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A Critique of the Pedagogies of Character Formation in Post-Independent Kenyan Schools

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Abstract:

After independence, the main pedagogical approach to character formation among Kenyan children was instruction. This was administered through formal schooling, with moral values being taught through disciplines such as Religious Education (RE), Social Education and Ethics (SEE), Life Skills Education (LSE), and also through spontaneous guidance and counseling, infusion and integration of moral values into other curricular areas. The study observed that there was little in terms of practical experiences, and very few teachers participated in the exercise mostly after being assigned the task. The said teachers mainly focused on producing high grades in examinations, at least in RE and SEE, as opposed to formation of good character among pupils. In the end, the objective of forming good character remained elusive. This paper used the Critical Theory to reflect upon the pedagogies so employed, and concluded that they were grossly deficient both in content and methods. Consequently, they could not lead to the realization of good character in the individuals subjected to the aforesaid educational experiences. The study therefore recommended a comprehensive programme that would be founded on sound pedagogical theories and practices.

Keywords: character formation, moral values, pedagogies, social vision

1. Introduction

World over, education is considered a very serious enterprise. This is predicated on the fact through education, individuals are able to acquire one of the most important aspects of humanity – good character, which ultimately provides the foundation upon which any society can function. As a country, Kenya was awake on this reality and this prompted her to introduce character formation programmes in the school curriculum. To this effect, various pedagogies were employed to actualize good character among children. Previously, the British colonial government had introduced schooling, a step that had restructured the indigenous way of educating. This implied that the general society had been implicitly relieved of their role of being major educators, and the same vested majorly on schools. On gaining independence, Kenya as a new government came up with a raft of policy reforms in her education. One of the policy reforms saw her form a commission that would oversee the transition of her education system from the old colonial one to a new independent one that would reflect the needs and aspirations of the Kenyan people.

To this effect, the founding president of Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, unveiled the Kenya National Education Commission – the Ominde Commission (RoK, 1964) that would spearhead the reforms. Part of the reforms aimed at recognizing and inculcating African social values which would be presented as goals of education for the new nation. Key among the goals was ‘the promotion of sound and religious moral values’ in individuals, a goal that is the object of this study. Hitherto, there had been a feeling that the kind of education offered by the colonial government had not focused on promoting moral values specific to the needs of the Kenyan society. This is why reforms had to be done so as to resurrect the values upheld by the African communities before the advent of western civilization.

From the moral and religious aspect, education was to provide development of knowledge, skills and attitudes that would enhance acquisition of sound moral values and help children grow into self-disciplined and integrated citizens. Looking at this rather broad aim, one would be on the alert to see how the above would be achieved. This study therefore took interest in the main issue - the *how*. It thus ventured to critically interrogate the various pedagogical approaches to character formation as provided for in the then new curriculum up to date.

2. Christian Religious Education as an Approach to Character Formation

A keen scrutiny of the goal of education alluded to in the introduction above obtains that Religious Education (RE) was implicitly put in place to realize the goal of character formation. Whereas other religions such as Islam existed, Christianity had dominated since the former colonial government had Christian inclinations. At that time, thinking about religion was equivalent to thinking about Christianity. This meant that RE as anticipated by the new government would be regarded as synonymous to Christian Religious Education (CRE), and taught in schools with an aim of developing good character among learners. Otiende notes that whereas the

church aimed at moral formation through evangelism, the new government targeted character training through religious education (read CRE) (Otiende, 1982). From this confusion, one would be curious to see how the government would achieve its aim of character formation through teaching 'about' religion as seemed the case rather than using religious knowledge to form character.

CRE is observed to have posed challenges (Kutto, 2013). In her study, Kutto explores the challenges that came in the way of using CRE to inculcate moral values in learners. To begin with, she notes that CRE had a wide mandate of not only inculcating good character in learners but also ensuring that all other goals of education were met. This can be seen in the general objectives of CRE syllabus in secondary schools today (KIE, 2002). In this syllabus booklet, the second objective states that learners should use the acquired social, spiritual and moral insights to think critically and make appropriate moral decisions in a rapidly changing society. To complicate the situation, the last objective states that CRE should enable students to acquire knowledge for further studies in various career fields (KIE, 2002).

