

Teachers and school leaders as ethical agents in addressing teenage pregnancy in Kenyan secondary schools: A Kantian deontological analysis

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ABSTRACT

Poverty, gendered power, coercion, misinformation, disparities in sexuality education and limitations in safeguarding and school re-entry are all factors that affect teenage pregnancy in Kenyan secondary schools. School responses may either shield the dignity of learners and ensure continuity of education or may reinforce stigma and exclusion. This article discussed the ethics of teachers and school leaders in the context of Kantian deontology on teenage pregnancy. A philosophical method of inquiry with critical and prescriptive approaches was used. Resources ranged from philosophical essays about Kant and material from peer-reviewed studies on adolescent pregnancies, sexuality education, moral-education/ethical leadership curricula and documents on the Kenyan curriculum and school re-entry, to demographic findings and international technical guidance. Selection of sources was done with care, with an eye to conceptual authority, methodological clarity, relevance to Kenya or similar environments, and empirical and policy claims. The critical analysis looked at punitive, stigmatising, narrowly informational and inconsistent school practices in the context of autonomy, universalizability, duty and respect for persons. The prescriptive analysis identified seven responsibilities as ethically pertinent to truthful and age-appropriate education, confidentiality within safeguarding parameters, non-humiliating discipline, fair re-entry, competent referral, professional development, and intersectoral collaboration. The study identified systems as necessary components of ethical leadership - approved content, trained staff, reporting mechanisms, referral partnerships, complaints mechanisms, re-entry planning, supervision and allocation of resources. Selective punishment and the use of pregnant learners and parenting mothers in schools as a means to uphold the reputation of a school are also not acceptable within Kantian ethics. The article's final conclusion is that teachers and school leaders are moral and institutional players who have responsibilities for more than just rule enforcement; they are responsible for conditions of informed agency, protection, dignity and educational continuity. Comprehensive sexuality education, adolescent-responsive services, child protection and action on structural vulnerability are important components that should be used alongside, and not in isolation from, Kantian ethics. The article advocates a form of professional development that is piloted, clarified by school procedures, prepared for safeguarding in pedagogy, and monitored by intersectoral referral systems.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Kantian Ethics, School Re-entry, Secondary Schools, Teachers, Teenage Pregnancy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescent pregnancies continue to pose an educational, social and public health problem in Kenya. National data reveal that teenage pregnancy is inequitably distributed and is linked to poverty, marital status, information and service access, gender inequality and educational vulnerability (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics & ICF, 2023). Such circumstances make it impossible to view pregnancy solely as the result of an individual's negligence and/or ignorance of the Law of Chastity.

Schools are key settings as they offer education, supervision, counselling, peer interaction, protection and access to other support. Teachers and school leaders can establish an atmosphere that will allow learners to get accurate information, ask questions without fear, report coercion and continue their education during and after pregnancy. They can also cause harm when responses are humiliating, punitive, inconsistent and/or associated with protecting institutional reputation over the learner's well-being.

According to the Curriculum Framework of Kenya (2019), values, critical thinking, life skills and learner-centred education are key elements included in the curriculum. Formal curriculum intention, however, is not a warrant for ethical practice. Håkansson et al. (2024) aimed to assess the needs of secondary-school learners in Western Kenya for sexuality education. Ogolla and Ondia (2019) reported on implementation problems in comprehensive sex education as well. It is

not simply an issue of what the policy says, however, but the action taken by staff and school leaders as they enact policy in their daily work of teaching, disciplining, maintaining confidentiality, referring and supporting.

These responsibilities can be discussed in terms of Kantian deontological ethics. According to Kant (1785/2012), there must be principles that govern moral action and can be universalized (willed as universal laws), and persons must always be treated as ends and not means. In school contexts, these principles lead to reflection on three aspects: Is it possible to consistently implement a disciplinary rule in the school setting? Is everyone affected by the decisions respected and treated as a person with dignity? Can decisions be demonstrated publicly to all concerned?

