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# **A Study of Ethics and Professionalism in Zimbabwe's Education System**

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## **Abstract**

*This study sought to investigate issues of ethics and professionalism in the Zimbabwean education system. The investigation employed the documentary research method, and used the secondary documentary sources to gather data. The findings from the data call for the reversal of the trend in the gradual erosion of moral values among people. This requires that the education system inculcates the values of hunhu/ubuntu and ethical behaviour among all learners from early childhood to university level. From an examination of the three normative ethical positions, it emerged that a more fruitful model of deciding right from wrong was to be found within deontological frameworks. A range of approaches to the resolution of ethical issues that may crop up and ethical decision-making were presented. Behaving ethically was at the heart of what it entails to be a professional. Some professional and ethical standards that guide the behaviour of members of the education profession were presented. Opinions differ as to whether or not teaching is a profession. While the general consensus said teaching is a profession, some authors viewed teaching as a semi-profession. Finally, a call was made to educator unions to form Professional Educators/ Teachers' Councils and have codes of professional ethics.*

## **Introduction**

Zimbabwe has achieved a huge quantitative expansion of its education system and has taken major steps to improve the quality of education and enhance education standards. The education standards, as measured by examinations pass rates; have been rising to unprecedented levels. Yet, there is a marked decline in the character, moral values and general behaviour of products (students) coming out of our education system. It would appear that somewhere along the way, we seem to have lost sight of the importance of our traditional values.

As posited by Mangena (2006, p. 1), emphasis has been on developing a school curriculum that prepares children for the world of work and very little attention has been given to traditional moral values when setting up curriculum objectives. Yet, there has been moral decadence in contemporary society due to the failure by social institutions such as schools, teachers' colleges and universities to teach moral values. According to Mangena (2006), modern society has become increasingly more lawless, violent, undisciplined and permissive, and the trend is more apparent in the younger generation. On a daily basis, newspapers have reports of corruption, violence against women, children and the elderly, robberies, rape, murder, financial scandals, fraud, plagiarism, lies and misinformation. Accordingly I support the assertion by Mangena (2006) that this trend of the gradual erosion of moral values among people needs to be reversed. People are asking where we went wrong along the way. Above and beyond questions of whether ethics can actually be taught and whether morality makes sense without a shared religious foundation, is a deep sense of conviction that we have to do something. Ethics touches all of us, in our professional lives, as well as our personal business dealings.

Accordingly, the study sought to investigate issues of ethics and professionalism in the Zimbabwean education system, and examine how the trend of the gradual erosion of the moral values among people could be reversed, and the ideas factored into pedagogy.

## **Ethics**

According to Pan (2009), ethics is the study of issues of right or wrong; thus, it is the study of morality, obligations, values, fairness and justice, in ways consistent with a society; and has roots in the historical origins. Ethics refers to the basic concept and fundamental principles of decent human conduct. Mangena (2007) defines ethics from an African view point when he notes that the terms *ethics* and *morality* denote the rules, traditions, taboos and principles used in a given society to define and guide behaviour. The terms *ethics* and *morality* may be used interchangeably to refer to principles or rules of behaviour. The term *ethics* also refers to the scientific analysis of moral concepts such as 'right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad', 'permissible', 'ought' and 'evil' among other (Pojman, 1993) concepts of professional associations.

Professionalism varies by industry and career. In education, teachers have broad professional standards based on their interactions with students, parents, community members, colleagues, staff, administrators and education authorities. The first step in becoming a professional is to earn an approved diploma or degree in education that meets the regulations by and teaching requirements of Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZimCHE) and Civil Service Commission. Educators are expected to engage in continual professional development and continuing education to keep abreast with the latest developments in their subject disciplines. In order to be a true professional, as pointed out by Billett (2008), one must be a reflective practitioner, well aware of the norms of the community of practice, and to be critical moral agents shaping the future norms of that community. This requires students to be vocal when faced with an ethical issue and in order for students to be critical agentic professionals.

Professionalism is built upon individual integrity, responsibility, and ethical conduct that demonstrate a profound respect for all learners (students). Professionals in the education system make decisions based upon knowledge of education theories and practices that recognize diversity of ability, developmental level, and family characteristics. Education professionals advocate for excellence in their subject disciplines, participate in life-long professional development to enhance their knowledge and skills and keep abreast with latest developments in their subject disciplines.

