
Promotion of Ethical Leadership Behaviour Practices in Public Secondary Schools: A South African Perspective

Mathew Kimanzi  and Peter Rakgalakane

¹Department of Language & Social Sciences, Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Abstract: Educators and school principals play an important role in promoting good ethical behaviour among learners and other stakeholders in the school setting. Learners look up to educators as catalysts in the promotion of values and morality, and in fostering responsibility in them. This study investigated ethical leadership behaviour practices in selected public secondary schools in Limpopo Province. The study followed a qualitative research method approach based on the interpretive research paradigm. Using a case study design with three public secondary schools in South Africa's Limpopo Province, a convenience sampling method was used to collect data from six educators, three deputy principals, and three school principals, through semi-structured one-on-one interviews. The study's findings revealed that unethical behaviour practices were identified as poor working environment and inadequate training of educators. Strategies to promote ethical practices included reinforcement of policies related to ethics for educators. The study therefore recommends that the Department of Basic Education should provide on-going educator development programs and workshops focused on ethical leadership and behaviour practices. Furthermore, educators should receive on-going support and monitoring to ensure that ethical leadership behaviour practices are implemented consistently, effectively and efficiently in public secondary schools.

Keywords: ethical leadership; schools; South Africa; principals; educators

CORRESPONDENCE

Email: mkimanzi@cut.ac.za

EDITORIAL DATES

Received: 26 June 2024

Revised: 30 June 2025

Accepted: 01 July 2025

Published: 24 September 2025

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51415/ajims.v7i2.3587>

Introduction

Ethical leadership is the central pillar upon which institutions and organisations are able to achieve stability, through ensuring trust, respect, integrity, accountability and justice. Without ethical leadership, institutions and organisations are beset by mass corruption and maladministration. Hlongwane and Bhengu (2025) align with the above assertion when they argue that organisations can engage in institutionalized discrimination, unequal treatment and exclusion. Mthiyane and Mudadigwa (2021) contend that the education systems around the world that are built upon ethical leadership possess the resilience to withstand ethical challenges and the responsiveness needed to deal with such challenges as they arise. Unethical leadership within the education system is widespread and characterized by organizational inefficiency, corruption and mismanagement

(Govender, 2023). encompasses innovative anti-corruption policies that go beyond individual compliance and aim to address corruption in organizations and learning institutions by emphasizing oneness in efforts to eliminate corruption in all its manifestations everywhere. This overall structure addresses ethical leadership through five main areas, namely, sustainable development, international peace and security, science and technology, youth and future generations and evolving global governance (United Nations General Assembly (UN), 2024). The Pact underlines the necessity to mobilize global governance, i.e., local and regional governments, the civil society and the private sector (United Nations General Assembly (UN), 2024).

In the South African context, the lack of ethical leaders in South Africa's public schools has been a moral dilemma for many years, even before democracy was established in 1994 (Mthinyane & Mudadigwa, 2021). As a result, schools are faced with a great number of ethical conundrums that are related to different environmental elements. Previous studies indicate that many schools have encountered challenges when attempting to incorporate ethical leadership behaviour standards (Madiga, 2022). Mlambo (2021) confirms this point, stating that ethical leadership difficulties like fraud, mishandling of school resources, sexual harassment, and absenteeism are plaguing educators and school principals. Similarly, Zahra et al. (2017) assert that to avoid burnout and betrayal of the institutions, school principals and educators must confront the challenging work of fostering morality, ethical ideals, and connections among instructors. Furthermore, asserts that unethical leadership behaviour practices in schools impede the vision and mission of the institution. According to Mthiyane and Mudadigwa (2021), some educators and principals are engaging in unethical practices in schools. Mlambo and Khumalo (2022) contends that any unethical and deceptive conduct or inappropriate behaviour by educators contributes to behaviours and attitudes that impede ethical practice in the school setting. This sentiment is supported by Mokgolo and Dikotla (2023), who argue that a poor working environment, disloyalty, a lack of commitment, and nepotism are all linked to unethical behaviour practices. Heyneman (2015) asserts that the absence of a policy implementation committee is another element that contributes to educators' and principals' unethical behaviour practices.

