

WHOLISTIC AND SERVICE-CENTERED LEARNING: EMERGING EDUCATIONAL LESSONS FROM STAREHE BOYS CENTRE AND SCHOOL, KENYA

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Abstract

Wholistic and service-centered education is a subject that has gained considerable interest among many educational theorists in recent decades. Using a qualitative research inquiry and data drawn from both secondary and primary sources, this paper, critically examines efforts being made by a high performing high school---Starehe Boys Centre and School, Kenya to offer an education that is wholistic and service-centered. From the study findings, the paper accentuates that offering service-centered education is essential and should be at the core of an effective education system. Because of its experience-centeredness, the findings demonstrate that the wholistic and service-centered education is a good preparatory approach for the learners with respect to discovering and nurturing their future careers and in identifying needy-service gaps or fields in the community.

Key Words: Wholistic-centered learning, Service-centered learning.

Introduction

Wholistic and service-centered education is a subject that has gained considerable interest among many educational theorists in recent times. In this paper, a critical examination is made of a high performing high school---Starehe Boys Centre and School, Kenya and its attempts to offer education that is wholistic and service-centered. Specifically, the paper examines literature on wholistic and service-centered education, manifestations of Starehe's wholistic and service-centered education and; emerging educational lessons. The paper accentuates that offering service-centered education is essential and should be at the core of an effective education system. Starehe's model illustrates that if the tenets of wholistic and service-centered education are well incorporated in the education curriculum they have the potential of marrying educational theory and praxis, seeding academic excellence, strengthening the link between school and society and, creating an engaged and reflective citizenry. In addition, the process provides students opportunities to learn to dream beyond their immediate world and challenges them to become critical scholars, cultural workers and societal change agents.

Research Methodology

The design of the study was qualitative. The research participants were primarily those individuals who had worked with Geoffrey William Griffin the founder of Starehe for several years and were instrumental in shaping Starehe's wholistic and service-centered educational approaches. They included: one co-founder of Starehe, current and former: administrators, teaching faculty and alumni. In total, 30 participants took part in the study.

Data was collected from both secondary and primary sources. Primary sources used were: open-ended interviews, direct field observations, document and audio-visual materials. The main method of collecting primary data was open-ended interviews. Secondary sources

formed the foundation of the study. They were extracted from books, journals and past researches.

Analysis of the data was done using qualitative techniques of: description, reduction, and interpretation. In the descriptive phase, narrative themes were isolated based on the main research questions. In the reduction phase, generative themes in the narratives were categorized into various sub-themes. The interpretation phase involved the reconstruction of the participants' narratives through various sub-themes, in which the sub-themes guided participant's views on the main research questions. This last phase also included discussions of the main themes and sub-themes.

Research Questions

The study sought to address the following questions:

- What is wholistic and service-centered education?
- How is wholistic and service-centered education manifested at Starehe Boys Centre and School?
- What educational lessons emerge from Starehe's wholistic and service-centered model?

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to the remaining co-founder of Starehe Boys Centre and School, its current and former administrators, teaching faculty, support staff and alumni's who were available at the time of the field research.

There was the death of Geoffrey William Griffin, a week before the beginning of the field research, the force behind the creation of Starehe's wholistic and service-centered education. This necessitated increasing of the study population than was previously planned and using more secondary sources to gain in-depth data on the research topic. Lastly, studies done on African wholistic and service-centered education were limited, much of the used literature was from outside Africa.

Literature on Wholistic and Service-Centered Learning

This section discusses the growing literature on service-centered learning and its essence in the education process. According to Dewey (1938) and Giroux (1993) 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, and rigor in societal work and change. This calls for developing schools that are service learning communities that engage people with the moral and technical challenges of the day.

Shor (1992) views teaching as a performative act. As a performative act, it offers space for societal innovation and reform that can draw from students varied talents. To embrace the performative aspect of teaching and learning, the school system is expected to engage all those involved in community service. This therefore, means that education can only be effective when it creates space for students to engage the community in order for them to realize that knowledge is a field in which both the school and the society actively toil.

