



# Ethical Considerations in Educational Leadership

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## ABSTRACT

In the realm of education, leadership transcends administrative efficiency to encompass a profound ethical dimension that impacts students, teachers, and communities. This paper examines the critical role of ethical leadership within educational settings, outlining foundational theories such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. It highlights the growing complexity of ethical decision-making as educational institutions become more culturally diverse and politically influenced. The study examines the significance of values in educational leadership, the recurring ethical dilemmas faced by leaders, and the importance of cultural competence in promoting equity and inclusion. Further, it interrogates the demands of accountability and transparency, particularly in global contexts where ethical norms vary. The paper concludes by emphasizing the influence of educational policy on ethical leadership and the need for leaders to navigate these frameworks with a strong moral compass. A reflective and principled approach to leadership is essential for fostering trust, justice, and genuine educational advancement in a diverse, evolving society.

**Keywords:** Ethical Leadership, Educational Administration, Cultural Competence, Ethical Dilemmas, Deontological Ethics, Utilitarianism.

## INTRODUCTION

In traditional human organisations, leaders have played a crucial role in facilitating an improved social life. Middle managers, team heads, project executives, and many other positions have the capacity to convene, preside over, and direct human activity, which leads to the realisation of goals and the fulfilment of aspirations. A common characteristic of these roles is that no leader gets to this position without having a broad network of social relations and having coped successfully with social processes in the past. As a consequence, leaders have a much more extensive experience of social relation management than their respective subordinates. To add value to these positions, leaders need not worry about restating the importance of their professional knowledge or experience. Therefore, it is a natural tendency to neglect ethical and moral factors in one's professional conduct, both in protecting and/or enhancing financial and prestige rewards, and also in a chronic non-critical mode. Educational leaders are powerful figures. Although educational organisations may be less hierarchical than other organisations, and school leaders may have less of a role in determining the distribution of financial rewards within the organisations, their actions may nonetheless impose powerful regulatory and symbolic disciplinary measures upon staff, such as monitoring mechanisms, threats to reward employment downgrades, or making an example to be avoided. School leaders are also powerful figures in terms of their ability to exert esteem-based coercion. Schools are places of collective social reproduction and effective learning during the day, half-day, and even at night. Teachers' careers, prospects, and prestige are also closely tied to the school they are currently working for. As school organisations commonly have a limited size and the social networks of teachers are often limited to the adolescent age of their students, a school leader's actions would be strongly observed from a fairly wide social network if they are manifestly socially damaging or unjustifiable. An indirect consequence of this growing emphasis on educational leadership is a heightened interest within the school leadership field regarding ethics and morality. Discussions concerning ethical and moral matters have become a legitimate part of the professional discourse of educational leadership.

Simultaneously, the philosophical foundation of the ethical character of educational leadership has been furthered by notable contributions in a seminal way. Moreover, various leadership conceptualisations that prioritise ethical and moral dimensions are prevalent [1, 2].

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Ethical Decision Making**

For educational systems and the leaders who direct them, ethical dilemmas have serious short- and long-term implications for the stakeholders involved as well as for the organization itself. As society becomes increasingly diversified by race, culture, class, and personal values, the ethical decisions confronting educational leaders grow more complex, nuanced, and morally ambiguous. Preserving a school's efforts toward equity, access, and inclusion among all students becomes the complicated responsibility for educational leaders attempting to meet the multifaceted needs driving this trend. Issues of power, privilege, equality, fairness, and justice undergird just about every element of diversity. The potential for bias, misperception, distrust, and conflict among stakeholders rises significantly in organization stakeholders attend to just one side of these multifaceted ethical considerations. Although growing in number, administrators who have the professional training and development necessary to address the complicated ethical issues facing educational organizations do not yet comprise the vast majority of school superintendents. For proactive, vigilant, and ethical decision making to become routine within educational organizations, a set of models or frameworks to help educational leaders analyze problems from various points of view must first be developed. School leaders today are faced with numerous ethical dilemmas. A variety of social pressures, political scrambles, and competing interests interact within the school milieu and community at large. Balancing these competing interests becomes almost, if not totally, impossible when occasions arise wherein the interests are combative. Also, the ethical pressures on school leaders today often stem from outside pressures over which they have little, if any control. Ethical challenges arise from, among other sources, the mandates of state and federal legislation, court rulings, community involvement, scrutiny from reporters, interest groups, and other political entities [3, 4].

