimes I remember that Sometimes our parents, instead of just coming out to say something direct cover it with some words. Sometimes you realize that the younger ones will not understand but rather the older ones .. especially when in the midst of other younger children, parents want to speak to the elder person you see. Say the older one has done something wrong and the parents want to correct him, they say the thing in a proverbial form so that the junior ones might not understand but you realize that older ones understand the meaning of what the parents have said. It serves as a form of advice for the child to change his ways. **[File 04: Text Units 110 - 120]**.

Bafoah reiterates that proverbs are wise sayings uttered to show maturity of thought and a comprehension of social issues. They contain advice and codes of sound moral conduct for youth. As a socializing medium, proverbs show the transition to adult status and for the Elderly the association with proverbs points to a higher level of conceptual thinking. Proverbs also contain the pedagogic and instructional relevance in guiding learners' behaviour to be socially responsible and respectful. Bafoah raises questions of youth discipline, indiscipline, bullying, etc. highlighting that the teaching proverbs have a lot to offer:

I think here our assistant headmaster (the one in charge of academic) he almost always when he comes to assembly to talk about an issue, he always like to quote this Ghanaian proverb and in most cases before he even goes along to say some of the thingsthe correct discipline.....The favourite one he always says is that "wo se nea ore twa sare no onyim de ne kyia kyea." [literally meaning the one creating a path forward may not know that it is a crooked line until she/he turns to look at the path behind him]. And sometimes he says that to emphasize that we as teachers have to constantly say some of the things that learners do are wrong [in order] for them to change because as

they are here they are young and they do not know some of the things that are right and some of the consequences of their actions that they are doing. So, he for example, almost always, before he makes any statement, - I think hehas a lot of these Akan proverbs that he uses a lot. **[File 04 : Text Units 120 - 143].**

In other words, educators have a responsibility to guide the youth/learner on a successful path.

Proverbs, Character Development and Moral Education

Education should be about socializing the learner to be a whole, complete person, a learner who is well-aware of her or his surroundings and strives to meet the mutual obligations that go with membership in a thriving community. Proverbs teach about wisdom, good conduct and moral behaviour motivates one to do good deeds Proverbs offer a course of action to follow in life. College science student Kessie also enthuses over the importance of proverbs in teaching moral values and character:

Many proverbs help you to know the values and characters of individuals of other aspects. When a proverb is made or when a proverb is said you can see or examine that it is trying to say something about a character which is good or not good so that we students will know whether to take the good one or the bad one and definitely we will take the good one. Because, it cushions us or it helps us or strengthens us, or cushions us so that we do the right thing. **[File 05 : Text Units 46 - 55].**

By teaching about good conduct proverbs motivate human behaviour. The moral teachings of proverbs as it relates to character building for the young, adult and the Elderly cannot be underestimated. Local community activist, Nana Abrase points to a number of everyday proverbial sayings illustrating moral values and character teachings for youth:

.....[Proverbs teach about] respecting oneself and knowing limits to our knowing. In this context, it is also said that ‘an elder helps to uproot debt but does not pay debt’. The elder is there to guide the youth provide them with the knowledge skills and advice that will enable the youth carve their own future. We also say “the one who owns the thing is the one who eats. It is not the person who is hungry”. This means that if it happens that a relative of your passes away it is the one related to the relative

who gets to sit on the throne and not a visitor. **[File 01: Text Units 3 - 25]**.

Proverbs guide youth to good conduct and appropriate behaviour. Proverbs offer advice and counselling.

Indigenous Knowledge, Culture and Language

Proverbs have embedded cultural meanings. One cannot say proverbs without understanding their Indigenous knowledge system and how a people make social sense and meanings of their worlds. To understand Indigenous knowledge we must first understand the local language. African Indigenous ways of knowing are conveyed in local language mediums and there are limitations of teachings such cultural knowings using the dominant language. Any learner not conversant in the local language cannot in effect speak the local proverbs to convey their full meaning and social impact.

It is important to highlight the question of local languages as most educators and student-teachers interviewed emphasized the importance of the connection between language and local cultural knowings including proverbs. For example, Senior High school physics teacher, Kofi Yamoah enthuses that language is important for the study and understanding of proverbs:

Language is very important because some of us are or we have some of the proverbs in Twi so when you want to translate it directly into English (laughs) the base is just not there. So, I think language is very much important because every language has got a way they put their proverbs. And, when you translate it or transfer it directly to English sometimes it doesn't work totally. **[File 06: Text Units 168-184]**

Proverbs convey deep meanings in local knowledge. Thus, one needs to examine proverbs in their local languages; otherwise, meaning is lost. Kofi Yamoah sees proverbs as local cultural knowledge:

..... because if you look at proverbs most of the proverbs that we use from our normal language, we just try to coin it in such a way that you understand what it means.... **[File 06 : Text Units 168-184]**

The tensions in using the dominant language to convey Indigenous perspectives is often highlighted in discussions. Local language is critical to the survival of Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous languages need to be kept alive in local communities and schooling, and education in Africa has a role to play in such an undertaking. Teaching local language then ensures the survival of local Indigenous knowledge systems. Language conveys powerful meanings.