### **Professional ethics**

The Constitution of Zimbabwe (2013), Section 194(a), expects and provides for the promotion and maintenance of a high standard of professional ethics in the various occupations and institutions. Professional ethics concerns 'those norms, values, and principles that should govern the professional conduct'. Miller-Keane Encyclopedia defines *professional ethics* as the norms, values, and principles that guide a profession and the ethics of decisions made within the profession. Thus, professional ethics are professionally accepted standards of individual and organizational behaviour; the norms, values, and principles that should guide the professional conduct and

the ethics of decisions made within the profession. Codes of professional ethics are often established by professional organizations to help guide members in performing their job functions according to sound and consistent ethical principles.

In 2001 the global educator union federation for teachers, Education International (EI), officially came into this debate when the Declaration on Professional Ethics (DPE) was adopted by EI's Third World congress (meeting in Jomtien, Thailand). The DPE is mainly intended as a blueprint for affiliates' own guidelines. It is complementary to the UNESCO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998) and draws on the 1966 International Labour Organization (ILO) Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948). Its stated objectives are: raising consciousness about the norms and ethics of the teaching profession; helping to increase job satisfaction in education; and enhancing the status and self-esteem of educators/teachers, as well as the respect for the profession in communities.

### **Professional and ethical standards**

Behaving ethically is at the heart of what it means to be a professional; it distinguishes professionals from others in the marketplace. According to the 2011 Ministry of Education Strategic Plan, Vision and Mission statements and Clients Charter, and the Public Service Commission statutory instrument number 1 of 2000, the following emerge as some of the key professional and ethical standards that guide the behaviour of members in the education/teaching profession, and provide clarity for the members, who must demonstrate that they adhere to them; and ensure that all those who deal with them have confidence in the profession. All members must demonstrate that they:

- i) *Act with integrity*: Being honest and straightforward in all that they do;
- ii) *Take responsibility*: Being accountable for all their actions; and not blaming others if things go wrong; and if something is not right, they take appropriate action;
- iii) *Act in a way that promotes trust in the teaching profession*: Both in their professional life and private life, act in a manner that

promotes the education organization that they work for and themselves in a professional and positive way. Trust is essential and is hard to gain and maintain, but can be lost very easily.

- iv) *Always provide a high standard of service*: Always ensuring their clients, the students or others to whom they have a professional responsibility, receive the best possible service, advice, support or performance; and
- v) *Treat others with respect*: Treat everyone with courtesy, politeness and respect; and consider and are mindful of cultural sensitivities and business practices.

Linked to the standards are some of the more frequent ethical issues that educators may encounter. These include conflicts of interest, improper associations with students, gifts and hospitality, and raising concerns when it appears standards are not being met or when there is inappropriate behaviour that members should always bear in mind. There are usually rules and regulations, and procedures, which may prescribe or guide how to deal with them. There is a special relationship between professional educators and their clients, the students. It's a relationship based on trust. The ethical standards provide confidence to the students, the public and others about the reliability and high standards they can expect when using the services of a professional. Some educational institutions may include these in their Clients Charter.

## **Hallmarks of a professional teacher**

A teacher is a professional, and teaching is a *calling*, and a challenging profession. A teacher moulds the next generation. So, for a teacher to succeed, he must be a *leader*, a *storehouse* of information, a *role model*, a *facilitator* and a *master* of educational theory. The following are some of the hallmarks of a professional teacher:

- ⌘ *Honesty and integrity*: A professional teacher demonstrates truthfulness, candidness, uprightness and freedom from deceit. Just a mere glance of him/her, commands an inspiration, respect and admiration.
- ⌘ *Punctuality*: A professional teacher abides by the education

- ✧ institution / school's contracted hours for teachers and shows up on time (even earlier) for all work functions.
- ✧ *Dedication and commitment*: He/she is dedicated to duty and committed to the highest standards of performance; and renders service beyond call of duty.
- ✧ *Resourcefulness*: He/she possesses the ability to cope with difficult situations and deal resourcefully with unusual problems.
- ✧ *Initiative*: He/she has the power or ability to assess and initiate things independently or to energetically follow through with a plan or task.
- ✧ *Accountability and responsibility*: He/she is answerable or accountable to his/her students and their parents; strives to achieve desired goals e.g. high student performance, and has a high sense of responsibility.
- ✧ *Courtesy*: He/she shows polite, thoughtful behaviour towards the public, parents, colleagues, staff and students.
- ✧ *Compassion/ good human relations*: Integrates genuine concern for learners/students, colleagues, office clientele, and supervisor-subordinate relationship into work situations.
- ✧ *Diligence*: He/she is not only committed and dedicated but diligent in his/her dealings with the learners: able to make learning highly informative, interesting and challenging for the fast and gifted learners; the average learners; and for the mentally challenged learners makes learning encouraging, captivating, and fun.
- ✧ *Loyalty*: He/she has a strong feeling of support or allegiance to the leader, institution and government; faithfulness to commitments or obligations.
- ✧ *Wisdom*: He/she has wisdom is gained not only from continuing professional development but, more importantly, from daily experiences and dealings.
- ✧ *Stress tolerance*: He/she demonstrates stability of performance under pressure or opposition
- ✧ *Fairness and justice*: He/she conforms to the usual principles of law; is fair, just and unbiased.
- ✧ *Attire/Dress code*: A professional teacher puts on appropriate attire for the occasion or task, in compliance with profession's