### **Utilitarianism in Education**

Utilitarianism is a theory which originates from Jeremy Bentham, but modifications of it have been extensively worked on by John Stuart Mill, Peter Singer and others. Bentham's original utilitarianism has a very straightforward quantitative approach to happiness. Where Mill raised some of the traditional problems concerning utilitarianism, and sought to deepen the account of happiness in terms of a qualitative notion of pleasure. Utilitarianism is a theory of the good, according to which what is good is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. It is an empirical theory, answering "what is good?" with the question "what do people desire?" What is good is what people desire in the sense of preferring it over its alternatives. The theory also presupposes that all desire-desires are the desire for the pleasures which will result from the preferred end. Thus the moral test on human actions is to add to the sum total of happiness, to optimize the utility in a social welfare function sense. The regards of the moral worth ascribed to actions are regarded as utilitarian in the broad sense if they bring about such results. In the stricter sense, a view is regarded as utilitarian if it goes further and ascribe the needs to be regarded as prescribed by such views if one seeks to act ethically. Bentham's theory is seen in a broader sense, but also viewed as a simple and juvenile theory. Mill is seen in a somewhat closer sense, his later views on the still-scorned lower pleasures and the problems of injustice connected with utilitarianism to name a few. To say that one morally ought to perform the action which produces the greatest good is roughly to regard it in the right perspective, that is as in that world view. Names a few people with obligations compatible with it and then removes the obligation from the shifting sands saying to the agents that the obligations they thought they had, the good did not has the moral light in their particular circumstances. One way to view utilitarianism with respect to educational policy is to take the question of a reaction to educational policy to be a question of what is good describing such questions as one described above. Utilitarianism properly captures the concept of good as more pleasures. So, to ask the question of utilitarianism is to ask the question of what is to be more intelligent either fully operational deliberate thought, or procedural knowledge concerning the bodies of general rules [5, 6].

### **Deontological Ethics**

Educational leaders must prioritize the interests of students by establishing preventive ethics principles to mitigate potential issues. These principles, based on hypothetical rules, aim to avert misfortunes. The five key ethical principles include: 1) Respect for persons, which emphasizes acknowledging individuals' rights and concerns, ensuring they are not exploited or manipulated. 2) Non-maleficence, which mandates avoiding harm to members of the educational community. 3) Beneficence, which involves promoting the well-being of the school community. 4) Justice, which requires fair evaluation of actions that distribute benefits and burdens, though it does not guarantee equal distribution. 5) Fidelity, which obliges

individuals to maintain ethical relationships and uphold trust through honest communication. Deontology, an ethical theory focused on absolute good, asserts that actions are deemed right or wrong based on their inherent nature, rather than outcomes. Actions that enhance students' moral and developmental growth are good, while those that marginalize or undervalue learners are wrong. Rejecting deontological ethics signifies a moral failure; it is grounded in rule-based ethics relevant to educational leadership and governing conduct concerning the rights and needs of the learning community [7, 8].

