Beyond Clerical Support: School Administrative Clerks' Ethical Contribution to the Professional Functioning of Their Schools

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This article is based on the view that school administrative clerks' professional contribution to schools are significant and noteworthy. However, the nature of their work especially for South African working class contexts remains under appreciated. The article addresses this caveat. Using an 'ethics of the self' framework the article posits that school administrative clerks in low socioeconomic contexts rework their subjectivities by adopting ethical goals and practices in response to their working environments. As they engage in these ethical practices, we contend that their practices contribute to students' well-being and that their practices positively influence school administration, teaching and learning. Based on a qualitative study of selected school administrative clerks, this article key contribution is that through the clerks' ethical self-formation practices they provide a modest but noteworthy professional / educational service in South Africa's working class schools

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Introduction

*Well if Megan had to be absent for a week, I think quite frankly, I think it's going to be chaos and because we really depend on her. (*Statement by a principal).

The article makes the case that school administrative clerks promote institutional functionality in Western Cape schools situated in working class and poverty affected socioeconomic areas. The professional identies and practices of school administrative clerks are an under researched aspect of education (Conley *et al*., 2010). Although previous research studies on the practices of school secretaries and administrative clerks do make reference to the unrecognised and invisible nature of their practices (Casanova 1991; Thomson *et al*. 2007), there has not been sufficient exploration of their professional identity formation and their contribution to schooling.

Research to date indicates that school secretaries and administrative clerks' contributions to the day-to-day running of the school that goes beyond their assigned roles and responsibilities (Casanova 1991; Conley *et al.*, 2010; Hart 1985; Rimer 1984; Thomson *et al*. 2007; Bayat 2012). Moreover, their practices are starting to be recognised by local educational authorities as crucial in enabling and supporting principals in carrying out their leadership roles (Woods *et al*., 2012). Despite this, there have been no detailed studies that address the issues around school administrative clerks' ethical identities, identity work and their ethical contribution to schooling. The article addresses this gap and seeks to answer the following question: what are school administrative clerks' ethical practices and how do these practice co-constitute their professional roles at their schools?

We employ a theoretical framework that is based on the assumption that identity formation and ethical intentionality are intertwined (Gee 2001; Foucault 1990; Butler 1990). We focus on the role of ethics in subjectivity formation and how this 'ethics of the self' (Foucault, 1990) underpin actual work practices. The article illustrates how selected school administrative clerks, in respect of their working class school context, appropriated discourses such as professionalism and care by which they 'subjectified' themselves and engaged in a range of ethical practices. Through their ethical practices they instantiated an ethically formed subjectivity which formed the basis of their modest but noteworthy professional and educational contribution to their schools. In the next section we present some of the literature on administrative clerks and follow it up with the theoretical considerations and conceptual

framework that we employed as our analytical lens.

School administrative clerks in the scholarly literature

The existing research on school administrative clerks focuses on various dimensions of their professional roles schools (Bird, 1995; Casanova 1991; Conley *et al.* 2010; Rimer 1984; Hart 1985). In this light, Rimer (1984) defines six job aspects of secretaries: engaging in public relations, providing student services, doing clerical work, ensuring office management, information supplier, and administrative assistant to the principal. Other strands of literature lament the low status of the general secretarial and clerical occupation (Ames 1996; Fearfull *et al.*, 2008; Fearfull 1996; Maguire 1996; Nystrom 2002; Pringle 1988; Truss *et al.*, 2013). A strand in the literature draws special attention to the fact that secretaries have a positive influence on school principals' performance (Mann 1980; Rimer, 1984; Woods *et al.*, 2012). Casanova (1991) highlights the duality of the secretarial role. One one hand, they do basic clerical tasks such as photocopying and answering the phone and on the other hand they stand in for the principal when s/he is not at school. Casanova (1991) further highlights that school secretaries' ability to stand in for the principal was an important but unacknowledged practice required of school secretaries.

The institutional identities of school administrative clerks are embedded within modern neoliberal assemblages of governance discourses that constitute educational stakeholders' subjectivities, including teachers, principals and administrative clerks. These discourses and subject positions frame the normative identity and practices of administrative clerks. Among these are the discourses associated with gender and bureaucracy frame school administrative clerks' institutional identity (Ames 1996). Secretarial and administrative occupations are regarded as feminine occupations (Pringle 1988; Truss *et al.*, 2013; Truss *et al.*, 1995) and by extension the institutional identity of school administrative clerks is also framed by discourses of femininity (Thomson et al. 2007). Gender norms associated with the secretarial occupational position dominate the institutional identity of the secretaries, infused as they are with traditional gender norms associated with femininity, such as deference, nurturing and relational work (Kanter 1977; Wichroski 1994; Truss *et al.*, 2013). Traditional feminine metaphors are used to describe this type of identity, including 'office wife' and 'office mother' (Casanova 1991; Kanter 1977).

