

Interrogating the Significance of Professionalism and Professional Ethics in the Teaching Profession

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ABSTRACT The teaching profession is generally referred to as a noble profession. There are, however, numerous reported cases of professional misconduct by teachers in schools. In this concept paper the researchers explore the concepts professionalism and professional ethics in the teaching profession. The researchers further examine the importance of professionalism and professional ethics in the teaching profession. Teacher accountability as a way of ensuring the upholding of professional ethics is discussed. Teacher indiscipline as a result of lack of professionalism is explored and common forms of misconduct by teachers in schools are unearthed through examination of related studies. The researchers conclude by restating the significance of professionalism and professional ethics in the teaching profession, against the realisation that teachers deal with the moulding of future citizens, which should be done with utmost care and concern. In this paper the researchers recommend that teacher training programmes should place more emphasis on the teaching of professional ethics in the same way content and pedagogical expertise are valued. Continuous professional development programmes for practising teachers should expose teachers to the importance of professionalism and professional ethics. Measures should be put in place to hold teachers accountable for the ways in which they dispense their duties. Performance-related pay increases and licencing of teachers are some of the ways to ensure accountability.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching profession is generally referred to as a noble profession. Hargreaves (2000) defines professionalism as the conduct, demeanour and standards which guide the work of professionals. Barber and Mourshed (2007: 12) observe that 'the available evidence suggests that the main driver of the variation in student learning at school is the quality of the teachers.' Zaidatol and Habibah (2004: 25) postulate that:

It is universally agreed that teaching is an important and noble profession. The society in general is concerned about the quality and type of individuals being selected into the teaching profession.

The consideration of the calibre of professionals serving in the teaching profession becomes very important, given the important responsibility placed on teachers' shoulders to mould future citizens.

Apart from facilitating learning of academic subjects, teachers in schools are responsible for the moral uprightness of the students whom they teach. Instead of merely teaching moral responsibility, teachers are models that students should emulate on moral issues. Lumpkin (2008: 45) contends that schools should produce a person of character and observes that:

A person of character has wisdom to know right from wrong; is honest, trustworthy, fair, respectful, and responsible; admits and learns from mistakes; and commits to living according to these principles.

In order to produce persons of character, teachers should be persons of character so as to be worthwhile role-models for learners. Lumpkin (2008) further observes that teachers should tell the truth and act honourably and it is through these displays of honesty and honourable behaviour that learners learn from the way teachers act and live their lives.

Hashemi et al. (2011: 255) talk of the importance of hidden curriculum in education. They state that much of the knowledge in schools is taught 'through interaction and communication which has arisen from social and educational environment of the school ...' This hidden curriculum is important in the development and nurturing of the moral and social personality of

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students. In this view, the way teachers talk to students, relate and behave in the school teaches learners a great deal. It is therefore important for the teacher to be of high integrity in view of the crucial role he or she plays in students' character formation. This is done through overt and covert ways, hence teaching and learning do not start and end in classrooms.

In showing the importance of professional ethics for teachers, in addition to pedagogical and content expertise, Boon (2011: 76) states that:

Quality teachers are considered to be those individuals whose pedagogy is grounded in values and beliefs that lead to caring, positive teacher-student relationships, embedded in trust and high standards of professional ethics.

Teachers need to always maintain sound professional relationships with learners. Such relationships are in line with Porlier et al.'s (1999) observation of the influence of teachers on learners' personal development. Hitz and Driscoll (1994) cited in Burnett (2002) further observe that teachers should engage in constructive encouragement of students to enhance their self-esteem. According to Liberante (2012: 8), positive and sound student-teacher relationships 'have immeasurable effects on students' academic outcomes and behaviour.' 'Teachers should be aware of the need for a positive loving relationship if learning is to take place' (Hood and Hood 2001: 171). This shows that the relationships that exist between teachers and learners in classrooms have far-reaching consequences on both academic achievement and personal development. It is, therefore, important for the teacher to know how to build and sustain positive relationships with learners.