It is especially in the human formulation that pregnancy-related stigma rises to salience. If the learner is excluded to preserve the school's image, examination statistics or preferred appearance of discipline, without taking her pregnancy into consideration, this undermines her dignity. A learner is also instrumentalised when accurate information is not provided to gain compliance, when confidentiality is violated without a protective need or when school leaders simply pass on all responsibility to adolescents, while failing to acknowledge coercion, adult exploitation, poverty or lack of access to services.

Kantian autonomous beings are not solitary, self-sufficient ones. Adolescents themselves are emerging as moral actors; and information, power, relationships and material conditions shape the choices that they make. Harada et al. (2024) found that taboos, misinformation, financial and economic constraints, and relationship dynamics had an impact on unintended teenage pregnancy in Kenya. Thus, respect for autonomy entails not only moral reasoning, but also institutional conditions that would allow for well-informed and autonomous choices.

This article is focused on teachers and school leaders as ethical agents. It explores their responsibilities in prevention, confidentiality, safeguarding, working with pregnant and parenting learners, working together across sectors and professional accountability. The analysis is of a normative and philosophical character. It does not assert that there has yet been an empirical demonstration of Kantian education's effectiveness in reducing the rate of pregnancies.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Educator reactions to teenage pregnancy can be too informational, punitive or inconsistently applied. Learners might be given rules and have no chance to make moral judgments, they might be given accurate information about sex and have no safe referral pathway, or formal permission might be granted to come back, but not the practical support needed to do so. In certain contexts, pregnancy becomes visible evidence that triggers discipline for the girl while the responsibility of boys, adult partners and institutions is poorly explored.

Existing literature extensively covers prevalence, determinants, sexuality education, health services and re-entry. It has been less explicit about the moral considerations that teachers and school principals must consider when assessing discipline, confidentiality, safeguarding, referral, and continuity of education. It was necessary to clearly explain the duties and test their consistency with school practices, and also generate recommendations which protect dignity without suggesting that this is a replacement for health, protection or social support, in order to move beyond previous findings in a systematic Kantian analysis.

1.2 Research Objective

To investigate the question of the role of teachers and school leaders towards reducing teenage pregnancy in the context of Kantian ethics in Kenyan secondary schools.

1.3 Research Question

How can teachers and school leaders contribute towards reducing teenage pregnancy in the context of Kantian moral philosophy in Kenyan secondary schools?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Kantian Deontological Ethics (KDE) and the Duty of an Educator

According to Kantian ethics, the primary criterion for determining the morality of an act is the maxim that motivates it, and its respect for moral law. The universal-law formulation asks the question: Could the principle of action be consistently willed by all human beings in relevantly similar situations? The humanity formulation is that every person must be treated as an end, and never as a mere means (Kant, 1785/2012). These principles, taken in combination, offer consistency, fairness, dignity and public justification tests.

This autonomy of Kantian ethics is not an unrestricted preference but rather rational self-government. The term 'autonomy' denotes action in accord with principles that reason can approve, according to Allison (2011). This in education implies that authority should enable students to learn to exercise judgment, and not just be fearfully obedient. Moral education, according to Formosa (2012), is a process of transformation from heteronomy to autonomy, and Formosa (2021) highlighted moral sensitivity and the ability to identify the ethically relevant aspects of a situation.

Kantian leadership is also related to institutional arrangements. Bowie (2000) discussed how leadership should treat individuals 'as ends' and provide 'requisites of agency'. A school leader cannot fulfil this obligation through personal goodwill but still label, single out and withhold vital information, as doing so would shame, marginalise or lessen the importance of the individual. Structures are needed, and they are responsible for making respectful practice reliable, as this is the basis for ethical leadership.

2.2 Teachers and School Leaders and Teenage Pregnancy

Classes shape learners' knowledge of consent, relationships, responsibility, gender and help-seeking. Comprehensive sexuality education is most effective when delivered at an appropriate age, with accurate scientific information, in a participatory manner, and with links to supportive services (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). However, teacher unease, lack of preparation, community pressures and time constraints can turn teachers into moralising instructors or transmitters of facts, rather than facilitators of moral deliberation.