Similarly, bureaucracy is another subordinating discourse that structures school administrative clerks' institutional identity (Ames 1996). One of the principles of bureaucracy is the division of labour within a hierarchical system where occupational roles have specific discrete activities that must be executed rationally and impartially (Kallinikos 2004). Power is distributed hierarchically, where, for example in schools, principals are placed at the top of the bureaucracy and are dominant and school administrative clerks at the bottom and are subordinate. The latter are required to serve their immediate superiors, i.e. the principals. They must take instructions and are generally not in positions that allow them to manage others (Pringle 1988). The bureaucratic discourse, thus places, clerks at the bottom of the hierarchy with little control over their tasks or environment. Bureaucratic norms subordinate them to explicitly defined tasks. The secretary has to respond "to momentary demands and immediate requests generated on the spot" (Kanter 1977: 79). Murphree (1987: 104) states that "(s)ecretarial tasks are generally defined by a principal or boss who has a great deal of latitude and personal authority in determining what a secretary does". It is thus through the gender and bureaucracy discourses, among others, that school administrative clerks are discursively constructed as holders of subordinate institutional identities which afford them little agency (Truss *et al.* 1995).

Theoretical considerations

We employ theoretical framework to inform the analysis in this article.??

Drawing on Foucault (1977), or starting point is the suggestion that dominant discourses frame the types of subject positions that holders can have without preventing holders from have some discretion in the way they ethically enact these identities. This discretion is usually in the form of resistance to the dominating discourse (Foucault 1997). The subject can come "to an understanding of their positioning within the …discourse …[and] raise their voices against the dominant discourse" (Nkoane 2011: 122). In choosing how to resist, the subject acts ethically. Ethics within a poststructuralist Foucauldian framework refers to the process where the subject invokes a particular ethical norm through which she re/shapes her identity within the constraint of dominant discursive identity norms (Foucault 1990).

Drawing on insights from Butler (1990), we suggest that institutional identities have to be performed in order for them to be instantiated. They require enactment via practice. Identity (or subjectivity) is not solely derived from the subject's position but includes what the subject does, i.e. their practice (Butler 1990; McKinlay 2010). However, practice does not always

correspond to the normative expectations associated with a given subject position. There is a gap between the normative expectations of the authorities (for example, an education department) and the daily practice of the person occupying that subject position (Davies 2010). It is in this gap that subjects re-constitute their identities by either slavishly following the norms prescribe for them (Foucault, 1977) or engaging in alternate ethical and tactical practices (De Certeau, 1984; Foucault, 1988).

In our theoretical framework we emphasise the view that gendered subject positions are performed through daily practices. Where daily practices differ from the dominant norms, it may be argued that this variation stems from the subject's assertions of her own ethical norms. In other words, it is through subjectifying themselves to an alternative discourse through the exercise of their ethical agency that subjects' practices differ from expected norms. These practices are the foundation for subjects' identity work and serve as the basis for their self-formation. It is through these ethically inspired practices that subjects enact and perform their personalised institutional identities. Thus, each subject can live out his or her personalised ethical version of the subject position. This article can be seen as a supplement to the existing Foucauldian inspired literature on ethical identity work among teachers and principals (see Clarke 2009; Gu, 2011; Niesche and Haase 2010; Zembylas 2003).

The theoretical perspective employed here views school administrative clerks' practices as agentic – not just 'acts of resistance', or 'making do' (De Certeau 1984), but rather ethically inspired and tactically located identity practices. Foucault's ethics are not about justice or moral codes, but are rather about self-formation (Styhre 2001), working on the self to change one's identity (or aspects thereof). From a Foucauldian perspective 'ethics…denote the possibilities of individual agency' (Styhre 2001: 799). For Foucault, ethics is:

…a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his [sic] position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him [sic] to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve and transform himself (Foucault 1990: 28).

Foucault provides a four-part schema for understanding 'self-formation as an 'ethical subject'' (Foucault 1990: 28). First, there is the *ethical substance*, which concerns the specific aspects of himself or herself that the subject targets for transformation. The ethical substance can be their actions, desires or emotions.

