

With recognition to Willem A Landman and Sake24

Behind the news (Wednesday 24 August 2011)

Ethics is more than a theoretical subject

Ethical view

Willem A Landman

In a speech last week, Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe suggested that ethics should be taught at school level. It thus appears obvious that this sort of behaviour could be reversed by education in ethics, especially by reaching impressionable youngsters timeously. An ethical culture can after all not be created overnight. One has to begin at the bottom, as it were, eventually to attain a more ethical society.

Teaching of ethics would thus mean that learners would be taught to respect key values – integrity, respect, responsibility, honesty, fairness, and so on – in their conduct towards others. If we understand that our conduct harms others, or disregards their rights, we shall adjust our behaviour.

Unfortunately, it is not so simple, for various reasons.

Our country is being submerged by a tidal wave of unethical conduct. Besides the usual quota of such behaviour, the week in which Motlanthe gave his speech was characterised by striking municipal workers robbing informal traders and destroying their stalls. Even the flowers of flower sellers, such an integral part of the Cape, were trampled.

Motlanthe regards ethics education as a means to combat corruption – according to him, humanity's biggest problem after racism. He deserves credit for his repeated statements about our moral crisis and the desirability of ethical behaviour.

Actualisation of values

Firstly, actualisation of ethical values is not something that is learnt like a skill or a technique. Values (or a lack thereof) are assimilated from an early age and determine the quality of all our deeds.

In contrast thereto, specific tasks – such as construction of a bridge, marketing of products, driving a car, or auditing a company's books – require specific technical skills. These tasks, however, are not value neutral, but laden with values.

Thus, one can, for example, market a product by making false claims, or in the construction of a bridge, fraudulently, and at variance with the contract, reduce the concrete reinforcement in order to save costs.

To live ethically thus requires not only knowledge of what values mean and demand of us, but also their actualisation in practice. The ultimate test of successful teaching of values at school is thus concerned with not only theoretical knowledge, but also whether it leads to ethical conduct.

For example: When learners one day work in the private sector, would they report corruption should they observe it in their companies? Or, if they work in the public sector, would they resist the temptation to participate in a corrupt scheme from which they could benefit irregularly?

Climate in schools

Effective teaching of values takes place in a climate and culture at school that support the actualisation of those values. The state of the vast majority of our schools, however, is in direct conflict with the actualisation of ethical values.

The facts are well known: Destruction of school buildings; teachers who come to class late or simply do not show up; teachers who operate shebeens where liquor is sold to learners; and teachers who have sex with learners.

In short: Where violence on the school premises, teenage pregnancies and a lack of respect for people and property are rife, it will be difficult for ethical values to fall on fertile breeding ground.

Schools will thus have to be transformed if teaching of values is to have any chance of success. Teachers will have to become role models of ethical behaviour. Parents will have to be involved. The department of education will have to provide assistance and apply discipline.

The destructive influence of the militant and self-seeking union – the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu) – will have to be stayed.

Ethics in the country

By their very nature, schools are part of the wider social, economic and political conditions in the country. If these militate against the teaching of values, the success of such teaching will be handicapped.

For example: If violence during strikes goes unpunished, if influential people – who ought to be role models – get away with corruption, if senior politicians make nonsensical statements that undermine the judiciary, and if there is a general lassitude with regard to law enforcement and work ethic, teaching of values will become an uphill battle.

Yet, there are wonderful examples of schools that are islands of excellence in a sea of disorder. Without exception, these are the result of professional school principals taking control.

Road ahead

Despite all these hurdles, Motlanthe's appeal should be taken seriously, debated and investigated. The following three aspects can be implemented as a starting point without curricula having to be turned upside down:

Firstly: Since the school subject life orientation (LO) already has a value or ethics component, LO teachers must be empowered to fulfil their task better. Research by the Ethics Institute of South Africa indicates clearly what the key problems and possible solutions are.

Secondly: Equip teachers to understand the value aspects of their respective subjects and to integrate them into all of their teaching. In this way, ethics will not merely become stuck in an LO ghetto.

For example: The syllabi of economic-science subjects should include the ethical reasons for accurate bookkeeping and auditing, the ethical basis of corporate governance, and responsibilities towards the environment.

Thirdly: The empowerment of teachers to undertake ethics teaching must be anchored in good scientific research on how to establish values in schools, such as the research of the Office for Moral Leadership of the University of Stellenbosch.

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