Freire (2005) observes that learning takes place when schools involve students in societal works. Freire's thoughts, are affirmed by Palmer (1998), in his arguments that enlightened teaching invites a teaching community. This community is seen as a sanctuary where the passion of people to dialogue and to learn from each other is constantly attained and renewed. In the education field, this community connects all those involved in the process, renews students' interest and spirit in learning. This means that learning cannot take place deeply until a community of learning is created in the school and a relationship between the school and society through various service stations established and sustained.

Counts (1932), Kohl (1994), espouse the need to link education to societal wants. For these authors there is an intimate relationship between the process of "actual experience and education". Counts (1932) notes that, "until school and society are bound together by common purpose, the program of education will lack meaning and vitality" (p.15). Schools are therefore required to prepare the young for their later service in the community. Education in this respect, functions well when it fuses the skills and knowledge of the community with those of the school. This demands being aware of students' potentialities and guiding them into fields that can permit them to flourish in society.

According to Giroux (1993), schools are expected to foster societal transformation. This entails viewing schools as transformative public spheres dedicated to forms of self and societal empowerment, where students have the opportunity to acquire skills that can help them function well in society. Education in this context is expected to empower students to be better scholars, to live more fully in the world beyond the school confines. Freire (2005) refers to the latter as "praxis" that entails action and reflection. The process of teaching is expected to transcend the subject matter to embrace critical thinking that can allow both students and teachers to mutually interrogate, create and re-create knowledge. In order to enhance critical pedagogy, Shor and Freire (1987) observe that teachers should help students "to read" the world critically, instead of mastering tools to read it. Schools in this context are expected to make learners develop questioning minds that can examine the world and permit them to make contributions to it.

The context of both individual and societal transformation is both inside and outside the classroom. McLaren (1989) underscores that schools are expected to create spaces that enable students to participate in daily democratic and societal struggles. To achieve this, schools are expected to offer high-quality education that can empower students to be critical thinkers and societal change agents. Education in this prism is expected to transcend academics, a job or status. It is expected to embrace wholeness, empowerment, liberation and vitalities of life.

Summing up the central purpose of service in the education process, Palmer (1998) notes that a sound education should have the ability to co-create a context in which learners can learn from society. The learning process in this sense demands a community---a dialogical exchange in which those who are involved can connect with each other, can interrogate each other's thoughts, challenge their biases and expand their knowledge. Through creating partnerships with society in the learning process the relevance that ought to be embodied in the education field is created and practiced.

Manifestations of Wholistic and Service-Centered Learning at Starehe Boys Centre and School

Right from its formative years, Dr. Geoffrey William Griffin, the founder of Starehe Boys Centre and School sought to offer education that could instill the spirit of service among his students. Presenting his views to the Kenyan National Committee examining objectives and policies of education, in 1976, he underscored the need for educational institutions to provide societal service. It was only through the latter that the educational system could make a positive contribution to society. He argued:

In our schools we should surely be striving to inculcate moral training, self-discipline, and a spirit of service. We want our young people to leave school not expecting to be spoon-fed by the government, but with a realistic knowledge of the problems they will meet, the cheerful courage to face and overcome them. We want them to use part of their time and talent in service to the nation. (G. W. Griffin, speech, 1976)

Starehe sees education as an avenue of service to society. It argues that a head who puts all his attention into trying to improve the academics is likely to be disappointed by the ultimate results. Whereas a head who concentrates on creating a school which develops habits of service in its students will find that academic and life success is easily attained. It was because of its prowess in service work that Starehe was able to stamp its mark on academic charts. Affirming Starehe's essence of education for service in learning in his speech during the school founders' day in 1998, Griffin asked his audience the following:

Are the principles of duty and discipline still as strong in Kenya as they once were? We all know that they are not. Throughout our beautiful country Kenya, men and women of all ages and classes are inclined to sell themselves above the law, to seek gain through corruption and to ignore duty. How can we remedy the situation? The key is mastery, the power to use the world and all resources and hand it on improved to those who come after you. To gain this mastery, students must learn, not just what is in the academic curriculum, but to explore, to lead and to give service. To learn to do everything that a man can do not for the sake of gain but for the power to serve one's nation and God. ("We must give preference to vital principles of duty", 1998)

In several of his addresses during Founders' Day from 1959 to 2005, Griffin reminded his audience the nobility of duty and service and their centrality as pillars upon which man raises himself or herself towards God and society. He reminded his audience on the significance of rendering service to society. In many of his speeches he frequently remarked:

As we all know, the world is passing through a difficult time. We see around us all too many people of ability but no conscience, who, if they feel it is to their personal advantage, will abandon without scruple the responsibilities entrusted to them. We see people who have no conception of the word service, and whose only touchstone in any situation is the question: How will it benefit me? Here at Starehe, we are not afraid of words like service. Rather, we look upon them as the eternal pillars by which man raises himself above animals towards God. Nor shall we be content to pay lip-service to such ideals, but will labor constantly to present them as vital realities to students in our care. (Martin, 1978, p. 216)

To emphasize further the importance of education for service, Starehe reminds its students every Friday during school assembly of its aspirations for the education that they are receiving from the school. It expects them to know that they are being prepared to render service to their nation and to carry the weight of their government through their later works. Service to mankind is viewed as service to God and the path of duty as the way to Glory. To ensure that Starehe students receive an education that can prepare them adequately for service, Starehe has enshrined the message within its school song. A critical examination of some sections of the school song underscores Starehe's message of service. The song reads:

These are the years when we are helped and guided
Taught by Starehe to know, judge, and do;
Prepared for the future, encouraged and provided,
Strengthened to serve.

Honor the school, a way of life which fires us,
Lifts up our spirits, sets us all ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us,
Planting the seed to serve all our days.

We pledge ourselves, when this our generation,
Must in its turn the weight of government bear,
To all mankind, through service to our nation. (Starehe Hymnal, 2005)

To ensure that Starehe students never forgot their lessons on the value of education for service, Griffin underpinned its importance in his last words to Starehe students before his death. He saw this type of education as the ideal education that a good education system should strive to provide because it labors on societal progress. In his final words to Starehe students, he wrote:

My dear boys, I have enjoyed a fruitful and happy life, and I learnt one great lesson that I would like to share with you. I hope that Starehe will always teach this lesson. Our world is full of people who do their duty half-heartedly and poorly. Don't be like them. Whatever is your duty; complete it as fully and perfectly as you possibly can. And when you have finished your own duty, go on to spare some of your own time and talent in service to the poor, not for any reward, but simply because it is the right thing to do. (F. Okono, personal communication, June 8, 2005)

Starehe maintains that all students have something to give, because there is always someone with less. In each student lies the power to do great things, the power to transform society, and ability to touch others through good works. It sees the youth as having the verve and idealism to give in return for which they can receive succor, experience and wisdom from the rendered service. It seeks to engender a spirit of giving in its students, not so much as an act of empathy and compassion but more as a sense of civic duty. It charges its students in future never to forget the benefits they have received from Starehe and to do all they can according to their talents and means to assist and enter into others labor as Starehe had entered theirs.

Because of its strong emphasis on education for service, Starehe emphasizes the need for schools to offer wholistic education that blends both academic and service. It expects its students to get an education that can prepare them adequately to face the world with

confidence and permit them to make positive contributions to it. In his challenge to the guests and parents during the school's 35th Founders Day, Griffin posed the following questions to them to underscore his views on the kind of wholistic and service-centered education Starehe expects its students to get:

What are your aspirations for your son? Power? Money? Fame? Indeed such things may await him somewhere down the corridors of time. But, for the present, link with us, in a common aim to make him a "whole man". A "whole man" is ardent in piety towards God, strong in patriotism, just in all his ways, resolute in honesty and impregnable to the temptations of corruption, devoted to duty, always willing to go extra mile, courageous in adversity, peaceful at temper, protector of the weak and prudent in decision making. (Hongo & Mugambi, 2000, p. 56)

It is because of its emphasis on wholistic education that Starehe has encouraged the growth of over forty active clubs and societies within the school. A great deal of liberty is allowed in the use of leisure time, permission is freely granted for the students to leave school on weekends, and visits are made to social amenities within Nairobi. Students are encouraged to excel in all these activities the same way they do in academics. Just like the latter, they are funded, encouraged and honored.

Starehe's belief in wholistic and service-centered education saw it accepted into the International membership of the Round Square Conference of Schools, an association of more than 50 global leading schools on five continents whose educational systems are directed at educating the "whole person", in line with theories of experiential educational philosopher Kurt Hahn. Hahn believed that schools should have a greater purpose beyond preparing students for college. He believed that it is crucial to prepare students for life by having them experience it in ways that would demand courage, generosity, imagination, principle, and resolution. He felt that young people should be empowered and permitted to develop skills that will allow them to be leaders and guardians of tomorrow's world.

