

“Black Sheep in the Kraal”: Threat to institutional moral purpose?

Matome L Ramalepe

Head of Department (HoD), Limpopo Department of Education, Teaching Assistant, University of South Africa (UNISA), tetelo4life@ymail.com

Abstract

There is consensus in the literature that moral purpose is one of the central desiderata for bringing about transformation in the learners' lives and producing improvement in learner achievement. Furthermore, the literature widely acknowledges that for moral purpose to yield the kind of change and desirable improvement in learning outcomes in schools, it must be embraced and enacted by all legitimate stakeholders in those schools. However, the larger study from which this article is drawn found that there are a range of threats to effective enactment of moral purpose in South African schools. These threats had culminated in undisputedly poor learning outcomes such as grade 12 examination results and Annual National Assessment (ANA). This study found that the poor performance in schools is predominantly caused by the indiscipline of leaders, teachers, learners and parents. One participant in my study labeled this breed of ill disciplined people the “Black sheep in the kraal” and indicated that their behaviour is counterproductive and sabotages the sharing of the institutional moral purpose. It is against this background that this article seeks to examine and discuss various tendencies of the “Black sheep in the kraal” and highlight their impact on the cultivation of moral purpose in schools.

Keywords: Moral Purpose, School Performance, Absenteeism, Learning Outcomes

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The notion of moral purpose is understood differently and has been labelled in various ways by many different scholars and researchers (Andrews & Lewis, 2004, Fullan, 2001, MacBeath, 2006, Ramalepe, 2014). Drawing from the current literature and the findings of his study, Ramalepe (2015) suggested three important descriptions of moral purpose as means to position moral purpose within school leadership framework. Firstly, he understands moral purpose as a “*moral goal of achievement*” which underlines the importance of imbuing academic goals with moral purpose. Infusing an academic goal with a moral feature makes the goal more convincing and persuasive and achievable. Secondly, moral purpose is perceived as “*whole-school vision for academic success*”, a moral purpose that underscores the need for schools to create and share a vision that focuses on the achievement of all learners. Thirdly, moral purpose was generally accepted by my participants as “*respect for people*”, a moral purpose at the crux of relationship-building processes, challenging people to treat one another ethically.

Jointly, these three descriptions validate that “The central moral purpose consists of constantly improving student achievement and ensuring that achievement gaps, wherever they exist, are narrowed” (Barber & Fullan, 2005:3). This demonstrates how moral purpose might facilitate the work of teachers and leaders in producing school improvement in learning and learner achievement. This means that teachers and leaders who possess and understand their moral purpose have a compelling motive that drives them towards a gradual transformation of learners and improvement in learners' achievements by closing the gap between higher performing and lower performing learners.

However, making a genuine difference in the lives of learners by improving their academic achievement is only possible when moral purpose is fully enacted by all legitimate stakeholders. Thus, there is a “gap between moral purpose and moral performance” (Thompson, 2004:27). That is, while a deep moral purpose is generally admirable, it can have no impact on school improvement if it is not linked to performance, if it is not translated into action. Bezzina and Tauna (2012:11) link moral purpose and moral action through the important influence of moral

potency. To them, moral potency involves “not just ownership [of moral purpose], but courage and a sense of efficacy [and] disposition to act morally and translate it into moral action”. This notion challenges school managers not only to believe in moral purpose and its underlying values, but also to have a firm commitment to actualise it with the desire and belief in their power and ability to do so. Moral potency, therefore, means moving from moral purpose to moral action or “realized moral purpose” (Fullan, 2010: 15).

When outlining strategies for realising the moral purpose, Fullan (2011) suggests that school managers must develop the collaborative among other things. He argues that achieving the moral imperative or purpose is only possible via the collaborative, and when the group is mobilised with force and specificity, it can accomplish amazing results. Therefore, moral purpose is enacted when there are shared values and vision directed towards the learning of all students, and greater reliance on collectivity to reinforce objectives, rather than on individual autonomy. However, my study of fifteen secondary schools in Limpopo Province found that building collaborative workforce with communal moral purpose is not effortless as there are those whose behaviour and tendencies inhibit the translation of moral purpose into practice (Ramalepe, 2014). Therefore, simply having stated the good consequences of the existing relationship between excellent learner achievement and moral purpose does not wipe away all obstacles that can challenge the realisation of moral purpose in practice. In South Africa, these obstacles and threats have culminated in schools performing below expectations in grade 12 examination and Annual National Assessment (ANA).