This study observed that the focus of CRE was in supposition. First, the second objective overtly states that CRE should lead to acquisition of spiritual insights and critical thinking. Reflecting on this, the study questions the assumption by policy makers that all learners could grow spiritually, whatever the term meant. There was no clarity on what was meant by 'spirituality', let alone how such would be measured.

Secondly, it would be misleading to imagine that CRE would develop critical thinking skills in learners unless a proper approach was put in place to necessitate the same. Whereas CRE/RE was ideally meant to teach morals from a religious perspective as reflected in biblical scriptures, the implementation was poorly formulated. Kutto (ibid) argues that teachers who were to guide learners in CRE had limited knowledge and skills to teach effectively. Onsongo (2001) explores one of the methods – life approach – which requires that the teacher employs real, concrete and current situations and let learners arrive at a religious understanding of those experiences. Clearly, the teacher's understanding of the approach is paramount. Yet, no effort had been done to retool the teacher.

The seventh and last objective of CRE (KIE, 2002) adds more confusion. According to this study, that objective insinuates that some learners may opt for the subject so as to meet their career prospects. For instance, pupils may study CRE with the intention of being career priests or lawyers. For such pupils, their focus is not on **moral growth** but individual career advancement. This effectively defeats the purpose of the discipline that was initiated to majorly form positive character among individuals. Further, the implementation was equally suspect. For instance, CRE, or any other RE, is an optional subject in most Kenyan secondary schools. If the government wanted to develop all learners morally, it should have come up with a compulsory programme. This study therefore infers that the policy makers created a loophole when they associated RE with career development, despite having implicitly designated it as an approach to character formation. It follows that the students whose prospective careers are not related to RE will not bother studying it, effectively losing out on moral development.

Eshiwani (1992) writes that the challenge of subjects like CRE lies in their perception by learners. For him, some learners view them as of no use to their ambitions of pursuing highly ranked professional courses like medicine and engineering. This position indicates the limited extent to which CRE can succeed in fostering moral and religious values in the country, at least in the form in which it is currently presented.

Kutto (2013) observed that the negative attitude towards CRE permeated the schools. She confirmed through interviews that some teachers made negative comments concerning the subject, following the low status that it is accorded. This study questions how the subject, or any other RE, can be of positive impact to learners if teachers have in the first place dismissed it. Such dismissal, the study contends, may imply that the teachers are either ignorant of the mechanism of the approach, or do not believe altogether that the approach can bear fruits.

Kutto further reports that lack of administrative support, and bias towards sciences and other subjects had impacted negatively on the efforts of CRE teachers to foster values in students. It is in the above light that this study found a reason to reflect upon approaches of such nature. To begin with, the study infers that the objectives are lacking in focus. It is factual that objectives inform curriculum content, and by extension, method (Peters and Hirst, 1970). If the objectives are overloaded, the content will equally take in too much and lose focus. Secondly, the implementers of such curriculum content must be well prepared and facilitated. Clearly, the environment surrounding the teaching of CRE has shown that the discipline cannot be given prominence owing to its perceived low utility and status. Matters are not made any better when the teachers lack in new approaches and appropriate methods of teaching values. This state of affairs was perhaps what informed the government to rethink its strategy, hence the introduction of Social Education and Ethics (SEE) in secondary schools.

3. Social Education and Ethics as an Approach to Character Formation in Kenya

As this study noted earlier, the first commission of education (RoK, 1964) which came after independence lay grounds for moral education. Pursuant to the recommendations of the Ominde report, another commission was constituted in 1976 and named the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies (RoK, 1976). The committee recommended, among other issues, the teaching of ethics based on the values of the rural African society. It also sought a distinction between the teaching of ethics and that of religion. As a consequence, another commission would be formed in 1988, the Presidential Working Party on Education and Manpower Training for the Next Decade and Beyond (RoK, 1988), which recommended that SEE be taught to all students at all levels of education and training in Kenya. This study notes that this gesture indicated the government's concern about character formation, at least in policy.