As a result, attempts by educators and school principals to promote moral behaviour practices are rendered ineffectual and inefficient (Israel & Bass, 2018). Nonetheless, the moral standing of a school and the ethical conduct of its staff, learners, and other stakeholders are greatly influenced by the effectiveness and efficiency of its principal educators (Dladla, 2020). Ethical educators, in Sabir (2021), serve as role models for character development. According to Icka and Kochoska 2024 theory, educators' ethical and character development can be significantly aided by ethical role modelling. In order to promote ethical behaviour in the classroom, Grigoropoulos (2019) underlined that educators who exhibit ethical behaviour themselves serve as role models for other educators, learners, and society at large. Importantly, encouraging ethical behaviour in the classroom seems to increase educators' efficacy and efficiency (Grigoropoulos, 2019). According to Neupane et al. (2022), integrating ethics education into the curriculum is equally vital because it exposes educators to the values, concepts, and ethical behaviour practices that assist in promoting the moral behaviour of both educators and students. In addition, Ghanem (2018) argues that ethical educators must make sure that ethics instruction is inclusive of every learner, regardless of their socioeconomic or political background. This helps learners understand the value of ethical behaviour practices in the classroom. Educators' and learners' ethical behaviour practices increase when ethics education programs are routinely evaluated (Di Miceli da Silveira, 2022).

According to Vikaramana et al. (2020), the honesty and commitment of educators to their work and vision determines their ethical standing. Zaid (2022) adds that educators who exhibit a strong commitment to their profession tend to undertake daring, forward-thinking actions. Further, they demonstrate their interest in setting a good example, behave morally toward their colleagues and students, and serve for longer periods of time (Zahra et al., 2017). However, there is a general consensus that unethical behaviour by educators in schools is a cause for concern (Ghanem, 2018; Mthiyane & Mudadigwa, 2021; Mlambo & Khumalo, 2022). This study therefore investigates the ethical leadership behaviour practices in selected public secondary schools in Limpopo Province. In particular, it examines the causes of unethical behaviour among educators in schools, and strategies that can be used to promote ethical leadership behaviour practices in schools. The main aim of the study is to investigate ethical leadership behaviour practices in selected public secondary schools in Limpopo Province. The following research objectives guided the entire inquiry process throughout this study:

- To investigate the causes of unethical leadership practices in public secondary schools.
- To determine the strategies that could be employed by educators and school principals to ensure the promotion of ethical leadership practices in public secondary schools.

Literature review

Ethics is defined as norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour needed in certain professional or social settings (Mle, 2012). Ethics is a set of moral principles that guide every decision made in schools, from assigning consequences to having educators speak to learners in class (Roberts, 2019). Ethical leadership is guided by moral principles or tenets that guide everyone's moral behaviour within the educational environment. Any school's success depends critically on its ability to lead ethically (Assiri, 2018). Educators worldwide are calling for effective, efficient and ethical leaders in schools (Puyo 2022). It is more crucial than ever to pursue ethical leadership (Emery, 2016). According to Yasir and Mohamad (2016), ethical leadership has an impact on the institutional moral culture of a school. One of the biggest challenges affecting educational systems worldwide, and especially in South Africa, is unethical leadership practices. The 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) by Transparency International (TI) (2020), the global coalition against unethical practices, showed that South Africa's rating is on the rise, with plundering, incompetence, misdemeanours, malfeasance, and malpractices Puyo 2022). Emery (2016) corroborates this as he points out that South Africa has become fertile ground where malpractices are rampant. Similarly, Serfontein and de Waal (2015) indicate that unethical practices and corruption have infiltrated schools in South Africa and that South African schools have become hotspots for corrupt practices.

Botman (2016) argues that South African schools are no longer institutions of learning but rather vendors for poor quality education. In addition, Govender (2023) maintains that educators' misconduct has increased at an alarming rate in South Africa. For instance, the School Governing Body Council of South Africa reported on the alleged corruption within the Limpopo Department of Education relating to promotional posts (Capricorn FM, 2021). Chisholm 2013 corroborates the statement as he reveals the jobs-for-cash misdemeanour and Limpopo Department of Education textbook scandal. Equally important, Serfontein and de Waal (2015) and Corruption Watch (2021) revealed that some educators display dishonesty by reporting late to work or leaving school early. They indicate that absenteeism has reached unacceptable levels in South Africa. A further problem is the embezzlement of school funds and awarding of tenders to close family relatives, thereby eroding the reputation of the schools and education sector (Fullan, 2023). Similar cases have been reported in other countries such as Botswana and India. Studies have indicated that education in Botswana has been shaken by numerous instances of unethical behaviour and poor management (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017; Pansiri et al., 2021). Similarly, Diraditsile and Rankopo (2018) note that Botswana has a pervasive culture of sexual assault and discrimination against female students. Kirya (2019) points out that unethical and fraudulent methods by educators, school principals, and education department officials have ruined human development, increased inequality, and damaged public trust. According to 82, a plethora of corrupt activities and maladministration include frequent incidents of embezzlement of school funds allocated by the education department to purchase teaching and learning materials, leakage of examination question papers, and plagiarism.

