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ETHICAL LEADERSHIP DILEMMAS FOR SCHOOL TEACHERS AMID SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TURBULENCES IN FOUR ZIMBABWEAN SCHOOLS

BERNARD CHINGWANANGWANA¹

Abstract

This qualitative study explores unethical practices by teachers amid turbulent socio-political and economic environments in Zimbabwean schools. The study was conducted in four Zimbabwean schools in Marondera Education District. The study data were generated through focus group interviews, documents review and semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that ethical practices in schools are very difficult, if not impossible, during turbulent socio-political and economic environments, like in Zimbabwe currently. The study establishes that a turbulent socio-political and economic environment compromises ethical practices as it facilitates incessant teacher unpunctuality and absenteeism due to private businesses, late payment of salaries and bonuses, the mounting cash crisis in banks, political violence against teachers, a collapse of the educational funding systems and learner deteriorating behaviour at schools, amongst others. Whenever there are two competing issues, one is bound to be outweighed, in the case of this study, ethical leadership is pitted against survival of the school personnel survival before ethical behaviour, creating dilemmas for the school heads and teachers. It has emerged, in this study, that the way forward is to deal with the turbulences that are pushing the educational practitioners to the cliff edge, hence restoring calm on the education flight.

Keywords: education district, school leadership, primary and secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Literature on ethical leadership in Zimbabwean schools points to the fact that the current socio-political and economic turbulences in the country are posing wide-ranging challenges to ethical and other forms of school leadership (Mawadza, 2009; Mufundikwa, 2010; Chireshe and Shumba, 2011; Shizha and Kariwo, 2011; Erlwanga, 2013). The study focused on Marondera, a dormitory town of Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe;

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because many studies conducted on ethical school leadership and practices were in Harare and other big cities, thus making the study relevant.

The phenomenon of unethical practices in schools amidst turbulence has not been widely researched in Zimbabwe as the socio-political and economic turbulences have been building up since 2 000 to the present day. Zimbabwe faced severe economic challenges, leading to the abandonment of the local currency in 2009 due to hyperinflation (Mufundikwa, 2010). The fast-track land reform programme that was implemented in February 2000, where the majority of the 4 000 white farmers were displaced from their land for redistribution to blacks caused a devastating economic meltdown (*ibid.*). Since then, there has been a continuous downturn in the Zimbabwean economy and analysts like Moyo, President of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions, pegged the unemployment rate at a whopping 95% (Africa Check, 2015). To date, the turbulence has not been tamed, rather, it has escalated since November 2017, when former President, Robert Mugabe was toppled and Emmerson Mnangagwa became President. The subsequent July 2018 elections rejected by the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which maintained that Mnangagwa's Zimbabwe African Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PFF) had stolen it, aggravated the already dire situation. A Constitutional Court challenge was raised and the standoff worsened the turbulence even more when the court ruling came out in favour of ZANU-PFF. This created new waves of unethical practices amongst teachers in the schools, in the sense that the much-anticipated transformation did not take place, rather new woes surfaced. The removal of the United States dollar as the official currency by the second republic and its replacement with the Zimbabwean currency, triggered the same journey that had been travelled from 2008 to 2017, decerebrating the situation. This exacerbated the unethical leadership practices among school heads and the teachers.

According to Burde (2014), a country in turbulence, like Zimbabwe currently, often suffers from a near-total decline of the state, displaying symptoms such as a shortage of resources, teachers included, as a human resource, forced migrations, breakdown in communications, health care and other state-run services. When an economy collapses, it is the public-funded activities and sectors that are affected first.

Relatedly, teachers were reported to be absent from duty or were constantly late because they were running private businesses to subsidise the eroded and late paid salaries and bonuses and leaving learners unattended ((Mawere, 2013; Masango, 2014). When there is socio-political and economic turbulence, people tend to do anything to survive and, as a result, ethical considerations become secondary (Magede, 2017). Teachers are critical agents in the academic and moral development of students.

Khandelwal and Biswal (2012) posit that teacher conduct includes professional commitment and ethical behaviour, hence the interrogation of unethical practices among teachers, heads of department and school heads in the four schools, concerning the turbulence prevailing in Zimbabwe.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Theories that were employed in the study were the Turbulence Theory (Shapiro & Gross, 2013) *Ubuntu* Leadership Theory (Khoza, 2012) and the Virtue Ethical Leadership Theory (Gini & Green, 2013).

