

Moral Decay in South African Schools: The Case of a Generation Going Wild? JM Mamabolo

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to explore causes of moral decay in South African public schools. It is widely accepted that schools are terrains of teaching and learning and therefore, for learning to prosper, it has to be interspersed with a propitious environment of security and hope. The study adopted qualitative approach because of its strength in describing and exploring phenomena and generating tentative explanations. Furthermore, I applied phenomenological method and case study for the collection of data. Sampling for the study comprised 211 participants that included teachers, learners and parents. The findings suggest that interpretation and understanding of moral conduct by participants varies and offers different connotations ranging from lack of learner cooperation to poor work ethics including alcohol and drug abuse. The implications of the findings raise question on the effectiveness of government policies on schooling in the country.

Keywords: moral decay, school safety, eclectic model, educational theory.

Introduction

The frequent and on-going acts of abusive violence in South African public schools have provoked a significant level of interest on matters underpinning moral veracity of society. In 1948, the National Party government defined the notion of morality within the realm of apartheid (Andrews & Ellman, 2002). In this context, the Immorality Act of 1950 sought to criminalise interracial union as a violation of morality (Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act, 1985). This view of morality championed by the Act was premised on narrow and skewed agenda propagated by the apartheid elite ostensibly to perpetuate white supremacy and the policy of protectionism. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 1999, which proclaimed that apartheid policy itself was a crime against humanity (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, 1999), further denounced the policy. Consequently, a new dimension in understanding morality was brought under the spotlight. The meaning of morality as defined by some scholars implies, among other things, differentiating “between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour”. Furthermore, morality may also refer to a “system of values and moral principles” (Diehl, 2004). Adding to the

forgoing assertion of morality is debates around education theory that has largely dominated discourses in recent times. The central argument of education theory revolves around the need to explain the objective of didactic exercise. In this context, several dimensions of morality emerge that include pedagogy, andragogy, curriculum, learning, education policy as well as organisation and leadership. Underpinning these debates is the affirmation that educational thought is premised on multiple disciplines incorporating, amongst others, philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology (White, 2012: 503).

The inference from the preceding claims is that these disciplines, viewed in context, constitute what could be construed as collective examination of educational matters from varied disciplinary perspectives. Moral questions cannot be confronted from one perspective only but from different angles as there are no one-size-fits-all solutions. Similarly, one solution may not be considered the panacea to all moral problems confronting society and citizens are therefore obligated to deepen their efforts from diverse positions for lasting resolutions. Key to the current debates was the perception of moral downside that was viewed as an obstacle in the running of schools, particularly secondary schools, in the Limpopo region of South Africa. The degenerative factor in the current context was central for this paper and research work was based on determining the extent to which some of the schools in the province deal with the perception of moral decay. Furthermore, the discourse was measured against the backdrop of the vision of the former President of the Republic of South Africa, Dr RN Mandela, whose contributions and initiatives for a better South Africa are viewed as iconic and legendary.

Schools and moral values

The excitement and hope of 1994 events that ushered in democracy in the country (SA) were so eventful that the country became an ‘instant celebrity’ across the world and a political and moral juggernaut of note. In the minds of many, it was going to defy imagination for a country that negotiated itself from the brink and became a beacon of hope in a continent so much characterised by blood, tyranny and coups. According to some sceptics, the hopes of a rising phoenix are being dashed by insatiable human greed. Educational theory, referred to earlier, suggests that thought is premised on a totality of disciplines and therefore thinking informs perception and perception triggers debates that may shape practice. Conflict arises when each of the strands in the equation collides rigorously with no truce in the offing. Construed in context, debates have arisen on whether or not schools are terrains of moral

values in addition to nurturing knowledge and skills. Witte (2012: 503) argues that “education as a public activity is inescapably political”. His contention is that however attractive the call for political non-interference in school matters may seem, reality shows that politics and education have never been separable centuries over. In addition, society has vested interests on all educational matters irrespective of who is in power.

