

Analysis of Socrates' Credo, "The Unexamined life is not worth living" in relation to learners who fail the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) Examinations

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Abstract

Every year when candidates sit Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations, a substantial number of candidates do fail to get the required grade that is considered as 'Pass'. Such failures get grade E which equates them practically to individuals who never attended school for whatever education although theoretically they are 'better' than the latter. This study analyses KCSE examination failings in a period of three consecutive years (2008-2010) in the light of an explication of Socrates' credo, "The unexamined life is not worth living". It is contended that learners have ability to auto-evaluate their knowledge and any other external evaluation of the same is subservient. It is concluded that the branding of learners as failures by the Kenya National Examinations Council in KCSE examinations is epistemologically fallacious. A learner who sits KCSE examinations has previously demonstrated academic related prowess in the previous levels of education at home, nursery and primary education.

Key Words: autodidacticism, credo, epistemology and heutagogy

Introduction

This paper uses analysis as a philosophical methodology to explicate meanings from the Socrates' credo, "The unexamined life is not worth living" in relation to learners who fail KCSE examinations, which is done after four years of secondary education. The examination assesses learner's knowledge, which is the epistemological aspect of the assessment process and the main concern of education in Kenya (Knight, 1998, p. 19-26). The paper is divided into five parts. The first part provides the concept of examination while merits and demerits of examination are analyzed in the second part. The theme of the paper on Socrates' credo is discussed in the third part whereas in the fourth part, a comprehensive model of assessing learners is prescribed. The fifth part concludes the discussion.

The concept of examination and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE)

Examination is found in almost every education system in the world and it is probably there to stay (Li, 2005).

Li further notes that the origin of the concept of examination in education system, which spread to all parts of the globe, is traceable to ancient Chinese education. The idea of an examination to test learners was brought to Kenya by the British colonial government (the United Kingdom (UK)).

The examining body was the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate, which was later replaced with East African Examinations Council. In 1980, Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) was established as an autonomous body responsible for the management and administration of examinations (Eshiwani, 1993, p. 181 and KNEC, 2009). The KNEC examines most examinations done in Kenya except those of the universities. The KCSE examination is just one of the more than a dozen examinations that KNEC administers.

The Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination, which is administered at the end of four years of secondary education cycle assigns learners twelve different grades according to performance in descending order as follows: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D- and E. Grade A is the best and E is fail. The learners can be grouped into three categories: those who passed as they expected; those who passed but not as they expected, and those who failed. Learners who passed as they anticipated are usually happy and they can pursue further education or careers of their choices whereas those who passed but not as they expected may have problems with their future education. For the learners who are branded as failures by KNEC, their future may be perceived as bleak and what their epistemological dispensation entails may be assumed to be incorrigible.

The Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) is an internationally recognized examining body. The grades attained in KCSE examination are used by learners to secure admissions into universities and tertiary institutions for various career placements. A learner who fails KCSE cannot join any institution for either career training or further education. A report on the KNEC results in a span of three years (2008 to 2010) indicate that between 292,000 and 355,000 candidates sat KCSE each year and between 6000 and 7000 candidates failed the exams, that is, attained grade E (KNEC, 2009, KNEC, 2010 and KNEC, 2011). This failure rate is about 2%. The least strenuous way to attain grade “E” in KCSE examination is for a candidate to just write their name and index number in the answer booklets without responding to any question. A candidate who gets grade E is equated to someone who did not attend school but only knows how to write their name and index number for which a grade E could be awarded.

This paper focuses on learners who are designated by the KNEC examinations as failures. These learners, for sure, stayed in secondary schools and attended classes for four years. When the results show fail, it strikes the mind to question the level of their epistemological dispensation. What is the rationale of equating someone who spent four years learning in a school to someone who did not go to school at all but learnt to write their name and some other number? This is the issue which is analyzed in this study through an explication of Socrates’ credo; “The unexamined life is not worth living”.

