Education as a Quest to Freedom: Reflections on Maxine Greene

Sella T. Kisaka and Ahmed A. Osman

Department of Curriculum, Instruction & Educational media,
School of Education, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya.

Corresponding Author: Ahmed A. Osman

Abstract

This paper critically analyses the conceptions of Maxine Greene on education. It is a theoretical paper based on secondary data that seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in education. Education is crucial in the realization of Kenya’s Millennium Development Goals and it is one of the key issues in the social pillar of Kenya Vision 2030 which seeks to have a just and cohesive society enjoying equitable social development in a clean and secure environment. The paper discusses education as a pursuit to freedom for both the individual who is educated and the community/society he/she lives in. The significance of this paper is that educators can relook at the curriculum with a view to changing it to realize education as a quest to freedom. This can be done by changing the teaching approach as well as the attitude of the general public so that education, which is currently exam oriented, becomes all encompassing for the learner and the society as a whole. The discussion is based on Maxine Greene’s philosophies on the use of imagination and the arts to learn as well as the role of education and the role of the teachers in enabling the learners (all human beings) to acquire freedom. It emphasizes experiential education that enables people to see the world from broader and multiple perspectives with regard to society, through the coming together in community, asking questions and critiquing and through consciousness.

Keywords: freedom, experiential education, dialogue, social justice, consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

Education concerns itself with the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes which are relevant to the survival of human beings. It can make a positive contribution to the economic and social development of communities. UNESCO (2002) contends that up to 20% of income growth could be traced to education. Thus, education helps enlighten people concerning the value of culture (MOEST, 2006). Among other concerns the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets to ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. It is in the light of this commitment from the government of Kenya that we seek to discuss how Education can be improved from its current state where learners, their teachers and the community place a lot of emphasis on passing exams and getting white collar jobs at the expense of the other benefits that the individual and the society get from education. Currently the Kenyan learner is a relatively passive participant in the education process.

We analyze Maxine Greene’s writings because Maxine Greene has been cited in the New York Times as “one of the leading educational philosophers of the past fifty years” (Kohl, 2007). This paper therefore focuses on three of Maxine Greene’s major themes:

- Freedom and the individual’s responsibility to become situated in the quest for freedom. This involves a focus on mystification as a barrier to freedom, Greene’s belief that freedom can only be attained in the social context of community and her emphasis on social justice as it pertains to freedom.

- Imagination and the arts, and how they can provide experiential opportunities to see the world from multiple perspectives, helping individuals “wake up” by experiencing empathy with others.

- The role of education and the responsibility of the teacher in helping students question what is going on around them in order to start their own journey toward freedom.

The paper then touches on Greene’s thinking as it relates to experiential education.

Freedom and Responsibility

Maxine Greene’s work encompasses what might be, and what is not yet. It is about the power of the possible, which is rooted in the idea of freedom. Freedom to alter situations, by reinterpreting them and, by so doing, seeing oneself as a person in a new perspective. Once that happens, there are new beginnings, new actions to undertake in the world. (Greene, 1988, p. 90)

Human beings are capable of reflection and can view the world critically if they are able to become “wide-awake” and view the world from a variety of perspectives. A person’s perspective is based on
her/his life history and experiences, and, because it is seen from one angle (the self), it is always incomplete. People become situated in their world by differentiating between the self, the world, and other people. Greene was influenced by many Existential philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Hannah Arendt, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In essence, Existentialism espouses that each individual human being has the responsibility for creating meaning in her or his life. In Greene’s existential view, the world does not swirl around us, but the “knower as person” exists in a concrete situation, seeing the world from that vantage point (Green, 1973, p. 137). Once a person can do this, he or she is empowered, is autonomous, and can make real choices. Greene explains:

From the perspective of the system or the cosmos, things seem to happen automatically, irresistibly…. From a human perspective…. nothing is fully predictable or determined. All kinds of things are possible, although none can be guaranteed. When risks are taken, when people do indeed act in their freedom, a kind of miracle has taken place. She reminds us that we ourselves are the authors of such miracles, because it is we who perform them – and we who have the capacity to establish a reality of our own (1988, pp. 55 –56).