Second, is the *mode of subjectivation*, which refers to "the way in which the individual establishes his [sic] relation to the rule" (Foucault 1990: 27); that is, the ways in which individuals come to take on moral obligations. An individual might, for example, accept a rule as part of a religious precept, societal norms or based on its aesthetic value.

The third aspect are *forms of elaboration,* which are the practices and technologies of the self, the various forms of elaboration of ethical work that a subject might apply not just to modify her conduct in relation to a rule, but to modify herself as the ethical subject of her actions. Such techniques might include regular meditation, prayer, training, adopting pre-existing moral practices, and self-examination of actions, thoughts and desires. These technologies of the self are:

techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies,…their own thoughts, their own conduct,…so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection (Foucault 1988: 18).

Technologies of the self are the activities and practices by which a subject changes his or her own practice. Although Foucault (1990) does not say it directly he seems to suggest that technologies of the self are methodically deployed. Our suggestion is that technologies of the self practices can be methodically and tactically deployed. We draw on De Certeau's conceptualisation of tactics to suggest that Foucault's technologies of the self can be employed seditiously. Tactics, as conceptualised by De Certeau (1984), are improvisations and small acts of resistance that refashions social spaces. De Certeau (1984) asserts that tactics are the practices of ordinary persons as they respond to the discursive constraints to structure their personalised spaces and identities. For De Certeau "tactics … manipulate, and divert these spaces" (1984: 30). Examples of tactical practices are informal communication, improvisations and the subversion of standard practices. We assert that these tactics represent the ethical practices of the subject.

Fourth, there is the *telos* of the ethical subject, which refers to the purpose and in particular the *mode of being* that the subject is aiming for in his ethical practice. The telos of ethical action might, for example, be taken to be 'goodness', recognition or the achievement of self-mastery. All four parts are interlinked and intertwined. Discussing one dimension means that the other dimensions are also implicated.

In sum, the theoretical framework presented above is based on the view that subject positions

are discursively constructed but that individuals resist this subjectivation. Whether conforming or resisting, enacting subjectivity requires the deployment or performance of practices. We suggest that school administrative clerks' resistance driven practices are informed by their ethical goals. Thus subjects through their practice of an 'ethics of the self' can transform dimensions of their institutional identity because ethics opens up the possibilities for agency and the exercise of freedom. We posit that these ethical goals may be arrived at through introspection and in response to the context in which the individual finds him or herself. Through the exercise of freedom subjects choose ethical practices. These practices are the technologies for self-transformation. These are multiple, improvised, and goal-directed practices that take the subject towards her ethical *telos*.

Methodology

Three school administrative clerks in three primary schools in Cape Town participated in this multiple case study research drawing on elements from discourse analysis. We refer to them in this article with the pseudonyms Megan, Pat and Fransina. One is a male and other two female. We chose the sample from a group of administrative clerks that were doing a training programme offered on behalf of the local educational department. They were purposively chosen based on their wide ranging contributions to their schools and their extended tenure as school administrative clerks.

The data collection and data analysis proceeded as follows. We initially did a literature review to help us identify theoretical constructs for our data collection. We interviewed the selected administrative clerks at their schools over a 12-week period using open-ended, semi-structured interview schedules. We also interviewed teachers and the principals with whom they work with the purpose of gathering multiple perspectives and insights regarding our understanding of the clerks'. We also spent several days at each school observing the administrative clerks. As the interview data was transcribed, we reviewed the transcripts and did initial data analysis. Data was analysed through a recursive iterative process in which field notes and interview transcripts were read, interrogated and reflected upon.

As analytical themes emerged we went back to the administrative clerks and engaged them further in respect of these themes. The process of working with theory and data followed a process of abduction that unfolded in an iterative and recursive manner (Timmermans &

Tavory 2012). We worked as bricoleurs sewing together the data and theory dialectically. Thus the data collection and analysis proceeded in an iterative manner. We worked with theoretical constructs, interviewed the administrative clerks, read and interrogated their answers and then gathered more data to answer the new questions that arose.

In the next section, we discuss the ethical work of the administrative clerks. Thereafter, we present the data that exemplifies our argument that the practices of administrative clerks are tactically deployed toward enacting their ethical telos.

