

# What can social workers learn from African proverbs?

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**Abstract:** There continues to be a call on social work education to incorporate diverse teaching and learning resources and strategies to meet the needs of its diverse learners. Proverbs tend to be well known metaphors, which are memorable and are passed on from one generation to the next, and exist in all cultures and in many languages. This paper presents an innovative and creative use of proverbs to facilitate this process, and provides students from different cultures the opportunity to understand and contextualise aspects of social work education and practice. The paper proposes the use of African proverbs to enhance learning for the growing numbers of African students of social work in England.

It is hoped that the use of proverbs, which combine cultural heritage and literature as creative arts, will enable students to view the world of social work with an additional lens, making it relevant, interesting and meaningful. The proverbs used in this paper have been translated from various African languages into English.

Writing from the perspective of a black female African social work academic, I believe it is important that black people are producers of knowledge and ideas in order to become a part of the writing of their own history.

**Keywords:** African proverbs; African students; black students; creative arts; global social work; teaching and learning.

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*Until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.*  
(Ghanaian proverb)

## **Introduction**

In 2008, along with two other academic colleagues, I explored the experiences of black African students studying social work at our university. The findings from these studies have been reported (Bartoli et al., 2008). A key recommendation from this study was that the incorporation of non-Western world views and perspectives into the social work curriculum was necessary. These additions and changes to the curriculum are ongoing and structural, involving members of the wider subject teaching team.

On a personal level, I have sought to develop ideas that might enhance the teaching and learning experiences of BME students enrolled on social work programmes. These ideas have been disseminated elsewhere (Tedam, 2012a, 2012b) and were motivated by an observation made by a black social work student in a large urban university in the United States, who concluded that students appreciated 'literature about people of colour by people of colour' (Daniel, 2011, p.255). This, in addition to a call for black academics and researchers to contribute to knowledge creation, has not gone unheeded.

It is against this backdrop that the current paper is presented, drawing upon proverbs from across the African continent as a tool to enhance understanding, knowledge and creativity in social work education and practice. In addition, Mieder (2004) believes that although most cultures have and use proverbs, some of the richest proverbs can be found in West Africa. As the introductory proverb implies, the person who tells their story is likely to tell it in their favour and not necessarily in the way that events occur. This will be reflected upon in the conclusion to this paper.

Walton (2012, p.725) proposes that any art form used for the purposes of education must be 'efficient, purposeful and effective' in order to avoid it being viewed as inauthentic or basic. Using this view, the paper will explore the extent to which proverbs are efficient and purposeful to students and practitioners of social work. It is, however, beyond the scope of this paper to examine the effectiveness of proverbs as this is a theoretical paper and it will be only after an evaluation is completed that some sense of its effectiveness as a teaching and learning strategy will be ascertained.

The core purpose of internationalisation relates not only to international students but also to how economic, cultural and social diversity influences learning and teaching and has resulted in innovative ways of thinking about teaching, learning, the curriculum and assessment (Clifford & Joseph, 2005).

## **Defining proverbs**

A proverb, according to Whiting (1932) is:

a short saying of philosophic nature of great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than the classes, constantly applicable and appealing because it bears a semblance of universal truth.

Mieder, perhaps one of the most popular authors in the area of proverbs, suggests that it is:

a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorisable form and which is handed down from generation to generation. (Mieder, 1993, pp.5, p.24)

Proverbs have been a part of the African way of life for centuries and, as Uhuegbu (2006, p.4) suggests, are the 'lubricant of any good conversation'. Proverbs, like storytelling and folklore, provide the reader with the opportunity to visualise and imagine what is being said and to make inferences of its meaning. They have also been used to resolve conflicts and arguments and settle misunderstandings, according to Agbaje (2002).

According to the definitions offered above, proverbs aim to illuminate actions or outcomes, and provide succinct and relevant information that is also memorable and applicable in a range of circumstances and situations.

