

## Meaning and Significance of Moral Purpose: Perspectives of 15 School Managers

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### Abstract

Though internationally there is much theoretical literature on moral leadership and moral purpose, little has focused on exploring the concept of moral purpose in relation to the role of school management teams. There is currently no evidence of any study that examined moral purpose in South African schools. These considerations led to a search for an understanding of how school management teams might identify as moral purpose underlying their educational leadership approaches. This gap further necessitated an exploration of the extent at which moral purpose transformed learning and leadership in selected schools. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to hear the voices of contemporary school managers as they articulate their meaning and significance of moral purpose. An in-depth analysis of the responses of these school managers and my probing into the inner workings of the school management teams had informed the understanding of the concept of moral purpose and clarified how moral purpose manifest itself within the framework of school leadership and management. Reflecting on their responses and perceptions, the school managers seem to believe that an overarching goal of moral purpose consists of gradually improving learner achievement.

**Keywords:** Moral purpose, respect, goal, whole-school vision.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, there is currently no evidence of any study that examined moral purpose in schools. Furthermore, there is little discussion in the international literature regarding moral purpose in the practice of school leadership. For the most part, discussion of moral purpose in the school leadership literature is fragmented, hence, failing to address the fundamental question “What is the meaning and significance of moral purpose?” A literature search on the subject further shows that researchers and writers present important questions and problems associated with moral purpose, but just as often, they do not provided immediate answers or ways to resolve the issues. Although many writers discuss moral purpose, few present suggestions on the meaning of moral purpose and how it influences leadership and learner achievement. Despite all the laudable efforts in the literature to situate moral purpose within the school improvement and leadership framework (Bezzina, 2007, 2010), the present literature’s descriptions of moral purpose continue to be extremely chaotic. The major challenge is that different international scholars and researchers continue to apply different labels to it. For example, Cuttance, Stokes, McGuinness, Capponi, Corneille, Jones and Umoh (2003) labelled it ‘whole school vision and goals’ and Andrews and Lewis (2004) labelled moral purpose as ‘community values’. Fullan (2001) and MacBeath (2005, 2006) simply use the label ‘moral purpose’. Therefore, this article seeks to add to the literature on moral purpose by hearing the voices of contemporary school managers as they articulate their description of moral purpose and how this moral purpose transformed learning and leadership in their schools.

Therefore, basing this study within a constructivist or interpretivism research paradigm was justifiable as a means by which the researcher can make sense of the school managers’ interpretation and experiences of moral purpose within their contexts. The paradigm allowed a co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and the school managers through the use of semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that the school managers perceived moral purpose as moral goal of achievement, whole-school vision for academic success, and respect for people. Based on the findings of this study, recommendations for future research suggested

that further investigation be undertaken to examine the utility of “The Leaders Transforming Learning and Learners” (LTLL) pilot program framework in the South African context as a means by which we can fully comprehend the meaning and implications of moral purpose in schools. A focus on this framework which was initially employed in Catholic schools can potentially reinforce the position of moral purpose within school improvement agenda in South Africa.

## 2. CONTEXT

To explore the contextual basis for the meaning and significance of moral purpose in school leadership, two significant frameworks developed by international researchers to support leadership and moral purpose in schools was considered (Fullan, 1993, 2001, 2002a, Bezzina, 2007, 2008, 2010). Drawing from these frameworks, two major themes were developed for this study. The first theme targeted moral purpose and how it enhances relationship building and knowledge creation and sharing. The second theme focused on the concept of team management as a core aspect of shared leadership, which is, in turn, the fundamental component facilitating moral purpose.

In his leadership framework, Fullan (1993, 2001) perceives moral purpose as one of the core components of leadership. Implicit within this framework, the concept of moral purpose is seen as inculcating in leaders a sense of making a positive difference in the lives of learners, teachers, parents and society as a whole. Thus, Fullan (2002b:4) asserts that leaders with moral purpose espouse the goal of making a difference in the lives of students, they have a “commitment to improving standards, no matter what, and ensuring that the gap between students is narrowed when it comes to achievement” (DoE, 2008:27-28). This moral purpose would also permeate how SMTs treat others whether they are learners, teachers, or parents (Bezzina, 2007, 2010). Therefore, moral purpose is the basis for relationship building (Fullan, 1993, 2002a). SMTs guided by moral purpose grounded on the aspect of respect are consummate relationship builders in their schools. They constantly foster purposeful interactions and problem solving in their schools.