School administrative clerks through the 'ethics of the self' lens

This section focuses on the ethical goals of the three administrative clerks. School administrative clerks' ethical goals reflect their internalisation of societal, religious and schooling discourses and values and these are to be understood in terms of their unique histories and experiences. Their ethical telos refers to the type of person they aspire to be within their schooling contexts. We discuss each administrative clerk's goals individually and then summarise their positions at the end of the section.

Megan's ethical substance is her persona as an administrative clerk. What motivated her to act in this way on herself is her religious beliefs, her confidence in her abilities, the challenges of her working class school context and also the quest to be recognised beyond the stereotype of her clerical position. Megan's self-formation practices is the ethical work she performs on herself in the form of her daily practices. Commenting on her ethical aspirations, Megan said that she endeavoured to be: "fair, honesty comes first, it is very important. We don't let my personal feelings get in the way of what is right". Furthermore, remarking on her ethical aspirations as an administrative clerk, Megan said, "I want my judgment to be respected...I want my opinion...to be important". This statement indicates that Megan wants to be considered a member of the school who is able to make competent discretionary judgments. She aspires to be a professional, and someone whose intellectual as well as manual labour is given credibility. She noted that when she would venture to question decisions the usual retort would be 'but you are just a secretary.' This comment reflects the lack of formal power that secretaries/administrative clerks. Megan's ethical telos? is to be a professional and therefore she subjects herself to the norms of fairness and honesty. Commenting on her ethical aspirations as they relate to the teachers and students, M said:

I want to help them [teachers] because they're so busy in classes...And I'm very much into the kids at this school. I mean I want to help them...if I could I would devote my entire time to their psychological well being, I would.

From the above statements we suggest that Megan aimed for an ethical telos where she, in the context of the school, catered for the psychological needs of students ravished by the effects of poverty and destitution. It also incorporated both goals and aspirations for herself. Her ethical telos extends beyond herself and includes caring for students and teachers at her school, Gardenia Primary (all school names in the article are pseudonyms). Thus we witnessed that teachers can come to her office not just for pens and paper but also for assistance with matters related to learners.

Gardenia Primary is situated in a former apartheid designated poor white area. Many of the white parents and children have left the area so there are very few white students in the school. The students come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including a growing number of foreign nationals. The school has a large number of working class black families with slightly enhanced incomes than the other two clerks researched in this article. Megan grew up in the area but had since moved on to a more affluent area. According to Megan and based on our own observations and interviews, the management of the school provides a strong institutional climate due to its principal's strong institutional leadership. The fragility of this climate, however, was subsequently indicated by the principal having become implicated in a financial scandal at school. Her ethical telos is to enact a 'caring professional' institutional culture in response to the challenge of her working class school.

Povarea Primary the school at which Pat works, is situated in a very low socio-economic status area of Cape Town. At the time of the research there were more than 1000 mostly black students from linguistically and culturally similar backgrounds. The school draws its students from a catchment area that has been acknowledged as being in the lowest socio-economic area/suburb within the city. Most of its students are poor and many live in single parent households. Pat is a resident in the area. His son attended the school. According to Pat and based on our own observations and interviews, the poverty stricken context of the township context coupled with the poor management of his school has given rise to a weak institutional climate with the principal struggling to deal with the issues that confront the school. For Pat, his persona as a participant across various school spaces is his ethical substance. The technology of self practices that Pat engaged in ranged from making sure he attended the

meetings to make suggestions for improving the running of the meeting. Commenting on his ethical aspirations, Pat said:

…I want to influence things about the area I know better [Pat speaking about school governance and management]…I was elected to be in the school governing body and I accepted that I want to be in the school governing body, because I thought that I could make a difference in the governance in the running of the school. I want to be there because I feel…I have a feeling that if I can be there then I can influence things to happen.

From the above statements, we can see that Pat's primary ethical goal is to contribute professionally to alleviating the institutional problems of his township school. Based on our interviews with Pat, it is clear that he wants to improve decision making in the context of aspiring to be a professional in a functional township school that can address the learning and teaching challenges of his school.

The following statement illustrates that Pat's ethical goal include professional development and growth.

I think it is also educational on my part because if I am being limited to the… [local] Education Department job description of an admin clerk, I won't grow beyond the secretary job. But if I am engaging in more, other things that's not in the job description this makes me grow, understanding other things in education.

