

THE HANDBOOK FOR THE CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

Some noticeable points for comment

1. Introduction:

When one looks at the title the Handbook for the “*Code of Professional Ethics*” at a first glance, one is likely to pause and check and see if this book is relevant to his/her situation or not. What does the title suggest about the state of professionalism in the country or does it spell out that something is wrong or is it a book that aims at merely conscientising professionals about the Code?

By the time you have thought about these questions, you would have realised that only one profession is under discussion here, i.e. the teaching profession. Everyday in South Africa we here, see and experience in one way or another instances of unprofessional conduct in various professions and the teaching profession is no exception.

These unacceptable practices perpetuated by certain members of the teaching profession which range from teacher absenteeism to sexually abusing female learners by male teachers resulted in the formation of the South African Council for Educators (SACE). SACE has therefore in an attempt to respond to these challenges developed the Code of Professional Ethics, which led to the production of this Handbook

It is for this reason that this paper highlights some critical issues about the Handbook for the Code of Professional Ethics which the writer feels they are worth commenting on.

2. The Book Itself

This final and revised version of the handbook is a product of collective effort and broader consultation where different writers mostly based at the University of Natal’s Ethics Centre who are experts in their fields were involved. It is also informed by insightful feedback from participants upon whom the Ethics and Values in Education workshops (EVE) using the pilot version handbook were conducted in all the nine provinces.

As the title indicates - this Handbook for the ‘Code of Professional Ethics’ is unlike other teacher reference materials in nature and in form. It is a manual that teachers can actively interact with individually, in pairs or in a group with their colleagues. One other critical point to note about this Handbook is that its content is in tune with the values which an educator is expected to teach described in documents such as Norms and Standards for Educators, Curriculum 2005, the National Curriculum Statement and the Further Education and Training Curriculum Framework. This Code of Professional Ethics goes one step further and describes the values which should govern an educator’s working life.

The book deals with issues that are central to their everyday professional lives in a thought provoking way thereby generating debates and discussions around what it means to be an ethical educator. The focus here is Ethical issues in education.

Given the complex nature of what is ethical, the information in the Handbook is not prescriptive way – telling educators what to do in any specific situation.

3. Its purpose

Categorically stated, the Handbook has two clear key purposes:

1. *To provoke thinking, debate and discussion about ethical issues in education.*
2. *To sharpen your understanding of ethical issues and your ability to act ethically.*

First, it is evident from purpose no. 1 above that the primary focus of this book is on the ethical dimensions of being educator in a schooling system while acknowledging that the ethical issues are equally relevant for educators in any work place. However, for the purpose of this manual the ethical issues under discussion also includes those in (formal, informal and non-formal educational institutions) e.g. Adult basic Education and Training Centres, Early Childhood Development Centres, Further Education and Training Institutions and other learning sites

The manual endorses SACE believe that developing the ethics of the profession means making the Code part of every educator's professional life. Again the Handbook solicits that the Code should not be a mere piece of paper but an instrument that will influence how educators project themselves in the relations with other people. With regard to this SACE' position is that the ideal way to attain this is to stimulate educators to start talking to one another about ethics in the profession and The Handbook for the Code of Professional Ethics is one step in that desired direction.

Second, objective no. 2 which is to sharpen one's understanding of ethical issues and one's ability to act ethically focuses on getting educators to be *ethically competent*. This, according to the writers of the Handbook means that you are able to make ethical decisions and to act ethically in the context of your every day professional life and that you understand the difference between right and wrong, good and bad.

4. The Scope of the Handbook

The writers of this Handbook have adopted a topical and problem-solving approach that attempts to encourage educators to fully engage with the issues raised and join in the debates that come up. The Code of Professional Ethics uses ethical problems and dilemmas that are drawn from 'real life' situations. The activities are designed to engage educators in some serious and critical thinking.

The Handbook is divided up into three parts, namely: *Part One, Two and Three*.

Firstly, Part One begins with a general introduction to the idea of evaluation in ethics highlighting how evaluation as an activity is central within education. It also looks at what is meant by ethics and morality and then investigate the origins of SACE Code. Final it moves on to look at what is meant by ethical competence or what makes and educator an 'ethical professional'.

Secondly, Part Two examines ethical evaluation and introduces educators to the religious, cultural and philosophical sources of ethics. It serves as the core of the entire Handbook as it touches in a very detailed fashion on the following:

- How the SACE Code draws on these sources to provide a vision of an ideal educator based on human rights approach that is grounded in African and Western traditions.
- That human rights approach is not unchangeable or inflexible and does not imply that other ethical approaches are bad or wrong.
- It is designed to provide you with knowledge and skills that educators can use to interpret and implement the SACE Code.

Thirdly, Part Three goes back to the SACE Code and take a closer look at the individual clauses in the light of what one would have learnt in first two sections.

5. How to use this Handbook

As said earlier on that this handbook is divided into three parts it also has activities, mostly in the form of case studies throughout. The writers' intention in producing this Handbook is to stimulate debate and discussion about ethical issues in education. The activities contained in this manual are designed to encourage educators to read and discuss this handbook as part of a group. The Handbook for the Code of Professional Ethics could be used in following ways:

- as a resource for staff development purposes
- Use the content and activities to trigger some debate around the issues of professionalism and ethics in your school
- It could also be used as PRESET Module in higher education institutions for prospective teachers.

Finally, it is therefore believed that in this way, the personal professional development of educators can be linked to the ethical development of the whole school creating an ethos that builds professionalism and accountability.