

## The Moral Purpose Model: A Lesson for Schools Seeking Effectiveness

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### Abstract

Recent literature spells out numerous reasons for why various schools fail. Many effective schools are characterized by the lack of culture of teaching and learning as well as low teacher morale. In South Africa there is much value put on standardized tests such as the Annual National Assessment (ANA) results from which schools are compared with other schools around the world. South African children tend to fail these tests each year and researchers have highlighted lack of teacher commitment, poverty of pupils' families, lack of social and cultural capital to be among the reasons why several schools fail.

This article focuses on a suggested model suggested after examining why schools underperform in Limpopo Province of South Africa. The study discovered the need to engender a moral purpose by management teams in schools is very pertinent. This article reflects on the cyclical moral purpose model which pragmatically portrays a holistic picture of how moral purpose can be promoted and enacted in schools. The cyclical conceptual model presented comprises of seven stages that school managers should enact in order to realize the necessary moral purpose. The stages present practical aspects and challenge school managers to position themselves at the nexus of improving learning and closing the achievement gap among pupils in their schools. Arguably, the cyclical model can be utilized in enhancing teacher commitment as well as dedication to the school's vision.

**Keywords:** Transformational leadership; Visionary leadership; School effectiveness; School culture and climate

### 1. Introduction: Understanding the moral purpose

Abu-Hussain and Essawi [1] state that school principals who demonstrate a moral value orientation are transformational leaders. Furthermore, these authors contend that such principals can build a constructive culture in their schools and this would ensure that they can cope with a "changing and competitive reality" [1]. Southworth [2] argues that schools can be

effective institutions if, among others, they create learning organizations through teamwork. Amid the characteristics of a learning organization is moral purpose linked to a focus on learning, teachers as well as the pupils. The moral purpose is also one of the cornerstones of leadership growth. In addition, Southworth [2] also argues that qualities such as "dispositions, professional and social values, vision, and moral purpose, as well as skills and abilities should all

fall within the preview of leadership development". The British Columbia Principals and Vice Principals Association (BCPVA) Standards Committee [3] based in Canada highlights the importance of the moral purpose in ethical decision making. The committee opines that one who uses leadership standards communicates the process of decision making using an ethical framework based on the moral purpose and the direction of the school. The BCPVA [3] also describes the moral purpose as that which is about the purpose that explains why organizations exist. It refers to a strong commitment to making a difference as leaders build a committed community.

In South Africa there are constant debates regarding education reforms. Among these is the focus on leadership where experts believe that management makes a difference in the running of schools.

However, in South Africa there is no evidence of studies that have explored the role of moral purpose in schools. Furthermore, even less international research has studied the effects of imbuing team-oriented School Management Teams (SMT) approach with moral purpose. The model presented in this article focuses on one study's results that sought to address this void within the context of South African schools [4]. Therefore, this article focuses on how the suggested model on moral purpose can help enhance the moral purpose especially in low performing schools. The suggested model rests on premise that specific dimensions of school leadership and management and moral purpose may produce key intermediate outcomes that could positively impact various processes within the school, and as such, may improve pupil achievement.

However, before discussing and presenting the steps of the suggested model of how moral purpose can be introduced in schools, we briefly begin by presenting the conceptualization of moral purpose that was employed in the original study. We also look at the effects of these relationships on pupil achievement as modeled in the research (see Figure. 1) as justified by relevant literature. Moral purpose is understood as the compelling determination or aspirational desire to raise levels of pupil achievement so that pupil under-achievement is minimized. Moral

purpose is reflected in the teachers' and leaders' aspirational purpose to make genuine difference in the lives of pupils by ensuring that all pupils.

At the core of moral purpose is facilitation of learning that engages pupils in a deeper understanding of their lives, thus, opening up possibilities for them to contribute positively to their communities and societies. This is the learning that does not only address the question of techniques or methodologies of teaching and leading but also pay attention to the underlying purpose of teaching and leading. In other words, moral purpose is commitment to ends that expresses the "why" of teaching and leading. To teachers and leaders, their moral purpose therefore lies in the answer they provide to a question: "Teaching and leading to what ends and by what means?" [5]. The answer teachers and leaders find to this question underlines their intentions to transform their leadership and teaching approaches to accommodate those notions that facilitate positive classroom practices where all pupils engage fully with subject content, pushing away all barriers to learning. The foundation for such aspirational purpose to raise achievement standards lie in a shared commitment to explicit values. The research identified five underlying values through which moral purpose can be expressed in the school, namely, excellence, respect, commitment, responsibility and discipline.

