

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION THROUGH PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT AND ETHICAL MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN THE PORT HARCOURT METROPOLIS

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Abstract

This paper explores the connection between professional conduct, ethical management practices, and the promotion of inclusive education in schools within the Port Harcourt Metropolis. Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable learning opportunities for all learners, regardless of ability, socio-economic background, or cultural difference. The study argues that professional and ethical behavior among teachers and administrators serves as the foundation for effective inclusion. Drawing an insight from educational management and ethics literature, the paper highlights how teacher professionalism, ethical decision-making, and transparent school governance aids in enhancing students' participation, well-being, and academic achievement. It concludes that sustained professional development and value-driven leadership are essential to strengthening inclusive education in Port Harcourt schools.

Keywords: *Inclusive Education, Professional conduct, Ethical management, Teacher ethics, educational management, Port Harcourt Metropolis*

Introduction

Inclusive education has become an essential pillar of educational development globally, emphasizing that every child irrespective of disability, gender, or social status has the right to quality education (UNESCO, 2020). Every child, without discrimination, deserves access to

free, quality, and inclusive education that supports their full development and prepares them for meaningful participation in their society. Within Nigeria, the growing diversity of school populations, particularly in urban areas like the Port Harcourt Metropolis, has intensified the need for professional and ethical teaching practices that accommodate all learners (Afolabi & Obidike, 2021). Professional conduct here deals beyond dressing appropriately to class or being punctual to class. It involves how educators communicate with their learners, show empathy, handle classroom behaviour, promotes equality, respect their learners and always maintain confidentiality. If these values are upheld, students especially those with disabilities will feel more safe, seen and respected. Professional conduct refers to the moral and behavioral standards expected of educators in their service to learners and society (Okorie & Eze, 2020). How the teacher interacts with the learners can either make or mar trust and resistance. Fairness, respect, confidentiality, and accountability in classroom practice should must be basic characteristics for all teachers. Ethical management, on the other hand, entails decision-making processes guided by justice, transparency, and a commitment to the collective good (Nwosu, 2019). When applied to inclusive education, these principles ensure that schools create environments that value diversity, protect learner rights, and promote equal access to educational opportunities.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two interrelated theories: The Transformational Leadership Theory propounded by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and the Ethics of Care Theory advanced by Nel Noddings (1984). These theories jointly provide the philosophical and professional foundation for understanding how ethical management and professional conduct can foster inclusive education in schools.

Transformational Leadership Theory

The Transformational Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of leaders in inspiring and motivating subordinates toward shared goals and moral responsibility. Burns (1978) posits that transformational leaders go beyond administrative control to influence the values, attitudes, and behaviors of their followers through vision, integrity, and ethical example. Within the context of education, transformational leadership is expressed through school heads and administrators who model professionalism, fairness, and empathy in their interactions with staff and learners

In fostering inclusive education, transformational leaders promote a school culture where diversity is appreciated and every child is valued, irrespective of background, ability, or need. Such leaders motivate teachers to demonstrate professional conduct through respect, collaboration, and equitable treatment of learners. By acting as ethical role models, educational leaders shape the attitudes of teachers toward inclusive practices and create an environment conducive to participation, belonging, and mutual respect. Thus, transformational leadership provides the ethical and moral compass necessary for achieving inclusive learning environments.

Ethics of Care Theory

Complementing this perspective, the Ethics of Care Theory by Noddings (1984) highlights the moral significance of caring relationships in education. The theory argues that genuine care and empathy should guide professional decisions and management practices in schools. It views ethical behavior not as adherence to rigid rules, but as a commitment to the well-being and holistic development of others. In inclusive education, care-based ethics demands that teachers and administrators respond compassionately to learners' individual differences and ensure that no child is marginalized or neglected.

Ethical management, guided by a caring philosophy, ensures that administrative decisions, policies, and instructional practices are centered on fairness, sensitivity, and moral responsibility. When educational managers and teachers act from a position of care and concern, they model ethical professionalism that supports inclusion, equality, and respect for human dignity.

