

Featured Research

Traversing moral shifts in adolescent education: insights from some rural south african secondary schools

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Abstract: The continuously evolving moral standards ‘new morality’ have emerged, particularly among the young people due to past prejudices. The paper investigates the teaching challenges experienced by educators who encounter adolescent learners influenced by ‘new morality’. The study focused on adolescents in rural secondary schools in three provinces, where 137 teachers from several different schools were surveyed. The findings suggest that new morality is often viewed more as a modern form of morality embraced by young people, rather than simply as misbehavior. As a result, teachers may mistakenly interpret the behaviors associated with new morality as defiance, when in fact the students are not necessarily acting out. Most teachers reported that the behaviors of these new morality-influenced adolescents made teaching quite difficult, and they called for policy changes to give them more control over the classroom. However, the teachers also recognized that for new morality not to disrupt the school system, new rules would need to be developed. The paper highlights the tensions and challenges that educators face in navigating the evolving moral landscape of their adolescent students.

Keywords: Adolescent education, Generation Y, Moral development, Teacher empowerment

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers often struggle to manage students with serious behavioural issues (Xie et al., 2024). The root causes can include inadequate self-awareness, poor lesson planning, inconsistent discipline, and negative teacher attitudes. Strategies to address disruptive behaviour include adopting a proactive, context-driven approach focused on developmentally appropriate guidance and curriculum (Pearce et al., 2024), identifying typical behaviour for the age group as a benchmark (Azevedo et al., 2024), maintaining enthusiasm for the curriculum and thorough lesson preparation to avoid disengagement (Owen et al., 2024), using interactive, joyful learning activities to keep students attentive

(Misra, 2023), neutralizing attention-seeking behaviour through changes in tone or statements (Davis & Rosee, 2024), and clearly communicating and consistently enforcing a few simple, justifiable classroom rule (Post, 2024). The premise that youth behaviour has radically declined is subjective and not supported by the search results. Behavioural patterns naturally evolve over time, and differences in factors like religion, age, and culture can lead to perceptions of "bad" behaviour.

According to Ramakulukusha et al. (2021) the new morality patterns in South Africa have disrupted the management of education, leading to uncontrollable behaviours in schools. The idea of new morality, which emerged when men were lawmakers and expected everyone to obey, is not new (Kearney, 2018; Sanger, 1920). Provost (2024) concurs by highlighting that new morality was introduced by Margaret Sanger in the 1920s when she advocated for the freedom of women and a new race. This new morality is a natural result of centuries when people wanted to express themselves. In the new South Africa, according to Olonisakin et al. (2024), children wish to showcase their strengths, which could have been hindered by past restraints. However, the liberated schools seem to show moral decay, with schools not producing the desired role models. Mischiefs in schools, such as drug abuse, bullying, cheating, carrying of weapons, gangsterism, high dropout rates, high pregnancy rates, and rapes, have become rife.

Learners are expected to become future leaders in business and government, with misaligned developments of global trends for improved economic outcomes (Guillén, 2020). However, Indrawati and Kuncoro (2021) reports that schools do not seem to be keeping pace with these advanced trends and alignment, particularly in low resource countries nations. Positive teacher attitudes towards student behaviours are vital for effective teaching, as teacher impressions of student moral behaviours can have a significant impact, either positive or negative. Consequently, ensuring that schools and teachers are equipped to foster the necessary skills and values in children to become effective future leaders is crucial.

The teachers' preconceived notions and experiences from the past negatively impact their ability to effectively teach modern students. Moreover, teachers often expect students to behave similarly to how they did in the previous dispensation, failing to recognize the human behaviour evolution (Bartelds, Savenije & Van Boxtel, 2020; Chew & Cerbin, 2021). This then, leads to misjudgement regarding certain modern behaviours as immoral or unruly, causing discomfort and a discourse between teachers and their adolescent students (Khan & Chandel, 2021; Legette, Halberstadt & Majors, 2021). That is, teachers' attitudes and impressions about their learners can hinder optimal teaching, as they judge students based on outdated expectations rather than understanding the changing nature of youth behaviour and priorities in the modern era (Boyle, Anderson & Allen, 2020; Heyder, Suedkamp & Steinmayr, 202; Le & Le, 2022).