Gross (2006) defines turbulence as a force from the environment that is usually unpredictable. Similarly, Burde (2014) defines turbulence as the entire process of economic change, where there are relocations, shutdowns movements, job losses, expansions and start-ups due to natural selection processes, economic changes, globalisation, technological change and political instability or wrong political decisions. Shapiro and Gross (2013) say there are two types of turbulences, namely external and internal, the internal coming from within the school setup, while the external comes from forces outside. Shapiro and Gross (*ibid.*) are proponents of the Turbulence Theory. It has four levels: light, moderate, severe and extreme turbulence. In light turbulence, there is little or no movement, while in moderate the movement is noticeable. With severe turbulence, control is getting lost and lastly, extreme control is lost. According to Gross (2006), in Turbulence Theory positionality is vital in that, where a person stands about the turbulence will determine how he or she experiences or reacts to it. In the case of the Zimbabwean economy and the prevailing turbulences, there are people benefiting from these turbulences and would want these turbulences to continue for selfish reasons. This is where the issue of positionality comes into play. While some are fighting to end the turbulences, others are busy fanning the fire to give it a new lease of life.

Khoza (2014) defines the *ubuntu* philosophy as humanness, a pervasive spirit of caring and community, harmony and hospitality and respect and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another. According to Khoza (2013), the *Ubuntu* philosophy hinges on group solidarity, aimed at building and maintaining communities with justice and mutual care. Under the *ubuntu* philosophy, the community is more important than the individual. Mathooko (2008) says, in the African landscape, regarding management concepts and ethics, you cannot ignore *ubuntu*. Khoza (2012) brings another dimension of interest to the study, that of attuned African Leadership, which he refers to as the compass of African humanism. He argues that a person is a person because of other people (*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*) Khoza (*ibid.*) equates this theory to the Biblical concept of love thy neighbour as thyself, arguing further that leaders should serve their people with a sense of integrity, accountability, knowledge

and transparency. If we were to follow the turbulence analogy, it will be apparent that people that are piloting the aircraft are the ones that should be steering it out of the turbulences, but in this case, the opposite might be true, hence the study.

Gini and Green (2013) give a five-point model in ascending order of importance, which they say constitute the necessary components of moral leadership, the first being that all leadership is power-laden. In Zimbabwe, a lack of proper balance of power and functioning of the executive, legislature and judiciary led to this scenario which has affected all sectors of the economy, schools included (Chireshe & Shumba: 2011). The second component is the relationship between leaders and followers. Here, Gini and Green (2013) advocate that leadership is plural in that it does not reside in one person. A shared vision is the third component of the five, where they argue that all leaders have an agenda, a series of beliefs, proposals, shared views and values of the organisation. These, however, should be driven by virtue ethics, targeting a shared vision. The fourth component of virtue ethical leadership is the accomplishment of real change and the fifth is value-based and ethically driven leadership. The argument is that leadership is not just a set of learned skills and a series of outcomes; it is about character attuned to its ethical responsibilities to others, where one is saying 'you are because I am, and I am because you are.' The motive is the common good for everybody. These three theories directly inform the study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study was a qualitative and interpretivist multiple-case study, focusing on unethical leadership practices amongst teachers in the context of socio-political and economic turbulence in four schools in the Marondera District of Zimbabwe. In the study, the boundaries were the four schools and the focus was exploring unethical leadership. Yin (2012) states that a multiple-case study is an approach to qualitative research that involves a specific and detailed study of cases. The study of these cases results in an invaluable and deep understanding of issues, which hopefully results in the creation of new insights and knowledge.

The current study used four schools and selected individuals. The individuals were identified as best suited to generate the data required for the study. There were four data generation sites: two primary and two secondary schools. Each case study goes beyond the study of isolated variables, given that each school as a case has its context and setting that cannot be identical to the other but are peculiar to them. Unethical leadership practices amongst teachers in the four schools, making the cases for the current study, were the boundary for the study and the school head, one head of department and four teachers were selected from each case and school, further creating another boundary.