Together, the Transformational Leadership and Ethics of Care theories form a robust framework for understanding how professional conduct and ethical management can drive inclusive education. Transformational leadership provides the vision and moral direction for inclusion, while the ethics of care offers the emotional and relational foundation that sustains it. The integration of both theories suggests that inclusive education is best achieved when school leaders inspire teachers through ethical example and genuine care for learners, fostering a learning environment where all students, regardless of ability or background, have equal opportunities to succeed.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of inclusive education emphasizes the restructuring of school culture, policy, and practice to ensure that all learners especially those marginalized or with special needs are fully integrated into the mainstream educational system (Booth & Ainscow, 2016). It refers to a teaching and learning approach that recognizes, respects, and values diverse needs of all learners. It is built on the belief that every learner, regardless of ability, background, gender, socioeconomic status, or disability, has the right to quality education and meaningful participation in the learning process. It goes beyond physical integration to include active participation, respect for learner diversity, and individualized support (Ainscow & Miles, 2019). Professional conduct in this context refers to the set of behaviors, standards, and responsibilities guiding teachers' interaction with learners, parents, and colleagues. It encompasses the professional standards, values, and moral principles that guide educators in promoting inclusion, equality, and quality education for every child, irrespective of ability, background, or circumstance. According to Adeyemi (2020), professionalism in education is built upon moral integrity, pedagogical competence, and respect for the learner's dignity. When teachers act ethically and responsibly, they model values that support inclusivity, empathy, and collaboration in learning communities.

The Role of Professional Conduct in Inclusive Education

Professional conduct is the foundation upon which inclusive education thrives. It plays a crucial role in the effective implementation of inclusive education. It serves as the foundation upon which teachers, school administrators, and educational stakeholders build a learning environment that respects diversity, promotes equality, and ensures that every learner receives quality education. Teachers' values, attitudes, and behaviors directly influence whether students feel accepted and supported in the learning environment (Adebayo & Lawal, 2021). In inclusive classrooms, professionalism extends beyond competence to encompass empathy, patience, and respect for diversity. Teachers who demonstrate fairness and adaptability help dismantle stereotypes that exclude learners with disabilities, learning difficulties, or socio-economic disadvantages (Ainscow & Booth, 2017). Teachers who demonstrate professional conduct avoid discriminatory attitudes and ensure that all learners are treated with dignity and respect.

Ethical Management Practices in Schools

Ethical management forms the administrative backbone of inclusive education. School leaders and administrators determine whether inclusion is genuinely practiced or merely stated in policy documents (Nwosu, 2019). Ethical management involves leadership that is fair, transparent, and accountable in decision-making. Ethical management is grounded in the understanding that education is a moral enterprise, and the behaviour of school leaders directly influences the community. When school administrators act ethically, they model integrity, fairness, and justice, values that are essential for creating a positive school climate. Leaders who act ethically ensure that policies regarding enrollment, discipline, and resource distribution are implemented without discrimination (Bass & Riggio, 2018). When leaders are transparent about financial records, performance evaluation, and disciplinary measures, they demonstrate a commitment to ethical governance.

Challenges of Promoting Professional Conduct and Ethical Management in Inclusive Education

While the importance of professional conduct and ethical management is widely recognized, schools within the Port Harcourt Metropolis still face numerous challenges that hinder their full realization. One major obstacle is inadequate professional training. Many teachers lack the pedagogical skills and ethical grounding necessary for inclusive education. As Obielumani and Briggs (2020) noted, pre-service teacher training programs in Nigeria often provide limited exposure to inclusive methodologies or ethical decision-making frameworks.

In addition, personal and cultural biases among educators can challenge the realization of inclusion. Teachers and administrators may unconsciously display prejudice toward learners with disabilities, those from low-income families, or minority groups. These biases often

manifest in subtle forms of exclusion such as low expectations, limited participation, or differential treatment which contradict the ethical principles of fairness and respect for human dignity. Promoting inclusive education, therefore, requires not only structural reform but also a shift in mindset and attitude among educators.

Another pressing issue is poor leadership and lack of ethical supervision. In many schools, the absence of ethical leadership results in weak monitoring and ineffective support for teachers. School heads who fail to model ethical behaviour cannot effectively demand professionalism from their staff. Ethical management requires leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and transparency in decision-making. As UNESCO (2020) notes, the ethical tone of a school is largely determined by the character and conduct of its leadership.

Socio-economic and political pressures also complicate the promotion of professional conduct and ethical management. In some contexts, corruption, favoritism in appointments, and political interference in school governance compromise merit-based decisions. When leadership positions are influenced by external interests rather than competence and ethics, it becomes difficult to sustain a culture of professionalism and accountability in educational management.