Collins (2011) argues that in great organisations the leader gets relationships right first and then deals with [moral] purpose. Fullan (2011) concurs that if you want to challenge someone to do better you had better build a relationship first. He suggests that building relationships starts with leaders conveying respect before people have earned it and doing everything possible to create conditions that make people lovable (mainly by creating circumstances that favour success). Once leaders have built positive relationships with staff, learners and parents, they need to make conscious adaptation to their practices by adopting leadership based on “broad directional vision” (Fullan, 2009:109). In accordance with this, he argues that for the moral society to thrive on a deep and continuous basis, it must have a moral compass (Fullan, 2001). Broad directional vision or moral compass is the shared value and compelling imperative that remodels a school into a moral society that is galvanised into achieving objectives. Moral society is directed towards the learning of all learners, and reflects a greater reliance on collectivity to reinforce objectives, rather than on individual autonomy. This reinforces the importance of moral purpose to establish collaboration in teams, and this collaboration leads to knowledge creation and sharing (Fullan, 1993). Fullan (2001) claims that knowledge creation and sharing is central to effective leadership. He emphasises the relationship between a knowledge society and moral purpose. For me, knowledge creation implies a constant generation and exchange of information inside and outside the school through purposeful social interactions.

For the school to thrive, SMTs should understand the value and role of knowledge by reinforcing habits of knowledge exchange among staff members. This informs the context of this study as it integrates the most current ideas and theories that support and illustrate how SMTs mediate the cultivation of moral purpose in complex times. This mediation comes about through relationship building and knowledge creation and sharing. Finally, closely connected to the first theme

is the challenge explored in this study, the degree to which shared leadership enhances the sharing of moral purpose. There is a need for this moral purpose to be shared and its purpose should be grounded in a shared commitment to explicit values (Andrews & Lewis, 2004). It is within the context of shared leadership that moral purpose is explicit and shared (Bezzina, 2008). This means that moral purpose can be shared when leadership practices are not limited to those in formal positions. Therefore, the literature on shared leadership will contribute to an increased understanding of how SMTs foster synergies and teamwork. These synergies and teamwork are guided by a moral purpose where a compelling idea or aspirational purpose galvanises a group of educational leaders, allowing them to achieve significantly more than they could as a set of individuals working independently (Darren, 2010:65).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

The larger study from which this paper is drawn preferred qualitative approach as a most suitable design to interpret and understand the experiences and perceptions of school managers. The findings presented in this article are part of a larger study in which fifteen participants were asked eleven open-ended questions about various aspects of moral purpose. These eleven sub-questions fell under four primary questions. For the purposes of this article, only two questions were considered, which led to two primary objectives: (1) to discover how selected school managers perceive and define moral purpose and (2) to examine the effects of moral purpose on school leadership and learner achievement. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants [principals, deputy principals and heads of department] from the population who were representative of the larger group of Limpopo school managers or they were informative about the topic of interest (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, 2006). The final group of participants included three school principals, two deputy principals and ten heads of department. Although the study employed three separate yet complementary data collection instruments, individual semi-structured interviews were the major focus. Therefore, this article discusses the findings obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the school management teams. All the interviews were audio taped. In addition, during the interviews, I wrote notes about answers of the participants to later develop tentative ideas regarding categories and relationships (Maxwell, 1996). The interviews lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim. Data was examined and organised according to the four research questions. During this research all reasonable steps to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were taken. These steps revolved around dual responsibility described by McMillan and Schumacher (1993:399): firstly, “the protection of the participant’s confidence from other actors in the setting whose private information might enable them to identify them and, secondly, the protection of informants from the general reading public”. In line with this, I did not reveal information about the attitudes, motivations or behaviour that a participant would rather not have revealed (Thompson, 2008). The real names of schools and participants were changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (e.g. Apple High School: Principal).