## **2. Moral purpose: what does it mean for the school?**

In his leadership framework, Fullan [6], [7] perceives moral purpose as one of the core components of leadership. Implicit within this framework, the concept of moral purpose is seen as inculcating in leaders a sense of making positive difference in the lives of pupils, teachers, parents and the broader community. Furthermore, Fullan [8] asserts that leaders with moral purpose have "commitment to improving standards, no matter what, and ensuring that the gap between students is narrowed when it comes to achievement" [9]. Therefore, moral purpose is the basis for relationship building [6], [8]. SMTs guided by moral purpose grounded on the aspect of respect are consummate relationship builders in their schools. They constantly foster purposeful interactions and problem solving in their schools. Collins [10]

also argues that in great organizations the leader gets relationships right first and then deals with moral purpose. Fullan [11] concurs that if one wants to challenge someone to do better; one should build a relationship first. He suggests that building relationships starts with leaders conveying respect, before people have earned it and doing everything possible to create conditions that make people lovable (mainly by creating circumstances that favor success).

Once leaders have built positive relationships with staff, pupils and parents, they need to make conscious adaptation to their practices by adopting leadership based on “broad directional vision” [12]. In accordance with this, Fullan contends that for the moral society to thrive on a deep and continuous basis, it must have a moral compass [7]. Broad directional vision or moral compass is the shared value and compelling imperative that remodels a school into moral society that is galvanized into achieving objectives. Moral society is directed towards the learning of all pupils, and reflects a greater reliance on collectivity to reinforce objectives, rather than on individual autonomy. This reinforces the importance of moral purpose to establish collaboration in teams, and this collaboration leads to knowledge creation and sharing [6].

Fullan [7] claims that knowledge creation and sharing is central to effective leadership. He emphasizes the relationship between knowledge society and moral purpose. We perceive knowledge creation as implying a constant generation and exchange of information inside and outside the school through purposeful social interactions. For the school to thrive, SMTs should understand the value as well as the role of knowledge exchange amongst staff members.

This then necessitates mediation that comes about through relationship building and knowledge creation and sharing.

The study conducted, demonstrated the degree to which shared leadership enhances the sharing of moral purpose [4]. There is a need for this moral purpose to be shared and its purpose should be grounded in a shared commitment to explicit values [13]. This implies that moral purpose can be shared when leadership practices are not limited to those in formal positions. Therefore, the literature on shared leadership will contribute to an increased understanding of how SMTs foster synergies and teamwork. These synergies and teamwork are guided by a moral purpose where a compelling idea or aspirational purpose galvanizes a group of educational leaders, allowing them to achieve significantly more than they could as a set of individuals working independently [14]. Below, the focus is on the actual model.

### **3. The Cyclical Moral Purpose Model**

The suggested conceptual model illustrated in Figure 1 below demonstrates the various stages necessary for the engendering of a moral purpose. It is a suggested model that presents a practical approach to assist schools on how they can instill a sense of moral purpose. This model can give direction to the strategic planning process at district and school levels. It can also inform the planning and formulation of strategic planning process at provincial level as well. This cyclical model builds on the assumption that instilling a sense of moral purpose into schools forms the basis for systemic improvement in pupil achievement, but that improved achievements depends on systematic approach which involves seven critical cyclical steps:

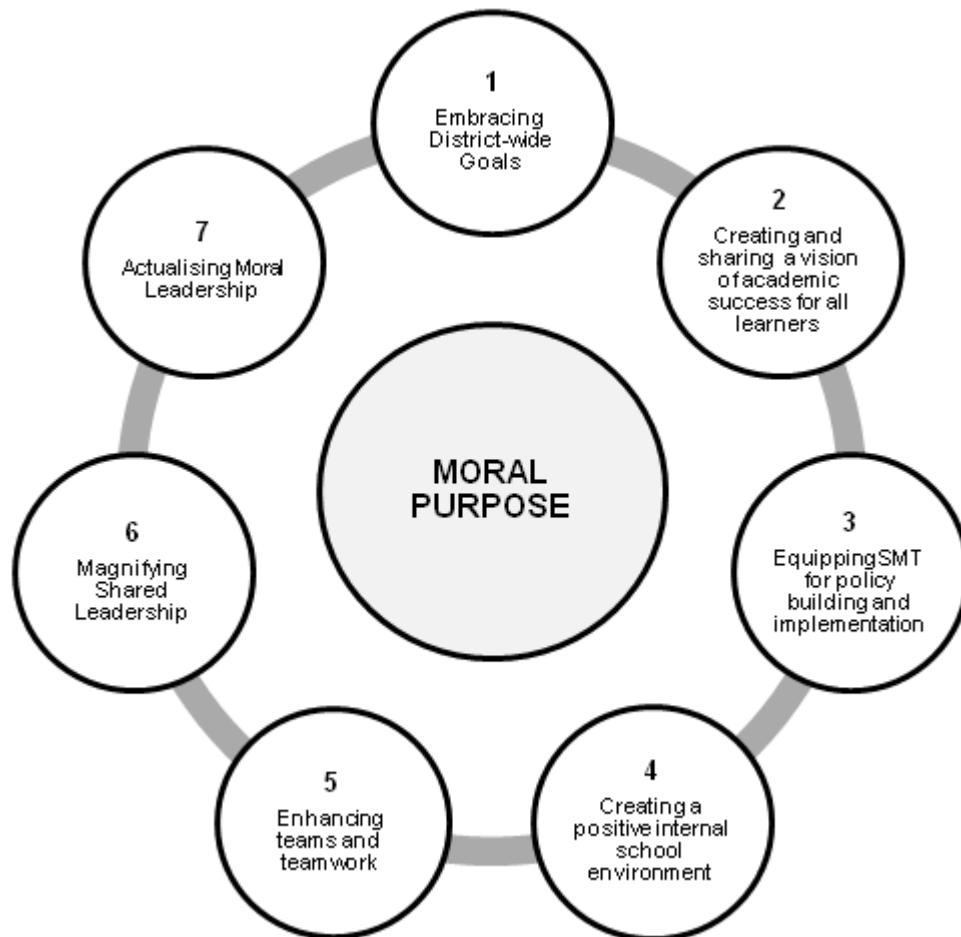


Figure 1. The *Cyclical Moral Purpose Model*

Below, we illuminate upon the model in figure 1 above.

### 3.1. Embracing district-wide goals

In the South African education context, a district is a level of a system where daily operations of the system and schools are planned. It is at this level where principals or SMTs and educators are sensitized through various circuit offices to achieve the vision of the provincial and National Department of Education. The strategies formulated by the provincial department of education fail or succeed at this level. The goals of the district should have a primary focus on pupil achievement and it must relate to the expectations or vision of the schools which always embrace school success. The district-wide goals should focus on narrowing achievement gaps between high and low performing schools in a district.

For schools to embrace and translate these goals into reality, the district offices should communicate these in an efficient manner. Coupled with this communication should be a district support to schools because effective school leadership depends on support from district officials. Except for the most extraordinary ones, school principals are unlikely to proceed with leadership style focused on learning if the district officials are unsupportive, disinterested.

Once the district leaders have formulated the goals, they need to build professional leaders who are willing to pursue the goals in practice. Having district leadership teams with people who are committed to high engagement with others in the district and schools and advocating a two-way communication that deepens shared

ownership of and commitment to the set goals will ensure a successful cultivation of moral purpose in schools. Building effective district teams that are able to articulate district goals to schools requires district managers who will be able to teacher improvement and pupil achievement in their districts.

The work of district managers should therefore be driven by deep moral purpose. They need to assume a responsible leadership role and be able to set high and common expectations for all the role-players. Leadership at this level is about having the courage to set direction and keep all role-players on what matters educationally and among the most important of these is the improvement of pupil achievement. The nature of the goals formulated by the district officials to achieve provincial expectations should be such that they allow for the smooth implementation within schools. On the other hand, the SMT should formulate their own strategic plans to ensure accomplishment of the goals communicated to them. To successfully implement these goals, it is recommended that schools build capacity among teachers to be responsible and responsive to the learning needs and concerns of pupils.

If district-wide goals are communicated effectively, embraced by all schools, these will have long-lasting improvements in pupil achievement. Successful school management teams are those that are able to effectively articulate the district-wide goals and are able to state the outcomes which are the building blocks of such goals. Furthermore, the SMTs in charge of achieving the district-wide goals need to identify with the outcomes of the school in order to promote creativity in the process of teaching and leading.