The four case study sites, together with the participants were selected through purposive sampling. The data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews and document analysis. The study made use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and the case sites, the schools.

EVIDENCE FROM THE GROUND

The turbulence factors cited by the participants that triggered unethical conduct amongst teachers in the schools were: late or non-payment of salaries and bonuses, massive teacher brain drain to neighbouring countries and greener pastures, a collapse of the educational funding structures within the schools, salary erosion and political violence on teachers. It was these socio-political and economic factors that created turbulences that triggered all forms of unethical conduct among teachers. These are discussed in detail next.

Amongst the socio-political and economic turbulences that were prevalent in Zimbabwe which had a bearing on ethical leadership in the schools were: late or non-payment of salaries and bonuses, massive brain drain, a collapse of the educational funding structures, political violence on teachers, amongst other factors (Kusereka, 2003; UNICEF, 2008;; Mawadza, 2009; *The Herald*, 2015).

In such an environment, unethical practices were cited as prevalent by the participants, some of their sentiments are as follows:

Were there any unethical practices caused by the socio-political and economic turbulences in Zimbabwe?

Many of the participants agreed that there were many unethical practices associated with the current socio-political and economic turbulence. The Head of Chifamba High School, Mr Zangata said:

There are plenty in this economic environment. Absenteeism, both teachers and pupils. Teachers because of economic hardships, the teachers are trying to put food on the table, trying to make extra cash, so at times he does not come to work, busy somewhere trying to make extra cash for a living. We have situations where teachers have affairs with pupils also, all because of the economic hardships driving these pupils to this, which drives some teachers to take advantage of these school kids. There is a betrayal of trust, there is a breach of the code of conduct.

When probed further, it emerged that most of these teachers who either came to work late and left earlier than expected or were absent, were entirely engaged in extra income generation projects, such as flea markets, market stalls, poultry farming, extra tutorial classes and vending. One teacher from Sungano Primary School, Mrs Gadzirai, had this to say:

Professionally trained people are out there. They are now vendors. You will be forced to set up a business out there and run it while you are also running the profession.

The teachers are aware that they are flouting the basic ethical conduct expected of them, but they blame it on the current turbulences in the country. Mr Ruzivo, also a teacher from Sungano Primary School) said:

Something in you will tell you that what you are doing is wrong, but then there is the issue of poverty, the issue of the cash crisis, teachers end up being corrupt, accepting bribes and trying to earn a living somehow but without considering the consequences. That is a big job now; you are supposed to be at work yet you want to have cash!

It also emerged that the same teachers who neglect the learners during formal class time in the school followed them after class and gave them extra classes in what had come to be called home tutoring. The data indicated that a teacher could have as many as 20 students each paying US\$10 (about R150) per home-tutored subject per month. Teachers abused the learners for the sake of making money out of them. Mr Tsika, Head of Department, Sungano Primary School) said:

Those people that are doing it are doing it for money. They do not bother themselves about consulting the syllabus and ensuring to follow what it prescribes. They are trying to raise some dollars there, so they say 1,2,3 child come to my place. We have teachers, in one of the schools, I will not mention the name, it was discovered they were using the school premises to do their extra lessons. So regional office descended upon them and almost the whole lot that was teaching Grades Five, Six and Seven were discharged.

This was the consensus amongst the participants, they strongly felt that the current turbulences had a great negative effect on ethical practices in the schools, regarding the teachers.

MASSIVE TEACHER BRAIN DRAIN

There was total agreement amongst all the participants that there was an exodus of trained professionals across all sectors of the economy from Zimbabwe due to the current socio-political and economic turbulence. The brain drain affected all sectors, trained teachers included. On April 9, 2010, the former Minister of Education, David Coltart, revealed that 45 000 teachers had left Zimbabwe for greener pastures abroad (Coltart, 2010). The respondents strongly felt that the brain drain created serious ethical leadership problems for teachers within the schools. The main issue raised in the responses, both for heads of departments and teachers, was the mentoring aspect that was lost when seasoned teachers left.

