Ethical Practices of Educational Administrators: A Nepalese Experience

Prakash C. Bhattarai

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Abstract

Ethics is an important part of administrative behavior for a head schoolteacher. A school often proceeds in the path of success if it is led by an ethically sound leader. However, professional ethics are largely thought to emerge from the conscience of the administrator. This article is based on a study undertaken with the purpose of identifying how the ethics of educational administrators are practiced in public secondary schools in Nepal. The study was carried out using a humanistic paradigm with a series of in-depth interviews and focus group discussion through a phenomenological approach.

The study found that professional codes of conduct for school administrators need to be well defined, well internalized, and focused on the culture and context in question. One way to do this is to require representatives of all of the school's stakeholders to discuss and develop the professional codes of school administrators. This sensitive and participatory approach in the development and adoption of the ethical rules generates a "feeling of ownership," responsibility, and commitment among all school stakeholders. However, at present, there are no such provisions to understand social interaction in particular social settings to ensure participation of all the stakeholders in the formation of ethical codes of educational administrators.

1. Introduction

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Several stakeholders—including teachers, students, and administrators—are engaged in school activities. Starratt (2005) observed that educational leadership was productively conceived in terms of service to students, staff, and society. The participation of a relatively larger group of people produced several ideas and values. Thus, it is "quite difficult for them to trace out the real effectiveness of educational values and principles on education sector" (Tschannen-Moran, 2009, p. 219). In opposition, ethical practices are a necessary part of organizational life (Bellingham,

2003; Langlois, 2011; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2003; Starrat, 2011). Schools adopt rules, procedures, and other formal mechanisms to guide the behavior of organizational participants. Because the field of education is rife with ethical problems and dilemmas, "it is urgent that well intentioned special education professionals learn and apply the relevant ethical practices" (Fiedler & Haren, 2008, p. 2).

School leadership, the most important component of the school system, is considered important to maintain school activities. The administrator's code of ethics is devoted to guiding teachers' behavior and job performance that, in long run, work to fulfill the tasks of education. As professional ethics guide behavior patterns of the head teachers, it is regarded as one of the important parts in managing learning activities of school. Moreover, the ethics of the administrators are not only limited to the school premises but also stretch beyond it. However, when we observe the ethical practices in a school, ethical considerations are found to be very fragile. In some cases, school administrators are criticized for unethical practices. Therefore, in the present context, it was important to focus on the studies of the phenomenon of ethics in a school setting. This article was based on a qualitative study undertaken to identify how ethics of educational administrators are practiced in public secondary schools in Nepal. This paper includes the methodology of the study, a discussion of how the ethics of educational administrators were practiced in public secondary schools in Nepal. During the discussion, this paper examines major drawbacks in the implementation of practice. Within th conclusion, there is a discussion of possible ideas to incorporate in the policy documents to maintain school as ethical workplace.

2. Methodology

This study was carried out using a humanistic paradigm (Flick, 2006; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) with phenomenological enquiry. During the study, the researcher conducted a series of in-depth interviews and group discussions based on research questions with the eight teachers, two head teachers, one School Management Committee (SMC) member, and ten students of the two schools. Saturation of information (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) was obtained while accessing the data from the research participants. In the course of the interviews, the research participants were given background information about the study. Then, for the purpose of the interviews, the participants were invited to participate in generating data for the research. They were also encouraged to ask questions about their participation and were assured of the ethical norms the researcher would maintain. During the interviews, the research participants were asked to share their experiences with the ethical practices of head teachers while the researcher played the role of an empathic listener who occasionally probed in order to delve more deeply into particular lines of thought or descriptions. The research assistant carefully wrote what and how the participants expressed their views. At the end of each interview, the researcher asked the research participant if he or she wanted to add any further comments.

The researcher also asked the participants' perspectives on how they experienced the interview so that their feedback could serve as a guideline for subsequent interactions. Every day when the researcher returned from the field, the research assistant filled in gaps where the researcher was not able to write what was expressed by the participants. While writing the field note, the researcher summarized the field notes in his own words. For the purpose of data analysis, the researcher transcribed all the data that he generated from the participants. The transcribed data was edited with the original record, and the data was used to create themes and to code. The codes were categorized to seek meanings. Thereafter, the researcher drew the research finding and linked some components of the phenomenon and showed their connections with the themes found in literature, theories, and personal reflections. The themes generated were: implementation of duty and responsibility; implementation of dialogue-based ethics; implementation of context-based ethics; and implementation of the roles of teachers, head teachers, SMC, students, and teachers' professional organizations. The author examined these themes obtained from the perceptions of the teachers, head teachers, and students in order to find the answer to the above research question. The following section examines these themes obtained in the process of data analysis.