⌘ prescribed dress code.

⌘ *Morality*: He/she has good morality - principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour.

⌘ *Decisiveness*: Acts immediately on needs, request in accordance with the prescribed rules and regulations and accepted norms of conduct and behaviour.

As an author says, 'teacher affects eternity' and some may just never know how.

### **Role of professional ethics**

Professional ethics have the following functions:

- i) Professional ethics assures the clients (who include the students, the parents/guardians, Ministry of Education authorities and school responsible authorities), that professional services (effective and meaningful teaching services) will be rendered in accordance with reasonably high standards (i.e. quality education, etc.) and acceptable moral conduct. This confidence enables professionals to exercise relatively independent judgments in decisions affecting clients.
- ii) Since the professional (e.g. educator, lecturer and teacher) is rendering a public service, ethical codes assure the public at large that the professional is serving the public interest and should continue to enjoy public trust, confidence and support.
- iii) Professional ethics provides a code of uniform rules, and behavioural standards by means of which professional conduct can be properly regulated. Thus, codes of ethics help maintain the integrity of professions and deter increased government intervention; and
- iv) Professional ethics helps demarcate an occupation as possessing one of the hallmarks of a profession. This attribute is especially important for semi-professions (e.g. teaching) that aspire to full professional status.

### **Findings from the data**

The study sought to investigate issues of ethics and professionalism in the Zimbabwean education system, and to examine how the trend of the gradual erosion of the moral values among people could be reversed. A close analysis of the findings reveals that ethics is essentially concerned

with what is right or fair, and focuses on what we ought to do. As such, ethics or moral philosophy seeks to establish principles of right behaviour that may serve as action guides for individuals and groups, and to investigate which values and virtues are paramount to the worthwhile life of society.

Professionalism in the education system is a standard of excellence that distinguishes members of the education or teaching profession. It is built upon individual integrity, responsibility, and ethical conduct that demonstrate a profound respect for all learners (students). In the education system, professional ethics are important as they act as an anchor to appropriate behaviours. Members are expected to show that they are acting and behaving ethically for their own benefit but, equally important, to show that they are also doing so to promote the profession as a whole; as the behaviour of a single member can bring the whole profession into disrepute. The teachers were urged to establish a code of professional ethics, somewhat parallel to the vows taken by medical professionals, so as to help guide members in performing their job functions according to sound and consistent ethical behaviour. Thus, the code of ethics for teachers is designed to protect the rights of the students, all the students. Furthermore, teachers are expected to be fair to all their students and not to take advantage of their position in any way. For example, a teacher cannot accept an expensive gift from a student as this may influence him / her to have bias towards that student.

It was observed that professional ethics assures the clients (who include the students, the parents/guardians, Ministry of Education officials and school responsible authorities), that professional services (effective and meaningful teaching services) will be rendered in accordance with reasonably high standards (e.g. quality education) and acceptable moral conduct. This confidence would enable professionals to exercise relatively independent judgments in decisions affecting clients.

The research findings show that the only way to address the moral decadence in contemporary society and arrest the trend of the gradual erosion of moral values among people was to provide value-orientation in our educational system. Consequently, this requires that the education system inculcates the values of *hunhu/ubuntu*, inclusivity

and ethical behaviour among all learners from early childhood to university level.

Accordingly, schools, teachers colleges and universities were called upon to do more in order to achieve this goal. There is, thus, need to teach ethics as a necessary component of the education curriculum from pre-school (ECD level), through primary and secondary school levels, to university level. It was noted that our education system may not have an opportunity for true success to reverse the erosion of moral values among people until moral issues are incorporated into the education curriculum.

It is, thus, incumbent upon the Ministries of Education, the educators and curriculum experts to consider at each level, the nature, content and scope of the moral education curriculum geared towards the teaching of moral values in our country's education system. It noted that universities have, over the years, churned out lawyers, engineers, professors and doctors of high intellectual integrity, but who still lag behind when it comes to the project of moral education.