Teachers should also avoid teacher-student relationships associated with conflict with students. Hamre and Pianta (2001) state that teacher-student relationships characterised by conflict have serious negative effects of student learning. Kelly (2014) states that the main task of the teacher in the classroom is planning, developing, organising instruction, housekeeping, record keeping and managing tasks, presenting subject material and assessments and also to gain and maintain the cooperation of students. Similarly, Spilt et al. (2011) as well as Walberg and Paik (2000) postulate that the quality of teacher-student relationship is important in students' well-being and academic success. In this

view, the teacher should be able to manage the class well, to enhance student learning.

In maintaining positive relationships with learners, teachers should be gender sensitive in the way they relate to both boys and girls. Berk (2006) observes that teachers, intentionally and unintentionally, should avoid gender stereotypes. Students of both genders should be encouraged to work hard and excel in all areas of study. There are instances where teachers may have different expectations from learners of different genders in some subjects that are considered challenging. Such beliefs and attitudes may result in learners, particularly girls, feeling inadequate and failing to perform to the best of their abilities. There are no masculine or feminine subjects (Berk 2006).

In a study on establishing gender bias in classroom interaction, She (2000) found that male students were more involved in teacher-student interaction than their female counterparts who were largely passive in class. She (2000) further established that the instructional language and learning materials used by teachers sometimes assisted in promoting gender bias. Ovie-Ekpewu (2010), in a similar study, also established that girls were not given encouragement by their teachers to study mathematics and science. Teachers as professionals should be aware of the issues of gender bias and how that negatively affects students academically and socially. Professionals should be gender sensitive. Allana et al. (2010: 344) advocate exposing teachers to gender equality education which entails:

... not only eliminating gender discrimination, which could be inherent in educational practices, but also integrating the experiences and needs of both female and male students into all educational practices and, ultimately, enabling them to overcome traditional gender relations through education.

The role of teachers in the promotion of gender equality in teaching and learning can, therefore, not be overemphasised. Teachers should not be at the centre of promoting gender stereotypes through their instructional language, instructional materials and relations with students.

WHAT IS A PROFESSION?

To the ordinary person what constitutes a 'profession' seems clear and easy to define. According to Watson (2000: 222), professions

are “occupations which have been relatively successful in gaining high status and autonomy in certain societies on the basis of a claimed specialist expertise over which they have gained a degree of monopoly control”. This means that a profession is a certain type of occupation. The terms ‘profession’, ‘occupation’ and ‘career’ are usually interchangeable. Hodson and Sullivan (2008: 258) define a profession as a high-status, knowledge-based occupation characterized by abstract, specialized knowledge, autonomy, authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups and a certain degree of altruism. From Hodson and Sullivan’s (2008: 260) definition, four hallmarks of a profession can be identified. Firstly, a profession is knowledge-based, meaning that every occupation has its own body of knowledge that its members master and this distinguishes professions. Secondly, a profession has autonomy, which means that a professional relies on his or her own judgment in selecting the relevant knowledge or the appropriate technique for dealing with the problem at hand. Thirdly, a profession has authority, which means that members of a profession can expect compliance with their orders from clients and subordinate occupational groups. Fourthly, a profession has altruism, meaning concern for others. Even though professionals seek an income from their practice, altruism implies they officially see themselves as having additional objectives (Hodson and Sullivan 2008: 262).

Sethna (2013: 11), on the other hand, defines a profession as “an occupation” characterized by rigorous education, a theoretical perspective, self-regulation, authority and service, and goes on to say “All professions are occupations but not all occupations are professions” (Sethna 2013: 11). Five characteristics of a profession are identified from this definition, namely, rigorous education, theory (the education is theoretical and not just hands on), self-regulation (members of the profession claim that only they possess sufficient knowledge to be admitted), authority over clients (members of a profession claim authority over the clients on the basis of specialized education and theoretical understanding) and service to society not self-interest (the public good lies at the heart of the profession) (Henslin 1996: 394). Strahlendorf (2005) provided a broader view of a profession according to which it would possess the following elements: group identity, shared education, train-

ing (requirements for admission), special, uncommon knowledge, knowledge used in the service of others, some autonomy in decision making adherence to certain values, and penalties for substandard performance.