### **4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section is a narrative description of the answers the participants provided to the interview questions: “What would you identify as moral purpose underlying your educational leadership approaches taken to transform the learning of your learners?” and “To what extent have this moral purpose influenced leadership approaches and learner achievement in the past three years? Responses to these two questions provide clarification on the meaning of moral purpose and the implications of focusing schools’ inner workings on moral purpose.

#### **4.1. The meanings and descriptions of moral purpose**

In response to the questions, the participants focused on three key areas: (1) moral purpose as “moral goal of achievement”, (2) moral purpose as “whole-school vision for the academic

success” and (3) moral purpose as “respect”. All these descriptions associate moral purpose with a significant learning outcome: learner achievement.

#### **4.1.1. Moral purpose as a “moral goal of achievement”**

One of the participants perceived moral purpose as a “moral goal of achievement”. In describing moral purpose in this way, the participant underlined the importance of imbuing school goals with a “moral” aspect. It is this moral feature of goals that makes them more convincing and persuasive, galvanising school managers to take necessary actions to attain them. Ordinarily, goals should give direction to the efforts of staff, parents and learners, motivate staff, parents and learners, and serve as a yardstick for measuring progress (University of South Africa, 2007). They should indicate the direction in which decisions and actions should be aimed (Hellriegel, et al., 2008). However, it’s difficult or almost impossible to direct efforts and actions of all legitimate stakeholders towards the goal of improving learner achievement if such goal lacks a moral dimension which spells out standards of conduct needed to achieve them.

Thus, a moral dimension of goals clarifies principles regarding the distinction between right and wrong in the behaviour and action of those involved the agenda ensuring that all learners achieve. The importance of integrating morals into achievement focused goals is that certain behaviours of leaders or teachers or even learners can jeopardise all efforts directed toward moving the school towards improvement. For example, teachers’ behaviour such as continuous late coming or absenteeism can derail every effort by the school principal to improve learning outcomes such as examination results. In addition, school managers who indolently shun their responsibility to manage teaching and learning are most likely to fail to attain the goal of transforming the learning of learners in their school.

Hence, Apple High School Academic Tutor maintained that the moral goal of achievement is attainable when “*the whole SMT plays a role via monitoring classes, checking the work that has been done, all the work that need to be done, and providing guidance*” (Ramalepe, 2014). Although many school managers hope for an improved learner achievement and leadership, unfortunately, there are too many examples of them who appear to pursue goals that are not moral. Moral goals are inclusive to involve all learners despite of their learning barriers. Grape High School Head of Department B stated that “Our goal is to ensure that all earners in our school achieve better results” Today, school managers continue to ask themselves how they can move their schools away from ineffectiveness and how they can organise to encourage shared goals. The answer to these questions is derived from.

Thus, all efforts to attain goals set need to be derived from a conception of what is right or good for an individual and the school. When goals are based on the school managers’ “moral sense”, that is, the sense of what is right or fair; they become a compelling and tangible purpose or imperative that informs the managers’ decisions and actions. It is therefore this moral dimension in school management that determines whether or not the goals are attained. In this sense, I argue that it is impossible for school management teams to fulfill the goals specified in the turn-around strategy of the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE, 2011) unless they infuse these goals with a moral dimension specifying moral principles that gives legitimacy and credibility to the goals. Therefore, without moral dimension, goals are without a soul and leaders cannot be sensitive to their moral obligation of raising achievement levels for all learners in the school.

#### **4.1.2. Moral purpose as a “whole-school vision for the academic success”**

Another component that five participants considered as being part of the description of moral purpose is the idea that moral purpose is the whole-school vision for the academic success for all learners. One participant asserted that moral purpose is the documented vision of the school. This description is congruent with Cuttance, Stokes, McGuiness, Capponi, Corneille,

Jones and Umoh's (2003) description of moral purpose as whole school vision and goals. In line with this, Fullan (2009:109) describe moral purpose as a "broad directional vision". The participants' perception highlights the central role of the school vision focusing on academic success in producing improvements in learner achievement.