He aimed to broaden his knowledge and understanding of educational concerns in order to address the institutional dysfunctionality of his school where the the numeracy and literacy scores of students were well below acceptable norms. This emphasis on his professional development and growth as a means to addressing his school's dysfunctionality is illustrated by Pat's completion of the Certificate in School Business Administration (CSBA) and his current postgraduate studies at a local university. Reflecting on the disquieting situation, Pat explained:

Even if that situation is not completely changed the way you want to be…but at least you make an effort to change that situation and I think that satisfies you because if maybe you see things that are going wrong when you didn't take any effort, then you won't be happy within yourself because you'd always blame yourself that, okay there was a situation and I felt that I can do something but I didn't, then you can't be happy…

This comment demonstrates that Pat is working on adapting to more effectively respond to

the working class township context of his school and community. Based on our interviews we suggest that Pat acted beyond his subject position, not only because he was resisting the normative bounds of the subordinate school administrative clerk role but because his ethical goal was to be a productive professional member of the school ameliorating the challenges of his township school.

Fransina works at Coloration Primary. This school is situated in a poor working class suburb which is a marginally better off area compared to Povarea Primary. At the time of the research there were slightly more than 400 students from linguistically and culturally similar backgrounds. Coloration Primary draws its students from a catchment area that has been acknowledged as one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the city, with most of its students situated in the poverty bracket and many from single parent families. Frnasina is not a resident in the area. She stays in a more affluent area but grew up in a poor working class type environment similar to the area in which the school is located. According to Fransina and based on our own observations and interviews, the management of the school provides an inadequate institutional climate for dealing with challenges that schools in poor socioeconomic areas face. The principal struggled to provide an adequate management response to engage successfully with the school's challenges. After we completed this research the principal resigned after being implicated in a fraud case at school. This gives us a glimpse into the school's institutional context.

Fransina's moral conduct centres on her behaviour and persona at school. Her ethical telos is informed by her intention to an effective school business manager. She is motivated toward this goal because of the administrative, teaching and learning challenges that a school in low socioeconomic communities faces. Another strong motivating factor is that she does not want to be treated as a subordinate worker in the in the power relations among the school's staff. Some of her self-formation practices in her work included doing the school budget, and arranging school fundraising functions. She used these practices to fashion an image of a school business manager geared for working class school challenges. When asked about her aspirations, Fransina replied: "for me …[to be a] school business manager". This is a specialized position and the apex to which an administrative clerk can aspire. Fransina's ethical aspirations relate both to her ethical persona but also speaks to the needs of her working class school. She also speaks about professional growth and development as an ethical goal. She said, "If you are in that position, as a secretary, you would want to be the

best…the best at all times". When asked about what she valued, i.e. her ethical aspirations and goals, F said, "…you must just try and do the right thing *volgens die boek* [following strict prescriptions]" which must be read within the context of her working-class school which is susceptible to fraud and corruption. From these comments we can see that Fransina's ethical goal is to strive to be an administrative clerk who is responsive to the complexities of her working class school environment.

In sum, Megan, Fransina and Pat have professional aspirations regarding the mode of being they aspire towards that is responsive to the working class complexities of their schools. For all three of them there are two key motivational factors. The first is dealing with the challenges of their working class schools and contributing toward an enabling teaching and learning environment. The second is their aspiration to go beyond the subordinate position of administrative clerk. They each formulated their specific ethical goals in a nuanced manner. For Megan, caring is a key ethical practice. Pat's professional identity is embodied by his decisions in addressing challenges. For Fransina it is to be ae exemplary school administrative clerk and reach the level of a school business manager. All of them are working toward establsihin functional working class school contexts purpose wherein they feel valued. In the next section, we discuss some of the school and self-forming practices of the administrative clerks. These practices serve as technologies for building functionality within their schools as well their professional identities.

The tactical practices of the professional administrative self

In this section, we focus on two sets of professional administrative clerk practices. The first set concerns tactical practices that exemplify care. The second set consists of tactical practices that exemplify management and leadership. They tactically deploy these practices as *technologies of a professional self*. The point of this section is to show how these tactical practices simultaneously exemplify their professional 'becoming' as well as their involvement in establishing a functional school climate in the midst of a working class community. However, in doing so we are not suggesting that they do not engage in their administrative duties. They are certainly very busy in the school office, meeting visitors to the school, answering the phone, making sure that the Centralised Educational Management Information System (CEMIS) is kept up to date, and that all the necessary paperwork is filed. However, what we are suggesting is that they are widening and refashioning their administrative

identities and practices in response to their working class environments.