In South Africa, the banishment of corporal punishment post-apartheid led to increased violence against peers and teachers, with students bringing to schools' weapons (i.e. guns, knife, swords, among others) to cause and inflict harm (Morrell, 2001; Maphosa & Shumba, 2010; Joyce, 2013; Nhambura, 2020; Chauke, 2021; Mahlangu et al., 2021). There is a need for studies to understand the 'new morality' and its effect on the future of

education, and the safety of teachers and learners against adolescent learners navigating the evolving new moral landscape. Existing studies on the new morality, have explored role of moral education in the morality of adolescence (Hakim & Ali, 2020), adolescences becoming their own role models living a morally virtuous life (Sanders, 2024), the effects of moral reasoning in the evolution of how human and their societies change (Killen & Dahl, 2021), challenges in adolescent moral development (Zhu, 2023) and pedagogical challenges in disseminating moral education (Akram et al., 2023), among others. The current study intends to contribute towards the sequel on adolescence education by exploring teaching challenges experienced by educators who encounter adolescent learners influenced by ‘new morality’.

METHOD

Research design

A qualitative case study approach was used to allow the researchers to gain in-depth, contextual understanding of the moral development and shifts experienced by adolescents in several South African rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and North-West Provinces. This methodology is well-suited to explore the nuances and complexities of moral reasoning and behaviour within the sociocultural context of village setting. The research used the Likert scale on a questionnaire adopted from Kubedi (2014) to quantify the qualitative data obtained. A piloted, validated questionnaire was used for data collection from teachers about how new morality impacts the adolescent learners. The Likert scale is used to convert subjective opinions of the participants into measurable, numerical data (García-Pérez, 2024). Its rating scale allows respondents to express the extent of their agreement or disagreement with a given statement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale. However, an open invitation was also posed as, “How are the moral values and ethical development of adolescents in your school evolving, and what factors are shaping these changes within the context of their education?”

Research participants

The target respondents were teachers at selected rural secondary schools who were teaching adolescent learners of ages 14 to 21 years old. Permissions to use these schools were granted through associates in the local district offices, circuit manager and school principals. Consent was granted by the teachers involved, voluntarily.

Data collection strategy

The respondents were informed fully about the purpose of the study during circuit inclusive education workshops in the areas, and through emails to the school principals. Workshop organisers were requested to assist with the responses as they had educators who were involved with adolescent learners of ages 14 to 21 years old, who were targeted to participate in the study. The study had planned to involve 10 to 15 respondents for the qualitative responses, but due to the willingness of associates in the three provinces, and the availability of google forms to distribute the forms to many teachers who had emails. Questionnaires were then sent by email to the associates to administer. From March 2023 to May 2024 there were 137 completed questionnaires that were returned. Therefore, a size 137 sample of educators was used.

Data analysis

Frequency tables and percentages were used to organise and analyse data. Thematic content analysis (TCA) was used to the qualitative analyse data, and simple graphs were drawn for the “Yes/No” responses. TCA assisted in reducing data to manageable proportions by dividing data into several categories and themes that emerged (Costello, 2003). Once themes have emerged, data related to that theme were clustered under that theme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographics of Educators

The study consisted of 137 responses from teachers who were all secondary school educators involved in teaching adolescents. Table 1 summarizes teacher responses on teaching adolescents and knowledge of new morality.

Table 1: Profiles of adolescents’ educator

Variable		Frequencies	Percentages
Teacher trained to teach adolescents	Yes	98	71.5
	No	39	28.5
Believe that educator should be trained in human behaviour	Yes	123	89.8
	No	14	10.2
Experience of teaching adolescents (in years)	Below 5	11	8.0
	5 – 10	29	21.2
	11 – 15	31	22.6
	Over 15	66	48.2
Respondent knew the concept of new morality	Yes	51	32.2
	No	86	67.8

Most teachers (72%) who were teaching adolescents had received training to work with that age group. Additionally, most educators (90%) believed that training in human behaviour was necessary to effectively teach adolescents. The teaching staff was highly experienced, with 92% having over 5.5 years of experience teaching adolescents, and nearly half (48%) having over 15 years of experience. Only 8% had less than 5 years of experience. However, only about a third (32%) of educators were familiar with the new morality concept, while the majority (68%) were not.

3.2 Adolescent behaviours

In Table 2, the teacher-perceived negative behaviours of adolescents are given and reveal that most respondents (84%) view the moral behaviour of adolescents in their schools as unsatisfactory, with 92% stating that it had declined compared to previous years. Close to 78% claimed that adolescents who challenged school authorities influenced others to misbehave, and 96% wanted schools to intervene to address this issue. Approximately 88% indicated that adolescent learners had poor social relationships and did not prioritize their schoolwork, while 77% felt that their schools were distracted by adolescent misbehaviour. About 74% believed that adolescents took advantage of children's rights laws to misbehave, and 80% stated that most adolescents lacked responsibility towards their schoolwork.

