

## **THE NEED FOR ODL STUDENT TEACHERS' AWARENESS OF ETHICAL PROFESSIONAL TRAINING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

No ethical and professional development of student teachers can take place without the ethical and professional conduct of mentor teachers. A need to determine whether teacher training programmes need to present more in-depth and authentic learning experiences that deal specifically with ethical behaviour is an important issue for all residential and open distance learning (ODL) teacher training institutions. The problem regarding the professional image of teachers is a huge concern in view of the recent reports of teacher misbehaviour, which still occurs and is even escalating according to the newspapers. The aim is to determine the nature of ethical behaviour of teachers and how to equip ODL student teachers for ethical behaviour in their teaching careers. A qualitative research approach was used. The article draws on data generated from documents and a document analysis was done to interpret the data. The professional code of conduct, emphasised by the South African Council for Educators (SACE), was used as a theoretical framework. It became clear from the data that examples of unethical behaviour exist and that there is a need for the introduction of modules in teacher training programmes with the focus on authentic learning experiences that will enhance the ethical professional development of students during the training years.

**KEY TERMS:** Ethical behaviour, ethical leaders, mentor teachers, professional development, professional code of conduct, unethical behaviour

### **PROPOSAL**

The ethical conduct and professionalism of teachers, who often act as mentor teachers, have an undeniable impact on student teachers and could determine their ethical or unethical future behaviour in the teaching profession. Current media reports (Mtshali 2011:6; *The Star* 2012:18; Matlala 2012:6; *Cape Times* 2012; Govender 2012:12; Mtshali 2012:5; Joubert 2012:7; *The Star* 2012:16; *The Mercury* 2012:5) reveal information on the ethical behaviour of teachers, which is a concern, as it involves moral decisions and ethical conduct that are values-laden and have an impact on the professional image of teachers and their responsibility to act as role

models for learners, student teachers, parents and in the community in which they live.

As the author is involved in ODL teaching practice modules and wants to incorporate authentic learning activities in teacher training programmes in order to promote ethical professional development, knowledge of current ethical behaviour is imperative. If student teachers can be made aware of ethical behaviour in the teaching profession and be equipped with skills, knowledge and values in order to behave ethically, they can become ethical role models and leaders, not only for learners, but also for parents and in the community.

Against this background, the main aim of the research under review is to identify the current ethical behaviour of teachers in order to determine authentic learning experiences that will promote student teachers' ethical professional development. Two objectives can be derived from the main aim; namely, (1) to discuss professional ethics for the teaching profession, and (2) to identify strategies for authentic learning experiences for student teachers during the training years. Concepts such as professional development, a code of conduct, professional ethics; ethical behaviour and authentic learning experiences guide the research.

Within a qualitative research perspective, discourse analysis – as a qualitative research design or strategy – has been chosen to obtain data. Data collection is carried out by choosing unsolicited texts such as existing visual materials, namely, newspaper articles. Evidence of current ethical behaviour of teachers, as reported in newspaper articles, was used to gain an understanding of the research problem and to analyse, present and discuss the data. Data was interpreted according to the literature review and ethical framework to clarify the collective educational meanings that may be underlying these practices.

Against this background the study is informed by two theoretical frameworks: the ODL framework of Jarvis, namely teaching the whole people through distance education, and Kant's ethical theory. These two theoretical frameworks, as well as literature study, is used to interpret the data in order to present in-depth findings.

### **Professional ethics for the teaching profession**

According to Lategan (2003:220) ethics is a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary science that analyses reality from the place and functions of principles and values. Ethics also studies the effect that it has on personal lives and social structures. Professional ethics structure the conduct of people in the workplace. The employee, as well as the employer, has to respect ethical principles and values. However, these values do not always guarantee ethical conduct (Lategan 2009:121). According to Lategan (2009), ethical conduct must never result in mechanically oriented actions, but must be personally integrated in the heart and soul of every person. Therefore, it has to be connected with cultural and religious backgrounds in order to assure ethical behaviour (Lategan 2009:129).