Tactical deployment of practices of care

Tronto defines caring as recognising and taking responsibility for needs in others and meeting those needs with attentiveness, competence, and responsiveness (1993: 127–34). We argue that the administrative clerks engage in practices of care which have institutional impact as well as effects on students, teachers and the principal. Institutionally their practices enable teaching and learning within their compromised contexts by providing students and educators with the pastoral care that we believe they require in their schools for effective learning to proceed (see Hoffman, Sayed & Badroodien 2016).

The following description of Megan's practice is an illustration of a practice of care. The extracts below are taken from an interview with one of the teachers who comments on Megan's benevolent behaviour thus:

There's a little boy in my class…She [Megan] would always come in and give him R2 or a sweetie or whatever and she would really make him feel good…I let him take the money [school fees, money for printing, fundraising money, etc.] to Aunty Megan…when he comes back, he's a totally different boy, where sometimes walking with a frown, whatever, but when he comes back from her…And I know she's given him a sweet or a hug or something but then he is a different boy…you see a lot of time Megan getting out of the car with bags of food, and bags with clothes, pillows, and cushions and stuff, I don't know, I don't always know who this goes to, but it comes from her and she gives it to the kid.

The above observation, corroborated by others with whom we spoke, are examples of Megan's care for impoverished students. Megan said that she "bought…[a student] a pair of shoes two months ago, pair of *tekkies* [canvas shoes] again today". Buying canvas shoes for impoverished students is not part of her job description. By purchasing the shoes she exercises a practice of care. The act of buying the shoes is a practice that help constitute her ethical identity. When, as we observed, she gave the student the shoes, she provided material support where there was a dire need but took care not to undermining the student's need for self-reliance. In selecting situations and people where she can practice her ethics of the self she is providing students some of their basic needs without which their continued

engagement in school would be compromised. In other words, her care practices provide a basis that makes it possible for the teachers of the school's students to take place.

Regarding her practices of dealing with teachers Megan said, "*ja* [yes], I do care about them, I must say". A teacher commented on Megan's practices of care,

I know the textbook and so forth, she releases me in that, when that supplier comes, she would check the books when they arrive because she knows we're busy teaching so she would check, count the books to check that everything's in the box and makes sure it gets signed, invoiced and so forth. So she files it and then at the end of the day she would just tell me a package arrived, it's accounted for, it's all there and you can just take the books basically. So that takes quite a lot of workload off us.

Megan thus translates the clerical practice of receiving books into a practice of care. Her practices ensure that teachers do not loose time that is meant for instruction and teaching the curriculum to students. Her practice of care augments the school's institutional functionality.

Commenting on her practices, Fransina explained that:

…the member of the governing body phoned me to say that the child [student] has been discharged at N1 city hospital. So I went to N1 City hospital, picked her up, dropped her off at home and then I came to school.

The parents of the child were not able to fetch their child. This is a practice of care. It sends a message to the student and to the parents that the school has her wellbeing at heart. Fetching learners at hospitals is not an expected practice of administrative clerks. In responding to the need of the the learner Fransina sends a message to the student that the school values her and her education.

A teacher at Pat's school said [concerning P]: "I'm doing my studies, when I need some help, maybe I have a problem on my assignment, he's the one who come(s) to help me." The teacher was a young undergraduate education student at a local university. She approached Pat when she had a problem with her course assignments. Pat's responsiveness to this teacher shows that through care the capacity of people in her professional environment can be augmented.

The administrative clerks' practices of care cited above are, as we have argued, enactments of their ethically infused professional identity. These practices go beyond the job description of a traditional administrative clerk. They have enacted practices of care which ameliorate the

challenges of working class schools to confront and respond to the pastoral care needs of their students. In the next section, we discuss the practices of the school administrative clerks that relate to management and leadership to further develop the argument that their practices augment functionality at school through their pursuit of their professional aspirations.

Tactical deployment of management & leadership practices

There has been a shift from heroic conceptions of management and leadership to "redefine leadership in terms of processes and practices organized by people in interaction" (Crevani, Lindgren, Packendorff 2010:78). Pat said:

…there are things that I have identified during the CSBA course, there are administrative problems that I have identified, that need to be rectified in the school. I was thinking that being on the [school] management [team (SMT)], then, I can influence things to happen.

From the above, we can see that Pat's ethical practices included reflection on the institutional problems of the school. Because of his professional learning and his community experience, Pat tactically sought to attend the SMT meetings which is outside of a school administrative clerk's role expectations. Notwithstanding this, Pat attended the SMT meetings, where, for example, he motivated for a standard format for an SMT agenda in order to more productively conduct the SMT meetings. This was adopted and, according to Pat, allowed the members of the SMT to follow up on previous issues raised as well as to provide a process for how issues could be dealt with systematically. These managerial practices strengthened the institutional functionality of the school and instantiated Pat's identity as a professional.