Several studies highlight how important it is for the Department of Education to support ethical leadership behaviour practices in schools (Mthiyane & Mudadigwa, 2021). In addition, empirical studies have demonstrated how conduct guidelines and ethics instruction can support instructors' behaviour (Mlambo, 2021). Educators who exhibit honesty, openness, responsibility, decency, and equity set the standard for ethical behaviour in the school (Dladla, 2020). Sabir (2021) asserts that, on a global scale, ethics play a crucial role in educational practices, accountability, respect, and integrity. Further, ethics establish a positive school culture and build trust among stakeholders in the educational context is. Ethics also provide integrity, fairness, and respect during the decision-making process (Mthiyane, 2018). According to Pansiri et al. (2021), ethics ensure the prosperity of the school and its surroundings. Roberts (2019) asserts that including ethics in the curriculum helps educators understand the fundamentals of moral conduct. In addition, Robert argues that including ethics in the curriculum will give educators the knowledge and abilities to encourage moral leadership behaviour practices. According to Ghanem (2018), all educators, regardless of level, should get supervision and support from the Department of Education in their efforts to encourage moral behaviour.

In a similar vein, Mthiyane and Mudadigwa (2021) recommend that the Department should hold frequent workshops to provide educators and school principals with the necessary training. Odou (2014) argues that in order to foster ethical behaviour practices in the educational context, the Department of Education ought to build up a continuous professional development program for educators and school principals. Educators'

comprehension of moral leadership and instructional techniques would improve as a result of this continuous professional development program (Madiga, 2022). Furthermore, in order to create a setting that is favourable for teaching and learning, ethical standards and principles should be included in policies (Shepa, 2018). Madiga (2022) notes that workshops, training sessions, and mentoring programs can assist educators in gaining the expertise required to successfully handle ethical dilemmas.

Theoretical framework

Albert Bandura's social theory theoretical framework was used in the study because it is pertinent to the promotion of ethical leadership behaviour practices. According to Bandura 1986 social learning theory, behaviour is acquired through three basic factors: imitation of models, reinforcement of behaviour, and learning through observing others. Social learning theory states that educators can model ethical leadership actions that educators can watch and take after (Bandura and Walters (1977)). Because they view their educators and school principals as excellent role models, students and educators observe and try to imitate their attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and behaviour (Bandura 1986). According to Bandura and Walters (1977), observation is crucial to learning because leaders' and educators' observations of leaders' conduct act as cues for proper behaviour and educators can exemplify ethical leadership by setting a good example of honesty, equity, and responsibility. This will have a positive impact on learners and other educators. In addition, Yasir and Mohamad (2016) argue that ethical leadership is based on the application of Bandura's paradigm and entails exhibiting moral ideals, responsibility, fairness, and respect. People pick up social norms through verbal persuasion, direct modelling, and observation of others. Furthermore, according to the social learning theory, followers are likely to follow the example set by their leaders by imitating their conduct (Bishop, 2013). Madiga (2022) states that educators will benefit from the ethical leadership behaviours of their principals by improving their own behaviour and developing greater self-assurance in their skills. Furthermore, moral leadership behaviours help educators and learners to develop and gain confidence. Because unethical behaviour is a behavioural issue that needs to be positively addressed in order to be altered, Bandura's theoretical framework is important to this study. In this sense, Bandura 1986 argues clearly that an undesirable behaviour can be changed provided a consistent modification strategy is applied. According to research by Green and Piel 2009, this theory offers a paradigm for comprehending, projecting, and modifying human behaviour. In terms of behaviour, certain researchers, including Beth 2007, backed up Bandura's fundamental tenet of social cognitive learning theory (SCLT), highlighted the fact that behaviour is goal-directed and eventually develops self-regulation.