In case of South Africa, these views are further attested corroborated by teacher union activities in schools. Mahlangu and Pitsoe (2011: 365) further contend that in many ways the battle for territorial control in organisation has increased in recent times thanks to unionism. Even so, conflicts in schools have become so bloated to the extent that factions have compromised the core business of school in the pursuit of narrow partisan interests. Accordingly, such interests are triggered by factors such as status, ideological positions and philosophical outlooks; styles, principles, values and beliefs (Mahlangu & Pitsoe, 2011: 365). One of the Chapter 11 organisations called Section 27 that took the Minister of Education to South Gauteng High Court for non-delivery of books in some schools in Limpopo Province during 2012 school year further attested the recognition of crises engulfing schools in the country. In the same year, teacher union, SADTU, also embarked on work-to-rule protest action, at first, demanding the dismissal of the Minister of Basic Education and the Director-General in the same Department. However, the demand for the dismissal of the Minister was subsequently rescinded after negotiations between the Department and the Union. According to Louw (2009: ii)

Moral degeneration is a universal phenomenon, which negatively affects many societies, also the South African society. The South African society, with specific reference to family life and school life is experiencing a serious moral breakdown. The media is constantly reporting this breakdown, which is evident in social ills such as a general lack of discipline and self-discipline, violence, poverty, unemployment, a high crime rate, promiscuity, school vandalism and corruption.

The preceding excerpt underlines the seriousness through which moral decline in schools is perceived. In addition, it punctuates the acute nature with which it manifests itself within the society. The decline of morals permeates various strands of societal structures and colludes with weaker enforcement codes engulfing society. The value system is being eroded at an alarming rate (Bak, Bossi, & Schuhr, 2009; Louw, 2009) and has become unenviable focal

point and the young and old are seamless and conniving parties in the episode. It is this observation that has evoked and adduced a challenge for me to research about this particular phenomenon. In the context of preparing this paper, I decided to pay attention to depraved factors occurring in some of the schools and villages that give rise to deteriorating value system and the need to get individual accounts from participants to the study. Furthermore, to determine the causes of downward slide in our value system afflicting schools within the region as specified. Underpinning human conduct is the question of conscience. Human beings are bestowed with traits such as conscience, fear, creativity, respect and drive or urge to restrict actions considered unethical (LaFollette & LaFollette, 2007).

In essence, human actions in many cases are preceded by the will to act and the mind is well placed to inform decisions. Consequently, no one can claim oblivion from deliberate act unless an act occurs as a result of compulsion (LaFollette & LaFollette, 2007). History affirms that brave men and women refused “immoral orders on grounds of conscience” because conscience encourages tolerance and moral conduct. Even with military conscription there are conscientious objectors who stand firm in their convictions. It is against this background that acting immorally is an act of personal choice. Some writers observe that the term ‘moral’ has had an inconsistent historical connotation in South Africa consequent to the legacy of apartheid colonialism (Andrews & Ellman, 2002; Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Swartz, 2006). Adding to the complex nature of the morality argument, it transpired that in a workshop held on April 2013, 08-12; in which lecturers from School of Education (of the University of Limpopo) argued intensely about morality. The argument became an interesting topical issue of discussion for over an hour and it further became clear that finding solution to moral questions is a daunting exercise. The workshop got polarised into two major groupings, viz. those who viewed school as an appropriate instrument for moral mentoring on the one hand; and those who see morality as a component to be natured in community structures and faith groups.

Following the heated discussion on moral issues in the workshop referred to above, strong argument ensued suggesting that a school is well positioned to nature moral questions and can best handle the issue. This is because the school is perceived as a microcosm of community values and therefore an extension of community’s value system. Strengthening this view is the perception of a school as an assemblage of learners from almost same environment and consequently, a fertile terrain for nurturing many issues of moral nature.

Although this view may arguably sound pertinent, it is however too simplistic in the opinions of other people if the aim and role of school is anything to go by. The role of school is seen mainly as nurturing learners with skills, knowledge and values in preparation for future careers or world of work. Furthermore, schools are obligated to foster a well-rounded human being whose contribution to civilisation would remain strong and sustainable, so the argument goes. On the other hand, there are those who view moral questions as the terrain of community structures and faith groups.

The Mandela factor

As pointed out in the latter part of the introduction the person of former President, Dr RN Mandela hangs fittingly in the annals of South African history and that of the world. His contribution to the liberation of this country from apartheid hegemony and subsequent ascension to the highest political office in the land are regarded by many as iconic. During his presidency and beyond, Mandela initiated significant initiatives that came to edify the country and its image before the international community. His charisma, humility and moral stature were a source of inspiration to the nation and the world. It is against this background that any form of moral downslide in schools represents atrocious setback to his legacy and the iconic example he bestowed to the country. Essentially, any form of moral decay triggers a disturbing phenomenon that spite Mandela's glittering legacy. The acknowledgement by the Ministry of Basic Education of crises in schools, the court rulings in favour of Section 27 agency, and incidents of abuse, corruption, and general maleficence in state departments are serious indictment on those who follow his example that, by and large, signifies glory personified. In his memoir *Long Walk to Freedom*, President Mandela observes:

The policy of apartheid created a deep and lasting wound in my country and my people. All of us will spend many years, if not generations, recovering from that profound hurt (1995: 384).