On Becoming “Wide Awake”
Wide awake philosophy refers to an individual’s ability to overcome hostile reality and make something good out of it. Maxine Greene would say that they have become “wide-awake” to their subjective realities, and are making intentional choices to act. Greene says that it “seems eminently clear that the freedom of wide-awakeness has to be expressed in intentional action of some kind. The one who drifts, who believes that nothing matters outside of his or her own self-preservation, can hardly be considered to be free” (1978, p. 153).

Confronting Mystification
To transcend the effects of mystification, it is necessary to wake up to the world and start seeing it from a variety of vantage points. This can be accomplished if we pay attention to “our nagging sense that things ought not to be this way” (Greene, 1973, p. 49), or we can be jolted into awareness through works of art that help us see a situation from a new perspective or when we come together with others to authentically ask questions and choose to act. Humans have the unique “capacity to surpass the given and look at things as if they could be otherwise” (Greene, 1988, p. 3).

The new cultists of efficiency, the would-be scientific managers, create their own mystifications by attempting to describe education as a technocratic operation, dependable because linked to what is most controllable and “real.” This is one way of the many indications of the importance of working against what Dewey called a “social pathology” and to do so with as much passion as can be mustered…” (Greene, 1978, p. 63)

The Social Dimension of Freedom
This is what we shall look for as we move: freedom developed by human beings who have acted to make a space for themselves in the presence of others, human beings become “challengers” ready for alternatives, alternatives that include caring and community. And we shall seek as we go, implications for emancipatory education conducted by and for those willing to take responsibility for themselves and for each other. We want to discover how to open spaces for persons in their plurality, spaces where they can become different, where they can grow.” (Greene, 1988, p. 56)

When speaking of freedom, the existential philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre focused on the individual. When he speaks of an individual using his/her freedom of action, Sartre “means that one wills a world that bends to his or her desires” (Rasheed, 2002, p. 394). Maxine Greene develops Sartre’s idea by bringing the concept of freedom into the domain of the community, where each person’s subjective reality is brought to bear in the inter subjective realm. The influence of John Dewey and others from the Progressive era is apparent when Greene says, freedom of mind and freedom of action were functions of membership and participation in some valued community. It is important to hold in mind … that the person – that center of choice – develops in his/her fullness to a degree he/she is a member of a live community. (1988, p. 43).

This social dimension of freedom sheds light on the concept of “negative freedom,” which is “the right not to be interfered with or coerced or compelled to do what they did not choose to do” (Greene, 1988, p.16). To Greene, this is not true freedom. Freedom involves praxis – acting together to influence reality, “a transformation of that situation to the end of overcoming oppressiveness and domination. There must be collective self-reflection; there must be an interpretation of present and emergent needs; there must be a type of realization” (Greene, 1978, p. 100). According to Greene, this can only be accomplished in concert, in community, with others.

To Maxine Greene, then, the pursuit of freedom is a social undertaking as well as a dialectic, or “the coming together, not the merging, of the self and the other” (Taliaferro, 1998, p. 91). Greene talks about the “subject/object relationship and the realization
that freedom can be achieved only in an ongoing transaction, one that is visible and legible to those involved” (1988, p. 83). As people begin to “wake up” and identify the objective obstacles to freedom, they can come together in inter subjective space, and proceed “out in search of meaning and transcendence, moving out to change their world” (Greene, 1978, p. 209). Freedom is a quest, an existential project which means it is a lifetime of confronting walls.

Imagination and the Arts
Imagination is a means to help us construct a coherent world. Greene states that “imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (1995, p. 3). When we are able to cross those spaces and experience empathy with others, “we can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears” (1995, p. 3). Without this ability we would be fixed in our own realities. Using imagination allows us to make a connection not only with others, but to see how the other realities impact our own, and “how the very act of imagining shapes our own realities” (Taliaferro, 1998, p. 94). Greene stresses the importance of imagination: “Of all our cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions.”

