

The Causes of Ethical Turpitudes in Schools: Evidence from Four Schools in Gauteng, South Africa

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Abstract: *This article reports the findings of a qualitative study that explored the causes of ethical turpitude in the four schools in Gauteng Province of South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were held with each school principal, eight heads of department and sixteen teachers. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the generated data. The findings suggest that most participants had pedestrian knowledge of ethical leadership and failed to demonstrate an appreciation of their agency role in promoting an ethical culture both in leadership and teaching despite the prescripts of the SACE Code of Professional Ethics and other laws governing their profession. Despite these negative findings, a minority of participants indicated how they promoted an ethical culture, integrity and honesty in their interactions with their learners. Amidst all the ethical challenges at the school level, the findings further suggest that there was minimal support by the Provincial Department of Education, SACE and teacher unions to equip the school management teams and teachers on ethical leadership and teaching. While numerous ethical turpitudes were unearthed, this study posits that the school management teams have agency and direct responsibility to address ethical challenges*

in their schools. While outside role-players have a supportive role to play, school management teams cannot give up and solely blame them for internal ethical turpitudes.

Keywords: Accountability, Continuous professional teacher development, Ethical school leadership, Ethical turpitude, Integrity.

1. Introduction

Leadership that is ethical is crucial in determining the success of any organisation (Branson & Cross, 2014). In recent years, ethical leadership has become topical in the South African public domain, both public and private. This may be connected to the ethical lapses reported in the print and electronic media in recent years. The jobs-for-cash scandal (Cronje, 2016) and the Limpopo textbook saga (Chisolm, 2012) are just two of the many examples of ethical turpitudes in the education sector. Ethical leadership deals with what is perceived to be right or wrong, values, norms and standards that are acceptable to society, living a life of integrity and in service of the common good (Özan, Özdemir & Yirci, 2017; Grigoropoulos, 2019). These values differ from one community to another, with some being basic to all societies. In the South African context, several pieces of legislation have been promulgated to promote ethical behaviour in the public sector. Chapter 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) highlights the basic principles and values which should underpin public administration, such as high standards of professional ethics, accountability, transparency, a development-oriented public service and efficient, economical and effective use of resources. Schools form part of the public service and thus are compelled by law to implement measures that promote ethical behaviour. Van Zyl (2014), and the Corruption Watch Reports (2016, 2017 & 2018) state that unethical behaviour has reached unacceptable levels in South Africa, contrasting with ethical leadership whose primary focus is good governance, leadership and management. Hall and Rowland (2016) and Özan, Özdemir and Yirci (2017) suggest that managers and researchers have been more serious about ensuring ethical consciousness in leaders as a result of peoples' low trust in corporate governance. This shows the need to regain trust from the people. Likewise, research has shown that organisations have better attraction and retention of employees, including job satisfaction and empowerment (Bottery, 2019; Grigoropoulos, 2019) if their practices are underpinned by ethical leadership. Therefore, leadership remains questionable where leaders engage in ethical turpitudes.

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While unethical leadership may be prevalent in the business industry and banking sectors, Cronje (2016) indicates a 16% increase in unethical practices in schools, with Gauteng recording the highest. This study also found a significant number of unregistered teachers employed by schools which is against both the policies of SACE and the Employment of Educators Act No. 76 of 1998. Likewise, du Plessis (2014) mentions embezzlement of school funds and unauthorised admission fees to schools or examinations as some illegal and unethical practices. In addition, Corruption Watch (2018) highlights stealing and lying about learners' reports when reporting to the parents. Such behaviour is observed among some teachers and clearly do not abide by the school ethics code. Singh and Twalo (2015) note that if employees steal or misappropriate the organisational assets, this damages and taint the school's reputation and the education system. This also means doubling or tripling the organisation's budget. Another disturbing ethical concern in some schools is sexual violence by teachers towards girl-learners (Brock, Brundige & Furstenau, 2014; Davids & Waghid, 2016; Corruption Watch, 2018). In terms of the *in loco parentis* principle, teachers have a responsibility to protect learners as parents would do and not to harass them. In some schools, this sexual harassment has been extended to boys, as reported in print media. Such unethical practices bring the teaching profession into disrepute as this behaviour contradicts the SACE Code of Professional Ethics (Republic of South Africa, 2000b). Meanwhile, Ncontsa and Shumba (2013) highlight that most of organisations indicate an awareness of the professional code of ethics, but some individuals choose not to adhere to them. Thus, every profession, including teaching, has guidelines that govern the professionals' behaviour and there is need to enforce the professional code of ethics.