Merits and demerits of examinations

Before analyzing the credo, it is worthwhile to take a general view of the merits and demerits of examinations. It is posited that every candidate does exam with the sole aim of passing it. It is also postulated that a learner who sits KCSE aims at either furthering their education or joining careers of their choice in the prevailing circumstances. It is a means of placement to the path of earning a living after study or to join a career of choice and hence great hopes are often placed on the results of the examinations.

Abagi (1998), Bundu & Nyaga (2010), Kellaghan (2004), Kellaghan & Greaney (1992), Wasanga & Ramani (2010) and Weaver (nd) underscore and authenticate genuineness of examination as undisputable procedure to promote learners, guide policy formulation, audit the success of education system and evaluate the achievement of learning. As reported by WikiAnswers (2011) and Importance of Examinations (2009), without examinations most scholars would not be well informed since people are motivated to study, investigate all possible questions and accumulate knowledge just to pass examinations. They contend that it may be wiser to improve on examination systems rather than to do away with them in education.

Although examinations are meritorious in the achievements of some aims of education, it is noteworthy to point out that examinations have demerits. As noted by Nyichomba & Mkilaha (1992) and Murthy (2011), examinations normally control education instead of the other way round. In most cases teaching is subordinated to examinations and teachers often teach solely to enable learners pass examinations.

Ongom (1992) states that examinations terrify learners and make them lose self-confidence since it is viewed as a determinant of their worth in society. In Tanzania, for instance, there is a worrying trend of students committing suicide when the results do not favour their expectations (Meserani Project, 2013).

As noted by Bonnet (2009), one of the serious issues with examinations is the mismatch between what the learner knows and the indicator provided by examination results. Albert Einstein faced this mismatch when he could not join a coveted college in Zurich to study electrical engineering because he failed an examination, although later after much struggle, he proved his worth as a great engineer and philosopher (O'Conner and Robertson, 1997). In Kenya, debate about the efficacy of KCSE examinations demonstrates the inherent problems. Siringi (2009) reports that about 10% of the students who sit KCSE examination each year, are not eligible for either further education or employment and, do not engage in any activity that requires their secondary education knowledge or experience. In a newspaper report, Caplan (2009) recommends replacing KCSE with another exam that does not consign candidates to failure. Does grade E, that is assigned by KNEC to a candidate, mean that the candidate is empty in knowledge? How much knowledge could be attributed to the candidate's experience of going through the secondary school education continuum? Which method is justified to be used in ascertaining a learner's epistemological disposition at the end of the four year secondary education cycle?

Socratic credo and epistemological assessment of learners

Credo can be described as an important statement that summarizes one's beliefs (Macmillan, 2002, p. 328). Socrates maintains that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Freer, 2012). He is considered as one of those who laid the philosophical foundations of Western culture and his central advice to people is "know thyself" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1979, p. 101f). Chambliss (1996, p. 616) describes the Socrates' credo as the "heart of his calling". Socrates maintains that an individual examines their life through an assessment of their worth through life tests (Freer, 2012). Life is a test on its own and from it, an individual becomes aware of what they know and what they do not know thus actualizing the aim of the Socratic interrogation as an aid in achieving genuine knowledge or epistemological dispensation (Philosophypages, nd). Learners are assessed solely to arrive at genuine knowledge that they exhibit. This genuine knowledge can be assessed by individual learners themselves. Socrates believes that learners could be their own assessors and be responsible for assessing themselves (Woodruff, 1998, p. 15). Individual assessment of oneself leads to truth as supported by Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedo* Field (1967, p. 17) and Bridgwater & Kurtz (1963, p. 1680). Plato maintains that truth is a product of self-examination; it is true knowledge and no one can teach it (Field, 1967).

Plato demonstrates the idea of unexamined life in his allegory of the cave (American People's Encyclopedia, 1962, p. 656). According to the allegory,

Human beings live in a cave and they are chained so that they can only see the wall in front of them. On the wall they see shadows (the world of senses) but they are unable to see, above and behind them, the light (truth) that comes into the cave from outside and produce the shadows. If freed to turn and look, the cave people are blinded by the light and would prefer to stay in the shadows. But when outside the light (wisdom, knowledge), few will wish to return to the cave.