In this way, Maxine Greene shows how she can be situated as white and woman and uses her imagination to become attuned to alternative realities, realities she could not experience directly. She is able to model how people can come together in a pluralistic community to open spaces, break with what is taken-for-granted, and create something new.

The Arts
As we attempt to make sense … we might well look through some of the perspectives provided by literature and the other arts. This is partly because an engagement with an imaginative form can lead, as no other engagement can, to a recapturing of our authentic perspectives on the world (Greene, 1978, p. 119).

For Greene, the imagination interacting with works of art is another way to access multiple perspectives, and even give us a reason to “wake up.” Interacting with a work of art by “bracketing out” (1978, p. 2) the everyday world and tapping into the “realm of imaginative possibility” can “offer alternative ways of structuring experience, as dreams and other kinds of imaging do. Engaging with them, the individual gains no factual information… he (sic) may well see facets of his own experience afresh; he may even reevaluate some of his knowledge to self-consciousness” (Greene, 1973, p. 16). In other words, the interaction with the work of art in this way is an experience, an experience from which learning can take place, and an avenue from which people can expand the scope of their lived realities.

Greene’s focus on the arts, especially literature, offers a way for people to achieve “wide-awakeness.” If people can seek out these perspectives “consciously and critically, and for meanings to be perceived from the vantage points of persons awake to their freedom,” then “perceptive encounters with works of art can bring human beings in touch with themselves” (Greene, 1977, pp. 123-124). In this way, the work of art can act as a mirror to the self and as a window to the other. When a person is equipped with their imagination and is open to new ways of seeing, he or she can travel to new places, enter new aesthetic spaces, and “locate himself or herself in an inter subjective reality reaching backwards and forward in time” (p. 123). She encourages every educator to pack her/his bags for the trip toward freedom because it is the wide-awake teacher who can spark students on their own freedom-trail.

Role of Education
It is through and by means of education, many of us believe, that individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their inter subjective space and that they may become empowered to think about what they are doing, to become mindful, to share meanings, to conceptualize, to make varied sense of their lived worlds. (Greene, 1988, p. 12)

In The Dialectic of Freedom, Greene painted a picture of schools in trouble. Since then schools are showing signs of losing ground. George Wood, principal of Frederick Hocking High School and director of The Forum for Education and Democracy sums it up this way:

For nearly twenty years we have ventured down this radical path of school reform that has led to more students being pushed out of school, more retentions of students, more dropouts, a narrowing of the curricula, and dissatisfaction on the part of teachers, students, and parents. NCLB [No Child Left Behind], which institutionalizes these narrow and inaccurate measures of school performance in unprecedented ways, only makes it worse (2004, p. 34).

Teachers, like anyone else, are subject to mystification and objectification. If left unquestioned, in the era of “No Child Left Behind,” testing and standardized instruction can turn teachers into technicians, leading to the dehumanization of
education. If educators are not careful, they will buy into a “Paradigm having to do with a monolithic system and individuals who are totally controlled” (Greene, 1973, p. 45), and where the person is subordinated to the system. “People who feel anonymous and unimportant are unable to assume responsibility for effecting change,” and young people who feel this way are what we call ‘unmotivated’ … [they] appear to their teachers to be apathetic, disinterested, dull”. According to Greene, then, teachers have profound influence on students, which can be either empowering or disempowering.

The teacher who can help young people attune to their own consciousness is one who can take on the persona of “stranger” – someone who, like one coming home from a long trip, sees their world with new eyes, the eyes of a stranger. This person notices hitherto unseen details, and views the world with wonder and curiosity. This teacher reflects on her/his philosophy of education, which “begins in wonder; philosophy always begins in wonder. The individual must be moved to ask questions about the universe, to engage in dialogue with himself (sic) about the world as it impinges on him and about the explanations others provide” (1973, p. 21). This teacher, who is thus “wide-awake,” is the only person prepared to reach students to begin the process of questioning and gaining their freedom. As Greene points out, this is not an easy task:

To create the kinds of social conditions that provoke and sustain autonomy demands the most critical consciousness of the forces that seduce into acquiescence and mindlessness. It requires a profound self-understanding on the part of the teacher, who has to live in a kind of tension simply to function as a free agent, to make choices appropriate to the often unpredictable situations that arise.