Strategies for Strengthening Inclusion through Ethics and Professionalism

Addressing these challenges requires deliberate, multi-level strategies that reinforce professional ethics and inclusive management practices. Continuous professional development (CPD) and ethical training must be institutionalized. Teachers and administrators should undergo regular training in inclusive pedagogy, ethical reasoning, and conflict resolution. Teachers and school administrators should be regularly exposed to workshops, seminars, and certification programmes that emphasize inclusive pedagogy, ethical leadership, and professional conduct. Such training helps educators to internalize ethical principles and apply them in practical classroom situations. According to Adeyemi (2020), periodic capacitybuilding workshops not only improve instructional competence but also reinforce moral awareness and reflective practice among educators.

Another important strategy is ethical leadership and supervision. School administrators play a crucial role in shaping the moral tone of their institutions. When leaders demonstrate fairness, transparency, and respect for human dignity, they inspire teachers to model similar values in their interactions with students. Ethical leaders ensure that policies, disciplinary measures, and resource allocations are handled equitably. According to the Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN, 2019), ethical leadership enhances trust, accountability, and professional discipline within schools, all of which are vital for sustaining inclusive practices. Ethical leaders should engage in lifelong learning to improve their competence, ethical awareness, and managerial skills.

Prospects of Professional Conduct and Ethical Management for Inclusive Education in Port Harcourt

The future of inclusive education in the Port Harcourt Metropolis is promising, provided that schools, educators, and policymakers continue to prioritize ethics and professionalism. Growing awareness of educational inclusion and social justice has encouraged schools to adopt new approaches to teaching, assessment, and leadership (Afolabi & Obidike, 2021). As Nigeria aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4—ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, the prospects for meaningful reform are increasing.

A major prospect lies in the growing recognition of professional ethics as a vital tool for educational quality and social justice. With increasing awareness among educators and policymakers about the importance of integrity, accountability, and inclusiveness, schools in Port Harcourt are beginning to adopt more ethical approaches to leadership and management. The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN, 2019) has continued to promote professional standards that demand fairness, discipline, and respect for learner diversity, which are all essential for inclusive education. As these values are reinforced through training and supervision, the culture of professionalism is expected to deepen across schools in the metropolis.

Another promising prospect is the emergence of ethical and transformative leadership among school administrators. Many school heads and educational managers are becoming more conscious of their roles as moral exemplars in promoting inclusion and equity. Ethical leaders who practice transparency, fairness, and accountability are better positioned to manage diverse classrooms, allocate resources equitably, and motivate teachers toward inclusive practices. This leadership shift has the potential to create a more positive and supportive school climate in Port Harcourt's educational system.

Conclusion

Professional conduct and ethical management practices are not merely administrative ideals but essential pillars for achieving inclusive education. In the Port Harcourt Metropolis, where diversity and inequality coexist, educators and administrators must view ethical practice as a moral and managerial responsibility. Teachers' professionalism reflected in fairness, empathy, and competence forms the daily expression of inclusion in classrooms. Likewise, ethical leaders guide institutions toward equity through transparent, participatory, and value-driven governance.

Suggestions

Based on the findings and discussions presented in this paper, several suggestions are offered to strengthen the role of professional conduct and ethical management in fostering inclusive education within the Port Harcourt Metropolis. These recommendations aim to guide teachers, administrators, policymakers, and community stakeholders toward sustainable inclusion practices grounded in professionalism and ethics.

1. Policy Implementation and Monitoring: The Rivers State Ministry of Education should intensify the enforcement of inclusive education policies by establishing clear monitoring frameworks and ethical compliance units in schools. Regular evaluation of teacher conduct, leadership ethics, and inclusion practices will ensure accountability and sustainability.
2. Continuous Professional Development: Teachers and administrators should be engaged in mandatory professional ethics and inclusive pedagogy workshops. Training should emphasize moral reasoning, empathy, and differentiated instruction, enabling educators to handle diverse learner needs effectively.
3. Leadership Training and Mentorship: School heads should undergo leadership ethics programs to enhance transparency, fairness, and participatory decision-making. Mentorship structures should be established where experienced educators guide younger teachers in maintaining high ethical and professional standards.
4. Community and Parental Involvement: Schools should collaborate with parents, NGOs, and community-based organizations to promote inclusive values and support vulnerable learners. Such partnerships can help mobilize resources and encourage collective responsibility for inclusion.
5. Ethical Accountability Systems: Institutions should develop and implement codes of professional ethics with clear sanctions and reward mechanisms. Rewarding ethical behavior and punishing misconduct transparently will promote trust and reinforce positive professional culture among educators.

Inclusive education in Port Harcourt can be significantly enhanced when teachers, administrators, and policymakers jointly uphold professionalism and ethical values. Sustained advocacy, continuous training, and a culture of transparency will ensure that every child, regardless of ability or background—has equal access to quality education.

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