

Ethical Practices in Vocational Technical Education: A Sure Way to Sustainable Vocational Education in Nigeria

Chinedu Ochuba, Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze, Nigeria
David Okoli, Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze, Nigeria

The Asian Conference on Education 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Ethics defines good or bad. When applied to institutions, it allows groups to determine fair and appropriate procedures of doing things. Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) is the form of education which is obtainable at Technical Colleges and designed to prepare individuals to acquire technical or practical knowledge/vocational skills, basic and scientific knowledge necessary for production. Despite imparting knowledge, Vocational Education teachers also have it as their responsibility to make sure that students develop a sound character and acceptable societal moral values. Therefore, VTE teachers should be best described as role model to the students and the society at large. The findings revealed that consequences of relegating ethical practices in Vocational Technical Education have manifested in the quality of education delivery in form of; fallen standard in vocational education, relaxed discipline in schools, quasi implementation of school curriculum, increased examination malpractice and struggle to acquire certificate at all cost. All these are at expense of quality VTE. The paper recommends among others that efforts should be geared towards: development, publication and enforcement of clear regulations and minimum benchmarks for VTE programmes; designing and implementation of quality assurance and inspectorate duties to facilitate, encourage and help teachers to professionally perform their duties; prompt identification, isolation and sanctioning of teachers, regulators and inspectors involved in unethical practices etc.

Keywords: Ethics, Vocational and Technical Education (VTE), Apprenticeship, Framework Practice

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Introduction

The need for VTE manpower development to protect and improve industrial and technological development cannot be undermined since VTE has the elements needed to add substantially to national development. Ibeneme (2009) justified that no nation can develop beyond the level of human resources available in that nation. For Nigeria to develop technologically via the industry, it requires amongst others, but most fundamentally, the introduction of ethical principles in VTE policy. Technical and Vocational Education (TVE) has been an integral part of national development strategies in many societies because of its impact on productivity and economic development. Despite its contributions, the leaders of most third world nations have not given this aspect of education the attention it deserves. This is one of the reasons for these nations' underdevelopment.

On the attainment of independence, the Nigerian government and educators suggested for more comprehensive Vocational and Technical Education as a prerequisite for development and productive sector sustainability (Ali, 2000, in Palnam and Unegbu, 2012). The old educational system as a whole was criticized as being remote to the needs and aspirations of the nation with little relevance to the requirements of individuals, firms and the society at large.

Today the Federal Government of Nigeria, having been fully aware of the vital roles which Vocational and Technical Education can play decided that a clear and comprehensive policy should be made on Vocational and Technical Education. This is the underlying principle behind the adoption of National Policy on Education, reviewed, re-reviewed and revised editions. There is no gainsaying that little or nothing maybe achieved if ethical standards are not enshrined in the National policy on Education of the country.

The Concept of Vocational and Technical Education

Vocational and Technical Education has historically been known as “education for work.” It has focused on providing learners with the skills and knowledge needed for successfully transition to the workplace. Therefore, Vocational and Technical Education refers to qualifying education paths that provide individuals with occupation-specific knowledge and practical skills, independent of the place, content, and education provider (Rodríguez-Planas, 2015).

VTE can be classified into three distinct systems: (1) school-based; (2) a dual apprenticeship system combining school training with a firm-based approach; and (3) informal-based.

School-based VTE system provides youths with a combination of general and occupation-specific knowledge, offered either at the lower or upper secondary level. Accordingly, it is integrated into the compulsory schooling as alternative to an academically oriented schooling track, or as part of several education options. However, there might be differences in the degree of transferability across occupations – while the VTE system in some countries transmits skills that are not restricted to one particular occupation, in others it provides vocational schooling for specific types of occupations (Shavit and Müller, 1998).

Dual VTE system aims to combine general, transferable skills acquired during School-based VET with structured on-the-job learning and actual work experience within a training company. Apprenticeship graduates acquire occupation-specific skills that render them employable by the training company or other employers, while the overspecialization and low levels of transferable skills generated by the higher share of firm- and occupation-specific training is counteracted by standardized curricula and examinations.