Fransina's management and leadership practices included tactically deploying anti-corruption practices. She used the policy codes to police errant senior teachers and a principal. She recounted practices of curbing fraud involving a principal and said that she had considered it her professional duty to counter fraud. She recounted an interaction with the principal where she retorted:

…we're doing the right thing now. It's no more *smokkel* [bribery] or *agter die ding se* [doing things clandestinely and irregularly] … no more *knoeiery* [conniving].

This is an example where Fransina acted ethically and demanded that the principal refrains from questionable behaviour. It can thus be said that her ethical demands on herself, to be a

professional, led to her to confront the principal. In doing so she boosted the fragile institutional context of her working class school.

Megan's management and leadership practices included her intervention in the dispute around the shortlisting of a new principal for the school. A dispute was lodged by a dissenting teacher and the matter was investigated. When she was interviewed on the matter - since she is part of the school governing body (SGB) - she justifiably accused the school institutional governance and management (IMG) manager of not following the local education department's procedures in the shortlisting of a candidate for the incoming principal. Megan explained that she spoke out in full knowledge that she might lose her job. Furthermore, the IMG manager attempted to discredit her by saying 'you are only a secretary', She challenged the IMG manager because she was pursuing her ethical agenda. It can thus be aid that, through this event, she championed ethical behavior in her working class school context.

All three of these administrative clerks were on the SGB as the non-academic staff representative. They tactically engaged in multifaceted governance practices. They did not just accept the narrowly prescribed roles of secretaries to the SGBs as the dominant discursive scripts would have expected. For example, Pat chaired the selection process for a new deputy principal; Fransina played a role in the selection of principals and teachers and mentored new SGB parent governors; and Megan was involved in the selection processes and influenced decision making around the granting of parent fee exemptions.

Pat said that he played an important role on the SGB. However, he said that at one time he resigned from the SGB because the principal deceitfully tried to get his preferred candidate nominated as the deputy principal during the SGB selection process. Pat explained that because he could not stop the principal's deceitful attempts, his tactical move was to resign. According to him, he sent a clear message to the principal through his resignation. He subsequently returned to the SGB having made his point. Pat's enactment of his professional identity is apparent in the manner in which he tactically moved in and out of spaces that afforded him opportunities to engage in practices of management and leadership. However, the incident also highlights that the administrative clerks' tactical practices are not sanctioned practices but occur as tactics in relation to the strategies of the principal.

Fransina said that when she started working at the school she too deployed managerial practices to establish her agency. There was a clique of teachers who resisted her attempts at assertion. They wanted her to be a subservient administrative clerk. She felt that she

experienced resistance because she did not toe the line and slot into the normative subordinate institutional identity. She continued to engage in managerial practices which eventually led to many of the school's their teachers' developing begrudging respect for her. An example of Fransina's managerial practice was her successful coordination of the school's main fundraising functions and her practice of doing the school budget. In another example, when a new governing body chairperson was appointed, she provided the chairperson with contextual information and knowledge. The SGB chairperson lauded her for this contribution. Her successes led the principal to accede to her request to join the SMT. Fransina agreed that being on the SMT allowed her space to deploy managerial and leadership practices and enact a professional identity.

The school administrative clerks' professional identity practices made them indispensable to their schools. Each of their principals conceded their dependence on the work of the school administrative clerks. Megan's principal said:

Well if Megan had to be absent for a week, I think quite frankly I think it's going to be chaos and because we really depend on her…but…if she had to undergo a liver operation quickly and she had to be absent for two to three weeks, then we're going to sit with a problem.

This comment indicates that Megan's principal acknowledged that without Megan's coordination work the school would flounder. When Pat was absent from school, the principal would delay the completion of tasks until Pat returned to work. Also, when Fransina was off from school for an extended period, the principal struggled to reconcile the accounting records and had to institute a new financial record system.

From the interviews we conclude that the selected school administrative clerks played pivotal roles in strengthening their schools' institutional functionality. In addition, they did not stay silent or express low-key comments and opinions as would be advocated by the dominant discourses. Instead, they engaged in debate, gave their opinions, differed with the principals and teachers and considered themselves capable governors. Through enacting these ethical practices they brought their professional identity into being. Specifically, by joining and participating in governance and managerial forums at school, these practices contributed to an improvement in the administration and functioning of their schools.

