An Investigation of Character Traits in the Context of Secondary Schooling in Namibia

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Abstract

Developing good character traits among learners is central to their moral development. And as such, schools in Namibia emphasize the importance of having good moral standards in learning settings through either morning assemblies or other organized school events. Further, schools are not only expected to enhance learners' intellectual development holistically, but also contribute to learners' moral development through either formal curriculum or extramural activities. This study aimed to examine how learners at one of the township secondary schools in northern Namibia practice good character traits by rating themselves on ethical statements representing four acceptable universal character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others.* Two hundred and sixty seven learners from grades 8 to 12 at Shuuveni Secondary School, a pseudonym, participated in this study. Learners were stratified and randomly selected. The descriptive survey research design was used for this study. Findings revealed that acquiring the character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others* could be either challenging or difficult to secondary school learners because of circumstances such as peer pressure, family and the socio-environments, they find themselves in. Study recommended that learners should be educated to internalize good character traits at schools because they can contribute to discipline as well as to general smooth functioning of the school.

Keywords: character traits; ethical behaviors; learners; morals; moral development; values

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1. Introduction and background

It has been almost two decades and a half of independence after Namibia, formally known as South West Africa, emerged out of colonial past. This apartheid legacy and the demographic reality of a diverse population widely scattered over the country has proved to be a challenge for the new government of the Republic of Namibia to provide access and relevant quality education to all its citizens. This is particularly true in the sense that before independence, schooling was an opportunity of the few [1]. However, at independence in early 1990, education became one of the basic and constitutional rights for every Namibia. Article 20 of the Namibian constitution provides that:

> *All persons shall have the right to education. Primary education shall be compulsory and the State shall provide reasonable facilities to render effective this right for every resident within Namibia, by establishing and maintaining State schools at which primary education will be provided free of charge [2].*

In response to the historical and cultural contexts that have impacted Namibia, among the values that learners should be equipped with are the good acceptable moral and ethical standards [3] These moral and ethical standards involve principles such as tolerance, responsibility, integrity, honesty, justice and fairness. These values are also expressed in the Namibian constitution as seen important in maintaining a diverse society. In a learning environment, these moral standards, acquired, foster acceptance, closer interactions and accountability among the various members, particularly when realizing that such values were either less regarded or totally under looked in the past education dispensation.

Notwithstanding in the context of the above, it is also critical to point out that as in the rest of Africa, communities take the responsibility to educate their children on important skills they need to function well in the society. For example, it is acknowledged and stressed in *Towards Education for All*, a policy document on the education doings of the Ministry of Education and Culture that has also set stage for education reform in new Namibia that,

> *We have always educated our children, and we did so long before what we now call schools were established in our country. The adults in our communities took responsibility for helping the new generation understand their environment, their society, and their responsibilities as members of that society. They also helped the new generation learn how to hunt, to distinguish between healthy and poisonous plants, to herd and heal the animals, and other skills they needed to function as adults in their communities [1]*

The most essential part of education has always been a passing on of norms and values [4]. This aspect is also realized by Reference [5] that education in Africa before the arrival of missionaries was mainly concerned with raising the person towards acceptable values and norms in order for that person to fit well in the immediate society. He stressed this point by saying:

> *Before the advent of Christiaan missionaries and Arabs in Africa, there existed no schools of the type*

that we have today. Nonetheless pre-colonial African communities had an education system which was informal in nature. In that education system no effort was spared by parents, grandparents and elder siblings during the socialization process to bring up the community members who perpetuated the values that helped the community to be integrated. These values included honesty, respect, obedience and generosity among others [5].

Shuuveni Seconday School opened its doors for the first time in 1980 as a Junior Secondary School. It was initially comprised of grades 8-10 but later was promoted to a secondary school level housing up to the 12th grade. The school became one of the education centers for learners who roamed the region in pursuing of education. New personnel with relevant academic and professional expertise were recruited.   Consequently, the school was recognized by becoming an International General Certificate Syndicate Examination (IGCSE) institution.