All member schools of Round Square view learning as an ongoing formation process whose fundamental objective is wholistic development of every student in the realms of academics, physique, culture, and religion. The association underscores the importance of giving service to others, adventure, leadership training, responsibility and international understanding. All these are seen as essential in preparing young people to meet their future challenges with confidence and compassion. Students in Round Square schools are part of the Round Square International Service (RSIS) which espouses a philosophy that requires the youth to blend education with community service. RSIS enables young people from many cultural, national, and racial backgrounds to work together with those who are in need in various parts of the world.

Starehe is among few schools in Africa who are members of this conference and the only one which admits students mainly from destitute backgrounds and educates them on charitable funds. In 1996, Starehe hosted the annual International Round Square Conference. The theme of the conference was "*Preparing Together for Service and Responsibility.*" The reason for the choice of Starehe was because of its commitment to wholistic and service-centered education. Commenting on this, the editor for the official conference magazine, ECHO, noted:

Indeed Starehe was the most appropriate venue for the conference, since as an institution it specializes in providing a good complete education. It is a living example of the fact that despite limited resources, the responsibility of service can be undertaken if there is proper commitment and preparation. (“Hahn’s philosophy comes alive at Starehe,”1997)

Voluntary Service Scheme at Starehe Boys Centre and School

It was because of its value for wholistic and service-centered education that Starehe has supported its holiday Voluntary Service Scheme, where students render free service to the Kenyan nation during their vacation. The idea was borne out of the student “*baraza*” (Parliament) in the early years of the school when a student asked how they could reciprocate to their sponsors from all over the world for the generosity they had bestowed on them. The scheme was begun modestly in 1966, when seven boys spent their August holiday working without payment at Nairobi and Kenyatta Hospitals. Through the scheme, Starehe’s virtues of service and loyalty to one’s country are demonstrated. Starehe believes that the Voluntary Service Scheme is education in the widest sense of the word, and commits resources to it just as it does to academics. Through the scheme students give up at least three weeks of their vacation to offer free services to the community. There is no pressure for students to volunteer and no reward of any kind is given to them.

From the beginning of the scheme, Starehe underlined three ways in which the scheme was to be beneficial to students. First, the student is required to learn how to find satisfaction in the humblest type of work and not to be discouraged by challenges faced. Two, the student is expected to be humble with regard to his approach to life. Through the scheme, the student puts into practice the scheme’s motto “If you are given a coffee cup to wash, wash it better than any coffee cup has ever been washed before in the world!” This motto encompasses both the idea of excellence and the admonition that no task is too menial or too lowly to be performed well. Third, the student is expected to practice the principle of “stickability.” Explaining Starehe’s views on this, Martin (1978) writes:

It shows us how people fail and become helpless because they give up on a job when they meet a difficulty, or because another job seems more attractive. He tries to make us understand that it takes time to do anything well and that one cannot get far in the world unless one sticks to one’s work and does it well. (p.185)

It was with this conceptualization of work that Starehe believes that people must be committed to their professions and not be lured by money to grass-hop from one job to another without caring about the damage this does to professional growth and to the recipient(s) of the service. There are various conditions that govern Voluntary Service Scheme. The first job must be of pure service and the student must be prepared to perform any duty given to him; the student must wear a smart school uniform, be punctual and work normal hours; and lastly, he must not accept any financial remuneration. The scheme is very competitive and popular with students, and approximately 200 students volunteer their services each term, which means that slightly over 600 students give their services each year to society. Each student is required to bring back a written report at the end of the holiday job stipulating his conduct and performance.