Therefore, "whole-school vision for the academic success for all learners" is a moral purpose that underscores the need to have the school vision focused on the achievement of all learners regardless of background. And in this, the participants seemed to suggest that any vision aimed at generating improvements in learner achievement should become a school-wide learning improvement agenda focused on the future expectations for learner progress. The moral purpose viewed in this way challenges all stakeholders to make a concerted effort to achieve it. The important role of school leaders is to facilitate the participatory process of conceptualising and negotiating the vision. The SMT has an important responsibility in the vision building process, its communication and implementation which essentially contributes to a shared process. Virtually, all the vision statements of all the selected schools contain an element of producing high achieving learners accomplished through good classroom practices that take place within a caring, trusting and high expectation environment.

In this sense, the University of South Africa's Study Guide (2007) states that the visions of different schools will probably be the same in the sense that they will focus on the core business of schools, namely teaching and learning, but each will formulate its vision differently depending on the context within which the school functions. This implies that moral purpose associated with the school vision needs to relate to the improvement of teaching and learning practices that are aimed at learner achievement. What appears to be emerging from the research is that school managers in higher performing schools engage in leadership practices that involve regular analysis of examination results as a means by which their moral purpose is realised. The components of such a leadership approach involve the identification of existing achievement gaps in the school and the provision of operational elements to enable efficient and effective use of analysis of learner examination results. This resonates with one of the recommendations offered by Ali and Botha (2006) that HoDs need to spend more time analysing learners' results. This should include operational elements such as appropriate school structures, adequate time to undertake such analysis, and formulation of whole-school plans to make effective use of the data generated. This analysis of results informs the development of improvement plans by all the departments in the school.

#### 4.2. Moral purpose as a "respect for people"

In addition to viewing moral purpose as the "moral goal of achievement" and the "whole-school vision for academic success for all learners", five school managers perceived moral purpose as "respect for people". A head of department in one of the highly effective school in Limpopo indicated that:

*"The first thing I think moral purpose should be the question of respect, whether that is a child or a teacher or colleagues and all those. For me is a point of departure because it comes even into play when we are talking about issues of punctuality, talking about issues of carrying out activities, talking about studying alone ... So all we try to do with their lives as learners is to emphasise the importance of respect ... and portray one's respect through one's conduct".*

Likewise, another participant, a school principal added:

*"But at the end of the day I have realised one thing that when you lead people, first is the hidden aspect that you cannot leave behind - respect. Respect even a learner, and the reason why these kids respect me a lot is the fact that there a kind of respect I'm giving back to them. When I speak to them I don't shout to them, speak to them in such a way that they will understand you. And when they leave here they are going to implement everything, they are going to do exactly what you have requested, even when you speak to teacher, when they come here make sure that you start by showing an aspect of respect"*

This research findings validates Barber and Fullan's (2005) view that moral purpose involves treating people with respect, be it teachers or learners within the school. Similarly, Fullan (1993) asserts that leaders of schools with strong moral purpose treat people ethically, that is, with respect and concern – be it adults or children. He sees this moral purpose as an overarching value that is evident in all good and effective school leaders. The participants appear to understand respect as a basic hidden aspect that they cannot afford to leave behind when leading the school.

They suggest that respect is more significantly portrayed by participants through their conduct towards others and this has a ripple effect in the whole school. School managers who respect others also get respected by others in return. It is a Biblical golden “Do unto others what you would like them do unto you”. This means school managers ought to treat others as they would like to be treated or relate to others as they want others to relate to them.

Participants further suggest that one aspect of the manager's respectful conduct is listening to others – a moral and ethical quality that upholds teams. Similarly, Maldonado and Lacey's (2001) study found that the qualities constituting moral and ethical include listening and dialogue. Participants in their study maintained that “An attribute of moral behavior is listening to individuals and to group and then entering into dialogue with them” (Maldonado & Lacey, 2001:88). For example, in an SMT meeting where the sharing of ideas is expected to take place, principals who portray respect would listen to other members' views on the subject under discussion. Therefore, respect overcomes what Everard and Morris (1996:71) call “failure to listen” on the part of the principal. In their views “Failure to listen ... is a game of asking people for their views in order to ignore them.” The principals are of the view that leaders need to learn to listen to their constituencies or stakeholders when they are to make binding decisions. According to Tyala (2004), a leader is expected to listen to members and understand the members' feelings and try to accommodate them. It seems participants acknowledge that through listening they could learn something new from other people. Therefore, school managers need, as far as possible, to listen to different views of different parties involved in the school in order to make informed decision. In a classroom context, respect is a reciprocal aspect underlying the relationship between teachers and learners. Learners who listen to teachers are likely to achieve better results. Likewise, teachers who respect learners are most likely to achieve a disciplined classroom and increased interactivity in the classroom.