At the time of this study, Shuuveni Secondary School accommodated 600 hostel boarders and 340 day learners from grades 8 to 12. The learners' ages range approximately from 15 to 17 taken care by 37 teaching staff. Having relocated to new premises in 1990, the school has committed itself to an open door policy, thus, enjoyed closer relations with both parents and other stakeholders in the community.

2. Context of the study

The secondary school phase is an important period in the life of the learners because the school curriculum is designed to inculcate the values and attitudes necessary to prepare them for adult life, tertiary studies or direct entry into employment [6]. Thus, the importance of possessing good character traits in learners cannot be over emphasized as this issue is fundamental to learners' social development as well as to the moral well-being of an institution. As asserted earlier, developing acceptable moral values has been cherished in African societies even before the introduction of Western education [7]. At the time it focused on values such as obedience to authority, work ethic, team work, communal living etc. Now, most of these values are a part of the national school curriculum in Namibia which aim to:

 … foster the highest moral and ethical values of reliability, co-operation, democracy, tolerance, mutual understanding, and service to others; to develop the learner's social responsibility towards other individuals, family life, the community and the nation as a whole; to develop and enhance respect for, and understanding and tolerance of, other peoples, religions, beliefs, cultures and ways of life; and to promote equality of opportunity for males and females, enabling both genders to participate equally and fully in all spheres of society and all fields of employment [6].

Education should promote character developments based on values such as truthfulness, honesty, integrity, individual responsibility, humility, wisdom, justice, steadfastness and dependability, etc [8]. An African Child is also expected to demonstrate moral values which include honesty, truthfulness, sincerity, hardwork, tolerance, self-confidence, perseverance, humility, friendliness, understanding, hospitality, selflessness, kindness and protection of the weak [9; 10].

3. Theoretical framework

Analyzing issues of moral development within schools can be drawn on a number of theories. One of such relevant theories is the Moral Development Theory of Lawrence Kohlberg [11] which, on a whole, explains and links the thoughts, behaviors and feelings of an individual to his or her individual moral development. Kohlberg's theory of moral development is formally called the cognitive-developmental theory of moralization. In Kohlberg's theory, the age of the child is not fixed to any stage of development. Therefore, individuals are at different levels of development in their moral reasoning. In his viewpoints, some are slow; others are progressive. However, Kohlberg as cited in Reference [12] did indicate that "the development of moral thought is a gradual and continuous process as the individual passes through a sequence of increasingly sophisticated moral stages". In Kohlberg's outline, most children advance through three hierarchical levels of moral reasoning: pre-conventional, conventional and post-conventional. Each of these levels is made up of two different stages. In stage one, a child obeys rules to avoid being punished. In stage two, the child follows certain rules in order to be given rewards. When reaches stages three and four, he conforms to avoid disapproval by authorities and from a guilty conscience. In stage five, he conforms to maintain respect of an impartial spectator or to maintain a relation of mutual respect. Finally, in stage six, he conforms to avoid self-condemnation. Kohlberg believed that it is possible to promote moral development through formal education and social interaction. Reference [13] citing the work of Freud, Kohlberg and Piaget, pointed out that moral development is greatly influenced by closer associates such as peers, parents and by the culture and by the moral contexts which include school, family and religion. This is also realized by Reference [14] that, "it is within these contexts where moral values of what is right and wrong are learned by children."

As any secondary school, Shuuveni has established its own ethical rules and standards within which learners should conduct themselves. Some of these are explicitly expressed in the school's mission statement. I will therefore be important to examine the moral development and reasoning of the learners through formal and social interactional contexts that exists within the school.

3.1. Statement of the problem

When one of the authors of this paper joined the school (Shuuveni) as a Principal in July 2002, he observed that some good character traits such as *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others* were not really evident in the daily practice of school learners, as he would have liked because these "moral values and behaviors are relevant to individuals, society and the nation at large" [14]. One would wish to see learners acting responsibly and accountably in what they do in the school setting. Again children or youth "are supposed to grow morally good for their own social and life development" as explained by Santrock cited by Reference [13]. Reference [13] therefore, would argue that societies and nations with morally children and youths are more likely to prosper than societies characterized with immorality. If learners lack good character traits as it appears to be the case, then school authority should take the responsibility of inculcating these values into learners' everyday lives through actions and activities.