The word ‘profession’ maybe synonymous with ‘occupation’. According to Hodson and Sullivan (2008: 257), a few occupations are professions. This implies that not all occupations are professions. Joseph and Media (2014: 1) concurs and declares that a profession is more than just an occupation, it also entails behaviour. One thing that is clear from the definitions is the fact that teaching is a profession. Teaching is a demanding job that requires in-depth knowledge of subject content, age specific pedagogy and many varied skills such as patience, leadership and creativity. Teaching is a very professional career where an individual is held accountable to the school through a series of tests, assessments and tools to gauge the achievement of learning. Teachers use their skill to convey a variety of teachable subjects to students within the classroom. Teaching is a challenging and demanding profession.

According to Joseph (1996: 41) a profession is like a community and its members share similar norms and values. Professions have certain requirements. Teachers are required to be content experts as well as education experts, all of which entail specialized knowledge and often long and intense academic preparation. Having assessed the characteristics of a profession highlighted in the definitions above, one would undoubtedly say that teaching meets all the requirements to be considered a profession. Doctors and lawyers are regarded as very skilled professionals. Teachers are equally skilled and gifted and hence are professionals. A professional is a member of a vocation founded upon specialized educational training, a person who engages in an activity with great competence.

Teaching occurs in a community of educators. The education system has professional codes of conduct for the teachers, leading to self-government and an integral disciplinary process that provides a mechanism for controlling inappropriate professional behaviour. According to Nuland and Khandelwal (2007: 18), this makes teachers feel they are recognized as genuine professionals. Like other professionals, teachers also have professional associations that regulate the teaching profession. Professionalism

is a standard of excellence that defines members of an occupation. These standards are set by a group or organisation for its members to follow. Professionalism also dictates how employees and associates should behave, dress and interact (Staffing 2013: 2). Thus, professionalism refers to the virtues set to govern the behaviour of individuals at work. In a study on how to make the work more exhilarating, by Davis (2007: 36), participants revealed that in professionalism there is "...need for greater accountability, enthusiasm, openness, willingness to take risks and innovate, team work and a capacity for strategic planning..."

There are characteristics that define a professional. Ling (2009: 49) states that a professional is an individual who possesses specialised knowledge not generally understood by the public, has a qualification which acts as a threshold entrance requirement to a profession, a sense of altruism and is able to subscribe to code of ethics. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993: 48) observe that:

When first thinking about professionalism, attention is drawn to issues of competence. Professionals are experts, and this expertise entitles them to be autonomous. But expertise is not enough to earn one the mantle of professionalism.

Professionalism in whatever area of specialisation or geographical setting is a product of education and re-education. Globally, governments, voluntary agencies, non-governmental organisations and individuals commit significant resources towards building and developing teacher professionalism (Anangisye 2011).

Pugach (2006: 359) reveals that teaching was thought of as a job and as one "fit for a woman." The current attempt to professionalise teaching is an effort to honour the expertise that teachers possess. Halliday (1996: 5) posits that "...through their professional knowledge as geographers, physicists and most especially teachers, it is foolish therefore to try to ignore this professionalism." Teaching is more than a process of conveying information to learners. According to McNergney and Herbert (1995: 5) teachers are professionals and professional teachers are people who possess specialised knowledge and skills about education. Professionals in a profession have to exhibit high lev-

els of professionalism. Professionalism is, thus, unpacked in the next section.

WHAT IS PROFESSIONALISM?

Professionalism is not an easy concept to define. Being professional can be defined as conforming to the technical or ethical standards of one's profession (Whitty 2006). Professionalism is the adherence to set of values comprising statutory professional obligations, formally agreed code of conduct. According to Haralambos et al. (2004: 625), professionalism is not a character inherent in certain types of jobs but a status actively achieved through the efforts of groups of workers. This implies that professionalism is not a given trait but has to be learned. Teaching is a profession. Therefore, teachers are expected to display appropriate, professional behavior, appearance and dispositions. Hargreaves (2000) defines professionalism as the ways of operating and standards that guide the work of professionals. According to Joseph and Media (2014: 1) states that "Professionalism also has to do with how you conduct yourself." While, Whitty (2006) argues that as professionals, teachers should be accountable for the way they operate in schools and they should operate with a code of professional conduct to ensure accountability.