In the next section we briefly reflect on the administrative clerks' ethical and tactical practices and discuss some of its implications.

Discussion

School administrative clerks in working class schools are important to their schools' institutional functionality by providing pastoral care and addressing key gaps within administration. Their practices are crucial because these reinforce the informal and formal rules within the school. In other words, their practices form part of the institutional fabric. These practices enact an institutional culture that enable functional or non-functional schooling experiences. In the case of the selected administrative clerks we clearly see how they contribute to institutional functionality.

School administrative clerks are perceptive of their subordinate institutional identity. They grasp that the dominant discourses instantiate (De Certeau, 1984) their office space as a subordinate space in which they are to follow instructions and have a limited control over their work and work priorities. However, as we have illustrated, school administrative clerks have ethical goals aimed at ameliorating the challenges of their working class contexts. In order to achieve their ethical goals, administrative clerks engaged in purposeful tactical practices. The characteristics of these tactical practices through which they constituted their professional identity varied. It included concern and care for students and teachers, accepting responsibility for financial matters, curbing fraud and corruption, fundraising, leadership, mentoring and inhabiting spaces of management and governance. All these tactical practices were in response to their working class school and community challenges through which they enacted a professional persona as their core institutional identity.

The theoretical contribution of this article is that the ethical practices of the clerks have strengthened compromised institutional cultures. The argument is that the administrative clerks' professional ethical goals motivated them to engage in tactical practices through which they contributed to an improved working class school institutional context.

Three insights from this study would be useful for educational policy makers to consider in better harnessing the work of school administrative clerks for more efficacious school functioning: One, we suggest that better appreciation of the role of marginal positions such as held by these administrative clerks would enhance the institutional culture of the school. The training of administrative clerks for more optimal professional functioning is key to their optimal utilization. Such training ought to emphasise management and administrative aspects

but should also be augmented by an awareness of the broader educational dynamics that surround their work. Two, these clerks play much more than an operational or purely administrative role at their schools. This has to be acknowledged by a qualification and remuneration structure that can accommodate and valorise these broader roles. Three, the leadership and management of school processes should be reconceptualised as being distributed within the school and not framed only as coming from the principal and head teachers. These clerks move seamlessly between administrative, management and leadership roles, which are vital to their schools' survival and functioning as educational institutions. A distributed notion of their professional responsibility would acknowledge and valorise their contributions across these three aspects. Such an orientation would enhance the esteem of these clerks, which in turn, would maximise their professional contributions to their school environments.

This article is a rejoinder to the conventional impoverished notions and stereotypical representations of school administrative clerks or school secretaries. It shows that school administrative clerks, while embracing their subordinate subject position, rework their professional identity tactically and creatively to counter their putative subordination and marginalization in the schools prpfessional hierarchy. In doing so they act ethically towards others which leads to them contributing to augmenting and strengthening their schools' compromised institutional weaknesses. Given the impact of poor governance and management processes on the functioning of schools, through their ethical practices related to care and management, school administrative clerks are able to contribute to ameliorating some of the local challenges faced by public schools in South Africa.

Conclusion

This article contributes to making administrative clerks in South African working class schools' identities and practices visible. These clerks' practices were presented as ethical practices that they enacted in response to the challenges of their working class schools through which they instantiated a professional identity. The selected school administrative clerks engaged with the discourses that constituted their subjectivity, read their position as subordinate and deployed ethical practices to transform their subjectivity. In doing this they ameliorated the gaps between official neoliberal discourses and the realities of their working class school institutional cultures. Through their practices, which was principally focused on

their self-fashioning, they improved the administrative, teaching and learning within their schools.

School administrative clerks constructed a different and distinctive professional mode of being in school which has direct implications for those they work with. They negotiated their institutional identities by employing carefully chosen tactical practices which had a positive impact on their school's institutional climates. Their enacted identity practices were varied and multifaceted, including curbing fraud and irregularities, doing philanthropic work, mentoring SGB governors, students and teachers, providing emotional support and enacting management and leadership practices.

Finally, administrative clerks' practices should be seen as shrewdly crafted and directed practices at the construction of professional identities. It is via these professional identities that they redefine their relationships with those with whom they share the school and thereby make a noteworthy contribution to mend their comprised schooling contexts where the lack of material and human resources and often narrow governing discourses are at odds with the challenges associated with improving the educational functioning of working class schools.

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