From various reports given about the SEE approach, the following observations are worth mentioning. Firstly, it took the government over ten years to realize that religious education is not equivalent to ethics. Secondly, it took the same government another ten years to make a follow-up on the recommendations of the Gachathi Report of 1976. The study notes that as policy makers dragged their feet,

the practice of character formation in schools continued to deteriorate under the confusion that CRE was the main instrument for character formation. Thirdly, the recommendation from Kamunge Report (RoK, 1988) was that the subject be taught at all levels of education and training; implying the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The study observed that save for the secondary level, all other levels were left out. Nevertheless, it was a positive gesture from the government as far as the quest for character formation was concerned.

Ideally, SEE was to inculcate ethical values aspired by society, as opposed to CRE which drew moral values as sanctioned by biblical scriptures. This study observed that SEE suffered the same fate CRE had faced before. Firstly, the specific goals of SEE were so many, such that they seemed to overlap with those of CRE which was and still continued to be in force. The overall aim of SEE was to cultivate sound ethical behaviour of the individual person, whether alone or with others, and in whichever place one would be (RoK, 1987). Specifically, the goals of the course were to:

- Develop a harmonious ethical/moral relationship between the pupil and the home, the school, the neighbourhood, Kenya and other nations.
- Help learners to appreciate the necessity and dignity of moral education in Kenya and other societies.
- Enable the learner base his decisions on sound ethical principles and as integral part of his personality development.
- Develop a rational attitude and outlook towards life.
- Enable the learner to acquire, appreciate and commit himself to the universal values and virtues that cement unity and understanding among various ethnic communities in Kenya.
- Enable the learner to rationally sort out conflicts arising from traditional, extraneous and inner-directed moral values.
- Assist learners to understand and appreciate the social fulfillment and moral rewards accruing from cultivating and adopting virtues and values offered by moral/ethical education (RoK, 1987).

This study is more emphatic in the way character formation was conducted under SEE. This, however, is not intended to downplay the formulated goals of the SEE, reason being that the educational activities of any course should relate to its aims and objectives. Focusing on the above specific goals of SEE, it is noticeable that the implementation of such numerous goals require a lot of effort, given that the course implicitly targeted holistic development of the learner - morally, socially, ethically and rationally.

Mbae (2014) in his article entitled 'Social Ethics in Kenya: Education or Indoctrination?' notes that the major undoing of SEE in the Kenyan education system was the ambiguous use of the term 'ethics'. For him, ethics is an inquiry into the nature of moral actions. He therefore sees the implementation of Gachathi's Report (RoK, 1976) - which implied that ethics consisted of concepts like family education and environmental education - as the cause of the confusion that ensued. For him, such issues belong to social studies. He adds that moral education is more specific and based on the idea that by means of rational reflection, an individual can arrive at those actions, values or attitudes which are considered moral (Ibid). Though Mbae fails to appreciate the various categories of ethics such as family and environmental ethics, which help people to study and reflect on moral aspects, he still makes his point concerning the obscurity that defined the implementation of SEE. This study therefore observes that SEE, in the form in which it was fronted, could not effectively facilitate the achievement of developing learners morally. The study advances that SEE was hurriedly conceived, leading to wrong approaches in its implementation. It further contends that the moment policy makers faltered on the issue, the implementers would only worsen the bad situation.

As earlier pointed out, SEE experienced challenges similar to those of CRE. To begin with, the policy makers were not sure whether the course constituted social studies or ethics. Ethics is a wide discipline that cannot be subordinated to social studies, unless it is well categorized. In spite of this understanding, it is apparent that ethical issues were studied under Social Studies without a clear formula of their relationship. To this effect, SEE, just like CRE, failed to achieve the intended goal of character formation.