Perhaps, the point of departure in diagnosing the reasons for the inefficiency of South African schools should be to examine factors that hamper the enactment of moral purpose. In its 2012 National Report, the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU, 2012) found that poor performance in schools is predominantly caused by the indiscipline of school managers, teachers and learners. The obvious manifestations of indiscipline in schools seem to be late coming and absenteeism without legitimate reason. Similarly, in their research of two schools, Van Deventer and Kruger (2003) argue that lack of discipline; low educator morale and other educational problems contribute to poor matric (grade twelve) results and other weak educational outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The larger study from which this paper is drawn employed a qualitative research 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 factors inhibiting enactment of moral purpose. These eleven sub-questions fell under four primary questions. For the purposes of this article, only one question was considered, which led to a primary objective: to discover how selected school managers identify as challenges inhibiting enactment of moral purpose. Where necessary, the data obtained through the semi-structured interviews was collaborated with data obtained through scheduled observations.

Purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants [principals, deputy principals and heads of department] from the six sampled secondary schools in Limpopo Province. These participants were representative of the larger group of Limpopo school managers and were informative about the topic of interest [Moral purpose] (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993, 2006). The final group of participants included three school principals, two deputy principals and ten heads of department. 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”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Threats to moral purpose

While acknowledging the need to take increased responsibility to articulate moral purpose, SMTs in my study noted that even though they try their best to raise the standard of performance for all learners, there are always “Black sheep in the kraal”. By this, they were referring to teachers, learners and parents whose indiscipline threatens effective enactment of moral purpose.

Learner-related threats

The Report of The Western Cape Education Department’s manual titled A Practical Guide to Understanding and Managing Learner Behaviour states: *“More than ever before, educators are faced with critical problems in their classroom, and are confronted with unacceptable learner behaviour and threatening situation”*(WCDoE, 2007). Corroborating the above report, my study found that the challenge of unacceptable learner behaviour is prevalent in schools. Within the context of this study, one school principal stated that *“... even though we try our best as a school to pass all learners, you will find a small group of learners whose ill discipline sabotage our moral purpose”*. My findings further suggest that, in most respects, the source of problematic learner behaviour is the influence of drugs and alcohol. The use of drugs and alcohol by teenagers is increasing, and this is one of the external factors that impinge on classroom behaviour (DoE, 2008). A participant in this study indicated that *“... learners who abuse these intoxicating substances become unruly in classrooms”*. He added the increase in substance abuse leads to an increase in learner absenteeism and late coming and further said that *“... sometimes these learners do not even write their homeworks.”* Obviously, in schools where these tendencies were prevalent, grade 12 examination results were low. Since discipline is an important element of the school and classroom management which ensures good classroom practice and creates conducive atmosphere for the achievement of higher achievement standards for all learners, there is a need, therefore, to prioritise an establishment of a culture of constructive learner behaviour in order to succeed in cultivating moral purpose.

Parent-related threats

While acknowledging the need to take responsibility to ensure a culture of positive behaviour of learners, SMTs indicated that parents should also play an active and supporting role to establish discipline and purposeful environment in which moral purpose can be successfully cultivated. It however emerged in this study that school managers lack parent support and involvement in issues of learner discipline. One participant stated that *“And of that sample of ill disciplined learners, we don’t get cooperation from parents ... And you feel like you are stuck with the soul and you don’t know what to do with the child”*. This response highlights the importance of parent involvement and participation. According to Squelch and Lemmer (1994), the benefits of parent involvement include improved school performance, reduced dropout rates, a decrease in delinquency, and a more positive attitude towards the school. It came out that the lack of parent support and involvement is caused by the presence of illiterate parents and dysfunctional families. Similarly, Bush *et al.* (2008) identified ‘disinterested and/or illiterate parents and/or dysfunctional families as major factor(s) that inhibit South African principals to overcome the problems from the schools’ contexts. Illiteracy, perhaps due to the legacy of apartheid education, appeared to be a critical factor hampering parents’ involvement because the majority of undereducated or uneducated parents become totally disinterested in their children’s education.

