Making Schools Democratic Public Spheres: A Case Study of Starehe Boys Centre and School, Kenya.

by

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Abstract

Nurturing freedom is vital in an education process. In this paper, a critical examination is made of one high school in Kenya: Starehe Boys Centre and School (SBC) and its attempts over the years to create a dialogical forum known as “Baraza” (Student Parliament) for its students to enable them participate in the administration process of the school. Specifically, the paper examines the literature on the significance of liberatory education; historical foundation of Starehe’s Boys Centre and School Baraza system; and its functions and effects on management, leadership, and learning process of the school. In conclusion, the paper contends that education flourishes where there is partnering in the teaching and learning process and when partnering is viewed as a practice of freedom.

Introduction

The need for education to create liberatory spaces in the teaching and learning process is a genre that has rapidly been gaining scholarship. Various educational theorists underscore the vitality of developing liberatory, democratic and pragmatic educational institutions. Dewey (1938), Giroux (1993), Kohl (1994), and hooks (1994) underline the significance of linking education to societal democratic process. They argue that there is an intimate relationship between the process of “actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1938, p. 76). According to Dewey the survival of democracy and civilization are dependent on teaching a particular form of critical thinking that requires school to play a stronger role in the control of the distribution of ideas and shaping of behavior. Schools are required to prepare the young for their later responsibilities and success in life. Education in this regard is expected to enable learners to “live beyond what theory has theorized” (hooks, 1994, p. 65). This is the future whose objects are linked to the present.

Hooks (2003), Freire (2002), Giroux (1993), McLaren (1989), Shor (1992) and Greene (1988) view schools as liberatory places where freedom in education is nurtured. Schools are expected to make students independent thinkers who ponder critically about pedagogy in relation to the practice of freedom. Schools are seen as places of promise and possibility that enable freedom to flourish. This means that schools should be avenues where pedagogical practices are interrogated, and knowledge offered to students empowering. Education according to these
theorists is expected to empower students to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond school. Freire refers to this as the “praxis” that entails action and reflection on the world as well as exploring possibilities of changing it. Schools are expected to teach in ways that can transform consciousness. The process of teaching is expected to transcend the subject matter to embrace critical thinking that is expected to integrate students and teachers into a process where both can mutually create and re-create knowledge.

In order to function effectively as liberatory spaces, Giroux (1993) notes that teachers are required to be actively committed to the process of self-actualization. This entails viewing schools as democratic public spheres and teachers as transformative intellectuals. As transformative intellectuals teachers are expected to view schools as avenues dedicated to forms of self and social empowerment, where students have the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that can help them live and function in an authentic democratic society. The purpose of education in this respect is to help students understand the social construction of knowledge in the framework of power. In this context, the school, as a site of democratic struggle is expected to promote justice and eliminate societal inequalities.

In order to forge a critical pedagogy, Shor and Freire (1987) observe that teachers should help students “to read” the world critically, instead of mastering tools of reading it. For this to be realized those who are committed to the process of liberation are expected to reject the banking method of teaching and instead replace it with the problem-posing method, a process that requires both the teacher and the students to be learners and critical agents in the knowing process. For Freire, classrooms die as intellectual centers when they become delivery systems for lifeless bodies of knowledge. Freire’s social pedagogy defines education as a place where the individual and society are constructed. This pedagogy challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance literacy and knowledge. The context of transformation is both inside and outside the classroom. McLaren (1989) underscores the need for schools to endeavor to foster critical pedagogy. He advocates for the need for educators to develop analyses that acknowledge spaces, tensions, and opportunities that enable students to participate in democratic struggles and reforms within day-to-day activities of the classroom. Schools are expected to offer high-quality education that empowers students to be critical thinkers. Hooks (2003) points out that schools should strive to foster democratic education, and learning should transcend the institutionalized classroom. Education is expected to embrace wholeness, empowerment, liberation, and all life vitalities. This process involves sharing of knowledge and challenging the construction of certain forms of knowledge as absolute truths.

A democratic educator is expected to forge a learning community that values wholeness over division, disassociation and splitting and works to establish closeness. Palmer (2000) refers to this as “intimacy that does not annihilate difference” (p. 50). According to Dewey (1938), the purpose of education is to create a democracy of citizens, who are able to govern and to be governed. This purpose places learning in the context of learning skills, discipline, and rigor in the service of social change and democratic life. This democracy is supposed to be part and parcel of students’ deep understanding that embraces values of humanness and diversity. It is required to become “a part of the blood and bone of a people, the fiber of their being” (Dewey, 1938, p. 160).