Finally, 97% of respondents said that the behaviours of adolescents in schools warranted the introduction of a general policy specifically designed to manage their conduct.

Table 2: Summary of adolescent behaviours

Statement	No %	Yes %
2.1 The moral behaviour of most adolescents in my school is satisfactory	83.9	16.1
2.2 Compared to when I was still at school, the current group of adolescents is not worse, morally	92.0	8.0
2.3 The group of outspoken adolescents in my school has no undesirable influence on other learners	78.1	21.9
2.4 The situation in my school does not require intervention due to the kind of influence caused by adolescents	96.4	3.6
2.5 In my school, adolescents generally relate well to other learners socially	87.6	12.4
2.6 Most adolescents in my school pay attention to their schoolwork	88.3	11.7
2.7 My school is never distracted by poor conduct of adolescents	77.4	22.6
2.8 Adolescents do not take advantage of the laws and policies (that are based on children's rights) that allow them excessive freedom	73.7	26.3
2.9 Most adolescents in my school demonstrate full responsibility in the things they do in the school	79.6	20.4
2.10 The behaviour of adolescents in my school is good (i.e. does not warrant the school to introduce policies to deal specifically with the adolescents)	97.1	2.9

Other experiences with adolescents

The new morality concept was not known to some respondents. The incidents of adolescents' behaviours in schools included gangsterism, carrying weapons, bullying, stealing, fighting, selling and using drugs, burglary, money laundering, early-age sex and teenage pregnancy, gossips, teasing, leaving school early, not doing schoolwork, disrupting classes, gambling, swearing and dressing inappropriately. The respondents informed that older generation adolescents were easier to handle and better behaved compared to the ones of the Millennium Generation (or Generation Y, who are the 21st century adolescents). According to some of the teachers, past generations (known as Generations X) adolescents would not do wrong in the face of adults as they maintained respect, accountability, responsibility, and upheld morality, among other good behaviours. The modern ones are said to be generally disrespectful, outspoken, inconsiderate, and self-centred.

Responses from open-ended question

The open-ended question indeed showed saturation as the respondents were revolving around same issues. Largely, the teachers believe that the changing moral landscape, fuelled by factors such as technology, parenting, and peer dynamics, is leading to a decline in adolescent discipline, respect, and adherence to traditional ethical standards. It was clear that the causes are complex and not easily attributed to any single factor. The teachers accused adolescents of moral laxity and poor conduct due to the influence of "new

morality". Some key themes that echoed from response to response were gathered and are five-fold as follows.

Lack of discipline and respect for authority: Many respondent teachers had observed that today's adolescent students tend to show less respect for rules and authority figures such as teachers, compared to previous generations of students. This perceived lack of respect has contributed to an increase in behavioural problems and discipline issues within the classroom setting. Teachers report dealing with more instances of students challenging rules, questioning their authority, and exhibiting disruptive behaviours that interfere with the learning environment. This shift in student attitudes and conduct is viewed by educators as a concerning trend compared to the more compliant and deferential behaviours exhibited by adolescents in the past.

Increased exposure to inappropriate content (by 135 respondents): With the increasing prevalence of the internet and social media, teachers have observed that adolescents are nowadays exposed to more mature or controversial content at a younger age than in the past. This early exposure to complex and sometimes sensitive material is believed to have a significant impact on the moral development of these young individuals, potentially shaping their values, beliefs, and decision-making processes at a critical stage of their growth and maturation.

Parental permissiveness (by 117 respondents): Educators concur that when parents do not uphold and enforce proper moral principles and discipline at home, it leads to misbehaviour and poor conduct from their adolescent children at school. The argument is that lax parenting, where parents fail to set clear expectations and consequences for their kids, contributes to the development of problematic behaviours in teenagers that then manifest in the school setting. These teachers contend that stronger parental guidance and accountability in the home could help curb disruptive or unethical actions by students in the classroom and school setting.

Peer influence and pressure (by 132 respondents): Many teachers believe that adolescents' moral decisions are overly swayed by the opinions and actions of their peers. Adolescents are at an impressionable age where they are heavily influenced by their friends and social circles. Teachers feel that adolescents' peers often encourage values and behaviours that go against traditional moral codes and societal norms. They view adolescents as adopt undesirable attitudes and engage in questionable activities due to peer pressure and a desire to fit in with their friends. Teachers are concerned that adolescents are not making autonomous moral choices but are instead deferring to their peers, who may be poor role models. There is a perception that adolescents' moral compasses are being skewed by the values of their social groups rather than being guided by traditional moral frameworks taught by parents, teachers, and society at large.