3. Implementation of Duty and Responsibility

Duty and responsibility are major concerns for head teachers. The participants in this study believed that the time allocated by the school administrator for their school was to be dedicated only to the school. However, some administrators did not care about their jobs. For example, a teacher revealed that the administrator remained absent for a long time or doesn't stay at school even in school hours (10 a.m-4 p.m.).

A chairperson (SMC) of one school had a similar opinion. He said, "Head teachers often engage in other fields of work to generate more income. They focus less on their administrative responsibilities." However, the ideas of school administrators in this regard were different from that of the teachers. One of the head teachers said that teachers hardly take care of their professional ethics. Teachers think that the teaching profession is just for their survival, and some teachers think that they are only "passing their time" in school. He further explained that teachers are not dutiful and responsible to the students: "We, teachers have our responsibility towards the future of the students. We want to fulfill our responsibility. However, this has not been fulfilled yet". "For example, some of us go outside for tea and snacks in half time, but we don't come back again. After going out from school compound in the name of tea and snacks we mostly engage in our personal work". At this moment, some students might be wounded within the school compound and there are no persons to take them to hospital.

When asked the same questions to the students in FGDs, they said, "Duty is a major concern for our head teacher". But the students in another school said that their head

teacher attends school just to pass time. This shows that roles of head teachers are perceived differently by different informants. As a result, the head teachers of some schools performed some duties very well, while for others it was no more than just a way to pass time.

4. Implementation of Diversity-Based Practices

Head teachers should behave the same with all students. No head teacher should discriminate between students on the basis of caste, class, gender, religion, language, etc. These ethical norms are appreciated by all participants of the study. In order to know the practices of these ethics, I asked my research participants how these diversity-based ethical practices were implemented at school. The themes observed in the transcribed interviews were gender, caste/ ethnicity, and religion.

Gender

Head teachers are supposed to practice equality among students and teachers of all genders. However, some of the research participants (students) argued that head teachers do not say anything when teachers punish male students and forgive females because females are perceived to be weaker than males. Head teachers must use common ethics to punish and reward both the male and female students.

In a Nepalese context, males are privileged in comparison to females. Female teachers cannot give much time to school activities, and for this reason, some school administrators do not like to appoint female teachers in their school. In this regard, a female teacher explained: "Males are believed to possess higher morals. Males can simply order their wives to bring rice (bhat) for them. We (females) do not only cook but wash the dishes before we go to school. This always hinders our performance in school". This might be a reason why a quota of female teachers were replaced by male teachers in the school.

Students of the studied schools claimed that the behavior of their head teachers were discriminatory, particularly in relation to punishment and reward for male and female students. A student observed that male teachers often disparage female students because female students do not perform their tasks as well as male students. They also stated that teachers often question female students for harmless activities, like walking with a male student. Similarly, another student added that school administration asks them to explain what and why they (male and female students) talk together in a group.

Caste and Ethnicity

Caste and ethnicity are considered the ways of stratification in Nepalese society. Although discrimination based on caste and ethnicity is not considered positive, the research participants believed that it is observed in every school to some extent. In this

regard, a teacher informant said, "The discrimination isn't done at school and should not be, but it prevails throughout the country and in every school. Only it differs to some extent." A *dalit* student had heard of a practice of discrimination of a school near her hometown. She stated: "The school was built for all people over there. However, teachers said that they would not teach the lower caste students. A female teacher opposed the teacher and she was asked to resign. Later, it became an issue of public debate. Because of the debate, the lower caste students could participate in the exam; however, they did not get high marks". There was one reason for not receiving a good mark on the exam. It was because the examiner was the same teacher who opposed the entry of the student from the lower class in school.

In this regard, teacher informants said that discrimination based on caste, ethnicity, and gender do not prevail in their own school. However, *dalit* students observed discriminating practices in school. A *dalit* student said, "Some teachers often show discrimination in their behavior. When I ask them permission to go to office room to drink water[1], some of them say, 'no.' They do not say '*no*' for Brahmin and Chhetri students." A similar experience was described by a female student who belonged to an ethnic minority: "My Nepali pronunciation is not similar to the students who belong to the Brahmin and Chhetri families. When I say something, my teachers mimic my words and make jokes about it. My pronunciation is often ridiculed by teachers and students in the classroom. For this, I often feel humiliation".

