

Ethics in Education

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Educational institutions are microcosms of culture and the society that supports them. As such, they should be bastions of ethical behaviour. These institutions should be the training ground for students to develop, shape, and practise their personal ethics code, which, hopefully, will guide them for the remainder of their lives. Despite this underlying supposition, the role of ethics in education is not often discussed in the classroom setting; perhaps because it requires a great deal of objectivity and openness from teachers on “subjective” concepts such as what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and unacceptable, and fair play and ethical behaviour. The influence of teachers’ personal ethics and beliefs has tremendous potential to jeopardise the objectivity of classroom discussions, and even to intimidate by imposing upon students views that may be inconsistent with their own.

Literature on the subject of “ethics in education” suggests that because the range and degree of compromise is so broad and varied, the distinction between fair play and what might be categorized as unethical behaviour or conduct is often blurry, depending on the particular situation, the stakes that are up for grabs, and the stakeholders involved.

In school life, students in their everyday classroom and playground experiences encounter situations that require them to make ethical decisions and/or choices in the things that they do, and often they are not aware of how to make these choices and decisions. Researcher Joseph D. McInerney, in his work on ethical thinking, presented a model for ethical thinking that could possibly be adopted in almost any situation by anyone faced with an ethical dilemma. The steps in this model are simple but sequential and involve, in the first instance, a good understanding of what is known and what needs to be known about the ethical situation. Pillared on rights-based thinking and consequences-based thinking, the second and third steps involve identification of the wants, rights, and duties of all those involved; and the positive and negative consequences of the various outcomes that those involved will possibly make about the ethical situation. The final phase of the model involves making a judgement by applying personal values to the consequences of each outcome before deciding on a course of action or no action at all.

Every year, nearing examination time, students in Forms 5 and 6 are confronted with the challenge of acting in an ethical manner with respect to the completion and submission of School-Based Assessment (SBA) assignments. Some students may be tempted to use past SBA assignments in an effort to meet submission deadlines with respect to both the quantity and quality of work required. If there was any doubt about the possibility that some students might give in to such temptation, that would have been erased by the fiasco surrounding the 2008 CAPE and CSEC examinations administered by CXC. This is a clear example of students compromising ethical principles in their quest for good grades. Is it that the end justifies the means, so that the want of a “good” pass is greater than the right to work hard? It is also possible that,

in the past, students were not convinced that the consequences of copying old lab reports or fabricating data values for their SBAs were outweighed by the consequences of not copying, that is, the receipt of poor grades. Certainly, there was little evidence of penalties for buying leaked papers. Hopefully, the results of the current investigations will change this perception of lack of consequences.

Students at the upper secondary level will no doubt continue to face situations like these and will be placed in positions that require them to make decisions on what is right and wrong. Educators are very concerned, moreso in recent times, that in spite of diligent efforts made to teach subject content to our children, insufficient emphasis is placed on developing their ethical base. The suggestion is that the focus is too much on the end product of the education process, in the form of certification, and not on the developmental aspects of the education process itself. Attempts have been made in the past to introduce programmes such as ethics in our schools in order to provoke and promote ethical awareness among our student population. Hopefully, recent events will ensure a resurgence of such efforts, so that while the decision not to copy SBAs or buy exam papers may be a difficult one for some students, they will have the ethical base required to resist temptation.

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