School leaders are responsible for creating the environment in which this type of teaching takes place. They approve timetables, allocate staff, interpret policy, handle complaints, make referrals, and decide if pregnant learners and parents are embraced or stigmatised. Starratt (2004) highlighted that ethical leadership is grounded in responsibility, authenticity and presence. Similarly, Oduol (2014) demonstrated that leadership in Kenyan secondary schools is not solely about values but also involves practical issues that have ethical consequences.

There is a need for protection from coercion and abuse in pregnancy prevention and response. Harada et al. (2024) showed that the choices adolescents face can be limited by economic necessity, misinformation and unequal relationships. When learners make disclosures, teachers therefore need clarity around confidentiality, safeguarding and referral. An unconditional 'no one will know' can leave a learner vulnerable and indiscriminate disclosure can put the learner at risk of stigma or violence.

A related moral obligation is educational continuity. Ministry of Education (2020) guidelines permit school return, but no official policy or document eliminates childcare, poverty, stigma or interruption of education. According to Mukabana et al. (2024), former school-going girls who are now mothers face these and more obstacles when trying to come back to school. UNICEF and UNESCO (2026) also found that there was an ongoing gap between re-entry policy and practice. School leaders must therefore shift from a passive 'allowance' to planning and support.

2.3 Knowledge Gap

There is robust research in the area of determinants, sexuality education, health services, and school re-entry. Philosophical writing illuminates concepts of autonomy, duty, respect and ethical leadership. Each body of literature is given separate treatment. Consequently, guidance for school practitioners on how to determine whether a particular action (for example, whether or not to disclose a learner's information, whether or not to exclude a learner who is pregnant, whether or not to teach abstinence without teaching other information, whether or not to refer a learner to an inaccessible service, etc.) is morally defensible is limited.

There was, therefore, a normative as well as an integrative gap. Attention was needed to how teachers' and school leaders' duties relate to Kantian principles while keeping the facts on coercion, poverty, access to services and educational exclusion in mind. What was sought was a defensible ethical framework, rather than a causal claim of a reduction in teenage pregnancy as a result of philosophical instruction.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

A philosophical research design was used with critical and prescriptive methods. Philosophical inquiry was suitable since the research question was not about the collection of fresh survey or interview data, but one that called for conceptual clarity, normative evaluation, examination of assumptions and the development of warranted recommendations. Autonomy, duty, dignity, responsibility, ethical leadership and educational practice were the central themes in the design.

3.2 Critical Method

The critical method focused on the clarity, consistency, adequacy, and ethical defensibility of existing assumptions and practices. Criteria of universalisability and respect for persons were applied to punitive/stigmatising school responses. Analysis was also done to determine any covert coercion, poverty, misinformation, gendered power, or institutional failure that the moralising language implied. Any class-level decisions that were not supported by evidence or based on an exception that leaders would not consider applying to all schools were rejected.

3.3 Prescriptive Method

The focus shifted from the identified ethical weaknesses to recommendations on what teachers, school leaders, curriculum developers, and institutions should do. This was the justification for recommendations using Kantian duty and the duty to treat persons as ends. The method did not specifically assert behavioural effectiveness. It developed norms for curriculum, leadership, safeguarding, referral, re-entry, and future empirical evaluation.

3.4 Sources and Selection of Materials

Materials for this were purposively selected documents such as Kant's philosophical works, scholarly interpretations of Kantian ethics and moral education, peer-reviewed research documents on adolescent pregnancy and on comprehensive sexuality education, Kenyan curriculum documents, re-entry documents, demographic evidence, and international guidance. Based on methodological transparency, contextual relevance, and currency, empirical and policy sources were prioritised, and where needed, foundational philosophical texts were retained.

3.5 Criteria and Evaluation of Validity

The materials were conceptualised and the argument mapped. Claims revolved around concepts of duty, autonomy, universalizability, dignity, confidentiality, safeguarding, re-entry, collaboration, and accountability. Moralism, paternalism, cultural pluralism, adolescent capacity, structural inequality, care and consequences were all examined as potential counterarguments. Conceptual clarity, logical consistency, responding to objections, proper presentation of the empirical evidence and proper limitation of the claims to those of a normative rather than causal nature increased philosophical validity.