A good number of the participants associated the young teachers (who now filled the places left by the seasoned teachers) with improper association, indifference, lack of commitment and failure to handle classroom situations appropriately. To add their voice, one of the participants said:

From my observation, the Zimbabwean curriculum and the Zimbabwean teaching profession have been good, the problem we are facing now is that we have young kids who have just graduated and the majority of the seasoned teachers who were supposed to groom these 'kids' to understand the expectations

of the system are no longer there (Head of Gondo Secondary School, Mr Ngwarai).

The study revealed that many of the young teachers are also leaving, some not even taking up teaching posts after graduation, exacerbating an already dire situation. One participant was eruptive over this issue as they bore the brunt:

Mrs Takunda from Gondo Secondary School, fumed

You are the ones who suffer with their load, those that leave, go on maternity or sick leave are not replaced. For three months you share loads of those on leave. We are tired now, so we also do our things.

Sentiments such as the ones coming from Mrs Takunda indicated an attitude of burnout, where one did not care anymore about what happened in the school, ethically or otherwise. This was the general mood amongst all the teachers the researcher interacted with in the focus group interviews. They exhibited tones of resignation and an attitude that said we are beyond the level of care.

Related to brain drain is teacher overload, which led to the loss of morale and motivation, eventually triggering teacher apathy and poor performance. Mrs Katsiru, a teacher at Chifamba High School, said the teachers and other professionals were still leaving the profession *en masse* and the trend was growing. As a result, the remaining teachers had loads as high as 60 in a particular class. Those that had remained behind in the country, simply left the teaching profession and engaged in private business, some even opted to be vendors because it paid more to vend than to teach, creating apathy within a once noble profession. Mrs Gadzirai had this to say, regarding vending as opposed to teaching:

Professionally trained teachers are out there. They are now vendors. Even those that were trained in 2014, 2015 and 2016 still choose to be on the streets selling tomatoes and so on, but they have got their certificates at home, waiting to come when sanity begins to prevail.

The participants revealed that the issue of improved remuneration was the key to transforming education and ethical practices in these schools. The teachers indicated that issues such as low morale, lack of motivation, absenteeism, unpunctuality, private businesses and the massive brain drain were all directly orchestrated by poor remunerations, a factor born out of the current socio-political and economic turbulence in the country and unless these turbulences are dealt with, the worst is yet to come.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST TEACHERS

There were indications that teachers were victimised in the run-up to elections, labelled as supporting opposition parties. Mrs Gumbeze, a teacher participant from Chifamba High School, commented on an incident of political violence on teachers that she witnessed, where teachers from a school in Marondera were taken to a community rally by their students and

beaten in front of them. These teachers went into hiding until the elections were over, and some never returned. The participant further pointed out that this is the degrading level to which the profession had been reduced.

Literature on studies conducted in Zimbabwe has confirmed what the current study found. In the Zimbabwean situation, students did witness and, at times, took part in executing political violence on their teachers (Kusereka, 2003). Once this happens, teachers lose respect and control of their students, thereby creating disciplinary problems in schools. Once schools were politicised and controlled by sources other than professional systems and associations, ethical teacher conduct in the schools ceased to exist (Mafa and Makuba, 2013). Amongst the unethical conduct triggered by political violence were teacher overload for those who were remaining, loss of control and loss of dignity amongst the teachers. As per the tenets of *Ubuntu* Leadership Theory, when situations like these do occur, they negate the values and essence of *Ubuntu* in schools and communities alike. There is usually a backlash when teachers begin to retaliate, posing unethical conduct. The philosophy of *ubuntu* embraces values such as transparency, consultation, respect, sharing, selflessness, caring and respect for others (Littrell, 2011; Msila, 2014; Ngidi and Dorasamy, 2014). Given the challenges educators were facing in the Zimbabwean context, the study envisaged serious conflict and dilemma for educators when it came to executing ethical leadership in schools.

According to Gross's (2006) turbulence theory, the concept of positionality is vital in that, where a person stands in the turbulence will determine how he or she experiences it. Turbulence is not spread around the school and community uniformly and the role one plays around also determines one's functions and attitude. A good example from the electronic media is the story in *ZimEye* (2018, Online News) where a High Court Judge barred ZANU-PFF from using schoolteachers, school buses and learners in their campaign rallies to swell up numbers for the July 2018 elections. Here, positionality affected the way each group viewed and acted around the turbulence. Usually, it is the teachers that always ended up on the receiving end and it affects ethical leadership in the schools.