(Greene 1978, p. 248)

Greene uses Camus’ novel, The Plague, as a metaphor for working in the schools, where the “plague” represents “evasion and indifference” (Maxine 1973, p. 281). In that book people had a choice to succumb to the plague or fight it – one was either a victim of it or a volunteer in fighting it. In our schools, indifference and evasion are endemic. The wide-awake teacher has a choice to make – do you throw up your hands in surrender or do you take a stand? Even if the “plague” subsides, it will never fully go away, so vigilance is required to address it when it returns. The wide-awake teacher is free to make a choice to make a difference.

**Greene’s Thinking and Experiential Education**

To find ourselves “in the delight of experiencing” requires a transaction with the world, an ongoing transaction with “qualities and forms.” This kind of transaction may be thought of in terms of acts of consciousness, meaning a series of moments in which we *grasp* what is given, in which we thrust into the world (Greene, 1978, p. 200).

Many people mistake activity – the doing of things – with experiential education. Maxine Greene reminds us that experiential education is really an internal process by which people can “wake up” and construct a coherent world on one’s own quest for freedom and transformation by integrating a variety of perspectives and vantage points. This process can be accomplished through the coming together in community, through dialogue and the asking of questions, through interfacing with art and literature. It is when a person can truly get outside one’s own reality, using a uniquely human capacity for imagination that transformation can take place. In this way, a person starts with her or his own experience and then, in the process of “waking up,” chooses to venture outside her or his own place and vantage point while constructing a more holistic image of one’s reality. The doing of things may provide a needed spark, but it is not an end in itself. At its base, experiential education is a constructivist process that takes place from the inside out, helping each individual make sense of her or his world.

One of Maxine Greene’s principal themes has to do with consciousness, and the viewing of the world through multiple realities. It is about reflectiveness and the making of “meaning of our experiences…which constitutes reality” (Maxine 1978, p. 173). Consciousness, in this sense, is not a passive act, but one that requires “imagining, intuiting, remembering, believing, judging, conceiving, and (focally) perceiving” (Greene, p. 14). It is through these acts of consciousness that human beings can connect with the world. It is an experiential process.

As a proponent of Dewey, Greene sums up his notion that:

“…the individual exists *within* a continuum of experience, a vital matrix in which all things are interrelated – the individual and society; mind and matter; thought and the phenomena of the world. ‘Experience is of as well as in nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature.…. Things interacting in certain ways are experience” (1973, p. 127).
Experiential education, in all its manifested forms, uses reflection to make meaning from the lived world. This, in turn, allows people to take conscious action. Whether one is engaged in inquiry, encountering a new reality in the out-of-doors, exploring the meaning of a literary masterpiece, or exercising one’s right to free expression, the experiential process invites people to find their place, or situation, in the world. Maxine Greene asserts that, “the point is that learning must be a process of discovery and recovery in response to worthwhile questions rising out of conscious life in concrete situations. And the learning must in some way be emancipatory” (Greene, 1978, p. 19).

Like the young people who came together and chose to act in concert to change their world, everyone has the capacity to wake up, reach out, and be free. It is about the power of the possible. Maxine Greene’s ideas provide an impetus to get started.

**The Educational Theory of Maxine Greene**

**Theory of Value:** What knowledge and skills are worthwhile learning? Those things which release more and people for reflection encounters with a range of works of art, works that have the potential to awaken, to move persons to see, to hear and to feel often in unexpected ways. Perceptive encounters with works of art can bring human beings in touch with themselves. We must awaken in order to continue our efforts to build a just, compassionate and meaningful democracy. “Are our ideas on democracy objectively true? It doesn’t matter” (Greene, 1978, p.60)

What are the goals of education? To help students to realize their deep connection to and responsibility for not only their own individual experience but also for other human beings who share this world. “… being able to express oneself in a number of different “languages”-including imagery, music, dance….” (Greene, 1978, p.57)

Students should explore the meaning of the text, share insights with others, and reevaluate their thinking in light of other ideas. Students need to come to understand that the reason for learning is to nurture their intellectual talents for the construction of our society into a more democratic, just and caring place to live. Citizens must be well informed and have educational abilities and sensitivities needed to critically examine the world in which they live. Freedom doesn’t mean absence of responsibility. One can be free when one accepts responsibilities for his/her experience of the world.