Teacher-related threats

Another issue arising from the findings is linked to the indiscipline of teachers. The apparent expression of this indiscipline is the frequent absenteeism by teachers and this, results in poor performance of the school. One school principal in this study stated that *“The challenge that I have experienced at this school over the past years is absenteeism... it is hardly a month without having people being absent, maybe because of personal issues.”* These findings corroborate NEEDU’s (2012) report which espouses that the most obvious manifestation of indiscipline in poor performing schools occurs through time not being observed in four ways: teachers and learners being absent frequently, coming to school late in the morning, not going to class according to the time table. The Advance Certificate in Education (ACE) manual for School Management and Leadership adds that teachers are often late and sometimes absent because of personal problems (DoE, 2008). The manual elucidate that some teachers are often late or sometimes absent because they are unwell because of sickness or have a disease such as HIV AIDS or are abusing substances such as alcohol or drugs.

The teachers’ lack of commitment and/or laziness also emerged from this research as a challenge confronting school management teams: *“... some educators are not committed to their work... Because sometimes when you delegate people keep on postponing. That is why I am saying such factors like laziness are the ones that are hampering our [moral] purpose ...”* It further came out that the lack of commitment or laziness on the part of the teachers serves as a crucial barrier to delegation. One school principal asserts *“When we duties are delegated to teachers, teachers keep on postponing the execution of those duties because teachers are just not committed”*. Obviously, this general tendency of indolence betrays the value of effective delegation. Van Deventer and Kruger (2003:119) state that *“The delegating process may be viewed as a developmental process as it provides subordinate staff members with an increasing amount of work to be performed, and also gives in-service management training”*.

CONCLUSIONS

Moral purpose is a “moral goal of achievement”, a “whole-school vision for academic success”, challenging schools to improve the academic achievement of all learners despite schools’ contextual factors. However, it came apparent in my study that schools often fail to deal with the contextual factors such as indiscipline, and their failure culminates in the poor performance of their schools. Therefore, for schools to succeed in attaining the “moral goal of achievement”, they need to overcome the myriad problems causing poor performance. The job to do so lies firmly in the purview of school principals and/or school management teams. The two school principals leading two most effective schools in Limpopo Province suggested two approaches that school managers can adopt to overcome the constraints of sharing moral purpose. Firstly, they assert that the school managers must be inclined to a notion of participative decision-making in which all legitimate stakeholders are consistently consulted on disciplinary issues. There is an accepted recognition of the importance of consulting with parents, learners and teachers when dealing with indiscipline.

Secondly, the school principals propose that the school managers must reinforce the policies, procedures and rules in their schools. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, the national and provincial legislation, and departmental policy are considered by the two principals as very important when dealing with issues of discipline involving teachers and learners. These two principals hold the strong view that school management can only be effective if it is discharged and confined within educational policy framework. In the same vein, the University of Pretoria (2010) states that policy; procedures and rules are the blueprints for effective school management. Therefore, principals must reinforce the need for the SMTs to “constantly engage in strategic thinking and transformation of such thinking into policies and programs” (Spillane

“Black Sheep in the Kraal”: Threat to institutional moral purpose?