Method

The study utilized the qualitative approach to explore the behaviour perceptions and experiences of the participants regarding the role of school educators in implementing ethical behaviour in public secondary schools. The qualitative approach was deemed the best method because it focuses on how individuals and groups perceive and understand the world, as well as how they make sense of their experiences (Mohajan, 2017). The approach allowed the researcher to capture educators' viewpoints and how they interpret their daily experiences (Maree, 2016). A paradigm is a set of hypotheses or beliefs about central features of reality that support a particular point of view (Maree, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified five paradigms, namely, positivism, interpretivism, initial realism, pragmatism, and postmodernism. The interpretivist paradigm guided the study. The interpretivist paradigm is based on the assumptions identified by Igwenagu (2016) and Guba and Lincoln (1994), namely, the belief that individuals' words are evidence of realities and that realities are multiple and socially constructed. The interpretivist paradigm's central goal is to comprehend the subjective world of human experience (Guba and Lincoln 1994). In this approach, thematic analysis is used to examine the respondents' lived experiences. Krauss, 2015

The interpretive paradigm takes precedence because it focuses on people's subjective experiences, on how people create the social world by sharing meanings, and on how they engage with or relate with each other (Maree, 2016). Maree (2016) further posits that human life can only be understood from within. The interpretive paradigm was appropriate for this research because the study investigates various forms of ethical behaviour challenges in selected public secondary schools in Limpopo Province and attempts to understand if and why schools may be indulging themselves in unethical activities, and what strategies could be employed to prevent the rise of malpractices in public secondary schools. In this case, the reality is interpreted through the meanings that the research participants provide to their daily lives (Silleyew, 2019). The interpretivist paradigm contributes to the understanding of the relationship between paradigm and methodological choice (Guba and Lincoln (1994)).

The researcher employed a qualitative case study method to elicit participants' perspectives and understanding on how they interpret and give significance to ethical leadership practices. Population is the complete group of persons about whom the researcher wishes to draw conclusions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population for this study was educators from Waterberg District in the Limpopo Province. Sampling, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), is the process of choosing a sample from the population. The study employed the convenient sampling approach to pick four public secondary schools for participation, including three principals, three deputy principals, and six educators who could offer rich information on ethical leadership behaviour practices based on their own experiences.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa prior to commencing data collection. Ethical considerations were observed during the data collection process. The researcher accorded total respect to participants' autonomy, dignity and made sure that they volunteered without coercion or influence. Waterberg District of Limpopo Province was chosen as the research site. The researcher employed convenience and purposive in the selection of the three public secondary schools. 6 educators, 3 deputy principals and 3 school principals were selected as research participants. Furthermore, the study scheduled interviews at a convenient time and place for the researcher and participants. Each research participant was interviewed for one hour. The study utilized one-on-one qualitative semi-structured interviews to gather data from the twelve participants. This approach allowed the researcher to get rich data directly from the research participants, which makes it acceptable for the study on ethical leadership behaviour practices in schools (Palmar, 2016). The researcher also employed document reviews to collect data from the selected schools as research sites. Petty et al. (2012) states that document reviews are executed for the purpose of collecting additional data and understanding concerning the topic being researched. The study reviewed the following documents that were gathered from the three schools to be examined, namely, The South African School Act 84 of 1996, Surname et al. 1998 Code of Professional Ethics for Educators and Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998. These are foundational in the sense that educators are bound to know and be directed by them. Document reviews assist to verify the trustworthiness and accuracy of collected data while providing evidence-based guidance for policy development and decision-making. Despite the existence of these ethical documents, the findings suggest that there are still serious ethical violations for unethical practices taking place.

The data collection was analysed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that helps the researcher find, examine, and present themes in the data they have gathered. The researcher can comprehend the underlying ideas and meanings by using the theme analysis method. A methodical process of coding, classifying, and interpreting data was used to perform data analysis in order to produce descriptions of a single phenomenon of interest. This was carried out in order to highlight themes, establish relationships, and advance knowledge of moral leadership conduct in educational settings. Analysis of data was achieved via an organized process of interpreting, categorizing and coding data to provide light on the phenomenon of interest. Thematic analysis was used in the research to analyse in-depth interview data and identify trends in the data in order to decide on relevant themes. Furthermore, the study observed the four standard by Enworo 2023 in selecting the trustworthiness of the study: credibility, dependability, transferability, conformability and authenticity. From the thematic analysis, the following four themes and sub-themes were derived and are presented below. The findings showed the differing perceptions regarding ethical leadership behaviour practices.