In this extract Mandela acknowledges the 'profound hurt' unleashed by the apartheid system and also reminded South Africans that it is likely to take decades, if not centuries, for the country to mend from the damage inflicted by the system. The question that is on the lips of many citizens, remains whether or not the path that current leadership collective pursues is in keeping with his legacy? Some critics contend that events manifesting in the country suggest a different path playing out, particularly, within school environments and in society and as

such it these events upset his legacy. It is common knowledge that Madiba played a pivotal role in the preparation of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa that ushered in democracy, freedom for all South Africans and social justice. These factors constitute some of the cornerstones upon which the country's freedom and justice rest. However, the crime rate, poor schooling culture, deprived services delivery and increasing youth unemployment rate including other social ills continue to cloud the successes achieved so far. In their work on morality in education, Merry and Karsten (2010: 497) argue that the tendency to restrict learners callously in their schooling amount to abuse of liberty. The authors highlighted in a significant way conflict that arises from liberty abuse in respect of schooling.

It may seem incredible to think that in the South African context, the relationship between liberty and schooling has become so blurred and nebulous in the main owing to the fact that liberty is misconstrued in some communities. This assertion demonstrates conflict of assumptions vis-à-vis anticipation. It may also seem credible to think that communities understood the meaning of freedom differently from responsible realities of self-affirmation. This diction undergirds the need to strengthen community education regarding implications of freedom without responsibility. The 'hurt' that Mandela was referring in the excerpt appeared to have meant anger, vengeance and self-destruction in the eyes of certain groups in communities. The culture of impatience is leading to the culture of mayhem and anarchy. This is amplified in such incidents as lawlessness that often translates into xenophobic incidents and decadence including felonious entitlements permeating South Africa's societal strata.

Community, faith groups and moral values

South African communities are characterised by important assemblages such as community forums, village meetings, women clubs, churches, mosques, etc. regarded as fundamental filaments of community networks. To remind the reader, one argument that emerged in the workshop was that it is not the role of the school to address moral questions but structures established in communities such as those alluded to above. In addition, they argue that the church's role and that of other faith groups is mainly to handle moral questions. This, according to the argument, is a well placed terrain at which the human child's value system can best be harnessed and nurtured. They content, for example, that when a girl child is sexually abused by an older male person and, in addition, another one falls pregnant; these are moral issues which, should be handled by the courts and community or even the church

for that matter. Seungbae (2011), for example, further argues that schools and churches are the embodiments of societal welfares and values.

Research Question

What propels immoral acts in our schools and to what extent can these acts be prevented? Opinions vary on what defines morality and whose responsibility to safeguard it. I read government reports and policies interspersed with interviews across villages and schools ranging from teachers, learners and parents; but the whole process is always characterised by elusive and somewhat evasive responses. Essentially, what comes out clearly in the whole exercise is the understanding that moral decay is engulfing our schools and society at large. It is against this contention that I wanted to find out the underlying causes of the decay and consequent breakdown of our value system and also to suggest possible solutions going forward. Whereas it is argued that it takes considerable amount of time to construct a house but, conversely, it only takes seconds to bring it down, I argue that it requires collective and concerted effort to shape society. It is through infinitesimal efforts including minute building blocks such as this kind of research that may contribute, however small, to possible solutions.

Methodology

The paper was premised on determining the extent to which moral decay in some of our schools and villages has deteriorated. Incidents of physical violence, rape, torture, abuse, etc. typify our daily lives in the country. To comprehend the complexities of these events, I decided on qualitative approach because it is especially strong in describing and exploring phenomena and generating tentative explanations (Patton, 1990). Furthermore, it is very helpful in adding new dimensions of understanding, e.g. understanding groups from the insider's perspective, understanding the importance of local context, studying complicated processes that occur over time, etc. (Cohen & Manion, 2009). In my opinion, this approach was particularly useful in elucidating participant's views and sharing their experiences without fear and coercion. It is important that when the researcher seeks information in relation to views or opinions of people, a pertinent approach is decided upon and, in the current context, qualitative approach became appropriate for achieving the goals as planned.

The present paper adopted phenomenological approach and applied case study method when information was gathered. Key factor when adopting phenomenological method involves

such questions, for example, as: what is meaning? What is the lived experience of individual or individuals?