3.6 Ethical Considerations and Scope of Claims

There were no human respondents. Ethical concerns focused on issues of academic honesty, appropriate use of sources, avoiding fabricated evidence, and addressing a sensitive topic, such as dealing with minors, sexuality and pregnancy, violence, and coercion, in a non-stigmatising way. The analysis did not represent pregnancy as evidence of moral failure and did not blame girls solely. Its proposals involve further contextual testing and empirical investigation, and thus cannot be adopted at the present time on a large scale.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Teachers Who Provide Truthful and Rationale-Based Teaching and Learning

Honesty is an essential part of day-to-day practice. No informed agency can be achieved if critical information about reproduction, contraception, consent, coercion, services, or safeguarding is intentionally omitted. A teacher who suggests that there is responsible decision-making, but denies the factual basis for decision-making, presents a contradiction. Universalization of the principle would prevent informed choice.

In education, there also has to be clarity about professional limits. It is important that teachers differentiate between evidence, policy, professional judgement and personal belief. They should not portray themselves as clinicians or investigators. Honesty in this context means identifying when it is necessary for a learner to be referred to a health professional, a counsellor, a child-protection officer or another qualified service.

Fear-based pedagogy is not reasoning-based pedagogy. Obedience can be gained through threats for a short-term period; however, threats of pregnancy, disease, rejection and/or shame may not produce moral judgment. According to Formosa (2021), Kantian moral education needs to produce sensitivity towards the relevant features of a situation. With fictional scenarios, teachers can have students explore the concepts of pressure, deception, unequal power, consent, competing responsibilities, and avenues of assistance without asking students to disclose.

Comprehensive sexuality education and Kantian philosophy go hand in hand. The former provides learners with correct knowledge and skills; the latter requires them to give reasons for action, respecting humanity and the dignity of others. Myat et al. (2024) revealed the continuing relevance of comprehensive sexuality education in schools. A Kantian contribution would only promote the moral dimension and would not eliminate the health and rights aspects.

4.2 Confidentiality and Safeguarding Duties

Confidentiality is important in respecting the dignity of the learner since disclosing sensitive information may result in stigma, punishment, violence and/or exclusion. This counterproductive disclosure renders the learner an object of institutional control and transgresses the humanity formulation. Information should be shared only for a defensible protective purpose and with those who have a need to know.

Confidentiality cannot be absolute. Where abuse, exploitation or serious danger exists, a teacher who promises to keep this secret may leave the learner exposed to harm. Kantian truthfulness entails that the boundaries of confidentiality

should be clarified prior to discussing sensitive matters. If disclosure is required, it should be kept to a minimum, be deliberate, and provide ongoing support for the learner.

Preparedness is a paramount responsibility. Consent and coercion lessons have the potential to result in disclosure. A school that, in the absence of a clear plan for where and how to respond to distress, identifies staff who should help, a referral plan, and designated persons to monitor simply opens such topics up, creates unrealistic expectations, and acts unethically. Readiness, therefore, should be determined prior to, rather than following, a crisis.

4.3 Discipline and Policy That Is Not Humiliating

Kantian duty rejects selective and degrading discipline. There is no way to apply a school policy consistently to the visibly pregnant learner if it does not also include a boy or adult partner, where relevant. It can also be a way to maintain the illusion that the school is well organised instead of considering the learner as an individual who has ongoing rights and educational needs.

Where the relevant circumstances are different, they do not need to be treated in the same way, provided that the distinction can be shown to be consistent. Healthcare needs, academic catch-up, flexibility, protection from harassment, or referral to childcare and social support may be needed by a pregnant or parenting learner. Giving such assistance is not an unfair privilege. Without such support, equality may be merely nominal, because these measures respond to barriers that would otherwise bring about exclusion.

The rules of the school need to be visible and justifiable. The reasons for procedures, the steps that will be taken to support the learner and/or family, the boundaries of confidentiality, and the paths for complaints should be known to learners and families. Ethical policy cannot be left to the subjectivity of an individual teacher or principal. It should become institutionalised and, therefore, similar learners should be treated in a similar way.