Findings and discussion

The findings are provided and discussed in terms of themes that evolved from generated data. Pseudonyms were used in order to conceal the identity of the respondents and schools in the study. Schools are referred to as School A; School B or School C. School principals are referred to as P1, P2 or P3. Deputy Principals are referred to as DP1, DP2 or DP3. Educators are referred to as E1, E2, E3, E4, E5 or E6. The study identified four main themes: (1) operating environment; (2) lack of ethical knowledge; (3) inadequate training of educators and school principals; (4) strategies to enhance ethical leadership behaviours.

Theme 1: the operating environment as a factor in unethical practices

The study found out the schools' operating environment was one of the main reasons as to why educators are involved in unethical practices. Participants E1, E2 and P1 from school A corroborate the assertion that school environment plays a role in the unethical behaviour of educators and school principals. Participant P1 articulated that:

I think...poor working environment, that is where you find most of us earning low salaries and not matching with high work demands...this is where dirty tricks of trying to get extra cash comes in. (P1)

Participant E1 from School A concurred with this view:

Oh yes...educators operate in a school environment which is not transparent. For instance, even if you see someone doing the evil thing... there is no mechanism in place to report the school principal or teacher. We are afraid of being victimized. (E1)

On further probing, E2 from School A asserted the following:

Yes indeed...some educators engage in these evil behaviours because they have inherited it within the community environment in which they serve. The environment of the school is a fertile ground to enrich them. Educators and learners are growing up and working in an environment with leaders who themselves are not leading by examples or walking the talk... not supporting ethical decisions taken.

Participant P2 from School B agreed with the views of participants from the other secondary schools that a negative environment is the cause of unethical practices of educators. He stated that:

Educators operate in the environment of fear...They don't want to report these malpractices because they are afraid of the consequences...fear of being victimized... or even being demoted... or not getting promotion.

Environment is one of the most influential contexts of unethical conduct in the school. According to social learning theory, people will behave following what values are acceptable in their environment by observing and gathering information on their surroundings (Bandura and Walters (1977)). Leaders have the moral obligation to create an environment in their organizations where employees experience security, integrity and trust (Grigoropoulos, 2019).

In analyzing the sentiments, all participants unanimously agreed that operating in a negative school environment contributes to unethical practices. The environment entices educators and school principals to be involved in evil actions (Zaid, 2022). The community within which the school is built plays an important role in influencing the ethical culture of the school. Nyabeni (2020) states that the school environment is one which educators, school principals, learners and other relevant stakeholders should operate in an environment of trust, transparency and accountability. According to the literature review, the community in which the school is built has a significant impact on the school's ethical culture (Sabir, 2021). As a result, a negative environment would produce negative behaviours within the school. Tapia-Fonllem et al. (2020) define a positive school environment as a school having appropriate facilities, well-managed finances, available school-based health support, a work ethic and a clear disciplinary policy, high levels of collaboration and communication among stakeholders and effective school leadership. In contrast, they describe a negative school environment as one where there are undesirable behaviours such as high levels of frustration among educators, school principals, learners, and the community at large, as the school is found in the community environment. Odole (2018) states that a negative work environment impacts ethical practices. The participants' responses are in line with literature by Cherkowski et al. (2015), who asserted that educators, school principals, learners and other relevant stakeholders work in an environment where trust, transparency and accountability are lacking. The school environment plays a crucial role in the achievements of the desired goals of learners and educators. Previous studies have shown that variables such as physical, academic and social dimensions influence the school environment (Ghanem, 2018).

Theme 2: inadequate training of educators and school principals

According to the study findings, a lack of adequate training for educators and school principals contributes to unethical behaviour practices within the school. The study's findings revealed that the majority of participants pointed out a lack of ethics education in their schools as the source of unethical behaviour practices. Most participants during interviews revealed that lack of training of educators and principals could be adding to unethical practices at the school. Participants P1, E1 and E2 from School A described inadequate training as the cause of unethical practices of educators and school principals. As P1 explained:

It is true, as a school principal, I have observed that some educators have only the theory part and lack the practical part of teaching...as class managers could hardly manage their own classes. They haven't acquired ample knowledge and skills. On the other side most principals don't know how to mentor or support the new ones. They are found wanting all the time.