It is acknowledged that the proverbs presented in this paper may be used in many other countries in Africa and elsewhere and in different languages and dialects. Consequently, countries are acknowledged here for their use of the proverb and not necessarily the development of the proverb in question.

## Learning through proverbs

Learning can be understood as the 'process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action' (Mezirow 1996: 162). Social work education reflects this view in that social workers draw upon their understanding of service users' contexts and circumstances, measured against a set of guidance, with a view to determining their decision-making and the subsequent outcomes for service users. In relation to social work education, prior interpretation and understanding of proverbs can be used to create new meaning when applied to contemporary situations.

Mezirow developed a unique strand of transformative learning based on Freire's work in the 1970s. Transformative learning theory, according to Mezirow, is the process by which adult learners make sense of their experiences through 'reflection, critical reflection and critical self reflection' (Dirkx 1998, p.4), and that creativity and the use of one's imagination can result in transformative learning. Students of social work, according to Jones (2009), should view their experiences as a source of transformative learning; the use of proverbs will enable social workers to critically reflect and self-reflect on how their experiences can be applied to practice.

Some authors have identified the effectiveness of proverbs in enhancing teaching and learning in different academic disciplines (Manzo, 1981; Ibanez, 2002; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Grant & Assimeng-Boahene, 2006) and a similar approach is being proposed here for social work.

Social work is a demanding profession (Collins, 2008), and in working with people, social workers are continually engaged in some form of communication, which can be delivered and received in different ways. Koprowska (2008) argues that skilled communication makes a difference to interactions in various settings and also between social workers and service users, especially in exploring difficult and sometimes complex issues. In this regard, Pepicello and Green (1984) propose that proverbs locate a real social problem in an art form and that, like art, social work is involved in clarifying the personal and moral meaning of social issues and events (Goldstein, 1999).

The intention of this paper is not to simplify the intensity, purpose and scope of social work education and practice but rather to use light-hearted, accessible proverbs to capture understanding and subsequently apply this knowledge to practice domains. Schon (1991, p.66) argues that teachers

‘must be ready to invent new methods’ and that they ‘must endeavour to develop ... the ability of discovering them’. This view is one of the intended outcomes of this paper.

## **Areas for exploration**

The author has identified many proverbs that fit the remit of this paper. However, in order to enhance clarity and provide some structure, proverbs will be examined under the broad subheadings of: the social work student; child and family; and collaborative working and respect for diversity.

## **The social work student**

The journey into the social work profession begins with the student, and so it is appropriate to begin the application of proverbs to the social work student. I begin with a call on social work students to learn from the best and mirror best practice always.

If one imitates the upright, one becomes upright; if one imitates the crooked, one becomes crooked. (Nigerian proverb)

Social work students are regularly asked to draw from best practice as one means of developing and improving their own practice. Where there has been poor practice, there are also opportunities for learning.

Practice educators are tasked with providing suitable learning opportunities for their students to develop their practice competence, and students have a responsibility to ensure that they mirror and imitate sound, ethical practice and reject poor or bad social work practice.

Through supervision and other forms of formal and informal support, social workers and students will reflect upon their intervention, relationships and outcomes for service users. This need for supervision should not necessarily be initiated by the supervisor or manager and is captured thus:

If a baby does not cry, he will die on his mother’s back. (Zimbabwean proverb)

Social work is a demanding and stressful profession (Collins, 2008) and its complexity means that social workers require good levels of supervision and support and opportunities to be able to reflect and share any emotional impact with others. It is only through this form of support that employers, managers and supervisors come to understand the day-to-day world of the social worker and how they are managing in their role. The importance of social work supervision has been extensively reported (Payne, 1996; Kadushin, 2002; Tsui, 2005; Cooper, 2002). However, in recent tragedies, it has come under immense criticism in terms of being of poor quality, ineffective, inadequate and in some cases absent (Laming, 2003).