When research participants were asked for their ideas on how to overcome this behavior, the head teacher of a school highlighted the importance of participation of every group of people in each activity within or outside the school. He blamed the older generations for not engaging all people of society in various activities to make a harmonized society. However, most participants raised the questions of the role of the head teachers in maintaining diversity-based practices within the school.

5. Implementation of Dialogue-Based Ethics

All research participants stated that if teachers, parents, management committee members, teachers' union members, and student representatives talk and work together, they could develop the ethics of the administrators or teachers. Administrators who do not care about the rules will then be obliged to follow ethical practices. One student held the view that this process of coming together to reach consensus ensures a feeling of ownership of ethical norms. In addition, this student noted that if some do not follow the norms, they should be reminded and asked to follow them. As one teacher said: "All rules and regulations that are formed and practiced by the head teacher may not be correct. To formulate rules, there must be staff meetings and we should invite the views of the parents. In this way, after preparing and following the internal policy, the performance would be better".

Currently, there is no provision to involve all stakeholders in the formation of teachers' ethics of school. A teacher said that it is necessary to develop a policy to ensure participation of all stakeholders to develop the administration's ethics. He further added that it is impossible to formulate rules and implement them by a single mechanism. Policy formulation must ensure the participation of all stakeholders.

A head teacher in this regard said that he failed to implement the ethical norms developed by teachers, students, and parents because the human mind does not want to be bound in rules and regulations. He stated: "We once developed codes of conduct for the teachers, students, and parents. However, it did not last for long. In fact, the code of conduct creates boundaries. But one does not want to stay in boundary. Students want to come outside from the class, especially in the leisure period". To maintain the ethics of school, teachers also have their role. However, teachers feel it is hard to maintain an ethical code of conduct, and they think that it is the duty of the head teacher. They do not want to bind themselves with the rules and regulations.

In some cases, maximum duty given to certain individuals was also responsible for the ineffective implementation of ethical codes. One teacher revealed that head teachers were given many duties beyond his available time: "We often have meetings in our school. Based on the decisions made in the meetings, we fix routine for our activities. However, we become weak in implementation. The reason is we allocate more duties to the head teachers. The head teacher can't perform them all because they demand more time than that available to him".

Monitoring and follow-up activities to ensure proper implementation of ethical codes in school were also reported to be weak. For example, the participants of a meeting might forget what the group had decided in the last meeting. A teacher school said, "When meeting is conducted in school, the decision of the meeting comes in practice for few days or weeks and slowly we begin to forget the minutes of the meeting." This indicates that dialogue-based ethics is another challenge to implement in the local context of school.

6. Implementation of Context-Based Ethics

People should concentrate less on individuals and their private moral decisions and more on the community and its moral health and welfare (Robinson & Garratt, 2004). Without considering community and social life, ethical codes cannot function. In fact, the state has developed a uniform policy for every school. However, it is hard to implement a uniform policy in each school of Nepal. A teacher at my research site said: The people who are living in the east [of Nepal] may not know the language about the center. Books are written in Nepali national language and Nepali language needs to be studied for everyone. In fact, Nepali language is spoken by the people of centre and they write the

book. The context and language of the text do not fit well everywhere in the country. One example was Indrajatra[1]. The subject matter of Indrajatra has limited or no use for the people outside Kathmandu although such matters are informative to study. In the same way, it is a fact that the poor students feel it is hard to write articles on rich culture since it is out of context for those students.

In the context of school, head teachers cannot develop their own policies. If they would like to extend the lunch break for an hour, the government won't accept it. Although ethics are context-based, these context-based practices are not functioning well since there is a provision that the center's rules are to be followed by any means.

Some research participants said that the ethics of the head teachers vary from time to time. A chairperson of an SMC explained that his head teacher and other teachers used to check the students' nails to see if they were properly trimmed. The teachers would also remind students to wash their hands with soap. In the present context, people are aware of such standards and it is not necessary to point them out. He also explained that cutting nails and washing hands is a practice that can change as times change. The above discussion indicates that ethical policies for school administrators are contextual and time specific. However, ethical policies are formulated from the center level, which do not consider the local issues and fail to cover the local context (Bhattarai, 2012). When contextual issues are not covered, ethical dilemmas can develop among school administrators.