Similarly, DP1 from School B echoed the opinions of respondents from other schools who described inadequate training of educators and school principals as influencing elements in the unethical practices of educators and principals. When asked about his education training background, DP1 went on to explain that:

During my four years training as deputy principal, our curriculum did not include subjects like ethics, ethical leadership and school financial management...moreover, we were not properly equipped to manage and lead learners and finances.

Participant E3 from School B concurred with the notion of DP1 that inadequate training was the source of unethical conduct of some educators and school principals:

I think insufficient amount of time is allocated to in-service training of educators and school principals. We are ineffective in the implementation of relevant legislation and school policies. Yet, we lack knowledge of morals, ethics and values. The Department of Education is not doing enough to capacitate principals and educators to be more effective and efficient. There is no consequence management, for principal and teachers think that they are above the law.

Participant P2 from School B was of the view that lack of training of educators impacted negatively on the learners, as they are on the receiving end. Participant P2 summed it up as follows:

Department of Education has taken corporal punishment out of school premises...no alternative ways of instilling discipline has been provided for the educators and principals. Educators are frustrated...educators have no clue of what to do. They end up taking the law into their own hands. Educators still want to use corporal punishment despite it being abolished.

The opinion of participant E4 from School C was corroborated by E5 from School C who articulated that:

Yes, educators are not fully equipped to deal with ethical dilemmas experienced day to day at school...in other words they are not capable to do the work that they have been employed for. In addition, there is no monitoring taking place by the District officials.

According to a review of the literature, educators and school principals should understand basic ethical principles and standards that they should uphold in order to be well prepared to deal with ethical issues in the school setting (OECD, 2022).

Theme 3: lack of ethics knowledge

The findings from this study indicate that participants did not have in-depth understanding of the concept "ethics". In addition, some of the participants explained it differently. Indeed, Tushar (2017) postulated that there is no universally accepted definition of ethics. Most participants gave different understanding of the concept "ethics". In responding to the question, EI, E2, P1 and DP1, who are based at the two Schools A and B, shared similar sentiments. Participant P1 further commented that:

I think ethics refer to a standard or ruler of measuring what is right or wrong in the eyes of the people. It is the set of values such as respect in the individual.

On further probing the matter, E3 from School B commented that:

Yes, ethics is the moral principles that direct a person's code of conduct in everyday life... Without moral principles there will be disrespect in our school.

In the same vein, E6 and DP3 from School C showed that educators are experiencing ethical issues which need to be resolved. Participant DP3 articulated that:

Teachers and principals are struggling to deal decisively with ethical dilemmas which they are experiencing daily at school...knowledge of ethics is critical.

According to Singh and Twalo (2015), ethics is the study of morals. Ethics are beliefs about what is right and wrong or good and bad (Eluka et al., 2015). Ethics education promotes ethical values in other people and leads to success in professional and interpersonal relationships (Reddy, 2017). The goal of ethics education is to raise the moral awareness and maturity of educators and school principals, which will spread throughout the school system. Ethics education will benefit educators and school principals, helping to cope with ethical dilemmas they face daily at schools. Ethics is a key element of any successful leader in the community, particularly the educators and school principals who are in positions of power in the school (Al Shebli, 2023). Brown and Trevino (2006) echo that the definition of ethical leadership implies that leaders are required to demonstrate good ethics. Assiri (2018) maintains that ethics not only provides a framework for decision making but also require reflection upon personal and professional values, attention to disciplined ways of thinking, and ethical analysis to respond to the demands of school leadership. A clear ethics strategy is needed to better enable the school to realize its ethical goals (Israel & Bass, 2018).

Theme 4: strategies to enhance ethical behaviour practices

This theme investigates strategies for promoting ethical behaviour in public secondary schools. According to the study findings, the participants affirmed two strategies that could be used to promote ethical behaviour practices in schools. These are ongoing educator development programs and implementation of legislation and policies in the school setting.