Language and culture are interconnected. When used inappropriately [as for example outside an appropriate cultural context] such meaning is lost. The language of other peoples cannot be used to teach or convey the full thoughts and ideas as expressed or embedded in such local cultural knowings as proverbs. Hence, as educators we cannot hope to promote the teaching of proverbs in schools without first ensuring the survival and vitality of our Indigenous language system. We cannot also understand local proverbs without a full grounding of local culture. Proverbs are part of the cultural values system. A complete ‘stranger’ cannot teach or fully comprehend local proverbs because she/he hardly knows the Indigenous language and culture. They may have an appreciation of such knowledge system but hardly grasps its intellectual intricacies.

Gender

In reclaiming culture the place of gender in society must be taken seriously to interrogate social and political structures that marginalize women in society. Schools contribute to the problem by the lack any critical focus on gender issues. If culture is to be claimed then the sites of empowerment as well as disempowerment for certain groups (e.g., women, children and religious, ethnic and sexual minorities) must also be exposed and addressed. The teachings of proverbs as local cultural knowings offer important opportunities.

As with age, there are significant gender dimensions to proverbs. Kofi Yamoah, the high school physics teacher highlights the question of gender in discussions on proverbs:

Well, I think that most often the proverbs I know, when they talk about men what they mean is somebody who should be active and doing something; shouldn't be sleeping like they will intentionally say something like "a man shouldn't sleep while his goats are on the farm?" Just to tell you that as a man you have to or when it goes to ladies they will tell you that "as a lady you should be decent for men to approach you. You shouldn't approach men." Or if you try to cook I mean, such things, they try to always coin it to suit particular genders. [File 06 : Text Units 277 - 286]

Educators must be able to tease out the gender tropes of proverbs in order to teach proverbs critically about gender relations. Some proverbs because they are heavily embedded in cultural traditions can be reproducing gender stereotypes of the subordination of women in society. In a patriarchal society proverbs can affirm masculine views and power relations and the responsibility of an educator

is to help learners understand such gender dimensions and to begin to ask critical question about why, how and when such patriarchal ideologies in society get reproduced in proverbial sayings. In effect, then, while valuing of Indigenous cultural knowledges there are some cautions as well. Educators working with Indigenous cultural knowings that evoke culture, tradition, history, identity in knowledge production must be well-versed to undertake a critical examination of elements of Indigenous knowledge system that is disempowering for communities. The concern then is for formal schooling and education to bridge Indigenous cultural teachings while maintaining elements of local culture that are absolutely worth passing on to the next generation (e.g., proverbs, stories, language etc.). The study of local traditions and cultures can be approached pedagogically in ways that allow learners to examine the histories, purposes and consequences of engaging local cultural knowledges in schooling and education.

DISCUSSION

As educators the question of what knowledge we teach, and why we teach these knowings is as important as how we teach. We need pedagogic, instructional and curricula initiatives that speak to the question of what learners learn when they go into schools. Such focus will bring to the table a comprehensive set of questions about the processes and structures of educational delivery, including the content of educational curriculum in schools. Berthe'lemy's (2006) study found that African countries pay relatively little attention to primary education, to the benefit of secondary education. Besides family and community socialization basic/primary schooling is where most teachers contribute to mold young learners. African cultural resource knowings, embedded in local proverbs, parables, fables, myths, mythologies and folklores hold some useful ideas for schooling at an early age. This case study offers us a way to rethink schooling and education through knowledge production, effective and meaningful classroom pedagogy and instruction, informed by community cultural resource knowledge base. Educational change must work with local knowledge, start from what local communities know, how they use their knowledge base and how such knowledge offers poignant lessons for educating the contemporary learner to be a responsible citizen or member of community.