Professionalism is an essential aspect in the teaching profession. A study by Day et al. (2011: 64) reveals that:

...heads in more effective schools are successful in improving pupil outcomes through who they are as well as what they do. Their professional values, ethics and educational ideals are integral to what they do, why they do it and how they adapt their practices...

It is through professionalism that schools produce an individual who is accepted in any society. According to Campbell (2008: 372), '...teacher education neglects the teaching of ethics' and he suggests that more emphasis must be placed on moral and ethical education because teacher training programs are 'the initial place to acquaint new teachers with the moral dimensions of their chosen profession.'

Professionalism in education is very vital as it determines the quality of the educational outcomes. Education aims to change people in particular ways and uses methods which involve close personal, hierarchical relationships. Teach-

ing is an occupation where ethical issues are central and therefore the provision of ethics education to support the code of professional conduct of teachers is essential (Snook 2003). Rowe (2003: 15) asserts that teacher quality is a key determinant of student outcomes, the quality of teaching and learning provision are by far the most salient influences on student cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes.

Aultman et al. (2000) contend that that one of the ethical boundaries teachers should observe in their dealing with students is the relationship boundary. Hansen (2000) states explicitly that teachers should refrain from engaging in intimate relationships with their students. Teachers should also maintain professional relationships with colleagues and with parents. This means that there is need for clear communication networks and collaboration between the school and the community. Commitment to duty is also another important element of professionalism. Teachers also need to exhibit high levels of professional integrity. This reflects that it is important for teachers to be aware of their professional ethics so that they behave accordingly. Professionalism is hinged on upholding professional ethics as discussed in the next section.

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS IN TEACHING

Strahlendorf (2005) describes professional ethics as the system of honorable standards which one uses in the line of work or one's career. This relates to rules governing the conduct, transactions and relationship within a profession and among its members. Thus, professional ethics involve the idea of knowing what is right and wrong in your professional life. This involves taking correct action and still following what you believe.

Haralambos et al. (2004: 625) state that professional ethics emphasize altruism, that is, a regard for others rather than a narrow self-interest. This means that professionals are supposed to be concerned with serving the community in general, and their clients in particular. Teachers are the guardians of education and provide important service that benefits the society in general, and the children, in particular. Professional ethics in teaching include professional relationships with students in the area of 'confidentiality, respect, professional environment, coopera-

tion with other professionals and professional responsibility' (Nuland and Khandelwal 2007: 17). Adeeb et al. (2008) concur and state that teachers are expected to operate with and uphold certain ethical professional standards. This implies that professional ethics enhance the teaching and learning process through good interactions of the member of the profession. Strahlendorf (2005) states that part of professional ethics has to do with the fairness with which issues are handled and cases decided. Thus, procedural fairness is part of ethics. As a result there must be adequate warnings, notice, a hearing of all sides, even-handedness and consistency in the sanctions applied. This ensures effective operation within the teaching profession.

Professional ethics form part of the intangible inputs into the education system and are very crucial to the delivery of quality education. Professional ethics ensure efficient use of resources for quality education and improved school performance. Without professional ethics, the teaching and learning environment will be compromised. According to Strahlendorf (2005), the role of professional ethics is that they help clarify values and rules, they strengthen group identity and collegiality, and they foster public confidence in the teaching profession. Ethics provide guidelines of how teachers should behave at work to ensure that quality learning take place in the education system.

According to Clark (2004: 80), ethics are more than just a code of ethics which codify a set of principles and rules which serve inspirational and/or disciplinary purposes for teachers. Teachers, as professionals, are engaged in one of the most ethically demanding jobs, the education of young people need to constantly reflect on the ethics of their activities to ensure that they exhibit the best ethical example possible to those they are morally educating. Teacher conduct has the greatest impact in the classroom, so the teacher has to be ethical in his or her conduct. The teacher thus should have the care and well-being of children at heart. According to Adeeb et al. (2008) it is quite necessary to develop a professional attitude. A teacher is expected to produce balanced, calm, satisfied and composed students for the socio-economic development of the society. The professional conduct of the teacher is crucial for effective teaching and learning processes.