According to the results of the study, the Department of Education should organize an ongoing development program for educators and school principals in order to develop their self-confidence and capacity. The participants' responses emphasized the importance of ongoing educator development programs in order to stop unethical behaviours from ruining ethical standards and professionalism in public schools. Participants E1, E2 and P1 from School A expressed similar sentiments about ongoing educator development programs. When asked about ongoing educator development programs, P1 from School A said:

I think continuous workshops and in service-training are critical in order to develop the moral behaviour standards for teachers and school principals in our schools.

On further probing the issue, E3, DP1 and P2 from School B indicated lack of training as a contributing factor in unethical practices in the school setting. Participant P2 said:

It is quite clear that there is lack of training for teachers on ethical leadership in our school. Most teachers and school principals do not treat each other with respect and just at the workplace... The moral of teachers is very low.

Responses from E4 and DP2 from School C corroborated the responses of the participants from other secondary schools. Participant E4 commented that:

All I can say is that ...You only know or hear about SACE or certain legislation when the teacher has violated one of the pieces of the legislation or code of professional ethics. I don't recall a meeting where time is allocated for training of teachers in our school.

When probing the matter further, E5, E6 and DP3 from School C revealed that ethical issues are not prioritized on the agenda of the staff meetings. Participant DP3 explained:

I do not recall our school or circuit office regularly organizing workshops on ethical issues for educators or school principals to equip us on moral behaviour standards. Our school does not have a year program where legislations and policies are being Itemized for discussion in the meeting... The lack of knowledge and training in ethics are the main cause of unethical practices of educators and school principals in schools.

The study found that to be regarded as a strong moral person, one should have the right attributes such as respect, honesty and transparency (Neupane et al., 2022). Respect makes followers trust their leaders and contribute more (Nevhutanda, 2017). Respect is shown by ethical leaders through good listening skills, feeling for others and

being able to tolerate different views from their followers (Nevhutanda, 2017). The importance of ethics training is to establish common codes of conduct, to acquire knowledge and skills which can help in identifying unethical practices, and to guide educators and school principals in making ethical decisions.

The Department of Education is one of the government departments which should organize on-going educator development and ethical programs for school principals, deputy principals and educators, to boost their confidence and capacity. This is affirmed by Manyaka and Sebola (2013), who state that ethical training and development programs form part of any ethical operation. This assertion is supported by Eisenbeiss (2012), who pointed out that educators and school principals who possess good ethics tend to implement ethical leadership more effectively. Similarly, Emery (2016) concurs with the above when he states that in order for ethical change to be effective, educators and school principals should be properly trained. Ongoing educator development programs include workshops and courses on ethics. Educators require knowledge and skills to enable them to face challenges in their school environment. Furthermore, educators need to be adequately trained so that they are competent to handle the ethical dilemmas in their schools. According to Nyabeni (2020), for ethical change to be effective, educators and school principals need to be properly trained. Educators who are receiving in-service training regularly tend to demonstrate good ethics in their leadership (Brown et al., 2005). To develop educators, both formal training and informal learning can contribute a great deal because these may lead to the educators' development of tacit knowledge, which can be contrasted with explicit knowledge (Vikaramana et al., 2020).

The ethical training program will assist educators and school principals to know more about the school code of conduct, which can support educators and learners in raising concerns about ethical practices (Manyaka & Sebola, 2013). Training is a formal way to learn leadership skills, and ethical training is needed to be an ethical leader. The Department of Basic Education should organize and develop ethical training programs for educators, deputy principals and school principals; this will guarantee that best ethical practices are being implemented in public secondary schools.

Implementation of legislation and policies in the school setting

The findings revealed that legislation and policies were identified as one of the strategies that could advance ethical behaviour practices in public secondary schools. Participants indicated that the main cause of unethical behaviour practices by educators and school principals was a failure to implement legislation and policies. Most of the participants' responses during interviews seemed to suggest that implementation of legislation and school policies could assist in the enhancement of ethical practices in the school settings. Participants E1 and P1 from School A believed that compliance with the legislation could advance the ethical behaviour of educators and school principals.

Oh yes most of the school principals and teachers are not following the legislative frameworks and policies because of poor planning... if Department of Education can be strict in the application of rules, teachers will behave responsibly...the Department of Education is dragging its feet to interfere in instances where the educator or school principal has contravened the law... in most cases they turn a blind eye, they only respond when the matter has been brought to the public by the social media... When the case is reported one office pass it to another office...no one wants to own the problem.