7. Theoretical Underpinnings

Five ethical theories have been proposed and best used to describe ethics of principals within a school setting (Bhattarai, 2010). The theories are *contractarian, communitarian, conventionalism, relational, communicative*. Contractarian ethics claim that "moral values are legitimized through some kind of (largely implicit) social contract, an agreement to which all members give their voluntary consent to be governed by certain laws" (Robinson & Garratt, 2004, p. 73). This theory emphasizes justice and rights. Respect for the freedom and equal moral worth of each individual may be expressed in a slightly different way by an enumeration of fundamental political, social, and human rights that are shared by all persons (Jennings, 2003). In the context of the head teachers' ethics, there are two aspects: justice to the individual and justice to society as a whole. Being an employee of the state, a head teacher agrees to accept the state "provisions of policy" document. This document explains the head teachers' duties and responsibilities. However, this document hardly covers the local context of ethics, as explained in communitarian theory. There are several local contextual issues, and "virtues such as loyalty, sincerity, courage, reliability, trustworthiness, benevolence, sensitivity, helpfulness, cooperativeness, civility, decency, modesty, openness, cheerfulness, amiability, tolerance, reasonableness, tactfulness, wittiness, gracefulness, liveliness, magnanimity, persistence, prudence, resourcefulness, cool-headedness,

warmth, hospitality" (Bowden, 2005, p. 8) differ from place to place. The state-imposed document cannot describe these local virtues in detail.

The theories of ethics also includes one of the important components: conventionalism within the wider context of ethics. This includes "the aspect of traditions that moral values are whatever a society agrees to accept" (Hinman, 1994). These societal aspects of traditions also differ from place to place and time to time, which is not articulated in the state-centered document. The next aspect within larger ethics is relational theory. This includes the warm and harmonious relationships among stakeholders regardless of caste, creed, ethnicity, and gender. The entire school community staff should develop an understanding of, and an appreciation and a respect for, ethnicity and socioeconomic circumstances (Greenfield, 2004). In this regard, the state-centered document has included this aspect of diversity. However, the document cannot explain the exact situation of the context, and this generalized version may leave out certain relational aspects of the school community since the dimension of diversity differs from place to place.

Another influential ethical theory is communicative, proposed by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas. He believed that moral values gain their legitimacy through some kind of social contract, but one which involves dialogue. This is one of the key aspects to develop a school as an ethical workplace. Many ideas are established when school stakeholders discuss together and find a consensus for their mutual benefit. Hinman (1994) explained Habermas' ideas as "the best guarantee of arriving at a good and just social order is to follow certain procedures in constructing a dialogue about fundamental moral values" (p. 74). This contextual talk among stakeholders can develop codes of conduct for head teachers and other members of the school community. This participative approach among school members generates a feeling of "we" to implement the ethical policy. However, the state-centered document has not given priority to those issues. Without the support of government policy, the consensus developed at the local level cannot gain legitimacy. As a result, the consensus for principals' ethics at schools begins to be dysfunctional.

8. Conclusion and Implications

Because professional ethics guide behavior patterns, they are regarded as an important aspect of school activities (Fiedler & Haren, 2008). Therefore, the ethical rules are often framed and reframed in the school level, and head teachers know the ethics, too; however, these rules are not often implemented, and if they are implemented, they are not considered to the required extent. For example, discrimination based on caste and ethnicity was not considered positively. It is, however, observed in every school to some extent. In fact, the state has developed the uniform policy for ethical practice by school administration. However, it has been hard to implement uniform policy in each school of Nepal. Without considering the social life of the community, ethical codes cannot function. If teachers, parents, SMC members, teachers' unions, and student

representatives work together to develop the ethics of the head teachers, the synergy could be helpful as they work toward improvement. Those head teachers who do not currently care about the rules are also obliged to follow the ethics.

This sensitive and participatory approach in the development and adoption of the ethical rule generates a "feeling of ownership," responsibility, and commitment among all school stakeholders. There are no such provisions to understand social interaction in the particular social settings to ensure participation of all the stakeholders in the formation of ethical codes of educational administrators. Without such policy, if the rules are developed, their implementation cannot be effective. The initiation at the local level may not function effectively since days and weeks can go by between the time decisions are made in the meeting and their implementation. Therefore, scholars should stop looking for a single "silver bullet," macro model to boost ethics in all socioeconomic settings (Bhattarai, 2009) and instead choose a paradigm that will allow them to find their own micro model in every context.

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