On a more superficial level, there is educational relevance in the documentation of proverbs, fables, folktales and myths (see Opoku 1975, 1997; Yankah 1989, 1995; Boateng, 1990 in the Ghanaian context for example). These authors offer insights into Indigenous philosophies, ideas and concepts that cannot be lost to future generations. Such Indigenous cultural resources and knowledges demonstrate ways societies deal with the tensions, contradictions and

challenges of tradition and modernity. Pedagogically, instructionally, and communicatively these Indigenous cultural knowings inform and/or teach about notions of ‘schooling as community’, learners’ rights and responsibilities to self and others (one’s peers, teachers and the community at large). These cultural knowings educate us about learning as a co-operative and collaborative undertaking. Despite the many successes, we are daily confronted with youth who are disaffected in society, are disengaged in schools and disturbingly see violence as a solution to problems. How can these cultural knowings be evoked in schooling and education of the youth to inculcate in all learners a sense of identity, self worth, hope, agency, resistance, as well as responsibility, personal discipline and respect? By teaching about citizenship, rights and responsibility, mutual interdependence and obligations these Indigenous cultural knowings offer educational possibilities for the learner.

To reform education for youth who will be able to transform our communities, we need education to place learners’ experiences, cultures and prior home/community knowledges at the centre of education. For example, the idea of ‘community education’ must be engaged to ensure a close relations and bonding between schools, parents, Elders, families and communities. Elders and cultural custodians can become teachers at school as well. This would allow for local knowledges to be transmitted to youth to assist in their holistic education. Critical education must also build co-operation among learners, teachers, parents, care givers, Elders and cultural custodians who must eschew the sense of individuality that sees learners as simply a sea of individuals! Every learner lives within a community, and community knowledges as conveyed in local proverbs, folktales and songs convey important messages about group membership, social responsibility, mutual interdependence and moral conduct and behavior and acceptance actions in society. We believe teaching these ideas to youth can assist in developing a sense of community responsibility and membership and move away from the ‘cult of individualism’. Classroom school teachings need to emphasize the self as well as collective well being and identities of all learners.

In this task of re-visioning African schooling and education the question of teaching Indigenous language is central. While current initiatives aimed at teaching Indigenous languages in schools are laudable there is more to be done. There are obvious limitations when policy mandates teaching local language as an elective and also for only a section of students. And, the question of how well Indigenous languages are being taught and comprehended by students will require an extensive discussion (see Brock-Utne and Skattum (2009). For example, Miti and Monaka (2009) have discussed the nature, extent and challenges of teaching African languages in primary school teachers’ colleges in

Botswana and Zambia. They found that in both countries training of teachers of African languages is not taken seriously, and moreover, there is “weak educational language policy and lack of will to promote the learning and teaching of Indigenous African languages” (p.220). The authors suggest the need for language policies that favor the development and promotion of Indigenous African languages in schools. In fact, Qorro’s (2009) study shows how parents’ and policy makers’ insistence on foreign languages as media of instruction has severely restricted access to quality education in Tanzania. Prah (2009) has also argued that African learners must be empowered through the education of their Indigenous languages in local schools. In his research on upper primary education (UPE, grades 7 and 8), Yohannes (2009) shows how the use of mother tongues has resulted in better achievement in sciences and math in Ethiopia. Writing in the Kenyan context, Mulu (1999) has pointed to the contradictions of “Africanization stance” by local state officials and governments. These contradictions are found in the educational policy which devalues Indigenous languages and encourages the use of English as a medium of instruction in local schools. Conventional arguments advanced to explain the reluctance to adopt Indigenous languages are untenable (see Mulu, 1999; p.240). The important point worth reiterating is that knowledge of local languages determines to a great extent how the cultural resource knowledges embedded in Indigenous proverbs and folktales, for example, can be taught and learned in schools. Consequently, the teaching of local languages must be given a high premium if schooling and education in Africa is to effectively engage local Indigenous knowledges. We need teachers who know, understand and can effectively teach these languages.

Similarly, the question of teacher preparation is worth noting. Even a good number of trained professional teachers are not sufficiently schooled in how to teach local cultural knowledges. Such lack of training and adequate preparation impacts the teaching of Indigenous knowledge. Therefore, there is a need to focus on teacher training and development, and to develop specific pedagogical strategies that can prepare Ghanaian educators to teach local cultural knowledge. What will be needed is an approach to teacher preparation and development that pays attention to the use of educators’ practical, experiential, and prior knowledge of their local communities as sites of pedagogy and classroom instruction. Educators could be encouraged to use their home-grown and cultural knowledges as sites and sources of classroom pedagogy and instruction and, thereby, encourage young learners to value their cultural resource knowledge. Some attention must also be paid to ways of exploring and persuading educators and educational policy makers to change their rigid

perceptions on what should be taught (curricula content) and the goal of teaching as simply to pass examinations.

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