Participants E3 and DP1 also concurred with the views of participants from other secondary schools. Participant DP1 articulated that:

There is lack of understanding of various legislations enacted by the South African government and in particular the Department of Education...regular workshops on these laws need to be conducted in order to empower the teachers in our schools. Most schools have beautiful school policies and laws... but the biggest problem is the application thereof...Some teachers take advantage of the situation and act unethically.

Participants P2, P3 and DP2 from Schools B and C also emphasized the need to create an atmosphere of teaching and learning through the enforcement of the school policies.

Educators and school principals are struggling to deal with ethical dilemmas in their schools because of poor interpretation of the school policies... All teachers and learners must be

treated equally and with respect... Yes, I think most teachers lack the knowledge and skills of executing the legislative frameworks and school policies... they struggle to write a report when the teacher has acted unethically... I think the Department of Education should organize regular workshops on the application of legislative frameworks so that school principals and educators can be effective in the implementation of these laws without fear or favor.

Participants E6 and DP3 from School C believed proper governance of the school must be established to assist with the implementation of the legislations and school policies.

To address unethical practices in the school, I think the Department of Education must assist schools to enforce the existing legislations... This will motivate educators and school principals to take their work very serious. They will be afraid of the consequences. Well, most of the training sessions are mere talk-shops. There is no feedback from the workshops... educators and school principals do not know the consequences of violating the law and school policies, and the punishment thereof.

The participant E5 from School C believed that effective execution of the legislation and school policies could eliminate unethical practices of educators and school principals. Consequently, the school will achieve the desired objectives. Participant E5 stated:

I think some educators and school principals don't know how to apply the school policies and legislations. If you report a wrongdoing... They apply a delay tactics until the ethical issue disappears naturally... They are also afraid to handle disciplinary cases because they think this might jeopardize their relationships. During our training there was no ethics as subject offered to us. As teachers we are not well equipped to deal with ethical issues at school.

The Department of Education should hold workshops for educators and school principals on the implementation of legislation and school policies. Legislation and school policies, in the researcher's opinion, guide educators, learners, and school principals' ethical behaviour. Finally, the current study found that the majority of research participants believed that modeling ethical behaviour could promote ethical behaviour practices among educators, learners and school principals. When it comes to acting ethically, the literature revealed that followers model their leaders' behaviour (Huang et al., 2022). As a result, ethical educators and school principals should set a good example. Numerous legislation and policies have been enacted to advance ethical behaviour practices in various government departments, including the Department of Education. The South African Constitution section 195 of 1996 stipulates that all public servants must advance high standards of ethics. In addition, the constitution infers that there should be strict mechanisms to ensure transparency, accessibility, and accountability within government. This includes learners, educators, and school principals. Nyabeni (2020) asserts that the South African Council of Education Code of professional ethics should be strongly applied to ensure obedience by all educators. Pansiri et al. (2021) posit that it is unacceptable to have rules and regulations that are not executed, as is the case with schools.

Conclusion

The main aim of the study was to investigate ethical leadership behaviour practices in schools in Limpopo Province of South Africa. In particular, it sought to identify the causes of unethical leadership practices in public secondary schools and to determine the strategies that could be employed by educators and school principals to ensure the promotion of ethical leadership practices in public secondary schools. The study found that the main causes of unethical behaviour practices were operating environment, lack of ethical knowledge and inadequate training of educators and school principals. The strategies that could be used to promote ethical behaviour practices in schools were identified as on-going educator development programmes and implementation of legislation and policies in the school related to ethics. This study recommends that ethics should be incorporated in the school curriculum for tertiary educator training. In addition, the Department of Education should provide ongoing support and monitoring of all educators and school principals in the effective and efficient implementation of laws and policies. In the same vein, the Department of Education should organize ongoing educator professional development programs focusing on techniques for fostering ethical behaviours in secondary schools. The study concludes that effective strategies for curbing unethical practices would enhance the educators' self-confidence and commitment in promoting good ethical behaviours.

Declarations

Interdisciplinary Scope: This article investigates how ethical leadership behaviours can be strategically developed and implemented within South Africa's public secondary schools. The interdisciplinary scope of this study draws on insights from leadership studies, organizational psychology, ethics, and management sciences.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, methodology, data collection, formal analysis, writing (Rakgalakane); writing, reviewing and editing (Kimanzi).

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the publication.

Availability of Data: All relevant data are included in the article. However, more information is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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