Dewey (1938), Freire (2002), and Kohl (1994) insist that education is an active and constructive process, and the central strength of progressive practice is its inclusion of students. To achieve this, schools are required to ensure that all students are included in the learning process irrespective of their socio-economic backgrounds. According to Freire (2002), schools should establish an educational practice that makes learners experience the power and value of unity
within diversity. Kohl (1994), advocates for the need to make habits of inclusion and exclusion a vital part of the teaching and learning process. Freire (2002) underscores the need for liberatory education “from the need to talk to learners to the need to talk with them” (p.111). He sees this as unpretentious but very positive way for teachers to contribute in their school to the training of responsible and critical citizens that is essential to the development of democracy. The success of this requires open and free dialogue that is centered on content and life.

Freire (2002) argues that it is important for schools to become spaces where certain democratic disposition can be gathered and engendered, for instance, the disposition to listen to others; a disposition toward toleration and deference to the decisions made by the majority that does not deny anyone who differs in opinion the right to express his or her disagreement; the disposition to question, criticize, and debate, and the disposition to respect the public matter of individuals. For Freire, the democratic school should not only be “permanently open to its students’ contextual reality in order to understand them better and to exercise its teaching activity better, but it should also be disposed to learn of its relationship with the concrete context. He observes that in so far as learners become thinking subjects, and recognize that they are much thinking subjects as are the teachers, it possible for the learners to become productive subjects of the meaning or knowledge of the object. It is in this dialectic movement that teaching and learning become knowing and reknowing.

Maxine Greene (1988) observes that in order for educators to develop a liberating pedagogy, it is vital for them to be engaged in a dialectical and relational educational process. She notes that educators do not come to the educational site as knowers of all but rather they come to share and facilitate that which they are privileged to know. She sees teaching as a honor and teachers as cultural workers who can influence students and open portals of knowledge. Their central role in the education process is to enable students embrace that which they have been offered. Educators are expected not be indoctrinators but rather should be committed to social justice, equity and humility. Education according to Greene is expected to transform the learner into a problem-solving agent, a creator rather than a creature. To this end, teachers are expected to go beyond mere transmission of factual knowledge to present knowledge, skills and values that are liberating, in as far as they create new horizons and new opportunities. The learners too must become critically aware of their potential as humans, and of their power to use circumstances rather than being used by them. The very purpose of learning, as implied here, points to education that goes beyond mere schooling and acquisition of knowledge but rather views it as being multidimensional.

Origin and functions of “Baraza” (parliament) system in Starehe Boys Centre and School.
The granting of freedom to students, faculty, and support staff is seen by Starehe as a key characteristic of running a school. From the time of its inception, Starehe has endeavored to create avenues where students can air their grievances without fear of being intimidated. This is done through student ‘Baraza’, held once a week after supper, in a totally free, relaxed, family-like atmosphere, for one and a half-hours in the evening. Here, students are given a total parliamentary immunity to say whatever they like without fear of reprisals from their teachers, prefects, or fellow students, against whom complains are made. Students, for instance, can call in question the conduct of a student leader (prefect) - and the prefect concerned must defend his actions and submit to public discussion. The freedom is immense such that students can challenge the school authority on anything that is bothering them. No subject is prohibited, including the school director’s conduct. The system rests on rules and assumptions that are perfectly understood by everyone that ‘Baraza’ is a privileged forum and what is said within it cannot give rise to recrimination, reward or victimization. It is also understood that complaints must be genuinely felt and put forward in a courteous and dignified manner.
Originally, students of all ages could attend Baraza, but as the school grew, it was decided it should be split so that Forms I and II alternate with Forms III and IV and the Technical Institute. This not only keeps the size manageable, but also enables the debate to be pitched at a level that is commensurate with age and academics of students. The school director serves as the “speaker of the house” and the students serve as “parliamentarians”. Doing this duty, the director decides, among the many upraised hands, the order in which students take the floor. Control is not difficult and it is always done with a sense of humor. On very rare occasions have there been instances when a student has allowed his feelings to carry him beyond proper limits of parliamentary conduct.