When the KNEC assesses learners, the grades assigned are deemed fit. Grade E is an indication that the learner is in total darkness where there is no light that can cause shadows. If one can realize shadows, it means one is aware of the light because shadows cannot appear without some source of light. So, grade E indicates complete lack of knowledge. What truth is there when a learner who has been in a school consistently for four years is portrayed as blank in knowledge acquisition? Although such learner may provide testimony for their knowledge, it is an external body in the name of KNEC that testifies for their knowledge and their verdict has a lasting effect on the learner's future.

The KNEC's mission is to "objectively" assess learners and at the same time "maintain both national and international certification standards" (KNEC Newsletter, 2008). The standards that KNEC strives to achieve by assessing learners may have no relevance to the learners who believe that the KNEC examination results measure the level of their worth in life. The examination that the learners sit for at the end of their four years secondary education is not focused on the learner as an independent being who is able to think and come up with their own assessment of themselves; the assessment procedure simply focuses on objectivity.

As argued by Charlesworth (1976), an objective person thinks not of themselves but of others. Suppose the mission of KNEC is to assess learners both “subjectively” and “objectively”, could it be possible to get failures? Self examination focuses on subjectivity, which, as explained by Chaube & Chaube (1973) and Charlesworth (1976) is the true knowledge.

The worth of the subjective view is corroborated by Descartes’ enlightenment dictum, *Cogito ergo sum*, meaning “I am thinking, therefore I exist” or “I think, therefore I am” (Patrick, 2001, p. 183, Thompson, 2010). What an individual can be sure of is their existence. It is considered impossible to be aware of someone else’s existence and you fail to notice yours. This dictum is considered to be the beginning of modern philosophy and an extension of Socrates credo (Freer, 2012). It becomes a philosophical paradox when examiners purport to be sure of learners’ failure in KCSE exam and assign grade E unflinchingly without giving them a chance for self assessment. What rationale does KNEC provide in assigning 600 to 700 candidates grade E? Socrates feels that learners should teach and assess themselves. Socrates maintains that he is not competent enough to be a teacher and thus advocates for a teacherless education (Chambliss, 1996, 616). Is there a system whereby the learners can be their own teachers and their own assessors? Socrates’ stance apparently calls for autodidacticism (autodidacticism) and heutagogy.

Autodidacticism is a theory of learning on one’s own accord and consequently, an autodidact is a self-taught person (Demand Media, 2013 and Mautner, 2005, p. 59). The term comes from two Greek words: *autos*, meaning “self” and *didaktikos*, meaning “teaching” and hence *autodidaktos* means “self-taught”. On the other hand, heutagogy means the process of self-determined learning that produces learners who are prepared for the complexities of life (Blaschke, 2011). The term was coined by Steward Hase of Southern Cross University and Chris Kenyon in Australia. It is a philosophy of learning how to learn and learning a given subject itself as embraced in emerging technologies in distance education (Blaschke, 2011). Therefore, heutagogy may be considered as a part of autodidacticism.

An individual is able to learn on their own and assess their own knowledge just like one who repents for their misdeeds. Just as it is difficult for one to repent for bad deeds of another person while that person is still living, a determination of attainment of knowledge calls for self assessment of one’s innermost introspective conscience. If KCSE candidates could be given opportunity to assess their knowledge and assign their own grades, then the examinations would focus on the inner feelings of the candidates and thus reveal the true knowledge. As Socrates explains, each person only acts on the basis of truth, and so we can allude that when given an opportunity to assess and evaluate themselves, candidates will act truthfully (Popkin and Stroll, 1973, p. 175) and reveal the inner knowledge of themselves.