### **Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics is a category of normative ethical theories that focus on character and virtue rather than duty or consequences. It emphasizes the moral agent's character, identifying attitudes and motivations that constitute a good person, leading to good choices. Unlike other moral philosophies that concentrate on actions' rightness, virtue ethics evaluates agents and their goals. It stresses the importance of moral education, which nurtures good character and relevant motivational states like judgment and desire. Recently, virtue ethics has gained traction in business ethics and politics; however, professional ethics differs due to unique occupational codes and social roles. This field examines professionals' nature, duties, and ethical responsibilities, focusing on their specific codes of conduct. The necessity to distinguish professional ethics from business ethics arises from the roles financiers play as both professionals and business people, leading to development opportunities in both realms. Nonetheless, due to professions' uniqueness, such as their perceived importance and specialized training, this distinction aids clarity. Professional ethics tackles ethical dilemmas tied to the responsibilities of specific roles. For instance, in education, it covers issues like discrimination, harassment, the use of technology during exams, parental involvement in accountability, and privacy concerns regarding recorded evidence of misconduct during employment termination [9, 10].

### **The Role of Values in Educational Leadership**

Human struggle has begun to take on new visions and dreams with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. Many nations have attained greater freedom through the stress on human rights as set out in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other similar documents. Education for personal dignity and social responsibility is supported politically; however, a much more difficult task is at hand, namely, the extension of these good works into daily practice. In the U.S., there is a need for conferences about and criticism of school leaders, who are gatekeepers to educational opportunity in the formerly segregated and newly emergent school systems. Each school leader has a professional code which sets forth values that he/she is supposed to honor in the discharge of duties. Leadership by superintendents, directors, principals, and teacher leaders includes serious and sustained discourse and debate concerning beliefs about children, families, and communities and value deliberation, whether it be for a day, a month, a year, or years. Increasingly, school leaders face the reality of schools based on substantially different beliefs and values concerning the nature of the child, moral and civic education, human rights, and social justice. In addition, public leadership is needed to foster a collective identity within and between districts confronting increasingly diverse schools and school systems. In a new time, with mixed governments and mixed policies, building democratic communities in deeply diverse school systems is as important as establishing democratic schools. Values of educational community and notions of good schooling, serving as a guide for school reform, are necessary. The trouble is not so much with confluences, but with frictions when beliefs meet differently. Thus begins a discussion of educational authorities, first systems to be dealt with outside schools meant to be an expert's institutions, where they observe something within perception for the first time, such as systems of government, economic production, and morality [11, 12].

### **Ethical Dilemmas in Educational Settings**

Every day, educational leaders face ethical dilemmas personally and professionally, to which they need to respond. An ethical dilemma can be described as a situation requiring a choice, and where the choice made will have ethical implications. The essence of ethical dilemmas is that there are choices to be made, and the choices can be presented as a 'catch 22' situation or as a double-edged sword. A typical catch 22 is when you have clearer decisions to take, but all possible options have ethical implications. For example, on the one hand, a principal strives to ensure that the whole teaching staff is fit for duty to benefit the students' future, and he/she would carry out performance actions. However, on the other hand, the principal may be aware of the severe consequences it might cost teachers' wellbeing and students' education at the same time frame too. A double-edged sword usually implies a dilemma where standards of fairness/justice may be applied, but where their application is not clear. For example, should rewards be allocated based on effort or on performance? Anti-discrimination policies could also be an example,

where the standards apply equally to all students, certainly, but not all students benefit equally from that application. Ethical dilemmas are caused by conflicts of interest or conflicting ethical considerations and, in general, represent the grey area of decision-making frameworks. Educational settings are dynamic and diverse. Within them, there are multiple groups whose roles, perspectives, and ethical codes may differ and may be invoked in the course of discussions, actions, and expected outcomes. Members of these groups also interact and interrelate and are affected by larger institutional and societal configurations. Ethical dilemmas may bifurcate into sub-dilemmas that need to be solved separately, or it may be thought that what is good for a particular group of stakeholders may not be best for another. At a fundamental level, the dilemma in educational settings involves the complexities arising from their multiplicity of related arenas and tensions between fairness and caring [13, 14].