‘Baraza’ is one of the oldest, unique, and vital traditions of Starehe and is quite central to its administrative system. From the early days of the formation of the school in 1959, Starehe founder and Director, Geoffrey William Griffin (1959-2005), had formed the habit of assembling students for a meeting with him on Friday evenings. In the early days, Griffin would tell students stories on Kenya’s history, classical legends, politics, religion, culture, and character. He gave students a broader background of general knowledge that they could not obtain from their classroom instruction. At the same time he also invited students to interrupt him, to ask questions, proffer their own views, to think together as a community. By listening and answering students’ questions, the director learns a lot about the undercurrents within the school. Discussions, though often spirited, are never rowdy and in the whole history of the ‘Baraza’ no member has ever been ordered from the chamber.

‘Baraza’ is not only an avenue for students to complain and criticize the school. Some significant ideas that have eventually become traditions of Starehe have emanated from the ‘Baraza’. One such tradition is the Voluntary Service Scheme, where students render service to the entire country free of charge during their holiday period. In addition, ‘Baraza’ has also been a significant vehicle for informing students’ school’s new developmental plans. During the Baraza the director takes them in confidence with regard to their views on how to address critical school challenges. Occasionally, he can produce school accounts to explain the school’s financial position. This gives students voice in Starehe’s administration and more importantly, it builds trust and team spirit in the school. Above all, ‘Baraza’ is also a psychotherapeutic avenue where critics and complainants gain an audience to air their grievances. Through it, happiness and a deep sense of belonging to the school is fostered.

Old students are always welcome to attend Baraza forums. Sitting with the teachers present, like them they accept that any student may ask them any question, which they must answer as truthfully as possible. Usually, such old students are at the university or are already doing well in their careers. The mission is to pass on pieces of good advice and school history to the current students of the school. In addition, they serve as good role models to students. Their attendance helps to strengthen the link between the school and the wider Starehe brotherhood.

At Starehe it is not only students who enjoy the freedom and democratic space that the school creates but also teachers. The school trusts teachers by not making them clock in and out when reporting for duty. They only come to school when they are scheduled to teach. The only requirement that the school demands of them is that when they are down for teaching, they come to school on time, prepared with lesson plans and notes. Because of this trust, Starehe over the years has received good dividends from its teachers, for instance, most of them are very devoted to their work and the school. They not only teach well but they are also willing to render their teaching services to students in their free time, during weekends, in the evenings and during the holidays pro deo out of their own professional devotion. Even some are ready to turn down Teacher's Service Commission promotions if this means them being transferred from Starehe.
Effects of “Baraza” System on Starehe’s Administrative System

Most Kenyan Heads to whom Starehe’s director would describe “Baraza system” were apprehensive about giving students too much freedom of speech. This same feeling was shared by some Starehe teachers, generally, those who had never been to a Baraza or those whose did not understand how the whole system functions. Over and above, it was evident that the “Baraza” system has worked well at SBC for over 49 years and has been instrumental in cementing the academic prowess and affective atmosphere that permeates the school. Summing up the importance of ‘Baraza’ system to Starehe’s growth, Murugu the Chairperson of Starehe Old Boys Society, in appreciating the school founder, Griffin William Griffin’s vision of creating Baraza, observed:

Here was a man who treated us with dignity despite our vulnerability. We who paid nothing, we who had no claims on Starehe, were given rights, and the right to demand rights that do not exist in the most expensive schools in this country. We could question the very hand that fed us! He never sought to dictate our destiny, allowing each one of us to chart our own course. He gave us the kind of opportunity, the kind of freedom many fathers are apprehensive to give to one or two teenage sons. (K. Murugu, personal communication, August 19, 2005)

Because of its easy “family” atmosphere, Baraza functions well as a forum that seeks to enrich students knowledge of the history of their school and their wider society. Through the forum pieces of school history are imparted, providing students with a deeper understanding of their environment. Through the forum students’ character is also formed and shaped. Baraza has not only been a forum of students airing their grievances or criticisms of the school but rather an avenue where some significant ideas that have eventually become traditions of Starehe have emanated from. One such tradition is the Voluntary Holiday Service Scheme, where Starehe students give up part of their holiday to render free service to various Kenyan institutions every year.

Baraza has also created a democratic space that has enabled dialogue to take a central function in Starehe’s administrative process. The forum has been psychotherapeutic- critics and complainants have been able to gain an audience for their views, the “oppressed” have been given chance to air their grievances. This dialectical approach to the process of teaching and learning has enabled Starehe students to develop a deep sense of belonging and commitment to the school and to view it as their own. It is this approach to addressing various challenges within the school that has enabled Starehe to be a premier and outstanding school both in character and academics not only in Kenya but in Africa.