Secondly, it was observed that specialist teachers were not deployed to teach SEE, just like the previous case where CRE teachers were required to teach moral education. Any teacher, especially the CRE ones, would randomly be tasked with the exercise of teaching SEE. To this effect, it was taught just like any subject where emphasis is on the acquisition of bodies of knowledge. As a consequence, learners would be taught 'about virtues' as Njoroge and Bennaars (1986) would say, instead of being guided to be virtuous.

Thirdly, SEE was made optional. In some schools, for instance, learners who perhaps were not comfortable with science-oriented disciplines such as Physics found SEE a booster subject - one that is considered relatively manageable and meant to bolster the overall grade. The idea behind making SEE optional was in a sense trying to associate the course with the job market (utilitarian thinking).

According to UNESCO (1972), too much emphasis being put on academic achievement, course marketability and economic competitiveness cannot enable education to meet one of its major goals of making persons actualize themselves in terms of becoming human. This is the fate that SEE suffered as it was considered like any other academic discipline. In the end, students who wished to study elite and science-oriented courses neglected it, while those who studied it apparently felt inferior. This can be interpreted as a total loss of the main focus, the main social vision of humanizing individuals. For yet another time, policy makers are seen to falter by mistaking utility for moral excellence.

This study reckons that the country had an idea of what it wanted to achieve. However, the vision's articulation in terms of aims and objectives was cloudy, leading to confusion and disorganization in implementation. In as much as the nation needs to develop all-round citizens (socially, politically and economically), such development cannot be realized without character formation (Nyasani, 1988). The fact that academic excellence was promoted with the hope that the latter would guarantee moral development led to complete failure. Eventually, SEE was unceremoniously phased out since its main objectives had continued to be elusive. The study argued that although SEE as an approach was well-intentioned, its conception and implementation was haphazard and thus could not lead to character formation among students.

Having phased out SEE in secondary schools, RE continued to be used as an approach both in primary and secondary schools. It was complemented by guiding and counselling, which was unstructured and lacked trained personnel. Further, the moral values taught under SEE were infused and integrated in other disciplines. For instance, language disciplines had comprehension passages which integrated the moral values. Similarly, those values were infused in extra-curricular activities, where pupils were to acquire such values as teamwork, honesty, tolerance and diligence through sports, games and performing arts (KIE, 2002). As it were, both the teachers and pupils would lose the greater picture and concentrate on answering comprehension questions correctly, and winning trophies in out-of-class activities respectively. Clearly, the objective of character formation was not given prominence. This study concluded that the government was apparently engaged in a game of trial and error, since it later introduced another discipline – Life Skills Education (LSE) – perhaps to fill in the void left by the scrapped SEE. The study subsequently ventured to reflect on the rationale behind LSE.

4. Life Skills Education as an Approach to Character Formation in Kenya

Having phased out SEE, this study observed that RE continued to prominently hold brief until when Life Skills Education was introduced in 2008 as a course to augment the efforts of character development. According to UNICEF (2002), ‘Life Skills’ include cognitive skills, practical skills and positive behaviour that enable persons to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life. Elsewhere, WHO (2001) gives a working definition of ‘Life Skills’ as abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges within the family, community and cultural context. For Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2001) Life Skills Programme is an approach that develops “skills in adolescents, both to build the needed competencies for human development and to adopt positive behaviours that enable them to deal effectively with challenges of everyday life.” (PAHO, 2001, P. 5).

According to KIE (2008), LSE entails an approach that inculcates abilities which enable an individual to develop adaptive and positive behaviour so as to effectively deal with challenges and demands of everyday life. Evidently, this definition is adopted from the WHO (2001) one. KIE, through the ministry of education, introduced LSE in Kenya in 2008 after observing that the prioritization of academics knowledge without acquisition of psychosocial skills was inadequate for preparing young people for complex challenges that exist in the contemporary world.

Previously, KIE (Wiki Educator, 2014) reports that the ministry of education had integrated life skills in the 2002 KIE revised syllabus. Here, such issues as HIV/AIDs, gender, children rights, child labour and drug and drug abuse were covered. Also, guiding and counseling was recommended. This study questions how all these aspects could be addressed, and more so how they could have contributed to character formation in pupils.

