

A Systematic Review on Ethical Leadership in Education

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of ethical leadership caught the interest of scholars for its implications in educational contexts. The perceptions of teachers about ethical leadership differ according to educational levels, while principals are often perceived as lacking an understanding of ethical leadership despite practicing it in different ways at the institution. The purpose of this systematic review is to analyze and synthesize different studies from 2010 to 2024 on ethical leadership in education across various levels. During the screening process for the studies anchoring to research questions about the characteristics and impacts of ethical leaders in education, the PRISMA model with the set exclusion and inclusion criteria was used. After the extensive review and careful analysis, four (4) themes emerged as the characteristics of ethical leaders in education: ethical integrity, social responsibility, adherence to professional standards, and spirituality. Moreover, the impacts of ethical leadership were classified into three categories: impacts on the school organization, teachers, and students. In the organization, they are led toward the formation of a collaborative environment, ethical technology integration, a positive school climate, improvements in OCB, and the sustainability of humane and effective education. For teachers, they tend to develop morale, employee engagement, enhanced performance and effectiveness, and high retention and stability. Also, students develop morale, increase student learning outcomes, and foster resilience. Hence, the ethical leadership of school leaders significantly affects the whole organization. Finally, this review calls for future studies about how ethical leadership is applied in education and for investigating its impacts on students.

Keywords: ethical leadership, ethical leaders, systematic review, characteristics, impacts, education

INTRODUCTION

The ever-changing world needs leaders who are competent with value-based leadership and management, leading to the success of their organization. Effective leadership is vital in any organization towards the attainment of goals. School leaders were observed moderately ethical in their administration and perceived by teachers who use mainly deception, abuse, and harassment on subordinates, which suggests professional scaffolding and training in fostering ethical leadership behavior to successfully run a school (Alemu & Abdillahi, 2020). According to Vikaraman et al. (2021), principals lacked an understanding of ethical leadership style, despite practicing it in several dimensions in school administration. Additionally, Edwards (2022) stated that school leaders do not have a sound conceptualization of ethical leadership and merely rely on a basic understanding of what is right and wrong. It can be argued that educational settings adapt to changes brought about by the influx of technological advancements. Therefore, ethical leadership is described as a dynamic and evolving practice that adapts to the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital age of education (Saifuddin, 2023).

There was a question posed about whether ethical perceptions change over time in organizations, as many factors contribute to the dynamics of ethics and ethical perceptions

(Göçen, 2021). The perceptions of teachers on ethical leadership differ according to educational levels where they are working, teachers in primary school have higher ethical leadership perceptions than the teachers working in secondary school levels (Özgenel & Aksu, 2020). Moreover, it was suggested that ethical leadership must be integrated into current school leadership practices to further understand its impact on education. In support, there was a proposition to conduct a study on the significance of ethical leadership in the educational context (Aldawsari, 2020). Teachers who have a postgraduate education are more critical in giving their perspectives on ethical leadership behaviors of school principals than those in bachelors (Özgenel & Aksu, 2020). The need to improve ethical guidance and role clarification through the leadership practices of school heads was highlighted; school leaders should focus on effectively communicating ethics, clear expectations of ethical rules, and actively promoting and rewarding ethical behavior among teachers through an improvement in ethical guidance (Zacarias & Flores, 2023).

To strengthen the ethical climate in an organization, school leaders should emphasize on open communication for ethical issues and create ethical awareness (Cansor et al., 2021). According to Sabir (2020), the ethical leadership behavior requires nurturing to be effective in elevating organizational commitment among teachers in an organization to achieve efficient performance. It was argued to further explore specific mechanisms by which principal leadership practices impact the personal development of teachers and eventually affect student achievement and well-being (Kilag, 2023). Based on the existing studies, principals are deficient in knowledge of the attributes of ethical leaders and how ethical leadership should be manifested in educational settings. Undoubtedly, a lack of understanding of how ethical leadership should be practiced in the school organization could lead to disparity. Accordingly, there is a need to further study ethical leadership and ethical climate in another context, providing substantial implications (Cansor et al., 2021). Hence, this systematic review aims to analyze and synthesize different studies about ethical leadership in education across various levels to come up with themes on its impacts in the field, including the characteristics of an ethical leader. The results of this study could contribute to the scientific body of knowledge about ethical leadership in education. It may serve as significant contributions to teachers and other stakeholders, especially school leaders, in effectively leading and managing the institution they represent, guided by a set of ethical principles in education.