According to Morrison (2006, p.88), 'the supervisee plays a part in the creation of his/her own supervision history' and so it is crucial that they are encouraged to proactively seek supervision support, formally and informally, to ensure they continue to provide sound support and service to people who require various forms of intervention. The Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers in England produced by the Health Care Professionals Council (HCPC) validate the use of supervision as a quality assurance and reflective tool and an opportunity to evaluate outcomes of services (HCPC, 2012, Clauses 11.2, 12.1 and 12.2).

In the proverb above, the social worker is likened to a baby whose every slight move and expressions of discomfort should be felt by the parent to whose back they are strapped. If the social worker keeps silent about how they are feeling and coping, they are unlikely to access the support they require. If they ask for help openly, honestly and in a timely manner then they are more likely to be supported through whatever difficulties they might be facing through supervision. Indeed, Curtis et al. (2010) have suggested that the working life of a UK-based social worker is on average eight years, which is much shorter than pharmacists (28 years), doctors (25 years) and nurses (15 years).

Social workers expect vulnerable families to feel confident to seek help and assistance when necessary. However, if they do not model good practice by acknowledging their own requirements in terms of nurture and support to satisfy their professional needs then they are unlikely to convey the message to their service users that it is acceptable for them to ask for help.

## **Child and family**

The author's social work practice experience and expertise has been in the area of child and family social work. Consequently, the discussion that follows provides readers with some insight into the family through the use of proverbs.

A family is like a forest, when you are outside it is dense, when you are inside you see that each tree has its place. (Ghanaian proverb)

This saying captures not only the complexities in understanding modern-day families, but also the collectiveness and individuality of families and family members. The density of the forest described refers to the 'family', which, according to McKie and Cunningam-Burley (2005), continues to be a dynamic concept, experienced and defined variably. Families are perceived as flexible social categories and include nuclear, step, lone-parent, same-sex, extended and adopted families. In addition to this, children's construct of families can sometimes include close friends, and this adds to the flexible nature of the concept and formation of families.

Offering further discussion about the various family forms, Segrin and Flora (2005) suggest that families can be defined according to the functions that they perform. They cite, for example, a task-oriented family, in which an adult and two or more other people engage in the development, nurturing, emotional and financial support of each other. This definition, they argue, has as its main function the socialisation of children by their parents, although there exists what Peterson and Hann (cited in Segrin & Flora, 2005) refer to as 'reciprocal socialisation', where children can and do socialise their parents. Families can also be defined through the structural lens, with the starting point the make-up of a family.

In addition to the family, the importance of support and other social networks cannot be overemphasised. These networks can provide support, advice, strength and energy which can be perceived as the glue holding families and their networks together.

Families generally tend to be united, and this is the view of the forest from without, bunched together. When social workers begin to work with families, they interact with the individuals who constitute the family – that is what is seen by being inside the forest. This proverb presents ideas around the importance of the family as a collective whole and the individuality of its members.

What the child says, he has heard at home. (Nigerian proverb)

This proverb reinforces the idea that children learn and are influenced by things that happen around them. It implies social learning theory to some extent, in that behaviours whether desirable or undesirable can be attributed to the mirroring of attitudes and behaviours witnessed.

The okra does not show its seeds through its skin. (Ghanaian proverb)

In social work education and practice, attention is given to understanding and interpreting non-verbal cues and actions that might arise during interactions with peers, colleagues and service users. This proverb, one could argue, suggests the opposite is true. Rather, the okra needs to be cut in order for its seeds to be visible to the human eye. It is also possible to see the seeds after the okra has been cooked and softened. My personal interpretation of this proverb is that if you are seeking to find something, then one has to look and try hard. It is unlikely to be delivered to you on a silver platter. When one reflects on the circumstances leading to the deaths of Baby Peter, Victoria Climbié and Jasmine Beckford, for example, social workers needed to have asked more questions, looked harder, and tried harder. In effect, they should have assessed the situations more critically and thoroughly. Ferguson (2009, p.477) suggests a 'skilful use of good authority' on the part of the social worker to be able to explore the lives and circumstances of service users in depth and to be able to see and hear what could otherwise remain invisible to the social worker.