In the year 2006, KIE saw the need to have life skills taught as LSE and as a stand-alone subject that would be examinable. This eventually led to the introduction of LSE in primary and secondary schools in the year 2008, though it was not to be examined. This study notes that no reason was given for not examining the subject, though the examination aspect had been factored in the initial formulation of the course. Such partial implementation of any programme, this study argues, may be the genesis of some of the challenges crippling character formation efforts.

According to KIE, the main goal of LSE was to enhance young people’s ability to take responsibility for making choices, resist negative pressure and avoid risky behaviour. The skills to be taught included self-awareness, self-esteem, coping with emotions, empathy, coping with stress, effective communication, conflict resolution and negotiation, friendship formation, assertiveness, peer pressure resistance, critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving and decision making. These, regardless of their large number, were to be schemed for and lesson plans well made so that these issues would be taught topically. Seemingly, no thought was given concerning the time required to carry out such a task. It is worth to note that only one hour was allocated for the exercise every week.

For KIE, it was expected that a comprehensive behaviour approach would be employed where focus would be on the whole person. Further, the approach would be interactive; an educational methodology that would transmit knowledge as well as assist youths to explore their attitudes, feelings, opinions and values so as to develop psychosocial capabilities that would prepare them to effectively face life’s challenges. KIE describes the method to be employed as learner-centred, youth friendly, gender sensitive, interactive and participatory.

The programme, under KIE, had envisaged benefits that were educational, social, health wise, cultural and economic in nature. This study notes that most of the health, cultural and economic benefits were tied to HIV/AIDs awareness. Of interest to this study were the social benefits which were listed as follows:

- Improves socialization
- Enables learners to choose good and reliable friends
- Helps learners use leisure time well
- Helps learners recognize and avoid risky situations
- Brings about meaningful interaction
- Helps in character building

The study examined the above expositions and made some observations. First of all, the conceptualization of the term ‘life skills’ was not clear to KIE. As reported, the ‘skills’ were first taken casually and integrated in other disciplines. The fact that the ‘skills’ covered such issues as gender, HIV/Aids, child labour and children’s rights points forward to a cloudy view of ‘life skills’. This study infers that KIE understood life skills to be strategies of protecting children from mental, physical and psychological abuse. In short, they were viewed as skills of avoiding problems in life.

Turning on the method, it was described as learner-centred and participatory. A study carried out by Abobo and Orodho (2014) indicates that the learner-centred method, which involves active participation of learners during lessons, may not work for life skills. They note:

- Literature on teaching of life skills education suggest that the subject is different from other subjects in that it is particularly concerned with teaching of values. Values are however not learnt as other curriculum subjects. Values are better taught by living them.” (Abobo and Orodho, 2014, p.3)

The study by Abobo and Orodho further contends that aspects of values are not found in books or documents but learned through daily interactions such as imitating the behaviours of teachers. Whereas this study does not fully agree with Abobo and Orodho (2014) concerning the aspect of values being found in books, it nonetheless contends that sole reliance on books is defeatist. For this study, books may be used to provide literatures that can ferment discussions on moral issues, and so are only but one of the resources used. However, a problem arises when KIE suggests that all the schools are to allocate one LSE lesson per class per week. This implies that learners are to wait for one more week from the last lesson so as to be taught again. Is it still learner-centred?

PAHO (2001) cites Bandura’s research which found that people learn what to do and how to act by observing others. Consequently, behaviours are reinforced by the positive or negative consequences viewed by the learner, each day of their lives. This is the principle of interactive learning and teaching, which KIE cites but does not provide for. This study argues that setting one lesson per week specifically for LSE will be tantamount to downplaying its importance.

This study also reflected on the benefits that KIE assumed would accrue, specifically those social in nature. Looking at the benefits listed in this study, it comes out that the purpose of life skills presupposes that youngsters interact only amongst themselves. Very little is stated to link learners to the greater society which they are part of. From the social benefits as well, character building is stated as an after-thought. This study contends that all the benefits listed are not equal partners with character, but outward manifestations of it. At another level, KIE stated that one of the cultural benefits of LSE was helping learners with clarification of values. When addressing values, the term that quickly comes to any serious inquiry is ‘values clarification’. It is imperative to note that under ‘values clarification’, no values are fronted. On the contrary, each individual is to pursue what they value. Evidently, this is not the position that is anticipated by KIE (the current Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development), going by their goals. If so, the whole concept of developing life skills becomes defeatist.