Some teachers have been found stealing stationery intended for learners, which is clearly unethical and illegal. Branson and Cross (2014) highlight that if there are no ethics, there is no leadership in the workplace. Consequently, an organisation rises and falls on its leadership ethics. However, values are determined by society; similarly, it makes them flourish or die (Ciulla, 2014; Bottery, 2019). It is, therefore, the role of the leadership of society to ensure that their values do not disappear. Drumwright, Prentice, and Biasucci (2015) highlight that cognitive limitations and pressures from society organisations may be a cause for ethical turpitude in leaders. This usually occurs when leaders are obedient to authority and fail to make their own ethical judgements in critical educational issues. In contrast, in another school, the School Governing Body chairperson was too vocal to the extent that the principal would make unethical decisions due to pressure. Such external forces need one to be ethically strong, but most leaders are not.

In addition, Serfontein and De Waal (2015) and Corruption Watch (2018) also highlight that some teachers come late to classes and unpreparedness, interval absenteeism and forging of transfer letters and reports. All these have negative effects on the performance of the learners. The South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996, Chapter 2, indicates the right of every child to education, but this is compromised by ethical turpitude in schools. Fanta and Makewa (2014) and Corruption Watch (2018) concur, as they also found in their research, that some teachers award students higher grades in exchange for favours and sexual escapades. Such ethical turpitude discredits the teaching profession. However, besides teacher registrations, SACE has a mandate to equip teachers about their professional conduct. Conversely, the SACE (2011) document, redefining the role of SACE, indicates that the non-visibility of SACE in the provinces in delivering services and inadequate professional development were a cause for concern. This indicates that SACE scarcely informs teachers of their professional expectations and principals are solely in control. Davids (2016) suggests that SACE is not adequately dealing with the unprofessional conduct of teachers and fails to ensure all teachers are registered. There seems to be tension between legalistic approach to ethical deliberation and real teacher experiences, which promotes ethical turpitude instead of engaging in reflective practice. Moreover, ethical turpitude is costly, as teachers who engage in unethical practices are arguably unfit for teaching universal values (du Plessis, 2014). This indicates the failure of SACE in ensuring the Code of Professional Ethics for Educators is adhered to from grassroots.

1.1 Statement of the problem

By law, school principals and teachers are bound to subscribe to professional ethics (Grigoropoulos, 2019). However, there are a variety of ethical turpitudes that have been observed

and reported in schools, including problems of school records being presented without authenticity, dishonesty by both the school leadership and teachers, the block adjustment of learners' marks to have a better pass rate for the school at the end of the year, misrepresentation of learners' marks in defiance of the Department of Education's set criteria for mark adjustments and a lack of records for progressed learners by teachers (Corruption Watch, 2016 & 2018; Osuji, 2020). Sadly, Grade 12 teachers are answerable when learners do not perform at acceptable levels, yet the problem emanated in lower grades.

In view of the above challenges, there is a need to curb ethical turpitudes and lack of accountability in schools. Conversely, competition for better school performance seems to be triggering unethical practices. Osuji (2020) notes that the increasing pressure on teachers for improved learner performance encourages cheating as learner failure is treated as teacher failure. All this requires rectification in order to bring back sanity to the education system. Meanwhile, Ehrich, Harris, Klenowski, Smeed, and Spina (2015) also note that very little research has been conducted on the understanding of ethical leadership by school leaders, which could be one of the causes of ethical turpitude in schools. Rangongo, Mohlakwana and Beckman (2016) conducted research with school principals in Limpopo Province in South Africa into financial mismanagement in public schools; and Osuji (2020) with teachers separately into examination mismanagement and malpractices in Nigeria, which have taken a new dimension and became sophisticated. This article was harvested from a bigger PhD study which sought to explore conceptualisations, practices and experiences of ethical leadership and teaching in four schools. Given the above discussion, the bigger study was guided by the following critical questions:

- What are the participants' conceptualisation, experiences and enactment of ethical leadership and teaching in the sampled schools?
- What do research participants believe are the causes of unethical practices in schools?
- How could unethical practices in leadership and teaching be minimised at schools?