### **3.2. Creating and sharing a vision of academic achievement for all pupils**

As indicated above, there is an increasing awareness of the importance for leaders to have a tangible and compelling school-wide vision of commitment to high standards and success of all pupils. This vision has more impact on the SMT's role of influencing their schools towards achieving the desired outcomes of the specific district-wide goals that pertain to pupil achievement. The underlying aspects of this vision is having a high expectation for all pupils

and placing academic achievement on top of the SMT's agenda. In any school, this begins with the SMT spelling out high standards and rigorous learning goals.

A vision of raising the overall achievement for all pupils can be described as a school-wide learning improvement program focused on the future expectation for pupil progress. This vision becomes an engine that drives the SMT and other role-players within the school to set their own goals that assist them to achieve more. This means that effective school management practices such as strategy formulation and policy making, all of which are irrevocably interconnected, can go a long way towards increasing productivity if driven by the vision of the school leader.

Effective leaders have their visions tied to the school's core business which is teaching and learning. Any vision connected to the core business of the school controls all activities happening within the school. It makes the school to focus on the future, without minimizing the role of the lessons acquired in the past. It is important for the school to build on the successes and learn from the failures.

The vision must be communicated to all the school's role-players. School Management Teams should take every opportunity to communicate the vision of the school to the community. The development, communication and accomplishment of the vision are the SMT's most important tasks. Therefore, developing a shared future vision around standards, and success for all pupils is an essential element of school leadership and improvement. As the common phrase states 'If you don't know where you are going, any road will lead you there', leaders without a vision of academic achievement of all pupils take route that they later realize is a "cul-de-sac" route.

### **3.3. Equipping SMT for policy building, communication and implementation**

To achieve the district-wide goals through their vision, we need to equip our school management teams for building, communicating and implementing policies. There is a realization that meaningful transformation hardly happens without being driven by policy. Moreover, to achieve certain specific goals at schools, a policy needs to be designed to guide general plan of



action. Education policies such as the White Papers, South African Schools Act, the Language policy, National Curriculum Policy, National Education Policy Act (27/1996), National Policy on Whole School Evaluation, and Education Labor Relations Council (ELRC) – Policy handbook for educators are some of the policies that have transformed the SA education system.

While it is generally the responsibility of the national or provincial departments to draw education policy, it is however, the responsibility of SMTs as well as teachers to draft the school policy that regulates the professional obligations of the role-players as they shape the decisions that have to be made in the school. The SMT also has the responsibility for policy making regarding professional tasks such as day-to-day administration and the organization of teaching and learning in schools. The examples of school policy documents which guide teaching and learning is assessment policy which indicates how assessment will be conducted in the school.

The greatest challenge we have observe in earlier studies is that only few SMTs are able to formulate their own policies. We have also realized that most of the policies in many schools are merely copied from other neighboring schools with no original inputs from the immediate role-players. This tendency hampers the implementation of such policies because it is hard to implement and communicate messages that were not originally formulated by the role players.

Van Deventer and Kruger [15] suggested a few general guidelines that the SMTs need to be familiarized when drawing up school policies and provided important steps in drawing up and administering policy. Basically, in drawing the school policy, the SMT and its delegated committee should take into cognizance the supremacy of the Constitution of the country, respects national or provincial legislation and community values. In other words, policy formulation must be in the broad guidelines of the Constitution and departmental policies. In addition, the SMT and/or its delegated committee should draft a short policy document using an explicit language that appeals to both the professionals and laypersons. However, putting policy into effect demands that

the SMT clarify who will administer deviation of the policy, ensure responsibility, accountability and authority for putting the policy into effect. The SMT needs also to review, evaluate and report on the results of carrying out the policy in order to determine if there is any reluctance or resistance in implementing the policy, where and why. This should lead to remedial action where it is required.

### **3.4. Creating an affable climate to teaching and learning**

Effective SMTs ensures that their schools allow both teachers and pupils to put learning at the center of their daily activities. Such productive internal school environment nurtures and reinforces interpersonal interactions which are crucial in team performance and predetermined achievement standards for all pupils. According to Van Deventer and Kruger (2003), a school's climate has a strongly directive influence on the motivation and achievement of its role-players. Such healthy climate is characterized by the basics like safety, discipline, quality and frequency of interactions and their modes, interpersonal relationships, organizational structures, and management and leadership styles. It can as well be observed in less tangible qualities of the school life such as supportive and responsive attitude towards pupils and a sense by teachers that they are part of a community of professionals focused on good instruction.