Abobo and Orodho’s report (2014) seems to indicate that schools are not ready to implement LSE. For them, the few resources available in secondary schools - charts and pictures, magazines, newsletters, pamphlets and video tapes - are not adequate to facilitate meaningful LSE. It also emerged that teachers had not been prepared on how to handle the subject. According to KIE (2008), about 1200 teachers countrywide had been trained by the time the programme was being launched, a clear indicator of unreadiness from the government’s side. This lack of preparedness is forcing schools to relegate the task of teaching LSE to teachers of CRE and Biology, as reported by Abobo and Orodho (ibid), regardless of the willingness of the said teachers. If no serious steps are taken to reflect upon this situation and make appropriate adjustments, this study contends that the programme will not achieve its goals.

Abobo and Orodho recommend that the programme of LSE be made examinable so that teachers and students take it seriously, like other examinable subjects in the school curriculum. This study considered this as an unreasonable solution, since SEE was examinable but still failed to facilitate character development. In essence, making the course examinable is treating it like other subjects which target intellectual competence and hence attract uncalled-for competition. In a nutshell, the study argued that whereas LSE as an approach was a positive, the Kenya Institute Curriculum Development suggestions towards the implementation of the programme were inappropriate. To this end, the study contends that the cause of underachievement of whichever goal set in educational circles is much deeper than perceived, and as such solutions must be considered against the wider picture of the learning process. Following this position, the study embarked on a reflection of the overall pedagogical practices within the Kenyan context with a view of establishing how effective they were towards character formation in individuals. To do this, the study undertook an evaluation of the Kenyan pedagogical approaches to character formation with an intention of prescribing a way forward.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper reflected on the way character formation was carried out in Kenya after her independence. Whereas character formation takes different approaches, the significance of positive character in individuals is incontestable.

This study made a few conclusions. Firstly, character formation is a very important venture but requires efforts to be intensified to bring it to fruition. This assertion is based on the observation that character formation is a deliberate plan of action that sees individuals acquiring desirable stable dispositions that advance the cause of a society. The term ‘deliberate’ underscores that it cannot happen automatically, neither can it be obtained as a by-product of any other educational programmes. Thus any society that aspires to develop socially, politically and economically must of essence formulate a strong programme of character formation that will effect such transformation.

Secondly, the Kenyan society is not forthright in her social vision. This is based on the observation that the various approaches to character formation instituted after independence have portrayed a trial and error characteristic. On one hand, the country’s education policies have pointed towards attaining moral and religious growth while on the other, the educational activities employed to that effect have either focused on the religious part, or aimed at developing the intellectual aspect at the expense of moral growth. Therefore, there exists a ‘value-use’ conflict, where the immediate utility of intellectual excellence is confused with the aspired worth whileness of education. The study concluded that policy makers and curriculum developers are largely responsible for haphazard pedagogical practices.

Thirdly, Kenya's current pedagogies of character formation are deficient. This position is informed by the various internal inconsistencies observed in the pedagogies, which render them unsuitable for effecting character formation among pupils. To this end, this study concludes that the failure to achieve character formation among Kenyan pupils, and as a consequence the wider citizenry, is largely occasioned by deficient pedagogical approaches so far employed.

Fourthly, the current situation characterized by a continued moral decline in the Kenyan society is likely to run out of proportion if an alternative approach is not established and implemented. This conclusion is informed by the fact that persons have a natural potential to become human, and will only actualize the potential through teaching and habit. When one uses the same method with negative results, it is impossible for the results to change on their own. To this end, a review of Kenya's pedagogical approaches to character formation has to be done in line with a comprehensive character formation programme which intelligible in terms of sound educational theory and practice.

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