RESEARCH METHODS

Protocol and Registration

The review was carried out using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Liberati et al., 2009). There were four (4) stages in the process of the review: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Before the start of the data gathering, a review protocol was developed. This involved choosing search terms, databases, and screening criteria. The databases used were Google Scholar and Taylor & Francis in searching for the related studies. These databases were used to get reliable and credible research papers and are free online.

Eligibility Criteria

Upon reviewing the research papers gathered, certain criteria were taken into consideration. These criteria ensure the attainment of the objectives of the study. The following were the inclusion criteria: (1) studies that discuss characteristics of ethical leaders in education; (2) impacts of ethical leadership in education; and (3) only research papers written in English with full-text access. The focus of the first criterion was to explore different perspectives on the characteristics of ethical leaders in education. The second criterion explores

the impacts of ethical leadership in education. The other studies that discussed how to develop ethical leadership or an ethical leader and its dilemmas were excluded so as to not deviate from the sole purpose of this systematic review. The research papers that indirectly talk about ethical leadership or ethical leaders in education were included, provided that they aligned with the research questions. In addition, studies that merely investigated the relationship of ethical leadership with any other variables were excluded as they did not enumerate the characteristics of ethical leaders or the impacts of ethical leadership. Finally, only research papers written in English with full-text access were included for accurate analysis and interpretation of the results.

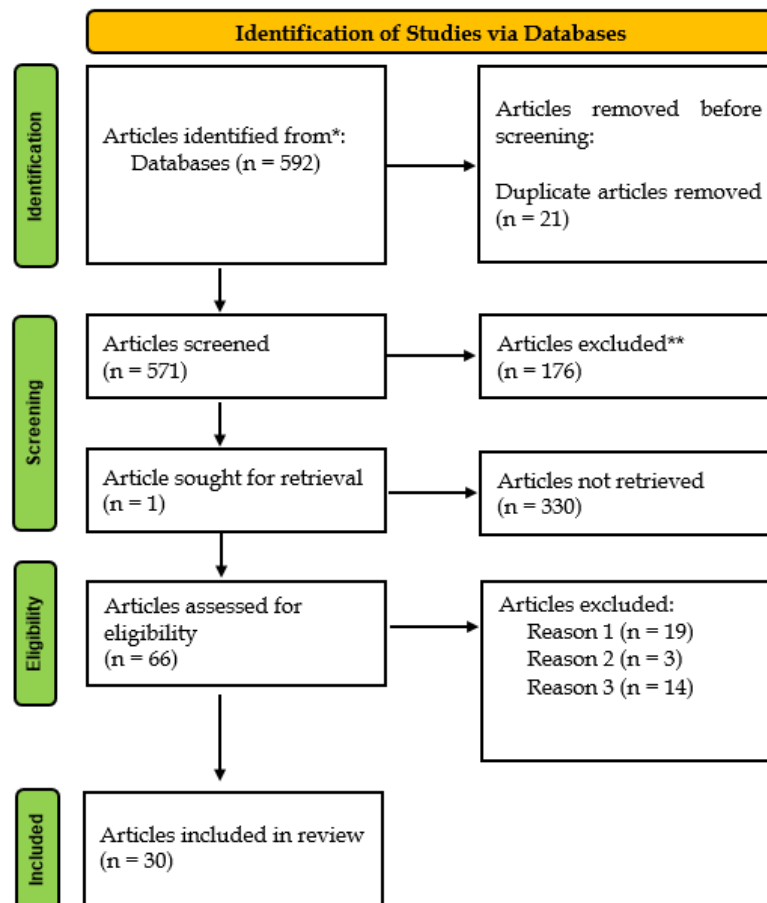


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Search Screening on the Review