However, this article focuses on the data gleaned from the interview responses to the 2nd research question on the causes of unethical practices in schools.

2. Theoretical framing

Two theoretical frameworks unpinning the study, and these were: Attuned leadership theory (Ubuntu philosophy) by Khoza (2012) and the Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011). These two theories complemented each other as the latter focusses on expected set principles on ethical leadership (ethics of care, critique, the profession, justice) while the Attuned leadership theory (Ubuntu philosophy) goes beyond by incorporating the spiritual aspects which address the inner being and sensitivity in response to different situations. A diversity of issues need to be taken into account at the workplace, while a balance should be created to deal with complex ethical dilemmas. The ethics of justice is described as the legal and democratic process which focuses on rights and laws, in which two schools of thought have been derived (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). The individual enters into some kind of contract with the community in which he or she is expected to behave in a socially acceptable way and the human reason where human needs are put first with regards to agreed moral principles (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). Another approach is the ethic of critique in which questions are raised about ethical turpitudes in society and seek to find justification on those who benefit and whether they deserve what they obtain and how the voices of the silent could be heard (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). This suggests a redefinition of power, privileges, culture and even justice. The ethic of care helps capture, retain and enforce societal morals and values, which shows an interest in one another's success and therefore, conflict is resolved through collaboration, which increase skill and strengthens community (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011). This suggests a strong sharing of feelings among individuals. The ethic of the profession is concerned with the fact that educational leaders should have their own personal ethical code, guided by the professional code of ethics. Meanwhile, the theory of African humanism by Khoza (2012) includes compassion, the being, humanness, moral necessity and individualism. This philosophy focuses on individuals and the society in which they live, where a human being is believed to exist because of other people. This compels every leader to serve the clientele with integrity.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, multiple-case study approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Mark (2010), Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that the interpretive paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed with no laid down rules. Further, the interpretive paradigm helps in choosing the methodology based on the assumptions about ontology. Mark (2010) posits ontology involves studying the claims and assumptions made about the nature of reality in which these assumptions make meaning of reality. In this study, the participants deliver their own conceptions, experiences and enactment of ethical leadership. Further, this researcher suggests that participants may give different perspectives about a single incident. Klenke (2016) states that epistemology deals with the researcher's belief system on the nature of knowledge and ways of getting knowledge. Thus, a researcher-participant collaboration was crucial in the generation of data. In the multiple-case study, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) argue that there is in-depth description and analysis through empirical enquiry into an investigation of a phenomenon in real-life cases, where the phenomena and context boundaries are not clear. Purposive sampling was employed to identify the research participants who believed to hold rich information on the phenomenon under investigation, based on their positions, expertise, and originality. In purposive selection, criterion-based selection was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The interviewed participants comprised of the four school principals, two heads of department per school and four teachers from each of the sampled primary and secondary schools. The inclusion of different levels of teachers and schools also ensured triangulation of the generated data.

All data was thematically analysed using Okeke and Van Wyk's (2015) model of analysis. This involved generating data, coding the participants' responses, grouping similar codes together and summarising them using an inductive approach and identifying patterns that emerged. From these patterns, emerging themes were established; those that had discrepancies were separated, making use of memos. In addition, all ethical protocols required by the university before conducting research were adhered to through the application of the ethical clearance and the permission to conduct the study with the Gauteng Department of Education and the relevant schools. Data generated were safely kept, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the research participants. Participants were informed that data collected was for research purposes only, to be kept safely at the university and then destroyed after 3 – 5 years.

4. Discussion of findings

The data that best addressed the research questions were inductively analysed and thematically categorised, as discussed below.