A teacher is a highly valued personality in a society and teaching is considered to be a sacred and distinctive profession. Most professions have a code of ethics that express the ideal relationship among the professional, the client and the community. According to Adeeb et al. (2008) the teacher is seen as a role model in society and is followed by students. Thus, the teacher is expected to become a model of excellence. Because of this, teachers should follow professional ethics for them to be effective. So if the teachers do not follow the professional code of education, they will impart wrong values to students and, in the process, defeat the major role of education. According to Nuland and Khandelwal (2007: 17), lack of integrity and unethical behavior within the education sector is inconsistent with one of the main purposes of education, that is, to produce 'good citizens' who are respectful of the law, of human rights and fairness. Teachers who indulge in unethical practices are unfit for teaching universal values such as civic education, moral values, honesty and integrity (Nuland and Khandelwal 2007: 18).

Strahlendorf (2005) says professional ethics help a professional choose what to do when faced with a problem at work that raises a moral issue. A code of ethics can be inspirational, educational, a tool for decision-making and a reference point. To curb malpractice, various countries developed professional codes of conduct in the education sector. Professional codes of conduct serve to enhance commitment, dedication and efficiency of service among members of the profession, provide self-discipline guidelines for members of the profession by creating codes of professional conduct and obtain the community's support for the profession by emphasizing the social responsibilities of the profession towards the community (Nuland and Khandelwal 2007: 18).

According to Clark (2004: 83) addressing ethical issues in teaching is not a straightforward matter since disputes and disagreements are always encountered. Without professional ethics, teachers may fail to behave according to required standards. Teachers' misbehaviour can disturb implementation of educational programmes and disrupt the correct functioning of the teaching learning process. Teachers' unethical behaviour includes demand for unauthorized school admission and examination fees, absence of teachers from school, leakage of examination

papers, abuse of the teacher/student relationship for private gains and embezzlement of school funds (Nuland and Khandelwal 2007: 17). Professional ethics ensure better teaching and learning environments and improve the quality of learning. Lack of professionalism is evidenced by teacher indiscipline.

Teacher Indiscipline

Despite the high esteem with which teachers are held, there are problems of indiscipline among teachers. Such behaviours exhibit high levels of unprofessionalism and violate professional ethics that teachers are supposed to uphold. Oghuvbu (2007: 2) states that indiscipline among teachers is their 'acts of behaviour that affect effective teaching, learning and administration of the school'. Oghuvbu (2007: 2) further observes that:

Common undisciplined behaviour by teachers include; absenteeism from school and lesson, lateness, non-preparation of lesson notes, failure to mark students exercise books, non-completion of school records such as diaries, registers, student results, involvement in examination malpractices, illegal collection from parent and students, unapproved study leave with pay, drinking, drug taking and sexual immorality.

The above litany of forms of indiscipline by teachers show that despite the trust that society places on teachers as professionals engaged to lead students, teachers are still found wanting on disciplinary matters. Okeke (2004: 10) states that "the teacher belongs to a special class (sub-group) saddled with" the responsibility of moulding the child into a functional adult. Such an adult will contribute to a society's development through the knowledge, skills and values imparted by the teacher.

In terms of sexual misconduct perpetrated by teachers on learners, Shakeshaft (2004) reports that about 3.5 million students report having physical sexual contact from an adult, most commonly a teacher or coach, in their school. These students describe unwanted touching on breasts, buttocks, and genitals, forced kissing and hugging, oral/genital contact, and vaginal and anal intercourse. In a related study of establishing the influence of school location on teacher indiscipline, Anam (2003) found that urban teachers were more prone to truancy and higher

absentee tendency than their counterparts in rural areas.

Teacher Absenteeism

Teacher absenteeism disrupts teaching and learning and negatively affects learner attainment and achievement of learning outcomes. Chaudhury et al. (2006) note the problem of teacher absence in Indian schools where absence ranged from 11 to 27 percent among primary school teachers. Finlayson (2009: 1) states that both common sense and research show that when a teacher is absent from the classroom, student learning is disrupted. When that teacher is repeatedly absent, student performance can be significantly impacted in a negative way. This further shows that the more days a teacher is out of the classroom, the lower their learners tend to score in tests. Teachers, as professionals, have to be available in classrooms to teach unless there are strong reasons that warrant leave-taking.