The Voluntary Service Scheme is seen by Starehe administration as an avenue that offers students an exposure to the real-life work environment and, in some instances, it

guides their career choices. Summing up the overall schemes value to students' career preparation, Okwemba a former Starehe student remarked:

In a way it prepared us for the careers that we would later take on in life. You would find guys who went to Kenyatta National Hospital, most of them ended up being doctors. You would find guys who went to the Voice of Kenya they would later end up as broadcasters. You would find people who went to newspapers ended up being journalists. That exposure, I think, helped most us to focus on how working life is, it prepared us for adult life. When Starehe's history is written, the secret of its voluntary scheme must surely be unraveled. How does an institution which places such a high premium on conformity turn out successive generations of fiercely ambitious and competitive men? I was writing news stories for the *Daily Nation* as a Form Three Pupil, about the time Raphael Tuju- yes, the minister – was clawing his way through the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation newsroom, also in school uniform. Dozens of others were pushing paper or making tea in hospitals. Rather early in life, Griffin's far-sighted approach to education exposed us to the realities of the work place. While boys our age were chasing girls and roaming the estates in gangs during vacations, Starehe took us to companies and institutions to toil with adults. We learnt to serve and persevere and to ask questions. Through it I developed an interest in journalism and adopted it as my craft. Between editing the school newspaper and covering courts for the *Daily Nation*, the seeds were soon of a lifelong career. Training turned me into a writer and editor. (D. Okwemba, personal communication, July 17, 2005)

Emerging Educational Lessons from Starehe's Wholistic and Service-Centered Learning

Starehe's wholistic and education for service model illustrates the vital role that the process creates in linking school and society. It affirms Freire (2005) thoughts that education can only be effective when it creates space for students to engage the community. The model shows that education for service provides the school opportunity to connect, dialogue and learn about societal challenges. These connections create room for vital partnership in societal development and provides room for innovation. Both school and society work in unison to effect societal change. It is this link that gives education meaning and vitality.

Starehe's model also illustrates how education for service provides opportunities for the young people to discover and nurture their talents and later career choices. This is the sole mission of the school according to Dewey (1938)--preparing the young for their later responsibilities in life. Education in this regard, works well when it fuses the skills and knowledge of the community with those of the school. This demands as earlier observed, being aware of students' potentialities and directing them into new fields that can enhance their development.

The model further shows that education for service provides students opportunities to be aware of ways on how they can use societal experiences emanating from their immediate conditions to address societal challenges. Education for service facilitates this interaction between school and society that is essential in exploring the best approaches that can be used to interpret and address these challenges.

Further, the model also provides room for critical examination of societal struggles both by the school and the society. Students' engagement in community service provides

them a window as Shor and Freire (1987) observe to mutually share, create and re-create knowledge and make it beneficial to society. This challenges schools to offer high-quality education that is empowering, transformational and one that engages the community in its work.

All in all, Starehe's model demonstrates that education for service is a strong force in creating and enhancing societal partnership. It provides avenues for connectedness and dialogical exchange between school and society that is essential for school excellence. As Palmer (1998) observes, this connectedness creates a community where all can expand their knowledge bases. By and large, the model illustrates vividly that if education for service is well cultivated it has the potential of enhancing societal progress.

Study Recommendations

On the basis of the findings above, this study recommends that there is need for:

- Educational institutions to establish transformative educational leadership structures that can enhance wholistic and service-centered education.
- Educational institutions to develop and nurture wholistic and service-centered curriculums.

Conclusion

Starehe's wholistic and service-centered education model illustrates on a practical basis, enormous benefits that learning institutions stand to gain if they incorporate the service element in their curriculum. From the discussions in this paper, it is clear that incorporating service component in the education process creates a strong ladder that can be used to nurture students' talent and potential that is vital for societal growth. The exposure not only introduces students to the world of work but it gives them opportunities to explore and discover needy professional fields that they can hone their skills in. In addition, the model also provides students with habits of service i.e work ethics and rigor that are vital for effective service delivery.

Starehe's model illustrates further that, when students are offered wholistic education chances for the school to excel are high and it is vital that schools invest in it. Starehe's prowess in both academics and co-curricular activities shows that when an educational institution is centered on service it is possible to build an effective learning community that has societal progress at heart for the process creates dialogue on societal wants. The model challenges all those involved in the education process to re-think their school curriculum models and their relation to societal needs. School curriculum is expected to provide students with intellectual, imaginative and emotional resources to understand education from the "inside". Schools are expected to "encourage students to learn to dream beyond their immediate world or environment and thinking critically of ways of creating fullness of life through service" (Kohl, 1994, p.44). Intellectual rigor in this respect is expected to enable students to reconstruct their societies and become critical scholars and cultural workers who can transform society.

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