If, for instance, the candidate is proven to tell lies, then that one is open to investigation. Thus external assessment would simply exist to verify that the self assessment matches the test of verifiable practicality and evidence. Even so, the investigation would not only focus on the lying individual but also the system of education which purportedly produces a liar in the midst of other non-liars. The truthfulness of the candidate’s evaluation can also be counterchecked through a series of both subjective and objective procedures. Subjective procedures may include the candidate’s detailed report that leads to the evaluation presented; candidate’s anecdotal history that authenticates their evaluation. Objective procedures are to be carried out by other people or agency like KNEC to corroborate the genuineness of the candidate’s self evaluation since as humans we tend to doubt subjective assessment. It is important to employ a comprehensive assessment that incorporates both subjectivity and objectivity so that failure is eliminated, while the right level of one’s knowledge is ascertained and rewarded in some way.

Suggested comprehensive assessment model of KCSE examination

Philosophers handle the concept of assessment with a lot of trepidations yet world leaders are concerned with how best educationists can design assessment tools that accurately evaluate a learner’s potentials (Strawser, 2009) in a way that is satisfactory to the learner as a depiction of their true potential. There is no student who enrolls in a secondary school in Kenya to get grade E at the end of four years of study. The grade is traumatizing to the student themselves, the parents, relatives and friends. When KNEC assigns grade E to a candidate, it can be metaphorically compared to someone who endorses a death certificate to the socio-economic life of the candidate. The knowledge background of someone who fails in KCSE examinations could be quite impressive but there is no forum to demonstrate it.

In the first place, the learner acquired education at home before proceeding to nursery school. After nursery school, the learner spent eight years in primary school and passed the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) in order to get admission into secondary school. If at the end of the four years a grade E is assigned to the candidate signifying that they never went beyond the knowledge of writing their name and index number correctly then that is absurd.

The knowledge of writing own name and index number can be accomplished in pre-school education when a learner is below six years old. The proposed comprehensive assessment model for KCSE examination comprises subjective and objective evaluations of knowledge. The subjective evaluation is the result of learner’s own assessment of themselves whereas objective evaluation results from learner’s assessment according to others. Both assessments focus on school subjects as prescribed by the curriculum. The two tables below, with three subjects as examples, summarize subjective and objective evaluations.

Table 1: Subjective Evaluation

SUBJECTS	GRADE	REMARKS
English	A	I have studied the subject thoroughly and I have been leading in it from primary school to date
Maths	C	I do not like the subject and my ability does not go beyond C (plain).
Geography	B	I have read the subject but did not complete the syllabus. I can do better than this.

Grade Aggregate: B +

Other Remarks

My pass can enable me join a university for Bachelor of Science Degree in food, nutrition and dietetics.

Table 2: Objective Evaluation

SUBJECT	GRADE	REMARKS
English	C	Did not answer all the questions as instructed. Omitted the compulsory question
Mathematics	C	Deserved the grade
Geography	D	Not well done

Grade Aggregate C -

Other Remarks—The student can pursue a certificate course-----

The subjective evaluation report should be sent to KNEC before the candidate sits KCSE. Why should KNEC fail a candidate who has evaluated themselves as fit?

It should, however, be noted that objective evaluation is given here as a contrast only. It may even correspond to or be better or worse than subjective evaluation. When it is better or worse than subjective evaluation, then there a problem that requires a different philosophic deliberation. As explained above, introduction of objective assessment in examinations is because of human nature that relegates subjectivity but it is philosophically unnecessary.

Conclusion

If this paper can stimulate the reader’s mind to disagree with KNEC for assigning grade E to a candidate who sits KCSE exam and to support the view that KNEC should assess learners both subjectively and objectively whereby both assessments should rhyme, then the objective is achieved.

It is epistemologically incorrigible to assign grade E to a candidate. Researches focusing on comparative philosophical analysis on subjective and objective evaluations of learners need to be carried out to reveal more about epistemological dispensations of the learners. The scope of this study does not permit working out criteria for subjective self-assessment. It could be interesting to do a comparative philosophical-analysis of objective and subjective examinations systems and assess their level of coherence in wholesome self-evaluation.

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