Information Sources

There were only two databases utilized for the search of relevant articles: Taylor & Francis and Google Scholar, with the exact phrases "ethical leadership in education", "ethical leaders in education", "ethical leaders", and "characteristics of ethical leaders in education." These databases provided sufficient relevant studies about ethical leadership and ethical leaders in education, as the focus of this study.

Search

The immense search using the terms "ethical leadership in education", "ethical leaders in education", "ethical leaders", and "characteristics of ethical leaders in education" accumulated 592 articles together from Google Scholar and Taylor & Francis. Using the phrases "ethical leadership in education" and "ethical leaders in education," the "advance search" was utilized to filter the results of the search guided by the criteria in both databases. In the advance search,

the phrases were placed in the box labeled “with all of the words” under “find articles” and were set “in the title of the article” before the search. For some studies from Google Scholar, the setting was the same except where the words occur in the articles; it was set as “anywhere in the article.”

Study Selection

As shown in Figure 1, there were 592 articles identified about ethical leadership in education, ethical leaders and characteristics, and its impacts in educational contexts. 554 of which were taken from Google Scholar and 38 from Taylor & Francis. Most of the articles came from Google Scholar because of the very limited relevant articles in Taylor & Francis. Initially, 21 duplicates were removed, leaving 571 articles for the title screening. In the title screening, 176 articles were removed because their titles did not indicate ethical leadership or ethical leaders. Hence, 395 articles were retained for the abstract screening. After the abstract screening, 65 articles were retained, and 1 article that was removed during the title screening was sought for retrieval. Therefore, 66 articles were subject to full-text screening, while 330 articles were removed for not aligning to research questions. These 66 articles were evaluated in full text for the eligibility assessment. Of these articles, 19 were discarded for not having full-text access, 3 were removed for not meeting the review's objectives, and 14 were found irrelevant to the educational context. Finally, 30 articles were included in the review for meeting all the set criteria.

Data Collection Process and Data Items

All the articles identified were stored and processed in Excel. The duplications found in both databases were treated as one, excluding the other entry. After this phase, titles and contents were evaluated thoroughly, considering the objectives of the review. As shown in the table below, among the 30 articles, 6 provided characteristics of ethical leaders, 19 discussed the impacts of ethical leadership, and 5 shared both characteristics and impacts of ethical leaders or leadership in education.

Table 1. Distribution of Articles

Classifications	Number of Articles
Characteristics of Ethical Leaders	6
Impacts of Ethical Leadership in Education	19
Characteristics and Impacts of Ethical Leaders/Leadership in Education	5

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged were classified into two general categories: the characteristics of ethical leaders and the impacts of ethical leadership in education. There were 4 themes for the characteristics of ethical leaders: (1) ethical integrity, (2) social responsibility, (3) adherence to professional standards, and (4) spirituality. Whereas the impacts of ethical leadership in education were distributed into (1) impacts on a school organization, (2) impacts on teachers, and (3) impacts on students with the emerging themes. The characteristics of ethical leaders are aligned with research question 1, while the impacts of ethical leadership in education are aligned with research question 2.