4.1 The causes of unethical conduct in schools

The data generated elicited varied causes of unethical conduct in the schools, including sheer greed among school principals and teachers; negligence; indulgence where some school principals abused school funds for personal gain; lack of policy implementation; violating laws on corporal punishment; lack of proper school structures; materialism-insatiable appetite for money and expensive holidays; laziness to teach which leads to cheating during examinations and un-procedurally delegating the stapling of examination papers to learners. Additionally, the lack of subject content knowledge by some teachers; employment of unqualified teachers; collection of school fees for personal use due to perceived low salaries; abuse of rights by learners; lack of open discussion forums with school management; poor delegation of work to teachers; weak dedication to the teaching profession; lack of trustworthiness; dishonest when working under pressure especially during examinations and learners' marks are required for promotional purposes.

Furthermore, some teachers came to school under the influence of alcohol or had personal problems; failure to distinguish professional boundaries by being too friendly with the learners; the use of grapevine by school principals; poor planning by the school management team (SMT); rigid management that fails to accommodate teachers' perspectives when making decisions; elevation of individuals who do not qualify to positions of school leadership and management; authoritative personalities, neglected consultations in decision-making; sexual harassment of both teachers and learners were just a few of the causes for ethical turpitude in schools. Below were

some statements made by the participants to emphasise their views. Ms Arifa, school principal at Endego Secondary School said:

Generally, this is caused by sheer greed, negligence and indulgence. Those are the three things that I think cause teachers to act unethically. When it comes to school finances, you find school principals stealing or misusing school funds because they engage in material things that are beyond their means. Then they begin to use school funds to make up for the shortfall.

Ms Arifa further said:

I have also seen the principal of my previous school sexually harassing one of the Post level 1 educators. I think this behaviour comes from a person's personality and how they are able to manage the position that they occupy. If they are not responsible, conscious and God-fearing or basically if they don't have integrity, they engage in these nefarious activities.

The abuse of power seemed to dominate the participants' responses. Concurring, Mr Vincent, school principal at Nelson Secondary School, said:

It's got to do with power... people are given authority now they become authoritative personalities, and they begin to abuse that power. It also has to do with a lot of how you got to the position, if you got it unethically, for example, you bribed some members of the school governing body, unethical practices are likely to continue because the behaviour has become habitual.

Mrs Nyara, a Post Level 1 educator at Nelson Secondary School spoke of the pressure on teachers during the examination period and how this led to unethical behaviour. She said:

Unethical conduct happens when teachers are under pressure during examinations. When exam marks are due, the SMT will ask for them, and the affected teacher will absent himself or herself from school, and this is unfair and unethical because the teacher is late in marking his or her scripts.

Data from the questionnaires circulated to Post Level 1 teachers also corroborated the findings from the interviews as most respondents shared similar sentiments and experiences about the causes of ethical turpitude among teachers. The questionnaire data mentioned the following as causes of unethical turpitude: inexperience or unqualified teachers; envious resentment; unfair treatment by school management; religious differences; racism; superiority complex; unprofessionalism among some teachers; close personal friendships with some members of the SMT; poor time management; poor learner behaviour; favouritism by some SMT members; disrespect for each other; not taken seriously; peer pressure; ignorance about the profession and the educational environment where learners are a hindrance to performance.

Similarly, Bowen (2011) shows that the challenges faced by teachers when they get into the working place such as technological advances, societal pressures and options for correct decisions. Critical thinking skills are essential for ethical decision-making hence the plea for the fusion of ethics and moral decision-making in the teaching profession. Some of these challenges contribute to ethical turpitude in schools. In addition to the above, George (2017) acknowledges the pressure among teachers leading to increased unethical behaviour. This researcher found that some of the causes of ethical turpitude in schools include ignorance, an increase in learner enrolment without an increase in human and material resources. This also concurs with Gardiner and Tenuto (2015) and Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2011) findings that educational managers struggle to serve a diverse clientele hence the need for the ethic of justice where one relinquishes some of their own rights for others. The ethic of justice should be extended to staff members and learners. This suggests that school leaders who act unethically by making unfair judgements to teachers lacked the ethic of justice which is essential when leading a school. Lack of good ethical leadership practices was shown where a few individuals were consulted in decision-making.