Rejection of traditional values (by all respondents): Teachers consider that modern adolescents are more inclined to question and disregard traditional moral and social standards, adopting a "new morality" that educators consider concerning. They perceive a shift in the attitudes and behaviours of young people, who are increasingly willing to challenge long-established norms and embrace alternative moral frameworks that may differ from those traditionally upheld by society. This perceived change in the moral

landscape is viewed by teachers as a potential source of concern, as they grapple with navigating the complexities of educating and guiding adolescents in an evolving social and ethical environment.

Discussion

New morality

The teachers reported that the adolescents in their schools were taught by well-trained and experienced instructors. These teachers had studied human behaviour, were highly skilled in working with adolescents, and were mature individuals. However, the teachers acknowledged that the concept of new morality was not fully familiar to them. The findings suggest that the moral views and behaviours of today's adolescents, particularly those of Generation Y, defy traditional societal norms and values (Easton & Steyn, 2022). The conduct of these young people in school settings was often perceived as misbehaviour, as it conflicted with the expectations and experiences of previous generations like Generation X (Easton & Steyn, 2022; Wandhe, 2024). The adolescents in the local community displayed behaviours that ran counter to what society typically approves of and what teachers commonly expect from students (Aventin et al., 2020; Svanemyr, 2020; Ryan, Holmes & Ensaff, 2022). Sauer et al. (2021) suggest a more nuanced, multi-dimensional view of moral progress is needed. Simply focusing on a single criterion like expanding the "circle of moral concern" may be insufficient. A pluralistic approach that considers various aspects of human flourishing and capabilities may be more suitable. In addition, the search highlights the value of coordinating philosophical conceptions of moral adequacy with psychological theories of moral development. Educators should strive to understand the cognitive and ethical principles underlying moral growth, rather than just focusing on behavioural outcomes (Gibbs, 2019).

Adolescent behaviour

The local schools lacked coordination between teachers and students, causing them to act as adversaries rather than collaborators. Adolescents influenced by changing moral standards, engaged in disruptive behaviour without guidance (Nhambura, 2020; Chauke, 2021; Mahlangu et al., 2021). Some of the reasons for such disruptive behaviours could be that teachers often expect students to behave similarly to how they did in the previous dispensation, failing to recognize the human behaviour evolution (Bartelds, Savenije & Van Boxtel, 2020; Chew & Cerbin, 2021). This leads to misjudgement on certain modern behaviours as immoral or unruly, causing discomfort and discourse between teachers and their adolescent students (Khan & Chandel, 2021; Legette, Halberstadt & Majors, 2021).

Other teachers perceived negative behaviors of adolescents includes poor social relation (Orben, Tomoya & Blakemore, 2020; Cooper et al., 2021). Kiuru et al. (2020) showed that having social relation improves academic performance. Secondly, adolescents failed to prioritize their homework. Similar studies (Evans, Van der Oord & Rogers, 2020; Tamm et al., 2020) also reported that adolescents failed to complete their homework. Gaarde et al. (2020) on the other reported that adolescent watched TV or played with their phones instead of doing their homework. Moreover, Núñez et al. (2023) reported that lack of parental support resulted in learner to complete their homework.

Furthermore, adolescents also caused destruction in school (Comer & Connolly, 2020; Mukherjee, Taleb & Baiden, 2022), lacked responsibility towards their schoolwork (Paul, Rashmi & Srivastava, 2021). Moreover, the study reported lack of discipline and respect for authority (Malti, Peplak & Zhang, 2020; Amemiya, Mortenson & Wang, 2020). Increased exposure to inappropriate content (Alshamrani, 2020; DeLago et al., 2020; Savoia et al., 2021), parental permissiveness (Obadire & Sinthumule, 2021; Salmiati & Zaman, 2021), and rejection of traditional values as factors hindering the change of moral landscape among adolescences in schools.

CONCLUSIONS

Educators' perspectives on managing adolescent behaviours in secondary schools seemed to have revolved around opinionated adolescents, value of collaboration, educator empowerment, flexibility and communication, adaptability to morality evolution, and accepting change. Most teachers reported that the behaviors of these new morality-influenced adolescents made teaching quite difficult, and they called for policy changes to give them more control over the classroom. However, the teachers also recognized that for new morality not to disrupt the school system, new rules would need to be developed. The study recommends that school system should be on par with modern era expectations to match the developmental patterns of new generations, rules be adapted to suit modern democratic changes, teachers be empowered through training and resources to be capable of managing emerging situations where modern adolescents could have undesirable influences and new morality.

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