Characteristics of Ethical Leaders

Ethical Integrity

School leaders should manifest personal attributes that make them ethically inclined to encourage their subordinates and follow their lead with trust and enthusiasm. An ethical leader manifests honesty, sincerity, trustworthiness, moral responsibility, and ethical competence. Ethical educational leaders show an emphasis—to a great extent—on honesty, sincerity, trust, and moral responsibility as core values that may assist them in making consensus decisions (Papaloi et al., 2023; Phuc et al., 2021). Similarly, the attributes of ethical leaders endorsed by Western and Eastern educators were honesty, respect, and fairness (Göçen, 2021). According to Edwards et al. (2022), trust is a vital component of ethical leadership. Moreover, Abdollahi et al. (2022) stated that a manager who possesses the characteristics of ethical leadership is morally right, which is associated with ethical competence. The ethical integrity of an educational leader could influence the behaviors of the people in the organization. Ethical leaders are the epitome of ethical integrity, enabling them to lead their followers with honesty, sincerity, trustworthiness, moral responsibility, and ethical competence. These attributes serve as their guiding principles for consensus decision-making processes, leading them to be morally upright in their service to others.

Social Responsibility

Educational leaders instill social responsibility for dealing with people while working with them. For this reason, the following social attributes are ascribed to ethical leaders in education: altruism, empathy, respect, propriety (social norms), recognition (valuing others), compassion, justice, role modeling, and collaboration. Leaders in education, especially from Western and Eastern countries, emphasized altruism and rewarding ethical contributions as part of the core values (Papaloi et al., 2023). According to Salifu et al. (2022), administrators influence their employee behaviors through role modeling. When school principals act as reliable leaders who treat teachers with fairness and accept them without prejudice, it positively affects teacher perceptions of their job (Cansor et al., 2021). Moreover, as endorsed by Western and Eastern cultures, fairness and justice are attributes of ethical leadership; team spirit and the ability to listen were highlighted by Western educational leaders (Göçen, 2021). Educational leaders have emphasized respect and transparency as vital components of ethical leadership (Edwards et al., 2023). Ethical leaders do not just think of themselves; they take into consideration their social responsibility in the educational institution. They are responsible for cultivating the ethical behaviors of teachers so that they can model and mold learners in the school environment. The act of being altruistic, empathic, respectful, abiding by social norms, valuing the efforts of others, compassionate, just, role models, and collaborative is a manifestation of how ethical leaders perform their duty for the welfare of others. Consequently, people under their supervision might see and consider them as reliable individuals in the organization, enabling them to promote a collaborative environment.

Adherence to Professional Standards

Ethical leaders uphold professional standards in the community they are leading with transparency, role clarification, credibility, flexibility, critique, and rationality. Human resource management can be assisted by ethical conduct and critique in key administrative and educational decision-making processes (Phuc et al., 2021). Accordingly, making personal gains one of the leaders' top priorities in the organization is unethical (Sam, 2021). In that case, transparency is a key component that ethical leaders should apply for a common good. Ethical leaders understand their roles between the organization and their followers, including the community where the organization is established. They have a clear understanding of how their front-liners function and perform duties in the institution. An ethical leader is expected to be attractive and credible, which allows him to influence the behaviors of employees toward their jobs (Salifu et al., 2022). Western administrators articulated rationality as an attribute of ethical

leadership in education (Göçen, 2021). Moreover, Edwards et al. (2023) emphasized that leaders must create a friendly working environment for employees to form the development of good and responsible individuals in the community. Leaders who are guided by ethical principles, transparency, feedback, open communication, confidentiality, and adherence to rules, guidelines, and checklists are necessary for leading the institution (Edwards et al., 2023). Indeed, what leaders showcase and how they represent the community affect the perceptions of others of them being professional individuals in top-level management. Their commitment to ethical codes is not just applicable in the institutional premise but is also actualized with other stakeholders in the community.

Spirituality

Spirituality is attributed to ethical leaders in education since they manifest good ethics at all times. This characteristic of an ethical leader helps in achieving a holistic educational process. It was argued by Karsono et al. (2022) that leadership with spirituality influences improving the quality of higher education and can affect all organs in educational institutions in the desired direction. The concept of work engagement among employees is prompted and cultivated by strengthening the constructs of ethical leadership and workplace spirituality (Adnan et al., 2020). Spiritual leadership can be associated with ethical leadership since both involve integrity, morality, and values. Having spirituality in an educational organization can be beneficial for the management as it manifests meditation, mediation, and reflection (Karim et al., 2022). There were three components of critical spirituality identified by Brooks and Ezzani (2022) that are essential for a school leader: critical consciousness, resistance, and love. It can be inferred that ethical leaders are equipped with spirituality as their guide for whatever decisions they will make in the institution.