Based on this encounter and coupled with knowledge of existing views of ancient Greece philosophers such as Socrates who encouraged critical reflections on how human beings interact and what it means to be a "good"

person, we decided to investigate how the learners at Shuuveni perceive their own personal ethical behaviors. Socrates made a bold statement that the *unexamined life is not worth living.* It was against this background that the primary aim and objective of this present study is to investigate how learners at Shuuveni Secondary School perceive their moral standards when compared to the four character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others.*

3.2. Research question

The key research question guiding this study was: **"**How do learners at Shuuveni Secondary School perceive their moral standards when compared to the four character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others"?*

3.3. Research design and instruments

The descriptive survey research design was used since it was found appropriate both in collecting data and in fitting the purpose of the study which is to describe the learners' perceived ethical behaviours at Shuuveni Secondary School [15]. As a result, a one-page survey questionnaire was constructed to collect data from the learners. It had two sections. The first section requested learner participants to complete their demographic information such as grade, age and gender. The second section contained various statements reflecting the character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others.* Learners were expected to respond, on a Likert Scale, to each of the 16 statements to portray their level of agreement or disagreement.

3.3.1. Population and Sampling Procedures

The target population consisted of all 940 learners enrolled at school ranging from grades 8 to 12 at the time of study. Learners, as participants in the study, were stratified and randomly selected from their classrooms. All grade levels and class groups were represented in the study. The total number of participants from grades 8-12 was 267 learners, which represented 28% of the total school's learner population. Table 1 shows the distribution of these participants in terms of grade and gender. As indicated, the majority (152) of participants were female. Also, a majority of participants came from senior grades (11-12).

Table 1*: Distribution of participants in terms of grade and gender*

Grades	8	9	10	11	12	Total	%
Males	6	11	5	54	39	115	43
Females	14	9	12	53	64	152	57
Total	**20**	**20**	**17**	**107**	**103**	**267**	**100**

3.3.2. Data collection procedures

The researchers requested the permission from the parents to allow their children to participate in the study. The parents were requested to sign the consent form together with their children. Copies of the questionnaire were

given to teachers to distribute to the selected learners who would complete and return in sealed envelopes to their class monitors (captains), who would bring them to the school secretary after filling in. These distribution and collection system were chosen as one of the researchers is former school principal at the school and did not want to influence how the learners might respond to the questionnaire. Prior to the administration of the questionnaires, learners and their parents were assured confidentiality in treating the collected information.

4. Data analysis

The nature and purpose of the study called for the descriptive analysis of data. In specific terms, the Microsoft Excel programme was used to calculate the frequency of learners' responses that would be given in a form of percentage as the sums of all total values. This method has enabled the data to be analyzed, summarized and presented in tables and chart. After all descriptive statistics are suitable in summarizing data [16]. The other aspect in dealing with data was to determine if there were differences among learners' responses due to gender, age and grade.

5. Data presentation and discussion

In this study, both the presentation and discussion of the findings are presented in accordance to how the learners perceived their moral standards on the basis of the four character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others.*

5.1.1. Regarding the character trait of honesty…

It unfolded that both male and female learners in senior grades (11-12) were inclined to be dishonest. Learners who admitted to lying to teachers averaged between 47% for males to 38% for females. About 15% of male learners indicated they do cheat on examinations some of the time compared to 5% of females. The percentage of both male and female learners who have admitted to copying someone's work and handing them in the teacher is approximately 33%. About 46% of males and 38% of females admitted that they have taken things without the owner's permission.