An examination of the three normative ethical positions, viz.: the virtue ethics, the consequentialist or utilitarian ethics and deontological ethics, revealed that the utilitarian analysis, seemingly the most common way of deciding macro-issues of governance, does not hold up to any kind of philosophical scrutiny. It was found that a more fruitful model of deciding right from wrong is found within deontological frameworks, even if, to avoid the excesses of Kantian absolutism, some utilitarian qualifiers may be required.

By virtue of their training and relevant experience, professionals in the education system make decisions based upon knowledge of education theories and practices that recognize diversity of ability, learner aptitudes, developmental level, family and school characteristics.

Opinions differ as to whether or not teaching is a profession. While the general consensus said teaching is a profession, some authors viewed teaching as a semi-profession. The latter view ranks teachers with the semi-professions (teachers, nurses and social workers) because of lack

of autonomy that teaching has due to state ties and the unclear status of their knowledge. It was observed that teachers' individual autonomy and decision making powers are limited. This is a complex issue because teaching is not a homogenous group; *university professors* in most cases do have this professional control, whereas *primary school teachers* usually do not have it.

Behaving ethically is at the heart of what it entails to be a professional. Some professional and ethical standards that guide the behaviour of members of the education profession are highlighted. Finally, a call was made to educator unions to form Educators/ Teachers' Professional Council and establish codes of professional ethics, to help guide members in performing their job functions according to sound and consistent ethical behaviour.

## Recommendations

In the light of the findings of the study, the investigator puts forward the following recommendations for consideration by the relevant authorities, that:

- ✍ In order for the education system to be able to successfully reverse the erosion of moral values among people, moral issues should be incorporated into the education curriculum.
- ✍ Moral Education be revived in schools using a relevant curriculum among other things, as the traditional curriculum cannot suffice.
- ✍ It is incumbent upon the Ministries of Education, the educators and curriculum experts to consider, at each level (primary, secondary, tertiary and university), the nature, content and scope of the moral education curriculum geared towards the teaching of moral values in Zimbabwean education system.
- ✍ The teaching of moral values by social institutions such as schools, teachers' colleges and universities adopts a paradigm shift from the traditional subject and teacher-based curriculum to one that encourages the cultivation of a whole person, an upright and virtuous person who strives to achieve and sustain the highest degree of ethical conduct.
- ✍ Ethics be taught as a necessary component of the education

- ✎ curriculum from pre-school (ECD level), through primary and secondary school levels, teachers colleges to university level. Accordingly, the Zimbabwean education system should strive to ensure that the products (students) coming out of schools, teachers colleges and universities have moral values and good ethical behaviour
- ✎ Students should not only know what is right but also develop 'moral courage' to do what is right. Students should be equipped with 'a moral compass' to detect what is right and wrong, and the ability to critically-consider the proper response and course of action. The learning of moral values and ethics should focus on the process of developing moral reasoning and capacity building rather than direct content knowledge.
- ✎ Mindful that teaching is shaping the character of the next generation, teachers should have a deeper understanding of the ethical implications of their teaching profession; and Educator unions form Educators/Teachers' Professional Council and establish a code of professional ethics, somewhat parallel to the vows taken by medical professionals, so as to help guide members in performing their job functions according to sound and consistent ethical behaviour.

## Conclusion

There is a trend of the gradual erosion of moral values among people that should be reversed; and the only way to arrest this decline is in providing value-orientation in our education system. This requires that the education system inculcates the values of *hunhu/ubuntu*, inclusivity and ethical behaviour among all learners from early childhood to university level. Of the three normative ethical positions discussed (the virtue ethics, the utilitarian ethics and the deontological ethics), the utilitarian analysis, the most common way of deciding macro-issues of governance, does not hold up to any kind of philosophical scrutiny. The 'cost-benefit' approach to ethical decision-making had a number of shortcomings, not least of which is its limited ability to deal with issues of social justice and minority rights, including those of the disabled. A more fruitful model of deciding right from wrong was found to be within deontological frameworks. Behaving ethically is at the heart of

what it entails to be a professional. Teaching was a semi-profession; and teachers were ranked with other semi-professions (nurses and social workers) because of lack of autonomy that teaching has due to state ties and the unclear status of their knowledge. Accordingly, a call was made to educator unions to form Educators/Teachers' Professional Council and establish codes of professional ethics, somewhat parallel to the vows taken by medical professionals, so as to help guide members in performing their job functions according to sound and consistent ethical principles.

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