**Theory of Knowledge:** What is knowledge? Knowledge is anything that helps us know ourselves and the world in which we live. “Incompleteness-the open question-summons us to the task of knowledge and action. …we actively insert our own perception into the lived world. It is a process of meaning making” (Greene, 1978, p.74)

**How is Knowledge different from Belief?** “Rather than seek out a theory of truth we simply affirm an ethical base for the value of cooperative human inquiry……we articulate what we believe and what we share” (Greene, 1978, p.69). Therefore Knowledge grows out of beliefs that have been subjected to reflection. A mistake is to fail after reflection to act.

Greene argues that we have the power to create ideas and we should act upon those ideas. Although our understanding of the world is not ultimate it would be a mistake to let this insight paralyze our thinking and actions. Greene state “Educators are condemned to action—by their freedom”. A lie therefore is anything that is believed without reflection. Activities that stifle the imagination lead to lies.

**Theory of Human Nature:** Human beings define themselves through the projects with which they become involved. By means of engagement with a project, the attitude wide awakeness develops and contributes to the choice of actions that lead to self-formation. A project means the internationalized vision or purpose of making or constructing the self and the world. In this respect human beings differ from other species as they are capable of viewing their actions and the world critically. Human potential is limitless if a person is willing to develop an attitude of wide awakeness, if he/she is willing to modify what he/she consciously pays attention to. Wide awakeness is not morally or politically neutral. Social action and intervention are crucial to attaining and sustaining an attitude of wide awakeness.

**Theory of Learning:** What is learning? The ultimate purpose of education is to help students and their teachers create meaning in their lives. Teachers should challenge that taken for granted, the given and the bound and the restricted. Education at its best is a process of teaching people to explore ideas about themselves and the world in which they live, to ask questions about the experience called living and to embrace ambiguity, to notice the unusual without fear and to look upon the ordinary with new eyes.” Place children in speech and free writing situations in which they can find out what they think and why?” (Greene, 1978, p.54)

**Theory of Transmission:** Who is to teach? Those who have learnt the importance of becoming reflective enough to think about their own thinking and become conscious of their own consciousness (Greene, 1978, p. 65). Introducing works of literature and art into the teacher education can help teachers
develop…”a conscious concern … for the particular, the everyday, the concrete” (Greene, 1978, p.69). Teachers must be taught to educate our children to take responsibility for our collective wellbeing.

By what methods should we teach? Pedagogy is collaboration which participants who are both part of the group and apart from it. Humanities serve as a catalyst through which teachers and students can explore deeply and thus make meaning out of life and culture. While it is not really necessary for everyone to be deeply knowledgeable in math and science, it is crucial for everyone to seriously contemplate who we are as individuals and as members of a culture. In that case a vision of education should be developed within our learning community (Greene, 1978, P.66).

What will the curriculum be? A humanities curriculum should be emphasized, works of art deliberately created to move people to critical awareness, to a sense of moral agency and to a conscious engagement with the world. They must be central to any curriculum that is constructed today. Teachers need to bring themselves to school, use their own lives, knowledge and explorations as elements within the curriculum. Greene strongly objects to education focused on world-class technical achievements rather than on creating a community of citizens (Greene Greene, 1978, p.64)

**Theory of Society: What is society?** The good society is deeply rooted in a tradition of democratic community. We must assume a critical stance toward whatever the community emerges from our efforts to create culture. The values of pluralism and cohesiveness are central. Democratic community is deeply rooted in an existential notion of wide-awareness. Principals of equality, justice, freedom have to be chosen by living individuals in the light of individuals’ shared life with others (Greene, 1978, P.66)

What institutions are involved in in the educational process? Good education is ultimately rooted in the conscious or unconscious visions of what is considered a good society. Democracy is a way of life not just a form of government- it needs to be practiced in social and political locations. Democracy is brought into our lives by personal relationships, recreation and education.