4.4 Duties Towards Pregnant and Parenting Learners

The dignity and right to education of the learner do not cease because of pregnancy. School leaders are responsible for informing parents or guardians about continued access, protection from bullying or humiliation, plans for missed instruction, and health and social services. Guidance by the Ministry of Education (2020) establishes a policy that needs to be backed up by action within the institution.

Mukabana et al. (2024) found that even when policy allows for return, childcare, poverty, stigma and withdrawal of support may prevent it. School leadership must thus identify and liaise with the learner and family with regard to identified barriers or challenges, and report on gaps which can only be resolved by county or national action. This type of encouragement - symbolic but without tangible assistance - is an ethically inadequate basis for action.

Planning for re-entry should start before exclusion is prolonged. This should cover academic catch-up, staff designated as a point of contact to address it, protection from harassment, attendance recording, confidentiality, referral for health, childcare or social protection. The learner should be involved in making decisions related to her learning and should not be encouraged to reveal personal information that is not necessary.

4.5 Ethics and the Command of Institutions

Ethical leadership does not end at the principal's door. It means having the right content, the right people, time allocated for learning, supervision, reporting mechanisms, complaints pathways, as well as resource allocation. Bowie (2000) associated Kantian leadership with conditions respecting agency. It is hard to see how a school can claim an ethical commitment while denying the time, training and materials necessary for staff to act ethically.

Performance expectations should be congruent with stated values under such leadership. A principal cannot expect counselling and participatory instruction to be of high quality and pay staff only for test scores or allow no time for counselling. Coherence in institutions is also a moral attribute since it safeguards the connection between public promises and actual institutional practice.

Professional development should not be limited to a single workshop. Teachers need to be equipped with knowledge of comprehensive sexuality education, Kantian concepts, participatory facilitation, adolescent development, gender, trauma-informed communication, confidentiality, safeguarding, referral and re-entry. Supervision, implementation, parent outreach, crisis management, and accountability policies must be addressed as well by school leaders.

4.6 Intersectoral Collaboration as a Moral Obligation

Factors that affect adolescent pregnancy are institutional. The school has responsibility for curriculum, climate, retention and referral; health providers have responsibility for clinical information and services; child-protection agencies respond to child abuse; family members provide support and communication; and social-protection systems address material vulnerability. No one can be solely responsible for the response.

The duties of a Kantian partnership must be clear and reciprocal, and publicly defensible. Schools should avoid recommending access to services that they know are unavailable or unsuitable for the learner. Schools should not be

compelled to disclose information to health providers unless there is a need to do so. Community involvement must not be used to censor scientifically valid information or to make safety decisions solely on the basis of family consent.

There should be written protocols that make clear conventions concerning referral, feedback, confidentiality, emergency response, and who is responsible for follow-up. Collaboration is another way of shielding teachers from unsafe role overload. The class teacher should not be expected to perform as a clinician, a long-term investigator, a counsellor, a social worker, and a philosopher at once. Responsibilities should be delegated responsibly, and ethical leadership should ensure that no one assumes another actor will take action.

4.7 Accountability and Monitoring

The criteria for accountability should be the ethics of implementation, not the policing of private beliefs. Appropriate indicators include the use of agreed and accurate content, participatory methodologies, feedback from learners, checks of readiness to learn, follow-up of referrals, support for re-entry, complaints handling, and appropriate treatment.

Monitoring should also be used to identify pressure placed on teachers to either omit material, share information inappropriately or deal with cases which are outside their scope of expertise. Confidential structures for advice-seeking and reporting institutional barriers are needed for staff. There is a need for avenues for learners to raise issues without fear of retribution.

Since the analysis is philosophical in nature, an empirical evaluation of the pilot should be conducted. Knowledge, ethical reasoning, help-seeking, perceived dignity, quality of response to safeguarding issues, attendance, return to school, and unexpected outcomes are relevant outcomes. Use of pregnancy prevalence would be an insufficient and ethically questionable indicator of school performance.