Informal system refers to a situation where occupational knowledge is transmitted between generations, within a family or clan. For instance the 'traditional apprenticeships' system in India and many African countries. Moreover, 'informal apprenticeships' are frequently open to apprentices not belonging to a family or clan. Despite taking place in the informal sector, they have some locally standardized structures and duration, and are based on some contractual agreements between the craftsman and trainee. Apprentices receive no or little remuneration during the training period, and might even have to pay a fee to the trainer. While the training is generally and entirely work-based, it may follow an informal training plan. Given the lack of a legal framework to enforce certain training standards, the informality of training may also bear certain risks to the trainee, with particular concerns involving the potential exploitation of children as cheap labourers, gender discrimination based on traditional gender roles, and unenforceable contractual agreements resulting in low training quality or an extension of the apprenticeship duration (Lerche, 2007).

From the definitions above, Vocational and Technical Education is regarded as an education which is designed for any occupation, career or profession that requires specialized manipulative skills, knowledge and attitude and should function within a specified/stated ethics.

The Concepts of Ethics

Decisions about right and wrong permeate everyday life, including our educational system. Ethics should concern all levels of life: acting properly as individuals, creating responsible organizations and governments, and making our society as a whole more ethical. Ethics provides a set of standards for behavior that helps us decide how we ought to act in a range of situations. In a sense, we can say that ethics is all about making choices, and about providing reasons why we should make these choices.

Making good ethical decisions requires a trained sensitivity to ethical issues and a practiced method for exploring the ethical aspects of a decision and weighing the considerations that should impact our choice of a course of action. Having a method for ethical decision making is essential. When practiced regularly, the method becomes so familiar that we work through it automatically without consulting the specific steps. This is one reason why we can sometimes say that we have a "moral intuition" about a certain situation, even when we have not consciously thought through the issue.

According to Bonde and Firenze (2013), the following three ethical decision frameworks may help to guide our ethical decision making: The Consequentialist Framework; The Duty Framework; and the Virtue Framework.

While each of the three frameworks is useful for making ethical decisions, none is perfect—otherwise the perfect theory would have driven the other imperfect theories from the field long ago. Knowing the advantages and disadvantages of the frameworks will be helpful in deciding which is most useful in approach the particular situation with which we are presented.

The Consequentialist Framework

In the Consequentialist framework, we focus on the future effects of the possible courses of action, considering the people who will be directly or indirectly affected. We ask about what outcomes are desirable in a given situation, and consider ethical conduct to be whatever will achieve the best consequences. The person using the Consequences framework desires to produce the most good.

Among the advantages of this ethical framework is that focusing on the results of an action is a pragmatic approach. It helps in situations involving many people, some of whom may benefit from the action, while others may not. On the other hand, it is not always possible to predict the consequences of an action, so some actions that are expected to produce good consequences might actually end up harming people. Additionally, people sometimes react negatively to the use of compromise which is an inherent part of this approach, and they recoil from the implication that the end justifies the means. It also does not include a pronouncement that certain things are always wrong, as even the most heinous actions may result in a good outcome for some people, and this framework allows for these actions to then be ethical.

The Duty Framework

In the Duty framework, we focus on the duties and obligations that we have in a given situation, and consider what ethical obligations we have and what things we should never do. Ethical conduct is defined by doing one's duties and doing the right thing, and the goal is performing the correct action.

This framework has the advantage of creating a system of rules that has consistent expectations of all people; if an action is ethically correct or a duty is required, it would apply to every person in a given situation. This even-handedness encourages treating everyone with equal dignity and respect.

This framework also focuses on following moral rules or duty regardless of outcome, so it allows for the possibility that one might have acted ethically, even if there is a bad result. Therefore, this framework works best in situations where there is a sense of obligation or in those in which we need to consider why duty or obligation mandates or forbids certain courses of action.

However, this framework also has its limitations. First, it can appear cold and impersonal, in that it might require actions which are known to produce harms, even though they are strictly in keeping with a particular moral rule. It also does not provide a way to determine which duty we should follow if we are presented with a situation in which two or more duties conflict. It can also be rigid in applying the notion of duty to everyone regardless of personal situation.

The Virtue Framework

In the Virtue framework, we try to identify the character traits (either positive or negative) that might motivate us in a given situation. We are concerned with what kind of person we should be and what our actions indicate about our character. We define ethical behavior as whatever a virtuous person would do in the situation, and we seek to develop similar virtues.

Obviously, this framework is useful in situations that ask what sort of person one should be. As a way of making sense of the world, it allows for a wide range of behaviors to be called ethical, as there might be many different types of good character and many paths to developing it. Consequently, it takes into account all parts of human experience and their role in ethical deliberation, as it believes that all of one's experiences, emotions, and thoughts can influence the development of one's character. Also, because it emphasizes the importance of role models and education to ethical behavior, it can sometimes merely reinforce current cultural norms as the standard of ethical behavior.