**Theory of Opportunity: Who is to be educated?** Since democracy and community are always in the making, everyone needs to be educated. As human beings we can create culture. We must broaden our concept of democracy beyond the political realm of society. We must learn how to enable the diverse young to join the community emergent culture’s ongoing conversation (Greene, 1978, P.56)

**Theory of Consensus: Why do people disagree?** Disagreement is to be expected. Each person acts out of his /her own consciousness. Consciousness is perceptual and the world may give multiple interpretations. Since there is no final agreement, teachers and students should simply learn to love the questions. While many opinions are possible and all opinions deserve consideration, those leading to democracy and freedom should get precedence. Greene is concerned the in the classroom we must be concerned with inquiry and able to uncover those ideologies that masquerade as neutral frameworks.

Maxine Greene philosophies focused on inspiring people interested in awakening the minds and spirits of their students, as well as those who are interested in teaching and acting in the realm of social justice. When she founded the Maxine Greene Foundation for Social Imagination, the Arts, and Education in 2003 Greene shared her vision:

> To generate inquiry, imagination, and the creation of art works by diverse people. It has to do so with a sense of the deficiencies in our world and a desire to repair, wherever possible. Justice, equality, freedom-these are as important to us as the arts, and we believe they can infuse each other, perhaps making some difference at a troubled time.” (The Maxine Greene Foundation for Social Imagination, the Arts & Education, 2007)

**Implications for the Kenyan Education System**

In the Kenyan context, we look at education in the light of Vision 2030 which is defined by three pillars namely Economic, Social and Political. We see that the objectives of the social pillar are stated as “investing in the people of Kenya in order to improve the lives of all Kenyans by targeting a cross section of human and social welfare projects and programmes…” Education and training is one of the stated programmes which fall under the social pillar. From this we note that as a government and as a people, education is fundamental to all the social aspects of life and as such should be taken seriously.

This paper highlights this by outlining the relationship between education, freedom, social justice and society as expounded by Maxine Greene. It views learning as a process of discovery. It helps students and teachers create meaning in their lives, explore ideas about themselves and their worlds. Education is about people’s life histories and experiences. It prepares individuals for their life in society and helps them make meaning of life and culture. We note that this view of Maxine Greene is also stated in the Ministry of Education Science and technology handbook in the introduction section of this paper.
Freedom is attained in the social context of community. It shows that education leads to collective self responsibility of the educated individuals in community with others. Experiential education is an internal process and can be experienced by people working together in society through dialogue, asking questions, using imagination and art. It emphasizes the value of education; learner’s connection to and responsibility for their individual experiences and others in society. Teachers/educators on their part should use their lives, knowledge and explorations as elements of curriculum. The knowledge gained from education helps the individual know themselves and the world they live in. Human beings define themselves by the projects they are involved in. Through critical examination they get social action and intervention. To achieve the aforementioned, the curriculum should be humanistic in nature and arouse critical awareness, moral agency and conscious engagement with the world. Education should be geared towards creating a society that is a democratic community that upholds equality, justice, freedom for each other in community. These attributes should be a way of life that should be practiced in social and political spheres and is brought into the individual’s lives by personal relationships, recreation and education. Education should create a community of citizens who by consensus consciously engage in critical thinking and questioning thus leading to democracy and freedom. In conclusion, this paper advocates a change of view of Education from attainment of a white collar job to a quest for freedom. Freedom to live and relate in our society and be productive members of the society

LIMITATIONS
It is important to note that this study does not take into considerations all the views of other philosophers in education as it restricted itself to Maxine Greene. However other studies can look at other philosophers some who share Maxine Greene’s views and others with different views.

REFERENCES