For junior grades (8-10), the character trait of honesty results varied much in terms of gender and grades. For grade 8 males, no one has admitted cheating on examination but surprisingly 50% admitted lying to teachers and having taken things without the owner's permission. Females in grade 8 indicated they do not cheat in examinations but acknowledged taking things without the owner's permission and copying someone's works and handing them in to the teacher, respectively. Altogether, this comprises about 10%. However, 28% of females admitted to cheating in examinations compared to zero percentage of males. There was no significant difference in the way males and females rated themselves on the character trait of honesty. Academic dishonesty is a problem that occurs in all levels of education. Reference [17] researched on academic dishonesty at college levels, found that over three- quarters of students at the colleges who participated in their study admitted to cheating, while 99% indicated that almost all other students cheated. The Center for Academic Integrity in the States found that academic dishonesty lessened in elementary and junior high grades but become more widespread in high school grades (11 and 12) [18]. This trend, however, declined as learners progressed through college.

5.1.2. On the character trait of respect…

The majority of males in grades 11 and 12 perceive themselves as mostly respectful persons. About 15% rated themselves as being more disrespectful than respectful in a given situation. The majority of female learners in grades 11 and 12 also see themselves as respectful in the four given situations. There was only 11% of female participants from senior grades who were willing to disclose their disrespectful behaviors. At the junior grades (grades 8-10), males and females except for females in grade 9 perceived themselves as being respectful in those given situations. The grade 9 females acknowledged more of their disrespectful behaviors compared to their fellow classmates.

5.1.3. On the character trait of self-discipline…

Both males and female learners in grade 11 and 12 see themselves as fairly disciplined. 84% of females and 67% of males responded positively to the situations. Both genders claimed to have fixed timetables for study and stick to them. They also expressed that they first do their school work and play latter. However, using time wisely received mixed responses.

Findings from males and females in grades 8 and 9 indicated that they have not yet developed self-disciplinary skills. Most indicated lack of fixed timetables; they usually tend to play first and too often procrastinate. The situation is not the same however with grade 10 learners. Grade 10 learners have indicated that they may be more disciplined than the grade 8 and 9 learners.

5.1.4 On the character trait of responsibility to self and others…

On the character trait of *responsibility to self and others,* learners from both phases (Junior and Secondary) scored almost the same. Findings illustrate that learners believe they are taking responsibility in the four given situations. Over 85% of the learners rate themselves being responsible for their own learning and do take care of themselves and of the school properties. They believe strongly that they do not blame others for their own actions. However, regarding the use of money they get from their parents, there was a significant number (about 35%) who indicated that some of the time they waste their parents' money.

6. Conclusion

The study outcomes illustrate that when learners rating issues related to their ethical behaviors, it might not be different from the actual practice or reality. One has also to bear in mind that 'values' is a "fluid concept subject to different interpretations" [19]. The results portray that learners in grades 11 and 12 are more inclined towards weak character traits of morality in comparison to their counterparts in junior secondary phase (grades 8-10). Looking at the theoretical framework underlying this study, it is not abnormal to have such differences as moral developments occur in a moral context shaped by peers, school, family and religion. Furthermore, children/learners are not in the same stages of moral development. Also, depending on a moral decision to be taken, it can be either be taken at the level of an individual or group to guide their actions on what is good or bad.

This study, although limited in scope, have given the learners at Shuuveni Secondary School to evaluate themselves towards ethical statements on the four character traits of *honesty, respect, self-discipline and responsibility to self and others,* and findings thus reflect learners' own perceived notion of their own ethical behaviors. The outcomes therefore, represent a revelation of the learners' perceptions and not necessarily the actual reality. We need to take into consideration, however, that these were what learners were willing to reveal and disclose about themselves.

Self-disclosure is not easy because one has to unveil, to make manifest or to show others what it is to "be me." Reference [20], with extensive research on the self-disclosure subject, found out that when a person discloses information there is a very real feeling; fear of rejection, of being laughed at, of being thought dumb or stupid or silly which often prevents a person from sharing personal information of who s/he is. But if the individual has developed a high level of trust and is willing to take risks, that person would be in a better position to disclose information. We feel learners were operating at a level of openness when responding to questionnaires.

7. Recommendations

A follow up study on how others perceive themselves in relation to the same criteria to find the correlation between perceived and observed experiences could be further undertaken. To get an in-depth insight of the learners' moral paradigm, it would be helpful to pursue a more structured and detailed interviews with individuals and groups discussing their interpretations of what constitutes good moral values and behaviors.

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