### **Cultural Competence and Ethical Leadership**

Education is a fundamental right for every student, regardless of background. In Victoria, Australia, there is a pressing need to address the challenges faced by culturally diverse communities within the education system. Culturally competent and responsive leadership is crucial to mitigate the harm that schooling can inflict on families and communities, especially in a multicultural society. Over the last thirty years, Victoria has experienced significant demographic changes and increased diversity, yet schools, particularly in Western Melbourne, still predominantly cater to a homogenous, white Anglo-Saxon population. This exclusion leads to the marginalization of culturally diverse communities. The aftermath of the September 11 attacks fostered distrust and racism towards Muslim communities, resulting in social isolation for newly settled migrants. This group often feels alienated in educational settings where they struggle to gain employment or influence within schools. Such conditions harm their self-worth and identity, breaching their human rights to equitable education. Additionally, discrimination against cultural expression is evident in education practices that do not respond to diverse needs. Globally, equitable education is a fundamental right, yet Victoria's education system often contradicts this principle. Counterproductive policies exacerbate the negative experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, promoting feelings of rejection and alienation. A lack of understanding of societal complexities and insufficient investment in education systems, influenced by systemic racism, could worsen the climate for culturally diverse communities. Addressing cultural continuity and safety is essential for improving educational experiences and outcomes for all students in these communities [15, 16].

### **Accountability and Transparency in Leadership**

Where Peru is, people study leadership inspired by the traits model; more recently, from transformational leadership. However, many discussions still rely on an untested or ambiguous understanding of ethics. The previously stated propositions have been somewhat taken for granted in Western educational leadership literature. Their absence in Peru suggests some questions: Are leaders, in the educational context of Peru, perceived as responsible and ruling figures for how others behave and for the decisions they make? Are leaders perceived as caring figures who take into consideration their consequences on others' dignity, well-being, and life chances? How do people perceive educational leadership, that is, which views or frameworks do they apply to discuss their practices? What do people mean when talking about ethics in educational leadership? In Peru, how do people conceptualise shared values for education? What is the common good in educational leadership practices? To what extent do these views cohere or diverge? To begin addressing these questions, one should analyse commonly held perceptions and assumptions in a community about educational leadership and ethics. Leadership is at the intersection of morality and influence; it involves a moral dimension through which leaders use their influence for positive or negative ends. Educational leaders, implicitly or explicitly, adopt a moral stance when seeking to obtain followers' compliance with educational goals. Some understand themselves as moral agents with the power to change society and a moral mandate to make a difference in the lives of children. Others merely act in accordance with norms and values learnt through socialisation; they privilege technical efficiency over the moral rationale behind decisions. However, it is those who make decisions unduly favouring their interests, the interests of their followers, or the interests of any specific social group in the detriment of others, who are likely to be perceived as knowledgeable and competent. With the former paradigm, educational leaders are assumed to choose one between visible patterns of coherent and rational behaviours and upholding vaguely stated, orthodox moral values conventionally [17, 18].

### **The Impact of Policy on Ethical Leadership**

It has been stated that "leadership is a complex phenomenon characterised by a plethora of definitions and approaches". By way of example, wherever one places oneself on a political spectrum, political leaders are a diverse bunch. Moreover, they view their roles and responsibilities in a multitude of ways. These same differences can be observed concerning educational leadership. Paradoxically, whilst pedagogically there

continues to be a move toward a consensus view of what constitutes quality school leaders, many fundamentally different philosophical views concerning the outcomes these leaders should be allowed to pursue and the means they should be allowed to pursue these outcomes exist. Narrowing this literature to a review of only particularly 'famous' educational leaders generates lengthy lists, thereby highlighting a second complexity. One key dimension within this supposed consensus is a recognition that educational leadership has a relationship to policy; ideally, policy development and enactment build and maintain a conducive and productive educational environment. Of the many facets of this relationship, three key aspects warrant further discussion. Educational leadership is one outcome of educational policy; oftentimes, educational leadership is itself a subject of educational policy; and increasingly, educational leadership is increasingly becoming an international subject, with attendant similarities and differences across borders. Educational policy directly addresses educational leaders, requesting, inviting, or requiring them to do something, to take some action, or to refrain from taking certain actions [19, 20].