NON-PAYMENT AND LATE PAYMENT OF SALARIES AND BONUSES

The late payment and at times non-payment of salaries and bonuses for up to as much as six to eight months was raised as one of the major causes of unethical leadership practices in these schools. According to the participants, they were trying to make ends meet because their salaries came some six to eight months later and the bonuses were said to have come at times one year later. The non-payment or late payment of salaries and bonuses pushed the teachers to the cliff edge when it came to economic survival. When probed further, it emerged that the majority of these teachers who were either

unpunctual and left earlier than expected, or were absent, were entirely engaged in extra income generation projects, such as flea markets, market stalls, poultry farming, extra tutorial classes and vending. The data pointed to the fact that some were engaged in private home tutoring, running a flea-market stall or having a vending stall. Mrs Gadzirai a teacher from Sungano Primary School said the issue of salary erosion and late or non-payment created by the current socio-political and economic turbulence contributed to all these behaviours and the poverty amongst teachers.

The resigned attitude of most of the teachers was evident on being asked if their ministry was doing enough in preparing them for ethical leadership in the schools, one teacher, Mr Mhuru of Sungano Secondary School, said, “We are happy with what they are doing, enough according to what we are earning from them. They know what they are giving us!”

Furthermore, viewed from the *Virtue* and *Ubuntu* theories, the current Zimbabwean socio-political and economic turbulence left educators impoverished and struggling financially (Mufundikwa, 2010). Hallak and Poisson (2007) lament that, among the many factors that led to corruption were low salaries and poverty among public officials and civil servants, as these forced them to drop their ethics. It thus implies that the more impoverished a country is, the higher the levels of corruption and disregard for ethical leadership practices. Hallak and Poisson (*ibid.*) maintain that such circumstances fuel corruption and unethical conduct among school personnel

THE CASH CRISIS IN BANKS

The study revealed that the cash crisis in the banks created a severe daily dilemma for the school heads and created unethical practices in the schools. Teachers needed to leave the school to access their hard-earned cash, which they could only get in small amounts at a time. The participants indicated that only US\$20 could be accessed in a day, from a salary of US\$300. The school heads were forced to compromise their ethical position and allow these teachers to be away, yet the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education expected them to be in the schools. Both the school heads and the teachers ended up involved in unethical conduct, one participant, Mrs Moto, a teacher from Chifamba High School said:

At times teachers come late for work from the bank, they have to get cash, they have to get money, they have to sustain themselves. They have to wait at the bank instead of exercising their duties at the workplace.

The tone in this statement indicated someone determined to get their money ahead of meeting their obligation at the school. The participants engaged made it clear that they ‘have to get cash no matter the consequences.’ The school heads had to find ways of accommodating these teachers and in doing

so there arose unethical conduct. The school heads and heads of departments were also caught up in this challenge, where one would also want to go to the bank to access money. They ended up, according to the findings, drawing up rosters for being absent from the school. Though unethical, it was a survival technique. One of the participants openly stated that while they value ethics, the situation on the ground demanded survival and not ethics.

Here, the findings on the ground seemed to be indicating that, when a person was confronted with two situations, professional ethics versus survival, people followed survival strategies at the expense of ethics. A study by Hester, Joseph and Kilian (2010) states that people's actions in organisations get driven by a balance between meeting personal and organisational values and needs. Once the scale tilts too much at the expense of personal values and needs, then ethics suffer significantly as individuals are forced to do things that serve their interests at whatever cost. Msipa (2016) says a lack of ethical leadership among the top political leaders of Zimbabwe led to the death of ethics in all public institutions. Unless this is corrected, there is bound to be a further downward drift, worsening an already dire situation.