Key characteristics, amongst other things, involved attempting to describe the lived experience of the participants as well as trying to get into life-world of participants through in-depth interviews. It enabled participants to keep their preconceived opinions in abeyance in the interests of factual developments on the ground (Patton, 1990). Construed in context, the method enabled me to elicit the appropriate data significant to understand the moral breakdown in the schools under the spotlight. It is crucial to provide space for participants to explain events as they unfold and to assert their concrete interpretations in line with their views. In this respect, credible data emerged that helped to comprehend the prevalent conceptions of existing value system.

Population

In this paper, eight schools whose teachers have enrolled for Bachelor of Education Honours (B.ED. Hons.) degree/qualification at Limpopo University, were identified for the study. In each school, five educators were interviewed along with twenty learners (i.e. 10 learners in grade 11, and 10 learners from grade 12). Five parents from each school representing School Governing Bodies (SGB) also were interviewed. The following is a graphical representation of the population:

School	Teachers	Learners	Parents	Total
School A	5	20	5	30
School B	4	16	3	23
School C	3	18	4	25
School D	5	20	4	29
School E	5	17	3	25
School F	3	15	4	22
School G	5	19	5	29
School H	4	20	4	28
GRAND TOTAL	34	145	32	211

Table 1: The table represents the population of teachers, learners and parents who took part in the study

Sample

Purposive sampling was used for information gathering as part of the focal point of the paper. Purposive sampling is designed to handpick cases for inclusion in the sample based on their unique characteristics. As a result, they consolidate and address the sample for precise objectives envisioned by the researcher (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2006). I used purposive sampling to address the main question as it relates to issues of moral decay mentioned earlier. By choosing purposive sampling, I hoped that the whole process yielded pertinent and accurate results. Semi-structures Interviews based on one-on-one design were largely used in the collection of information. These were interspersed with group interviews to acquire and adduce appropriate information from participants. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2002) assert that semi-structured interviews are credible in many ways because they are preceded by high level planning and furthermore, topics and issues are specified in advance. In addition, the strength of semi-structured interviews is that the comprehensiveness of data makes it somewhat systematic for each respondent. Mertens (1998) further adds that when using semi-structured interview, the researcher should consider such aspects as local language as well as sharing the purpose of the interview, something I found very helpful in the present study. Preference was made for the use of these techniques to ensure that participants yielded as much information as they possibly could.

Data Analysis

It is important to ensure a suitable mind-map for analysing data. I used four-phase process to analyse data recommended by scholars such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2006). According these scholars, the researcher, first, has to search for “significant statements” (i.e., words, phrases, sentences, etc.) that have particular meaning to the participants or have direct relevance to the phenomenon being studied. Second, some researchers like to make a list of their interpretations of the significant statements (these are called the “meanings”). Third, the researcher searches for themes in the data (i.e., in the significant statements and meanings). Fourth, the researcher attempts to construct statements of the fundamental structure of the experience (e.g. of what it is like to experience the death of a loved one) that will create a vicarious experience in the reader of the description. In the present context, I used statements to construct themes from information provided by the participants. The statements were codified into meaningful themes that assisted in the analysis of the data.

Results

As indicated earlier in this paper, three schedules of semi-structured questions were prepared for teachers, learners and members of School Governing Bodies to determine whether or not there is moral degeneration in their schools. The responses for each group of participants were remarkable and they yielded sufficient data that addressed the main question of this paper. Some of the questions included, for example, how long have you worked in the school? Would you say the school has problems of moral relapse? How is the scale of drug abuse? What is your opinion about home-school bond regarding your school? These and other questions formed the bases of the schedules. They produced remarkable data that I considered pertinent for the research question. Furthermore, they also assisted in providing alternative thinking to prevent further decline in moral fibre in the affected schools.

Discussion and arguments

The interviews yielded significant perspectives among the three groups regarding their understanding of moral conduct in relation to behaviour of learners. It emerged that in the opinions of the teachers, moral conduct has a lot to do with, amongst other things, lack of learner cooperation, poor work ethics, poor lesson attendance, lack of strong parental involvement on school matters, alcohol and drug abuse. Perspectives of learners regarding moral decay ranged from poor school management, drug abuse on a limited scale to blaming teachers for lack of commitment to their work. The responses from parents were also negative and accusing learners and teachers for their reprehensible conduct that compromise the integrity of their schools. Their responses could be categorised as ranging from describing their schools as teetering on the verge of moral disaster, blaming other parents for not doing enough to the desire for strengthening home and school support.