4.8 A Kantian Appraisal Matrix for School Practice

Table 1 provides a set of questions that can direct policy review, professional development, and pilot monitoring in response to the philosophical analysis. The matrix should not be used as a substitute for Kenyan legislation, policy or professional judgement.

Table 1

Kantian Appraisal of Teachers' and School Leaders' Responsibilities

Practice area	Kantian question	Required institutional response
Sexuality and life-skills education	To what extent are learners provided with accurate information in a manner that enables rational agency?	Approved material, interactive learning, qualified teachers, anonymous questions.
Discipline	Is it feasible that all those responsible could have the rule applied in the same way?	Gender-fair and non-humiliating procedures; transparency.
Confidentiality	Does information sharing preserve dignity and have a legitimate reason?	Clear boundaries, limited information sharing and a protection pathway.
Pregnancy and parenting	Is the learner treated as an end with continuing educational claims?	Continuation/re-entry planning, catch-up and protection from stigma.
Referral	Does the service respect the learner, respond well and remain available?	Verified referral partners, feedback, follow-up.
Leadership and resources	Do budgets, timetables, supervision and incentives assist in accomplishing leadership statements regarding moral obligations?	Resource allocation, professional development and accountability.
Collaboration	Do responsibilities, roles and portfolios make sense and are they defensible?	Written protocols within the education, health, protection and social-support sectors.

Source: Philosophical Analysis (2026).

According to the matrix, when translated into institutional questions, Kantian ethics turns out to be practical. Tests for universalizability entail consistency; tests for humanity mean dignity and non-instrumental treatment; tests for autonomy examine whether students are given truthful information and meaningful options; and tests for duty examine whether responsible actors act because it is obligatory, rather than merely convenient.

The matrix also sets out the boundaries of the framework. It does not show that a practice will reduce pregnancy because there is a positive Kantian appraisal. It demonstrates that this practice is coherent and ethically sound and deserves well-chosen and well-informed application and self-examination. Whether or not it is actually effective is another matter.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Teachers and school administrators are moral agents who have a role other than merely passing on rules or responding to pregnancy. These responsibilities are: honest teaching, help in moral decision-making, respecting confidentiality, protecting against pressure, just and non-humiliating discipline, competent referral, and active support for continuity of education.

The value of these duties is explained with the help of Kantian ethics. Consistent policy with universal application, refusal to use learners to enhance institutional image, accurate information about options and ethics, and routine systems that make it easier to act ethically can all be grouped under the principles of universalizability, respect for persons, and duty. Effective leadership thus becomes institutional, rather than just individual, and is about being ethical.

The framework is intentionally limited. Reducing teenage pregnancy to moral failure, or denying the need for comprehensive sexuality education, health services, child protection, social protection and action on gendered power, is unacceptable. There is a normative contribution in Kantian ethics as part of a comprehensive evidence-based response.

5.2 Recommendations

Curriculum agencies, in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission, should develop and pilot professional development models which integrate comprehensive sexuality education with age-appropriate and considerate Kantian reasoning, safeguarding, confidentiality, referral and re-entry. For certification, practical skills in workshop facilitation and protective response should be demonstrated, and not simply attendance at one or more workshops.

Secondary school procedures should be put in place and made public in writing with regard to sensitive disclosure, limits of confidentiality, safeguarding, support with regard to pregnancy, school continuation/re-entry, complaints and referral. The procedures must include the following: any interaction must not contribute to a humiliating experience for girls, boys and adults; the minimum necessary amount of information must be shared; and everyone involved in the procedures must take responsibility.

School-based health services and adolescent health services should be developed and referral pathways verified with child-protection actors, social workers and social-protection programmes. Follow-up should be included with referral and this should not be considered a transfer of responsibility. Schools should record obstacles that prevent learners from returning to education or accessing services, and pass them on to those who are responsible.

There should be ethically reviewed implementation pilots with the participation of learners, teachers, families, health and protection actors. Monitoring should include accuracy, participation, dignity, quality of safeguarding, help-seeking, non-attendance, and re-entry; unintended impacts also need to be monitored. Any claims about behaviour or pregnancy should be based on appropriate empirical designs and not assumed from philosophical coherence.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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