NON-PAYMENT OF FEES AND LEVIES AND OTHER FORMS OF FUNDING

The study findings suggested that very little or no funding at all came into the case schools and there was a severe shortage of resources. When conducting the focus group interview for the teachers at Chifamba High School, one of the researchers wanted to close the door to create some privacy and reduce noise from outside, but there was no door. Also, when the researcher remarked on this, all four teachers laughed. Only then were other signs of dilapidation around us noticed, such as broken windowpanes, floors with holes and chalkboards that were crying for paint and renewal. There was consensus amongst all the participants engaged, that the education funding structures for schools had collapsed and the schools were in challenging circumstances. This scenario triggered a lot of unethical practices among the teachers. Mr Ngwarai, had this to say on the issue of lack of funding:

Yes, the situation is affecting the parents' ability to pay fees, so most of the students are not paid up. Moreover, the school is expected to use the money to function. Other expenses are mandatory, like affiliations to organisations like NASH (National Association for Secondary Heads). The school is failing to purchase essential equipment and materials, for the proper delivery of lessons and proper functioning of the school, so, it has a bad effect on the school.

These circumstances may seem not to have a bearing on ethical practices if viewed from the surface, but when one goes beyond that, it becomes clear that lack of resources was the trigger for a variety of unethical practices. The inactivity of teachers while at the school, their frustration and

demoralisation, their absconding from derelict school environments and their failure to give learners work were all a result of a lack of resources. Most of the absenteeism from work could be attributed to the desolate conditions in the schools. According to Mr Musa, the School Head of Makore Primary School, they had a staff contingent of 60 and an enrolment of 2 025 learners. When asked how they were faring regarding resources, he said:

This is a very big challenge, a very big challenge and an issue of real concern. Resources are very limited and the school is massive, one would expect resources associated with such an institution, but it is the opposite. Directly opposite in the sense that we have got fees and levies, it is not much given the situation because our school is a government school, it is \$5 (about R75) and the SDC levy is \$20 (about R300) per child per term. Now the pattern in payment is pathetic; it is just pathetic because we have some parents that have gone for five, or six years having paid nothing.

(Mr Musa, School Head, Makore Primary)

It emerged that there were only 15 tablets for a school of over 2 000 learners. Again, these tablets were a donation from Econet Wireless. In the same vein, Mr Davirai., also a teacher from Makore Primary School, said:

Textbooks, furniture, classrooms, workloads. We have got hot sitting and we teach under trees, can you imagine, if a snake falls, can you imagine the disaster? And the pupils will be sitting on the ground while you sit on a chair, you feel sorry for them when it's raining or cold and no students are allowed to be sent home for not paying fees. So, we have cases where learners only paid once when they joined the school.

According to Mubvumbi (2016), the numerous changes made by the then Minister of Education, Lazarus Dokora, were not good for ethical leadership in the schools, let alone the education system in Zimbabwe for. According to his argument, all meaningful changes require a lead time and adequate resources. These have not been put in place at all in the Zimbabwean context. A case in point is the new emphasis on science education and technical subjects. Good as it may be, there are no resources in the majority of schools to equip laboratories and the practical subjects' tools and equipment. As a result, teachers and learners end making do with the little they have. Suffice it to say teachers would be forced to cheat and fabricate marks for practical subjects because the materials would not have been there to do the correct thing. Where resources were lacking, as the data suggested, changing the curriculum would result in severe ethical malpractices.

CONCLUSION

Indications from the study were that school heads were still trying to save the situation, but they were carrying too heavy a load, as the teachers were exhibiting a resigned mood. The heads were still optimistic, like Mr Musa, the Head of Makore Primary, who had a teacher establishment of 60 and 2 025 learners, most of whose lessons were conducted under the trees. The scenario of the *ubuntu* theory is relatable, where society continues to hope

and labour to bring about change and invest in next generations. The tenets of *virtue*, *ubuntu* and attuned leadership, where the interests of the nation should come before of personal gains and human greed can be referral points. However, restoring the economy and dealing with the non-availability of cash in the banks, engaging all stakeholders, including the international community, would help rescue the current situation.

Based on the research findings, it has emerged that teachers are struggling to balance ethical practices within the current socio-political and economic environment in Zimbabwe. It is, therefore, recommended that serious concerted effort be made, through a multi-faceted stakeholder approach to address the challenges unearthed in the study, which is making ethical practices difficult, if not impossible, in the schools. Some of these issues include: the restoration of funding structures for the schools, engaging the donor community including the NGOs that used to assist schools with funding, restoring the value of the teaching profession, improving the remuneration for teachers and having a Council for Educators.

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