### **Unethical behaviour of teachers**

Apart from all the emphasis on the ethical behaviour of teachers, misconduct on the part of teachers is increasingly being examined. Most notably, media focus has expanded to teachers who have sexual relationships with learners. The majority of

the educators who abuse learners are classroom teachers, followed by coaches (Knoll 2010: 371-373).

In a somewhat broader sense, Hallak and Poisson (2005:3) find a variety of misbehaviours; namely, embezzlement of education finance, demands for unauthorised fees for admission, absence of teachers from schools, and leakage of information before examinations. It is not surprising that the price of such unethical behaviour can be costly.

Research conducted by Barrett, Headley, Stovall and Witte (2006:430-431) on teachers' own perceptions of the seriousness of violations of ethical standards revealed three general domains of violations. The first domain of violations referred to violations of boundaries between educators and learners, namely nonprofessional relationships, which place learners at serious risk for emotional or physical harm. The second domain involves carelessness with regard to interpersonal behaviour, such as gossiping to colleagues about learners and speaking disparagingly about other educators to colleagues, as well as carelessness in instructional practice, in other words, educators coming to classes unprepared and engaging in classroom activities that are not relevant to teaching and learning. The third domain involves subjectivity in grading and delivery of instruction. Examples of unethical behaviour of educators in this domain are: raising grades due to parental pressure, and giving learners higher grades if they like the learners.

## **Research design**

Within a qualitative research perspective, discourse analysis – as a qualitative research design or strategy – has been chosen to obtain data.

The method used for this research project is discourse analysis, which originates from Phenomenology. The purpose of discourse analysis is to study the significant of words within larger “chunks” of text, such as conversations or discourse. Discourse analysis is, at times, defined as the analysis of words “beyond the sentence” (Mouton 2011:168). According to Henning, Van Rensburg and Smith (2005:118-122), the style of reasoning is primarily inductive by interpreting and making sense of portions of information. Meanings need to be found in the discourse, the language behaviour of the participants and the way in which sense can be made of their reality. Discourse analysis needs a frame within which actions can be placed in order to make sense out of reality and how the discourse holds in a social context. Metaphors and symbolic use of language, which are pertinent indicators of meaning, should be identified. The strategy to collect data was discourse analysis, a method that invokes context, both “distal” (social class, institutional context and cultural settings) and “proximate” (physical setting) (Wetherall 2001:380-390). Data was captured by analysing newspaper reports about the ethical behaviour of teachers. The strategy used to analyse the data was document analysis. Documents are tangible manifestations that describe people's experiences, actions and values (McMillan & Schumacher 2001:451). Moreover, analysing documents enabled the researcher to recognise, understand and then synthesise the data to present a perception of the phenomenon that may not have been directly observable (McMillan & Schumacher 2010:24).

## **Findings**

The data captured from newspaper reports were from 2010 till 2012 and can be visualised in the table below:

	Number in 2010	Number in 2011	Number in 2012
<b>Reports of unethical behaviour</b>	26	31	8
<b>THEMES</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>
Sexual misconduct:abuse/rape/	12	7	1
Absenteeism	1	7	3
Inappropriate conduct <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arriving late</li> <li>• Making girls strip</li> <li>• Arriving drunk at school</li> <li>• Using drugs in classrooms</li> <li>• Assaulting learners (beating)</li> <li>• Murder</li> </ul>	1	1	1 1 1 1 1
Strikes	12	6	1
Taking leave against departmental policy (illegal sick leave/incapacity leave)		2	
School principals failing to monitor teacher performance or absenteeism		1	
Insubordination			
Corporal punishment	1	3	
Unethical behaviour of teacher unions	2	3	

## Discussion

It became clear from the data that examples of unethical behaviour should be viewed in a serious light and this has led to the unambiguous conclusion that there is a need for modules in teacher training programmes with the focus on authentic learning experiences that will enhance the ethical professional development of students during the training years.

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