### **Professional Development and Ethics**

Professional development (PD) is perceived as an indispensable requisite for educational leaders' ethical conception. In view of being a profession, a reference body is required for educational leaders to extend and/or improve each aspect of their practice. Such reference can be institutionalized as a code of ethics. In parallel, it is necessary to train them in ethical reasoning, allowing them to take into account all the elements that compose a situation, so they can identify which ethical principles and standards are at issue in that context. These two stipulations are complementary, since, if neither is present, the educational leader may focus on their own conception of ethics, which is very subjective and therefore is much more vulnerable to bias. However, should both be present, ethical understanding will be much less uncertain, since it can be shared and, therefore, acts can be scrutinized by a larger group. Moreover, if educational leaders were trained for ethical reasoning, the application of the code of ethics would be much less arbitrary and discretionary. A certain level of skills for ethical reasoning would allow the educational leaders to establish substantive grounds, according to which a certain interpretation or application of the code of ethics is deemed as rigorous. Furthermore, it would avoid unjustifiable or unreasonable takes on the code of ethics, such as the case of putting in the same bag the expression of tough criticism of the Ministry and acceptance of bribes. It is in the nature of documents such as codes of conduct and ethics to be discursive, instrumentally simple and vague. The latter implies that they will always require a certain grade of attenuation, interpretation and application. Besides the educational leaders' training in ethical reasoning, such codes should be accompanied by robust emotional education programs, aimed at preventing the emotional distortion of ethical deliberation, understanding that the importance of caring should be firmly integrated [21, 22].

### **The Future of Ethical Leadership in Education**

In the past, educational leadership has confronted numerous challenges, particularly with increased accountability linked to change-oriented policies. School leaders are expected to ensure compliance with such changes and achieve positive outcomes for their communities. These external pressures affect the fundamental aspects of schools—learning and teaching. Research indicates that educational leadership is vital for school improvement, which relies on the principles and practices shaping contexts and leadership. The focus here is on ethics, a discipline examining values and morals central to educational leadership. Recent years have seen heightened attention to the ethical dimensions of leadership, reflecting growing concerns. Advances in technology have allowed information to flow globally, but they also introduced challenges; economic rationalism has contested existing ideas. Consequently, the world has experienced troubling shifts in ethical behavior across various institutions, leading to a climate of cynicism regarding leaders and leadership. This cynicism often relates to perceived dishonesty and self-serving behavior, prioritizing personal over public good. Additionally, there's a disconnect between leadership rhetoric and actual practice, which adds to the cynicism faced by educational institutions. The ethical implications of this situation demand deeper exploration. Leaders increasingly find themselves in the eye of public scrutiny, with research indicating that moral lapses among leaders can lead to significant failures. When trust erodes and cynicism prevails, the consequences can be severe, stifling progress and fostering resistance to change, especially in public sectors like education. This dynamic has prompted calls for alternative leadership models that emphasize values, ethics, compassion, and community focus [23, 24].

### **CONCLUSION**

Ethical considerations are integral to the practice of educational leadership. Leaders operate within complex environments where ethical dilemmas are inevitable, often shaped by competing interests, diverse values, and policy constraints. Theories such as utilitarianism, deontological ethics, and virtue

ethics provide valuable lenses through which educational leaders can evaluate and guide their actions. As the social fabric of communities becomes increasingly diverse, cultural competence must be embedded within leadership practices to ensure inclusivity, equity, and respect for all stakeholders. Accountability and transparency are no longer optional but essential for maintaining legitimacy and fostering trust within educational systems. Furthermore, policy landscapes must be navigated carefully, recognizing that ethical leadership is both a product and an influencer of educational policy. Ultimately, ethical leadership in education demands more than compliance; it calls for a profound commitment to fairness, social justice, and the cultivation of democratic values within learning communities.

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