Therefore, after visioning the future of the school in terms of pupil achievement, the SMT should engage in the process of building a positive school climate in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interactions prevails. Making the schools great places in which to work productively is a crucial responsibility of the SMTs if they are to turn the lower pupil achievement around. As forming the basis for sound culture of teaching and learning, positive school climate will have the following effects: (a) the reduction of absenteeism and drop-out rates because pupils want to be at school; (b) the promotion of pupil motivation and their will to learn; (c) increase willingness on the part of teachers to take risks, to step outside the defined boundaries, and to make classroom more exciting and challenging to pupils; and (d) the encouragement of pupils to

continue with confidence in their efforts even if they failed to succeed the first time [17].

In reality, it has appeared that it is not always easy to create a healthy and positive school climate. Usually the discontent and conflicts in the staff room create an untenable and toxic climate in a school. This environment may be characterized by a sense of hopelessness and teacher pessimism. All these are recipes for disaster and school failure. To change this kind of climate, the SMT should dedicate itself to combating teacher isolation by enabling healthy communication and focusing on building a good sense of school community. Each school department needs to spell out its expectations as leaders demonstrate instructional leadership.

### **3.5. Enhancing teams and teamwork**

Vivian [16] understands teamwork in schools as small groups of people who work together, and thus communicate with each other, on a daily basis. Essentially, the critical elements of teamwork which can facilitate improvement in team performance and pupil achievement are communication, effective co-ordination and division of work load amongst members. In addition, meaningful teamwork in schools consists of time and resource commitment on the part of the SMT communication skills building, and senses of belonging or being part of something that works [20]. When team members have a sense of belonging, they tend to be highly involved in team activities and that team experience higher levels of coordination during team tasks.

For teamwork to prevail in schools, SMTs need to value and promote team communication. Open and easy communication within the team is critical for goal accomplishment and completion of regular activities within the team. In Ramalepe's study [4] it was found out that that communication within a team facilitates the sharing of moral purpose, and thus, can discriminate between effective and ineffective teams. SMTs practicing effective communication are likely able to influence teachers to rally behind their moral purpose. Effective communication involves such factors as increased listening, openness to suggestions, and prompt, relevant feedback, which are also communication-based indicators of effective team functioning [18]. This means that SMT

need to practice effective dialogue in their communication with those they care about [19].

This model reflects a proposal that provides avenues for teachers to participate in leadership roles. The indirect impact communication has on teacher leadership is important for the cultivation of moral purpose as teachers are not likely to share into something that was never clearly communicated to them. Coupled with communication is effective conflict management. Teamwork can only lead to a feeling of personal worth among team members when interpersonal differences or disagreements within the team are positively managed. Unfortunately persisting conflicts in schools can thwart the formation of teams. Conflict exists when two or more members of a team disagree. A conflict becomes harmful and disruptive force if the tension within the team is such that it impedes members from achieving team goals. These disruptive conflicts within a team are commonly known as dysfunctional conflicts. According to Mullins [21], some of the outcomes of dysfunctional conflicts include: distance between people increases owing to the development of a climate of mistrust and suspicion, individuals concentrate on their own narrow interests, and existing differences worsen, and feelings of bitterness and hostility increase, and resistance rather than teamwork develops. However, not all conflicts are harmful. Conflict may be useful if it awakens members to alternative points of view and stimulates creativity in problem-solving and decision-making [18]. This is sometimes referred to as functional conflicts which arise when team members have differences of opinion resulting from the availability of two or more alternatives ways of dealing with a situation.

The effects of conflict depend on how the members of the team manage, control and resolve the problem. Van Deventer and Kruger [15] found that positive conflict management actions such as peaceful coexistence, compromise and problem solving can have impact on teamwork. By peaceful coexistence they mean avoidance of conflict by retreating from arena of confrontation. Compromise is a "give-and-take" exchange, resulting in neither party winning or losing. Problem solving on the other hand seeks the resolution of disagreements

through face-to-face confrontation of the conflicting parties.

### 3.6. Magnifying shared leadership

In the particular context of school, the commitment to moral purpose depends on a gradual transformation of leadership in the school to accommodate school leadership that is collaborative or shared. Drawing inspiration from a body of work on shared leadership, we maintain that distributed leadership or teacher leadership is another critical pathway by which SMTs can transform teaching and learning processes in order to attain pupil achievement [22]. This is so because acknowledging and developing the broader leadership capacity in schools hold the key to unlocking the store of leadership potential grounded in instructional expertise that school principals are often unable to provide [7], [23], [24], [25].