Do not look where you fell, but where you slipped. (Ghanaian proverb)

People tend to learn from their mistakes in order to prevent a reoccurrence of events. We all make mistakes, some minor and others major. In social work practice, mistakes can lead to tragic consequences for service users and their families and can result in unwelcome media attention and intrusion. This proverb urges social workers to trace and examine the stages and processes involved in any intervention and to evaluate their effectiveness, success or failure along the way. Examining the end result (outcome) of an intervention may not provide social workers with a realistic and comprehensive understanding of what went wrong, nor address additional questions of where, why and how?

Using the Victoria Climbié case as an example: the Laming inquiry



examined the life of Victoria from the time she arrived in Britain, the agencies and professionals she came into contact with and the opportunities that were missed to intervene and save her life. The inquiry concluded that the social worker involved 'slipped' right from the start of the process. Although the outcome of her slipping was an eventual fall, it would have been insufficient to concentrate on the outcome without fully addressing the process that led to the death of Victoria. This proverb urges us to examine the roots of a problem as a way of trying to understand the problem and how we might avoid it in the future.

## **Collaborative working**

Collaborative working, sometimes referred to as partnership or multi-agency working, is a core requirement of contemporary social work practice (DfES, 2006). Its centrality has been reflected in the raft of legislative and policy guidance (Frost, 2005). The Laming inquiry cited poor communication among professionals as a central factor in the fatal outcome for Victoria. Research into the strengths and challenges associated with multi-agency working has been widely documented (Cameron & Lart, 2003; Frost, 2005; Simkins & Garrick, 2012).

In multi-agency working, there is the sense of working together towards a common goal, which is captured succinctly below:

When the right hand washes the left hand and the left hand washes the right hand, both hands become clean. (Nigerian proverb)

One gets the sense that one hand might be able to wash itself. However, its cleanliness might be dependent on the use of two hands. Along similar lines is the proverb which argues that:

You cannot pick up a pebble with one finger. (Malawian proverb)

This suggests the importance of a number of fingers working together to pick up a pebble, which can be small and elusive.

As a social work academic with strong anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory values, it would be disrespectful not to acknowledge that the proverbs used to highlight collaborative working might be offensive

to persons with certain disabilities and/or injuries. The intention here is to enhance learning through creativity and not to cause offence or appear insensitive.

In the following proverb, the intention is to promote accountability and assertiveness on the part of social work students and practitioners. There is acknowledgement that standing with others can be easier as the spotlight, so to speak, is not on any one person. To stand on one's own can feel isolating and frightening, not least when being encouraged to work in partnership with others. Standing alone requires one to know and appreciate one's strengths and to be accountable for one's decision-making.

It is easy to stand in a crowd; it takes courage to stand alone. (Zambian proverb)

Working in and as part of a team has the potential benefit of providing a supportive, nurturing and mixed-ability environment conducive to positive outcomes for service users. It also involves being a part of any successes or failures associated with the team or group. On the other hand, recognising the level of accountability associated with standing on one's own can be daunting and requires courage, self-discipline and self-awareness.

## **Diversity**

Understanding, respecting and celebrating diversity is a crucial ingredient in sound, ethical social work practice. The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (TCSW, 2012) requires social workers to engage effectively with people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences. This requires an understanding that people are different and consequently exhibit behaviours, attitudes and views that are different from the majority's. This difference should not result in discriminatory or oppressive practice but should be used to enhance social workers' understanding and respect for difference.

A donkey's thank you is a kick. (Kenyan proverb)

This proverb crystallises the idea that, for example, appreciation can be

expressed in different ways, and in the case of the donkey, in a way that perhaps might hurt and is far removed from what a social worker views as the standard or norm for expressing appreciation or gratitude.

