

OPINION

EDUCATION



Barrack Muluka

If Ministry of Education were very mindful of underprivileged children, would it not give them a different examination from those considered to be privileged? Once you allow all children to sit the same examination, have you not already committed the original sin?

Kaimenyi's ban on exams ranking laughable move to evade real issues

The reasons advanced for abolition of grading of national examination candidates and schools are concurrently ridiculous and laughable.

We have heard that grading encourages unhealthy competition among candidates and schools. That this competition leads to cheating. We have also heard that the system is unfair, because some schools and children are underprivileged. We have been told they do not have the same facilities as those who excel. Hence it is unfair to grade them as if they were operating from an equal pedestal. Finally, we have heard that students learn many other things in school, besides academics. They say, therefore, that it is not right that at the end of the cycle children and schools should be graded based on academics alone.

The Cabinet Secretary for Education, Prof Jacob Kaimenyi, is the Chief Priest for this confounding gospel. First, let me say a word about Prof Kaimenyi's tenure in Jogoo House this far. It always confounds even the most casual observer that the moment some people ascend to high public office, they suddenly know everything. Those who work with them and under them are only expected to listen to wisdom oozing from the man at the top and concomitantly justify and implement it.

Such is the tragedy of institutions in our country and indeed elsewhere in Africa. The big man arrives in the morning and all professionals in the corridors of that institution are kowtowing obsequiously before him. They are fawning, fearing for their jobs. They listen and nod like the agama lizard as the big man says things that will drag the institution so many light years back.

Prof Kaimenyi, a dentist, is the boss at Jogoo House. His appointment was political. Characteristically, panicky professionals in Jogoo House could be simply looking on as the dentist drags education into a teething quagmire. They don't want to rub him the wrong way by contradicting the "wisdom" from his teeth.

Does grading of students and schools encourage competition? Of course it does. From day one, we have learnt that education is competitive. Indeed, all life is competitive. Biologists tell us you begin competing way before you are conceived somewhere, in the birth canal system. From then on, it is more and more competition. In the end, life is a competitive jungle. Only the fittest will survive. That is why you have never seen a limping antelope. An antelope on the limp is instant prey to predators. It will be eaten. Life is not fair. It simply does not know how to be fair.

Is exam grading therefore unfair? Yes, it is. But such is the functioning of nature. Nature abhors weakness. That is why the limping gazelle will perish the self same night, if it does not know how to take cover. But if the Ministry of Education were mindful of underprivileged children, would it not give them a different examina-



Kwale County top candidate Stephen Nyongo of Littleroots Academy in Diani celebrates his victory with his colleagues and staff at the Upendo Children Village, a home for orphans. Stephen got 411 marks in last year's KCPE. (PHOTO: TOBIAS CHANJI/STANDARD)

tion from those considered privileged? Once you allow all children to sit the same examination, have you not already committed the original sin? Could you then possibly undo your original sin simply by refusing to grade the outcome?

Regardless that you grade them or not, some school will be number one. Another one will be number last. The only difference is that someone adequately dishonest will pretend that there was no top school and no bottom school. Laughably, even while the Ministry has refused to tell us which school performed how, we have seen schools and students burst into the street, to celebrate their sterling performance. Rather than pretend there was no top school, therefore, Jogoo House ought to look the problem squarely in the eye and call the challenge by its name.

Hidden truth

There has never been equal education anywhere in the world. It will not start in Kenya. What needs to be done is continuous conscious narrowing of the gap between the privileged and the underprivileged. Yet, can this be done when there is no grading of schools and candidates alike? For, when there is no grading, it is not possible even to tell the extent of the gap. Oftentimes, the gap is likely to grow without anybody paying heed to it, for in principle it is unknown. In practice, however, someone in Jogoo House knows the gap exists but they are keen to hide it from the public.

Do candidates cheat in exams because of competition? This is possible. Yet we may not draw fast and hard conclusions on this without proper scientific research on cheating in exams. Students in this country cheat in exams at every level. As a teacher at the university, I have documented cheating all the way to

Biologists tell us that you begin competing way before you are conceived somewhere, in the birth canal system. From then on, it is more and more competition.

postgraduate levels. Why would a Master's student want to cheat in an exam? Why would she want to reproduce her colleague's term essay for marks? Why would she commission someone else to write her term paper or project? Does this have anything to do with grading?

Is it likely that we have institutionalised cheating as part of our national culture? We have heard of the political class cheating in elections. The notion of a "stolen election" is household in Kenya. We have seen primary school children take autographs from high profile suspected thieves on trial. While we have not heard the last word on the Goldenberg Scandal and who is guilty for stealing what, we know that names that have been featured as the mastermind of the grand theft. Yet we continue to glorify these same people. If this is role modeling, what should stop the admiring youth from cheating and stealing? Our children cheat in exams because we have taught them that cheating is a good thing. Even if this curious abolition of grading students and schools holds, examination cheating is not about to go away. Cheating runs in the national bloodstream.

So children should not be graded on the basis of academics alone? Prof

Kaimenyi is right that children do many things in school. National curriculum developers have established curricular goals and activities as well as co-curricular focus. While some schools and children have not excelled in academics, they have been outstanding in co-curricular activities. Some are outstanding in football, while others are unbeatable in basketball. Some have consistently emerged tops in the music festival, while others are beaters in other non-academic activities. Every so often, we hear and read of their exploits.

If we cannot be free to say which school has topped in the KCPE or KCSE examinations, why should we be told who is the national football champion? Is this not unfair? Is it not leading to unhealthy competition in sports in schools? Indeed, schools have been known to end up engaging in physical violence after some school has lost a football match. Is this not unhealthy? Should we not, therefore, abolish grading of schools in sports? Should we not abolish having winners in the schools music and drama festivals, too?

Even a village professor here in Emanyulia would tell you that there are many different metrics in the school system. A national examination, such as the KCPE, seeks to measure the learners on specific parameters, as laid out in the curriculum. In order to parcel them out and channel them to the next logical path, you must invariably give them marks in the exam. Thereafter you must grade them. But if you do not want to do this, then please be rid of the exam system altogether. Abolish all competition and competitiveness in schools. Let children simply mark time in school and move them all on to the next cycle, once they are done with the present cycle.