In addition, ethical decision-making requires critical reflection and cultural component for social justice to meet community needs and move beyond a simplistic justice framework (Gardiner & Tenuto, 2015). Unqualified leaders struggle with constructive criticism and working with others in decision making because of a sense of insecurity and may act unethically. Grigoropoulos (2019) states that formal ethical codes and training have little success unless ethical actions and behaviour

of top management are consistent with taught, defined norms and values. This suggests that inconsistency in the management unethical behaviour especially where leaders make themselves fit and acceptable to a certain group compromising their positions.

4.2 Exposure to ethical education during teacher training

The data from the interviews indicated that the majority of the participants had done some work on ethical conduct during their training as teachers, even though very few could remember the details of the courses as they had occurred many years before. The participants indicated that they had learnt about ethics in modules such as Theory of Education in Sociology, Professional Studies or in Life-long Learning as educators. None of the participants indicated that they had done any stand-alone, detailed module on professional ethics. Below are a few excerpts from the participants to illustrate this point. The principal of Endego Secondary School, Mrs Arifa, said:

That was a very long time ago. There was a bit of ethics within the course work but nothing as a subject on its own which I think they should include as a subject on its own for teachers. There is a need to start from the grassroots level for student teachers to understand the importance of ethical behaviour in schools. I mean, we are dealing with children here. So I think the emphasis on ethics should start at universities.

Likewise, Mr. Vincent, the principal of Nelson Secondary School said:

Yes, there was a subject that we did and can't even get the name, but I know it was about values in education. But I can't remember what exactly it was, yes, but we did speak about it those days.

Additionally, the Head of Department from Eukaryote Secondary School, Mrs Rachel, said:

Yes, in the Guidance course, we did something on ethics but the course concentrated mostly on careers rather than ethical issues.

Similarly, Mr Doonai, from Nelson Secondary School, mentioned the importance of understanding the precepts of education, he said:

In my days, the dinosaur years, yes, we did Didactics, Pedagogics and Ethics. The new teachers, just coming out of universities, they don't understand that.

The above quotations suggest that the research participants had generally done some modules where they were exposed to ethics though those were not fully-fledged ethics courses as in other professions such as in Accounting or Health sciences. This could account for their lack of sound conceptualisation and enactment of professional, ethical conduct in their schools.

The SACE Code of Professional Ethics provides guidance for educators on professional, ethical conduct for teachers. However, while teachers receive training on ethics education at universities, there seemed to a disjuncture between the theoretical (book) knowledge and ethical practice. This requires a closer investigation and analysis on what we could be missing during teacher training and whether detailed, stand-alone courses on ethics education to fully equip new teachers is required or not. Questionnaire data seemed to concur as it showed not much was done to fully equip the pre-service educators with information on ethical conduct in schools. Even though the SACE Code of Professional Ethics and literature on ethical conduct are available, this remained an area of serious consideration in teacher training.

Bowen (2011) conducted research on challenges faced by newly qualified teachers and found that teachers need to be equipped for ethical decision-making. In addition, teachers training courses should infuse ethical codes and moral aspects to enable them to deal with practical situations. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2011) also support the introduction of ethics education as essential for teacher training has the potential to enable teachers to better handle ethical issues. In addition, passion for the job is an enormous drive to ethical leadership. Human beings need to have fellowship through respect, sharing and caring, and a sense of community (Khoza, 2012). Lack of such knowledge contributes to ethical turpitude in schools. While the participants had some ethical knowledge, their practice left much to be desired. The participants indicated a lack of proper ethical leadership training and may be contributing to ethical turpitude in schools regardless of the availability of the professional guide.

4.3 In-service training and development on professional ethics

The interviewed participants indicated they had not been workshopped on professional ethics by the Department of Education as their employer or SACE while they had attended meetings where ethical misconduct by school principals was mentioned. In this regard, the principal of Endego Secondary School, Mrs Arifa, said:

Generally, in the first two weeks of school in January, most of our principals' meetings focussed on ethical behaviour. It was not workshops but meetings to discuss the problems of an ethical nature from the previous year, such as school principals stealing school funds or using them for personal use. This was a big thing in our district last term.