Putting the Frameworks Together

By framing the situation or choice you are facing in one of the ways presented above, specific features will be brought into focus more clearly. However, it should be noted that each framework has its limits: by focusing our attention on one set of features, other important features may be obscured. Hence it is important to be familiar with all three frameworks and to understand how they relate to each other—where they may overlap, and where they may differ.

The chart below is designed to highlight the main contrasts between the three frameworks:

	Consequentialist	Duty	Virtue
Deliberative process	What kind of outcomes should I produce (or try to produce)?	What are my obligations in this situation, and what are the things I should never do?	What kind of person should I be (or try to be), and what will my actions show about my character?
Focus	Directs attention to the future effects of an action, for all people who will be directly or indirectly affected by the action.	Directs attention to the duties that exist prior to the situation and determines obligations.	Attempts to discern character traits (virtues and vices) that are, or could be, motivating the people involved in the situation.
Definition of Ethical Conduct	Ethical conduct is the action that will achieve the best consequences.	Ethical conduct involves always doing the right thing: never failing to do one's duty.	Ethical conduct is whatever a fully virtuous person would do in the circumstances.
Motivation	Aim is to produce the most good.	Aim is to perform the right action.	Aim is to develop one's character.

Table 1: The main Contrast Between the main Frameworks

Because the answers to the three main types of ethical questions asked by each framework are not mutually exclusive, each framework can be used to make at least some progress in answering the questions posed by the other two.

Specified Ethical Practices Toward Students, Public, and Education Profession

Idaho Schools Professional Standards Act (1972) specified the following as ethical practices within the education sector especially towards students, public and education profession.

Ethical Practices towards the Student -The educator measures success by the progress of each student toward realization of potential as a worthy and effective citizen. The educator therefore works to stimulate the spirit of inquiry, the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and the thoughtful formulation of worthy goals. In fulfilling obligations to the student, the educator:

- a. Shall not without just cause restrain the student from independent action in a pursuit of learning, and shall not without just cause deny the student access to varying points of view.
- b. Shall not deliberately suppress or distort subject matter for which the educator bears responsibility.

- c. Shall make reasonable effort to protect the student from conditions harmful to learning or to health and safety.
- d. Shall conduct professional business in such a way that the educator does not expose the student to unnecessary embarrassment or disparagement.
- e. Shall not on the ground of race, colour, creed, age, sex, physical or mental handicap, marital status, or national origin exclude any student from participation in or deny the student benefits under any programme, nor grant any discriminatory consideration or advantage.
- f. Shall not use professional relationships with students for private advantage.
- g. Shall keep in confidence information that has been obtained in the course of professional service, unless disclosure serves professional purposes or is required by law.
- h. Shall not tutor for remuneration students assigned to the educator's classes, unless no other qualified teacher is reasonably available.

Ethical Practices towards the Public - The educator believes that patriotism in its highest form requires dedication to the principles of our democratic heritage. The educator shares with all other citizens the responsibility for the development of sound public policy and assumes full political and citizenship responsibilities. The educator bears particular responsibility for the development of policy relating to the extension of educational opportunities for all and for interpreting educational programmes and policies to the public. In fulfilling an obligation to the public, the educator:

- a. Shall not misrepresent an institution or organization with which the educator is affiliated, and shall take adequate precautions to distinguish between personal and institutional or organizational views.
- b. Shall not knowingly distort or misrepresent the facts concerning educational matters in direct and indirect public expressions.
- c. Shall not interfere with a colleague's exercise of political and citizenship rights and responsibilities.
- d. Shall not use institutional privileges for monetary private gain or to promote political candidates or partisan political activities.
- e. Shall accept no gratuities, gifts, or favours that might impair or appear to impair professional judgment, nor offer any favour, service, or thing of value to obtain special advantage.