Impacts of Ethical Leadership in Education

Impacts on a School Organization

Ethical leadership plays a significant role in education as it leads the organization to achieve a collaborative environment, ethical technology integration, a positive school climate, improvements in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and the sustainability of humane and effective education. According to Berges (2022), the implementation of ethical leadership in education promotes cooperation among learners, administrators, faculty members, and staff; it also helps reduce unethical issues, leading to effective leadership and high productivity in the organization. Ethical leadership is imperative in the digital age of education; leaders who embrace ethical responsibilities ensure the effective use of technology for education advancement while upholding values and principles (Saifuddin, 2023). In addition, employees who work under a supervisor who exhibits a high degree of ethical leadership characteristics have less exposure to cyberbullying in the workplace, which leads to an ethical and supportive work climate with fewer stressors (Tiamboonprasert & Charoensukmongkol, 2020).

Also, it was stated that ethical leadership has a role in shaping the school's ethical climate; the qualities of ethical leaders, such as honesty, fairness, and rewarding and supporting teachers, nurture and foster an ethical climate (Cansor et al., 2021). Furthermore, Phetsombat & Na-Nan (2023) and Taamneh et al. (2024) stated that ethical leadership had a direct positive effect on the organizational citizenship behavior of employees. As the adherence to ethical leadership behaviors by school principals increases, the organizational health of the school increases positively (Özgenel & Aksu, 2020). Ethical leaders tend to inspire followers through their actions with honesty and transparency (Sabir, 2020). Accordingly, ethical leadership has a positive effect on job satisfaction and affective commitment, which are associated with school effectiveness (Negiş, 2020). The application of ethical leadership in school organizations creates the right conditions that improve the learning performance of students and contribute

to positive socialization among vulnerable groups, consequently creating a positive educational climate (Geropoulos & Tsioumis, 2022).

Ethical leadership behaviors of school principals positively affect the quality of education and the performance of workers (Kaçay et al., 2020). Furthermore, female faculty seemed to have more clearly focused perceptions on ethical leadership; the increase in emphasis on diversity includes increasing the number of females hired for tenure-track positions and having a greater number of female employees in committees (Hubchen et al., 2024). A school organization will have a greater chance of survival amidst the dynamics of business when its leader takes the responsibility to be ethical in their practices, influencing their followers (Sabir, 2020). It can be inferred that the effect of ethical leadership encompasses every dimension of the school organization as it provides ripple effects. When it improves the satisfaction level of teachers, the performance of students can be influenced by providing them with quality education. Therefore, it is imperative to adopt ethical leadership principles in an educational context, establishing favorable conditions to maximize learning results, improve organizational health, and promote diversity and inclusivity.

Impacts on Teachers

Behind the impacts of ethical leadership on a school organization are the underlying impacts on teachers: the development of teacher morale, employee engagement, enhanced performance and effectiveness, and high retention and stability. As stated by Guo et al. (2023), ethical leadership enhances the ethical work behavior of employees. Additionally, ethical leadership was found to be positively impactful on teacher commitment, which includes commitment to teaching and commitment to their profession (Sabir, 2020). Ethical leadership influences the organizational trust of employees and consequently improves their workplace engagement (Ilyas et al., 2020). Ethical leadership has a significant effect on job satisfaction and affective commitment among teachers (Negiş, 2020). This claim was escalated by Cansor et al. (2021) that teachers experience more satisfaction in their schools when ethical leadership is perceived by their school leaders, implying that fostering ethical values, practices, and behaviors in an ethical climate increases teacher job satisfaction.