For the enquiring mind, the question would be, 'How do we know for sure a donkey is showing or has the ability to show gratitude?' The recommendation is to understand motives and to recognise that in our work with information, ideas and reports that can be open to interpretation and subjectivity, we need to keep reflecting on how different service users present in terms of their understanding, acknowledgement and reactions to the various social work processes and stages.

A second proverb which highlights the importance of acknowledging and respecting difference is captured below:

It is not only the fox; even the snail arrives at its destination. (Nigerian proverb)

The fox is a fast, adept animal which uses its speed to catch smaller and other weaker animals and cannot be compared to a snail using criteria such as speed. Here again, we acknowledge difference and the richness it brings to our interactions with service users, colleagues and peers. There is the need for social workers to continue to be aware of the differences in capacity when working with service users. This reflects Clause 13.4 of the Standards of Practice for Social Workers, which tasks professionals with understanding the impact of social inequalities and injustice (HCPC, 2012). Some service users will arrive at their destinations sooner than others, who might take a detour or stop along the way but could eventually arrive at the same destination as others. This proverb reminds us about how unfair it is for comparisons to be made about others – whether service users, colleagues at work or students. The fox and the snail cannot and indeed should not be compared. Their physical appearance, aptitudes for survival, dietary and reproductive traits are vastly different. Consideration of these differences should not result in undermining either of them, or unfair treatment, labelling or any other form of prejudicial treatment, but rather encourage dialogue about the inherent benefits of an inclusive, non-discriminatory and non-oppressive approach to people we come into contact with.

Figure: Summary of proverbs

Social work student	<p>If one imitates the upright, one becomes upright; if one imitates the crooked, one becomes crooked. (Nigerian proverb)</p> <p>If a baby does not cry, he will die on his mother's back. (Zimbabwean proverb)</p>
Child and family	<p>A family is like a forest, when you are outside it is dense, when you are inside you see that each tree has its place. (Ghanaian proverb)</p> <p>What the child says, he has heard at home. (Nigerian proverb)</p> <p>The okra does not show its seeds through its skin. (Ghanaian proverb)</p> <p>Do not look where you fell, but where you slipped. (Ghanaian proverb)</p>
Collaborative working	<p>It is easy to stand in a crowd; it takes courage to stand alone. (Zambian proverb)</p> <p>You cannot pick up a pebble with one finger. (Malawian proverb)</p> <p>When the right hand washes the left hand and the left hand washes the right hand, both hands become clean. (Nigerian proverb)</p>
Diversity	<p>A donkey's thank you is a kick. (Kenyan proverb)</p> <p>It is not only the fox, even the snail arrives at its destination (Nigerian proverb)</p>

## **Final reflections**

I position myself in this paper as the historian for the lion and hope that the proverbs I have drawn upon have been appropriately and fairly examined and have been instrumental in enhancing the learning of all who engage with its content. I also seek to answer the question I set at the start of this paper, which is, what can social workers learn from African proverbs? The answer is dependent on what social workers believe to be applicable to contemporary social work practice. The sample of proverbs examined within this paper speaks to individual traits, qualities and collective wisdom examining concepts of assertiveness, resilience, honesty, perseverance, use of supervision and working together. For social work educators, drawing upon proverbs from around the world could enhance students' cultural competence and provide opportunities for debate and critical reflection and has the potential to create a relaxed and respectful learning environment for teachers and students. Proverbs provide insight into a range of cultures and for students from specific ethnic groups, further acknowledgement and celebration of their heritage.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has offered the use of proverbs as a useful addition to the repertoire of learning and teaching strategies with students. The College of Social Work (2012) proposes to academics and providers of social work education that learning through a range of strategies and in different formats is as important as the curriculum content itself.

This has been presented as a conceptual paper and there are plans to progress these ideas with students and social workers in the future.

In highlighting the breadth of learning about social work practice and education that can be achieved through the use of proverbs, the author has actualised a number of relevant outcomes such as internationalisation of the curriculum, creativity and innovation in learning and teaching as well as contributing to ways of knowing and the construction of meaning.

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