Rademeyer (2013) reports that South Africa had the worst teacher absenteeism rate out of 14 African countries and also reports that Human Sciences Research Council researchers found that between 20 and 24 days' schooling had been lost to absenteeism in 2008. This shows a real problem regarding the seriousness with which teachers executed their duties. It further reveals a lack of professionalism and the upholding of professional ethics. Mthombeni (2012) observes that teachers abused leave privileges, resulting in increased cases of teacher absenteeism. In a study by Betweli (2013: 2) it was concluded that teacher misconduct is a problem of great concern in both rural and urban schools. It affects teachers' work performance, the teaching and learning processes, and the quality of education at large. The paper by Betweli (2013) also concluded that the variation of teacher misconduct in schools was greatly influenced by teachers' gender, work experience, and level of education.

Teacher Accountability

Kleinhenz and Ingvarson (2006) observe that the clear relation between teacher quality and student learning achievement makes it mandatory to call for effective systems of teacher accountability. Sachs (2010) calls for the introduction of standards meant to improve the perfor-

mance of teachers as well as standards meant to improve the standing of teachers. In this view, Monyati et al. (2006: 428) cited in Maphosa et al. (2012) refer to accountability as "responsible practice and responsiveness to clients". This means that teachers have to act responsibly in the way they operate in school. They have to give value for money to their major clients namely learners and parents. In showing the importance of teacher accountability, Maphosa et al. (2012: 546) state that:

Teaching as a profession has professional standards that should be upheld. Hence teachers as professionals should be held accountable for such standards. All other professions such as the medical profession, practitioners are answerable for every decision they make as they deal with human life and errors of omission or commission have immediately felt results.

Therefore, in upholding standards teachers, like any other professionals, should account on the way they dispense their duties in schools. They should be willing to accept responsibility for their decisions and actions and to justify them to others. Teachers deal with future lives of innocent students and if there are no measures to hold them accountable, it will be tantamount to giving them the licence to kill. Teachers, like other professionals, operate under a professional code of ethics and hold themselves responsible for their professional decisions and actions.

Teachers and Management of Learner Discipline

Teachers should maintain high standards of professionalism and uphold professional ethics in the management of learner discipline in schools. In separate studies, Mokhele (2006) as well as Maphosa and Shumba (2010) established that since the abolishment of corporal punishment, teachers find it difficult to manage learner discipline in South African schools. In this view, most teachers continued to use corporal punishment despite it being outlawed (Makapela 2006). Continued use of illegal means of managing discipline in schools is problematic and reflects the need to enforce the issue of professional ethics among teachers.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing discussion has made it clear that teaching is an important profession as

teachers are responsible for nurturing future citizens. Teachers work becomes very important and due diligence should be taken in the way teachers execute their duties. As a profession teaching entails imparting a body of knowledge, skills and values through training before one enters the profession. High levels of professionalism are expected from teachers as professionals and they are guided by codes of conduct that ensure the upholding of professional ethics. Sadly, despite being held in high esteem teachers are associated with numerous acts of indiscipline inconsistent with the professional demands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

1. Teacher training should place emphasis on professional conduct. Separate and well thought-out courses or modules on professional ethics should be taught to trainee teachers in order to thoroughly initiate the would-be teachers into the expectations of the profession. Content and pedagogical expertise that is not matched with relevant ethical behaviours is not very useful.
2. Continuous professional development of practising teachers should take form of short courses and school-based staff development programmes on professionalism and professional ethics. This will assist in constantly reminding teachers of the importance of such issues.
3. Measures should be put in place to ensure that teachers are held accountable of the way they dispense their duties and such measures should reward hardworking teachers and punish the lazy and unprofessional ones. A performance related pay system is one such measure to ensure accountability.
4. Entry into the teaching profession should be regulated by establishing a strict system of licensing teachers with periodic renewal of licences based on performance and conduct.

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