A positive relationship among ethical leadership, organizational commitment, and life satisfaction was determined to exist, implying high retention and stability for teachers and a reduction of burnout (Kaçay et al., 2020). It has been proven that ethical leadership significantly impacts the organizational citizenship behavior of employees in higher educational institutions, leading to a positive effect on academic engagement. When leaders demonstrate ethical behavior, impartiality, integrity, and empathy, teachers are more likely to engage in discretionary actions that allow them to accomplish their primary mission guided by policies (Taamneh et al., 2023). Ethical leaders need to maintain high faculty satisfaction in a school organization they manage to achieve effective and quality education. Based on the review, when ethical leaders influence the well-being of their teachers, faculty members tend to influence their learners positively.

Impacts on Students

Not much has been discussed about the impacts of ethical leadership on students. Nevertheless, of the few studies gathered on the impacts of ethical leaders on students in the school organization, three themes were determined. These were student moral development, increased student learning outcomes, and fostering student resiliency. The ethical behaviors of academic leaders escalate student satisfaction as one of the determinant factors for measuring the effectiveness of an organization (Paharia & Singh, 2018). In an administration with leaders who live out principles of ethical leadership, the learning performance of students is likely to improve through effective instruction by their teachers (Geropoulos & Tsioumis, 2022). As opposed to the claim that ethical leadership uplifts student learning outcomes, Kibui (2021) indicates that there is no significant relationship between ethical leadership practices and

student academic success. However, there still exist indirect impacts of ethical leadership on student academic achievement with various mediating factors. As Flores and Zacarias (2024) imply, teachers who perceive their leaders as ethical are more likely to be motivated on their job. Despite the limited number of related studies, ethical leadership is undoubtedly influential on student learning outcomes as it impacts teachers who have direct engagement with the learners in a classroom setting.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

After a thorough analysis using the PRISMA model for a systematic review on ethical leadership in education, several characteristics and impacts have been found. For the characteristics, ethical leaders uphold ethical integrity, social responsibility, adherence to professional standards, and spirituality as they manage and lead a school organization, influencing teachers and students through direct or indirect means. Furthermore, the impacts of ethical leadership in education are categorized into three: on the organization, teachers, and students. In the organization, they are led toward the formation of a collaborative environment, ethical technology integration, a positive school climate, improvements in OCB, and the sustainability of humane and effective education. Ethical leaders play a pivotal role in the organization, making the individuals cooperate, share ideas, and collaborate toward achieving common goals. Additionally, the community becomes more responsible in utilizing and integrating technology for any purpose in the school setting, which also allows them to manage their respective activities with etiquette and netiquette. As a result, the community promotes a positive climate whose constituents make themselves behave with discretion and abide by policies. Hence, administrators and other stakeholders become more motivated, leading to sustainability in quality and transformative education.

On the teachers' end, they tend to develop morale, become engaged in the organization, enhance their performance and effectiveness, and make themselves retained and stable while executing their duties. With that, they become more efficient in their respective tasks, as they believe that their leaders support and recognize what they can contribute to the institution. For the students, they can establish moral development within, increase their learning outcomes, and foster resilience. However, the impacts of ethical leadership on students are not direct. Before the learners can experience the influence of school administrators, it would initially affect teachers, then with them. Nevertheless, the impactful service of teachers and administrators with quality and teamwork eventually makes the children resilient.

Despite the meticulous process of this review about ethical leadership in education, it was realized that very few researchers delved into investigating and exploring the impacts of ethical school leaders—principals or administrators—on the students. For this reason, it is recommended to conduct further study about the said limitation with various possible factors. Also, future researchers may focus on how ethical leadership is applied in educational contexts to make it more established. It can be said that the roles of educational leaders are crucial, as they can transform or deform the behaviors of those who are under their supervision and management. Hence, this area of research interest might serve as a foundation and basis for the development of enhancement programs intended for school managers. Finally, this review can be supplemental to the concepts and literature for ethical leadership in education.

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