By listening and answering questions, the director of Starehe learns a great deal about undercurrents within the school. Conversely, “Baraza” over the decades has become a perfect vehicle for the Director to inform students about new plans and taking them into his confidence with regard to their challenges. Occasionally, the Director has produced school accounts and explained school’s financial position. This has made students to become meticulous about avoiding waste in school. This has enabled the school to nurture trust and a team spirit in its administration.

Starehe over the years has also used Baraza system to maintain its high level sense of discipline that has enabled it maintain its rank as one of the best high schools in Kenya for over 40 years. Through the forum, collective responsibility, issues of hard work, probity and excellence have
been developed, nurtured and cemented and a collective sense of responsibility built within the school. Accessory to this, “Baraza” system has acted as a forum of nurturing responsible, accountable and transparent student leaders. Being an open forum, majority of students have been able to get a platform to express their opinion on school leadership and to gain honest and candid responses to their various concerns, a process that has allowed sound leadership to evolve and develop, a skill that many Starehe alumni’s have carried to the larger Kenyan society.

Starehe’s constant willingness to listen to students, and the encouragement it constantly gives to them in the Baraza to express their views reasonably but frankly, has provided the key to the great paradox of its freedom. A critical examination of Starehe’s organization indicates that the various avenues of freedom that students are granted is far greater than what is offered in most Kenyan schools. Although Starehe boys are polite and respectful, they do not just accept anything you tell them. You must convince them that what you say is right. They have confidence in themselves and in their knowledge. Their intellectual emancipation is as striking as the amount of physical freedom allowed to them.

Emerging Educational lessons from Starehe’s Baraza model

Starehe’s Baraza model shows that it is possible to make schools democratic public spheres. This is the stronger role that the school according to Dewey (1938) is expected to spearhead, in terms of nurturing critical thinking, control of ideas and shaping of behavior that is inherent. Starehe’s model also affirms the role of school as an avenue for preparing the young for their later responsibilities in life and how it functions well when it fuses the skills and knowledge of the community with those of the educators.

Starehe’s model affirms the central tenets of school functions as liberatory and places where freedom and change in education can be developed and nurtured. Starehe emphasis on linking theory and practice, where the teaching and learning goes beyond classroom instruction reinforces the idea of viewing pedagogy as the practice of freedom and where schools are seen as avenues where pedagogical practices are interrogated, and knowledge offered to students empowering and life changing. Ideas that have emerged from Starehe’s Baraza such as Voluntary Service Scheme affirms Dewey’s view of positioning learning in the context of learning skills, discipline and rigor in the service of social reconstruction and democratic life. It is a democracy that embraces students deep understanding of humanness.

Starehe’s Baraza system further demonstrates Freire (2002) and Kohl (1994) idea of looking at school as an inclusive, active and constructive agency. Including learners in all facets of their teaching and learning process enables them to develop habits of love for their school an act that creates a constant urgency of excellence in all areas of student learning. This is the wider concept of education that views it as being multidimensional and wholistic.

The model shows that it is possible to use educational institutions as avenues of seeding democracy and citizenship. Through the Baraza forum, democratic elements of the “need to talk to learners to the need to talk with them” (Freire, 2005) are cultivated. The forum provides students the opportunity to be engaged in the schools administrative process. This is a practice that if well carried to the larger society has great potential of developing, nurturing and enhancing the practice of democracy and partnership in societal leadership. It also provides space for the training of responsible and critical citizens. This according to Freire (2005) makes school an avenue of gathering and engendering certain democratic characteristics such as: listening to others, respecting others, tolerance, deference to decisions made by the majority that do accommodate different opinions, disposition to question, criticize, debate and respect of public matters.
Conclusion

Starehe's Baraza system demonstrates that it is possible to plant seeds of democracy within educational institutions. The model illustrates that teaching and learning prospers in situations where students view education as the practice of freedom and where avenues of partnering are created and nurtured. The study indicates that the more liberatory spaces are created within an educational institution the greater the democratic and citizenship growth. For educational institutions to enhance democracy, the study notes that it is vital to engage all the relevant stakeholders in a mutual dialogical relationship that is engaging, inclusive and socially constructive.

References


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