She further said:

Another unethical practice that came up was the hiring of teachers with no qualifications. In these meetings, it was noted that certain schools principals were hiring teachers with no qualifications just because they were neighbours, friends or family members.

Likewise, the Head of Department from Nelson Secondary School, Mrs Margaret, highlighted that she did not remember being invited by the Department of Education to any workshop on ethics. She said:

No, I do not remember Madam, not any workshop on professional ethics. What I can say is that professional ethics gets mentioned as we learn from whatever workshop they are conducting. If they conduct IQMS, they will talk about the values, so their reference to ethics will be made. But it has never been stand-alone workshops on ethical management or behaviour in schools.

Similarly, Mrs. Nyara, a teacher from Nelson Secondary School, also said:

With the Department of Education, I have not been invited, but at the school level, there have been such meetings where ethical issues have been presented but not like a workshop.

Mr. Michael, a teacher from Eukaryote Secondary School commented on his non-attendance, he said:

Actually, I have not been, but when you register for SACE, you will see the list of things you must do, and you must not do so calling us in-service training and development I have never been called but SACE.

The above interview data also corroborated questionnaire responses which indicated that the majority of the respondents had not attended a workshop or in-service training on ethics education as part of their professional development, while a minority had attended workshops facilitated by a teacher union (the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa) as part of professional development at their school.

The data seemed to suggest very little was done by the Department of Education and school management in educating the participants on ethical behaviour in schools. Those who attended workshops had scanty information which left them ill-equipped for the kinds of ethical challenges they regularly faced at work.

Likewise, the findings from the interview data, the majority indicated that they had never been invited by SACE on the code of professional ethics. The minority that had attended any workshop indicated that most of the workshops were not organised by SACE but by other Non-Governmental Organisations, which allowed them to get SACE points IQMS (Integrated Quality Management System) purposes.

In response, Mrs Arifa, a principal from Endego Secondary School reiterated that she had not been invited. She said:

I have only been a principal since January 2017, and this is now over three years. To date, I have not been invited not attended any workshop by SACE on professional ethics.

In contrast, the Head of Department from Eukaryote Secondary School, Mrs. Rachel, also highlighted that they had someone from SACE, she said:

Last year, we had someone who conducted a workshop on how SACE works and how educators should conduct themselves ethically. However, I cannot say whether he was from SACE or not because you don't question who organised the workshop, we just have lots of workshops, and you don't know who provides these workshops.

Additionally, Mr Michael, a teacher from Eukaryote Secondary School, said:

I have never been invited to any workshop, all that I see is on TV that a teacher from a particular school has done something unprofessional. And after that, he or she is suspended or fired. I see that on TV, but one never get details of why or capacity building for the teachers.

The above findings have led to SACE being criticised for “inadequate provision of professional development programmes; not performing its role and being the arm of the Department of Education” (SACE position paper, March 2011). SACE seems visible when it comes to disciplining teachers. A significant number of participants commented that they only got to know that SACE exists when they see reports about them and their activities on television.

5. Conclusion

The research participants highlighted an array of the causes of ethical turpitude in schools. Evidence provided on the causes of ethical turpitude in schools suggested a variety of factors such as materialism, living beyond one's means and thus tempted to abuse school funds and abuse of power where those in authority victimised both teachers and learners. While the above was observed mainly among school principals, the post level 1 teachers exhibited their own ethical turpitudes such as lack of proper lesson planning, joining the profession only for financial gain and having unsavoury relationships with learners. However, some factors appeared beyond teachers' influence, such as lack of resources and pressure from authorities on performance. While there were numerous ethical lapses in the sampled schools, this study posits that the school management teams, led by the school principals and the school management team, have agency and direct responsibility to intervene with credible and workable and continuous professional development programmes to address ethical challenges in their schools. Further, while other role-players such as the Provincial Department of Education, SACE and the teacher unions have a role to play, school principals and the school management teams cannot throw their arms in the air and place the blame of ethical lapses in their schools elsewhere.

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