## **5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MORAL PURPOSE**

In response to the second question “To what extent have this moral purpose influenced leadership approaches and learner achievement in the past three years?, often the participants' answers to this question were intertwined with their description of moral purpose. Specifically, they discussed two areas in response to this question – improvement in learning practice and outcomes and shared leadership paradigm. The participants claimed that by focusing on moral purpose their schools experienced a veritable change in both leadership approaches and grade 12 examination results.

In this connotation, the results of the LTLL yielded a similar picture of a group of schools that underwent genuine change both in leadership and learning practices and outcomes (Bezzina, 2008). The implications of focusing on a moral purpose in the LTLL project encompassed areas such as leadership practices, classroom practices, and student outcomes (Bezzina, 2010). It was clear that a focus on moral purpose in the six schools renewed interest in applying student centred teaching approaches with a view to addressing the needs of all children in the school. As a result of this, learners became more motivated and engaged, taking responsibility for their learning. Engagement is not being simply active in the classroom. It involves self-responsibility, challenge, self-direction and collaboration. These elements of engagement transform the classroom into a more interactive environment with learners taking ownership of their learning and sharing ideas.

The sense of learner transformation is given expression in terms of student outcomes such as examination results. One participant claimed “Our results were very poor in the past years, but since we embraced moral goal we have been improving in grade 12 examinations, we are now a consistent school in the circuit”

Furthermore, participants maintained that the implication of focusing on moral purpose was that they were compelled to move from a sole –hierarchical leadership to shared leadership. Banana High School Principal accentuated that “*In my approach I don't regard myself as a sole manager, so all SMT members are managers. We share these responsibilities.*” The recognition by this school principal, who leads one of highest performing schools in terms of grade twelve results that the “*sole leader*” approach will result in their failure illustrates the richness that can come from shared leadership. But what did members of SMTs view as shared leadership? One perspective identified the benefits offered by having to recognise the existing expertise within the SMT and outside the traditional hierarchical leadership structures in the school to involve even the teachers to co-manage the school. It is within the context of shared leadership that moral purpose is explicit and shared (Bezzina, 2008). This means that moral purpose can be shared when leadership practices are not limited to those in formal positions.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

The major goal embodied within moral purpose is to make a difference in the lives of learners by committing to transforming the learning of all learners in the school. This means that teachers and leaders who possess and understand their moral purpose have commitment to ends that express underlying values and ethics, and the commitment is ultimately to the gradual transformation of the learner into a fuller, richer, deeper human being (Bezzina, 2010). Commitment to ends implies clarity of the purpose of leading and teaching. Moral purpose can be understood as the compelling motive that drives teams towards a gradual transformation of learners and improvement in learners’ achievements by closing the gap between higher performing and lower performing learners. Therefore, leaders with moral purpose lead with a sense or vision of transformed learners, which is exemplified by their desire to raise the standards of achievement for all learners within the school. The vision embodied in moral purpose gives rise to a particular set of aspirations for the learners. The leaders’ and teachers’ aspirations for the learners results in learners taking delight in both the subject and the process of learning, for which they take responsibility as part of a life-long journey (Bezzina, 2010). Bezzina adds that their growing understanding reflects a rigorous, critical and respectful approach to the subject matter and their fellow learners. To achieve this goal requires a creation of an environment hospitable for teamwork, this is an environment characterised by respect among individuals in the school. The consequences of focusing on moral purpose include improved learning outcomes and acceptance of shared leadership.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

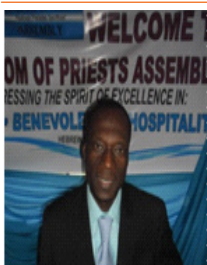
The role of research supervisor is fundamental but occasionally vexed, yet in this research I was so blessed to work with a man whose professional support was unequalled and exemplary. Special thanks to my passionate supervisor, Professor Vuyisile Msila, whose warmth, academic rigour and encouragement never waned throughout the journey.

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