Ethical Practices towards Education Profession - The educator believes that the quality of the services of the education profession directly influences the nation and its citizens. The educator therefore exerts every effort to raise professional standards, to improve service, to promote a climate in which the exercise of professional

judgment is encouraged, and to achieve conditions which attract person worthy of the trust to careers in education. In fulfilling an obligation to the profession, the educator:

- a. Shall not discriminate on the ground of race, sex, age, physical handicap, marital status, colour, creed or national origin for membership in the profession, nor interfere with the participation or nonparticipation of colleagues in the affairs of their professional association.
- b. Shall accord just and equitable treatment to all members of the profession in the exercise of their professional rights and responsibilities
- c. Shall not use coercive means or promise special treatment in order to influence professional decisions of colleagues.
- d. Shall withhold and safeguard information acquired about colleagues in the course of employment, unless disclosure services for professional purposes.
- e. Shall not refuse to participate in a professional inquiry when requested by the commission board.
- f. Shall provide upon the request of the aggrieved part a written statement of specific reason for recommendations that lead to the denial of increments, significant changes in employment or termination of employment.
- g. Shall not misrepresent professional qualifications.
- h. Shall not knowingly distort evaluations of colleagues.

Consequences of Relegating Ethical Practices in Vocational and Technical Education

The ever increasing fallen standard in vocational education, relaxed discipline in schools, quasi implementation of school curriculum, increased examination malpractice, struggle to acquire certificate at all cost, anti-social behaviours, declining civility, deteriorating reading culture, cultism, and cheating in our society today are manifestations of unethical practices in education sector, Vocational and Technical Education inclusive were attributed to the consequences of relegating ethical practices. Hence the urgent need to re-visit the ethical practices (to students, colleagues and regulatory standards in our Vocational and Technical Education institutions across the nation.

Recommendations

To encourage good practice, and promote quality, efficient professional ethics among VTE teachers, the following recommendations have been suggested by the writers:

1. Reintroduction of school inspectors properly trained on all aspect of enforcement of minimum standards in VTE ie properly trained on effective and efficient monitoring mechanisms; and supportive of teachers in enhancing learning outcomes.

2. Strengthening the capacity of regulatory, supervisory and quality assurance agencies in the education system like National University Commission, National Board for Technical Education, and National Commission for Colleges of Education to make them more effective, dispassionate and scrupulous in the discharge of their responsibilities especially in enforcement of minimum standards.
3. Wide publication and circulation of accurate, reliable and easily accessible information on criteria and procedure for enforcement of minimum standards that should include the external and internal quality assurance measures in tertiary institutions.
4. Designing and implementation of quality assurance and inspectorate duties to facilitate, encourage and help teachers to professionally perform their duties without diminishing their freedom and motivation of teachers to take initiatives.
5. Prompt identification, isolation and sanctioning of teachers involved in unethical behaviours.
6. Prompt identification, isolation and sanctioning of regulators and inspectors involved in recommending, facilitating, approving, licensing and accreditation of sub-standard and illegal institutions, programmes and courses.
7. Institute strong legislative and policy frameworks for promotion of ethics, integrity and best practices in examination, assessment and evaluation systems; combating examination malpractice; banning examination “special centres” or “magic centres” which are fronts for organized examination fraud syndicates.
8. Promulgation of strong policies against accreditation scams through which processes of ascertaining whether or not an institution satisfies Benchmark Minimum Standards (BMAS) in a particular field of study are thwarted; backing accreditation reports with sworn affidavits to the effect that the reports are the truth and nothing but the truth so that misrepresentations can be prosecuted for perjury.
9. Developments, codification and wide circulation of best practices policies relating to: integrity in teaching; research; relationship with students, colleagues and communities; compliance with the proper use of property and equipment; conflict of interest and intellectual property rights in addition to regulations defined by the public service rules.

Conclusion

Any country desirous of quality citizenry and effective and efficient manpower for national development must give priority to robust Vocational Technical Education. A realistic part of overhauling the educational sector would demand that stakeholders that include parents, non-governmental organisations and state actors, must fashion out a national goal of VTE based on present experiences and realities. The idea that VTE is basically a meal provider or employment grantor should be disregarded as a motivation for the provision of educational services. Our national ethos, discipline and respect for persons and the lofty ideas of qualitative living are all tied to proper VTE.

Armed with a realistic national goal, modalities for creating objectives towards that goal should be put in place and must be accompanied by ethical practices. And these

must inform the standards by which to judge the quality of our educational system. Thereafter, there should be investment VTE. In terms of action plan, this should be a priority. It is high time stakeholders found a link between TVE and patriotism and moral-ethical citizenry. Anything short of this is mere politicking that takes one to nowhere.

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Contact email: daveoko2003@gmail.com