The proponents of shared leadership suggest that collaborative leadership has the potential to account for the broader range of naturally occurring leadership processes that exist in schools beyond the formal leadership exercised by principals [26], [27]. Moreover, Hallinger and Heck's [22] study which focused on examining the effect of collaborative leadership on reading achievement found that shared leadership can influence the school academic capacity to enhance pupil achievement. Therefore, commitment to shared leadership will facilitate broad sharing of moral purpose within the school. Within the context of shared leadership, moral purpose emanates from the SMTs to various other teams within the school, and thus becoming a compelling idea for all role-players in the school.

Once moral purpose becomes widely shared, it becomes a crucial recipe for school improvement which enhances teaching and learning. Since pupil achievement represents the core business of any school, the SMTs need to develop broader instructional expertise among its teachers. The development of instructional expertise among teachers is possible when shared moral purpose underline the distribution of leadership functions to all teachers. When distributive leadership is infused with shared moral purpose, teachers' capabilities are optimized to achieve expected leaning outcomes.

### 3.7. Actualizing moral leadership

The SMT can be a powerful structure that has a huge influence, if its members are able to be introspective and be reflective practitioners. These are necessary qualities to reach many goals that would ascertain that schools do move towards the realization of mission and vision. Leaders who embrace and advocate for moral leadership have a long-term commitment to transforming their schools into moral organizations through their vision and mission drafted by their schools. Bringing core values to life is central to moral leadership. Some school leaders are committed to expressing the values contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Other school leaders draw from their own experience those values they cherish the most in the working environment, such as accountability, equality, fairness, dedication and respect.

Improving pupil achievement in our schools is a moral goal that needs leaders who are deeply certain about their moral values and beliefs. These leaders are humble and willing to surrender their own self-interest for the sake of pursuing their moral goal. Schools need leaders who are servant leaders if they are to actualize moral leadership. Arrogant leaders who are not committed to the vision of the school will hardly realize the actualization of moral leadership and ideals of servant leadership. Msila [28] writes about the need for teacher commitment if servant leadership is to be attained. Msila [28] contends:

*The important aspect of servant leadership is that it underscores the importance of serving first before leading. Servant leadership defeats the notion of individualism, hence my earlier portrayal of how isolationism can defeat the aims of collaboration. Committed teachers lead with a sense of moral purpose necessary for achieving schools. Schools where there is collaboration and participative or shared leadership might get teachers who practice the common and accepted form of leadership.*

*A servant is a leader who is at a complete disposal of another, be it teachers, pupils or parents. This means that a servant leader will always have time to help others or to add value to others. Servant leaders believe that to get ahead, they need to put others first rather than to dominate over them.*



This approach develops a school-wide value of mutual benefit and good faith among the staff.

#### 4. Achieving moral purpose: Goal for future schools?

This model presents dimension of improving schools. There are many others and panaceas in education cannot be found in one single model. Despite this though, the society needs similar models that would guide educational transformation and general school reforms. The future schools would need not only committed teachers but passionate teachers. Moreover, as this article has shown, the other role-players' function is pertinent to actualizing the any school's goals. Teachers are at the implementation end of all reforms and reforms will be as effective as the people who implement them. The model portrayed shows that teachers would have to be lifelong learners to understand their role as moral leaders. When teachers are moral leaders they become change agents.

Fullan (1993) argues that teacher education programs should help teachers to embrace the moral purpose so that they can be change agents. This author also points out that teaching itself is a moral profession. Fullan (1993:2) also avers, "Moral purpose keeps teachers close to the needs

of children and youth, change agency causes them to develop better strategies for accomplishing their moral goals". Schools need to move towards the envisaged improvement as they ensure that teachers become these lifelong change agents. A model such as the one suggested in this article has a potential to help in moving towards this direction.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article portrayed a suggested moral purpose model. All school principals wanting to build schools around moral purpose need to inculcate a conducive culture first. Unwilling teachers would not build effective schools. The approach to transform a culture of learning and teaching in schools should be eclectic and there cannot be any one perfect solution. Some models will be more effective than others and school contexts will always dictate this. All schools though should strive for closing the achievement gap between the poor and the affluent children. Committed school leaders will try and do this through the engendering of a moral purpose captured in the cyclical model of moral purpose discussed above.

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