et al., 2005). This strategic thinking should involve pragmatic ways of applying Schools’ code of conduct for learners and the South African Council of Educators’ code of conduct. These two policies are critical when managing misconduct as they embody rules, procedures and sanctions which ensure that every teacher and learner knows what to do. They are guidelines that should be used to guide SMTs in the decision making process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all the Limpopo secondary school principals, deputy principals and heads of department who participated in the research by contributing their time and thoughts to the lengthy interviews. The learners and staff in your schools are really blessed to have such magnificent and committed people leading them. Finally, I would like to express my profound gratitude to the three people without whom my doctoral thesis from which this article drawn would not have happened. To my beautiful and joyous daughter, Haraepha, and my talented boy, Horeloketsi, I dedicate this work to you, that in it you too may be inspired and discover the joy of lifelong learning. Finally, to my lovely wife, Motlanalo, thanks for your sacrifices and encouragement throughout this amazing journey.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Andrews, D. & Lewis, M. (2004). Building sustainable futures: *Improving schools*, 7(2), 129-150.
- [2]. Barber, M. & Fullan, M. (2005). *Tri-level development: It's the system*. http://www.michaelfullan.ca/Articles_05/Tri-Level%Dev't.htm. (Accessed on 21 June 2011).
- [3]. Bezzina, M. & Tauna, N. (2012). From awareness to action: Some thoughts on engaging moral purpose in educational leadership. Manuscripts submitted for publication.
- [4]. Bush, T., Joubert, R., Kiggundu, E. & Van Rooyen, J. (2008). *Leading and managing literacy and numeracy*. Johannesburg: The Zenex Foundation.
- [5]. Department of Education. (2008). *Understanding School Leadership and Governance in the South African Context*. Core module, ACE (*School Leadership*). Pretoria, South Africa.
- [6]. Fullan, M. (2001). *Understanding Change: Leading in a Culture of Change*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco.
- [7]. Fullan, M. (2010). *The Moral Imperative Realized*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- [8]. Fullan, M. (2011). *The Moral Imperative Realized*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin, and the Ontario Principals’ Council.
- [9]. National Education Evaluation and Development (NEEDU). (2012). National Report: The State of Literacy Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Phase. Government Printers, Pretoria, South Africa.
- [10]. Ramalepe, M.L. (2014). *The role of school management teams in cultivating moral purpose in Limpopo secondary schools*. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- [11]. Ramalepe, M.L. (2015). Meaning and significance of moral purpose: Perspectives of 15 school managers International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE). Vol 2(3), 151-158.
- [12]. Spillane, J.P., Diamond, J.B., Sherer, J.Z. & Coldren, A.F. (2005). Distributing Leadership. In Coles, B.J. & Southworth, G. (Eds.). *Developing Leadership: Creating the schools of tomorrow* (37-49). Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.
- [13]. Thompson, L. (2004). Moral leadership in a postmodern world. *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, 11(1), 27-37.
- [14]. University of Pretoria (2010). Management and Leadership in Education. Study Guide for LVO 721. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- [15]. Van Deventer, I. & Kruger, A.G. (Eds.). (2003). *An educators guide to school management skills*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- [16]. Western Cape Education Department (WCDoE). (2007). Learner Discipline and School Management. A *Practical guide to understanding and managing learner behaviour within the school context*. (Accessed on 20 August 2009) from <http://www.westerncapeeducationdepartment.gov.za>.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY



Matome Liphya Ramalepe is born in Mopye village, Tzaneen, Limpopo Province in 1974. He received his Secondary Teachers' Diploma (STD) in Mathematics and Biology from Naphuno College of Education. He received Bed Honours (*Cum laude*), Masters and Doctor of Education in educational leadership from the University of South Africa (UNISA). He worked for 15 years a teacher and head of department (HoD) and worked as a teaching assistant at UNISA since 2013. His Masters dissertation was about "The role of school managers in the implementation of Continuous Assessment (CASS) in the Further Education Training Band in Limpopo". "The role of school management teams in cultivating moral purpose in Limpopo secondary schools" was doctorate thesis. He is the founder of Renewal Africa Network Ministries International and currently serves as a senior pastor of Kingdom of Priests Assembly.

Citation: Matome L Ramalepe (2015) "Black Sheep in the Kraal": Threat to institutional moral purpose? . IJHSSE 2(5), pp: 98-103.