The preceding categories represent the generic views of the participants although, in some instances, participants were not as clear as one would expect particularly with learners. The responses were characterised by evasiveness and elusiveness and one could attribute the action perhaps to fear of reprisals in spite of the assurance to the contrary. Interestingly, when diagnosing these responses, a pattern emerges that point towards 'blame game' and 'finger pointing' as well accusation and counter accusations from amongst the participants. Remarkably, none of the parties shows responsibility for contributing to towards the decay save for parents to blame the home for not doing enough to help out. As pointed out earlier, educational thought suggests that change processes are undergirded by interdisciplinary

cooperation to ensure success of human enterprise. In this context, it is prudent that to stem the tide of moral decay in schools all stakeholders have to work together vigorously at all times by being frank and honest with each other on all issues of education. No discipline can succeed without embracing the values of others and this assertion finds solace in multi-discipline as one of the fundamental bottom lines for success in any human endeavours.

Whereas it may be argued that finger pointing and blame game is as old as man, it cannot be justified that schools are allowed to go down the stream of ignorance without a significant effort to stop the decay with vigour. The need to prevent schools from downward slide has become even more imperative given the legacy of South Africa's democracy founding father, Dr RN Mandela. He initiated many projects during and after his presidency to address social ills afflicting the nation. As pointed out earlier his leadership was hailed across the globe as iconic in many respects only because he was perceived as the embodiment of reconciliation, peace, social justice and freedom. In Mandela, the human spirit of colossal magnitudes was personified and is no wonder many people around the world regards him as representative of perpetual and victorious battles of freedom and justice. Sadly, at the time of preparing this article President Mandela had just passed on at 20: 50 on Thursday 5th, December 2013. The news of his death was announced by the South African President, Mr. Jacob Zuma around 23:30 on the same day. The projects he initiated range from HIV AIDS campaign, the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No. 34 of 1995 (Taylor, 2007), which gave rise to Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Mandela Children Hospital to moral regeneration and value for life among South African people and the peoples of the world.

In the context of these values and assertions, it is prudent therefore to establish whether or not moral decadence could be apprehended? Central to moral regeneration is the values espoused and encouraged by the person of Mandela. The negative perceptions towards learners harboured by participants in relation to their generic conduct on moral discipline represent complete opposite dimension to Mandela legacy. Reference to drug abuse cited by both the learners and teachers, teenage pregnancy, poor class attendance and lack of discipline are strong cases in point suggestive of a community of learners going asunder. It is therefore important going forward that a new beginning in families is introduced for respect to the values articulated in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act, Act No. 106 (as amended) are fostered and practiced in families. It may be a strong indictment to all players if the perceived moral down slide is not curtailed as a matter of urgency.

Some scholars highlight the issue of perceived home factors as some of the overriding features contributing to violent behaviour among secondary school learners. In the opinions of these scholars, for example, factors such as “poor relationship between parents and children”; “manner of disciplining children at home”; and “low level of home supervision” (Poipoi, Agak and Kabuka, 2011: 30). These factors are consistent in part with the findings in this paper that suggest poor home-school relationship and were found to be significant in the upbringing of children. Furthermore, the binary factor that of girls serving dual roles as mothers and school children simultaneously creeps in from the point of view of these authors. It is accepted that learners found in this situation usually underperform in their studies. This, in part, is said to be caused by elements such as life stressors and poor resources to learners from indigent background. According to Louw, Mokhosi and van den Berg (2012) learners from indigent background experience considerable stress as a result of home conditions. Conditions of this nature, they argue, translate also into poor classroom performance and inconsistent behaviour that has considerable impact on the general conduct of a learner. It is interesting that these viewpoints and contradictions would assist in shaping existing education policies or would instil a new sense of introspection by the powers that be. Either way, based on the findings or the vision of Dr R.N. Mandela, the need to revitalise moral values in schools has become even more imperative.

Conclusion

To remind the reader, the main question of the study was to investigate causes of moral decay in some schools in the Limpopo Province and propose possible solutions going forward. In the light of the categories enlisted above, it is incontestable that all the participants affirm the challenges in relation to the value system in our schools and no quick fixes are readily available to confront the status quo. The teachers are blaming the learners and lack of firmness from the state for declining values. They further contend that government policies exacerbate the situation (through ambiguous policies) and these factors lead to acute down slide in moral values. On the other hand, learners point an accusing finger to teachers and management of schools for the challenges of moral decay. Parents are not optimistic either and their accusations are levelled against teachers and they also seem to accept the blame that they are not doing enough to help schools to apprehend the problems. They further acknowledge that home-school bond needs to be emboldened as part of confronting the crisis of declining morals.

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