



Interplay of Relational Leadership Styles of Principals on Ethical Climate of Public Secondary Schools in Davao De Oro Division

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the relational leadership styles of school heads and the ethical climate in public secondary schools within the Davao De Oro Division. Additionally, it investigated the relationship between these two variables. Using probability sampling, 150 secondary teachers from public schools were selected as respondents. The data were analyzed using the descriptive-correlational survey method, employing Mean and Product-Moment correlation techniques. The results indicated that both the relational leadership styles of school heads and the ethical climate were extensive. Moreover, a significant relationship was found between the two variables. Based on these findings, it was suggested that higher officials in the Department of Education could support school heads in enhancing their relational leadership styles to foster an ethical climate. Future researchers are encouraged to explore these variables further, considering other factors and research methods.

Keywords: Relational leadership styles, ethical climate, descriptive correlation, Davao De Oro Division, Philippines

Introduction

Ethical climate is considered a crucial element in an organization's life as it directly affects both individual and organizational behaviors and outcomes, embodying the organization's core values through employees' positive and negative behaviors and perceptions (Teresi et al., 2019). In schools, the ethical climate specifically reflects teachers' shared perceptions regarding formal and informal rules about acceptable behavior and how moral issues should be addressed. It also encompasses common beliefs about the organization's priorities and expectations for decision-making and moral conduct (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2016), as well as teachers' views on school policies, procedures, and processes with ethical significance (Rosenblatt & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2017). However, schools face numerous challenges that impact their ethical climate, which in turn is reflected in student behavior.

In Indonesia, records from the Yogyakarta Regional Police indicate that in 2021, there were 58 cases of *klitih*, with 80 perpetrators identified as students. These offenders were teenagers between 15 and 18 years old, although other studies suggest the age range of perpetrators is 14 to 22 years, encompassing junior and senior high school students. Some of these individuals are still in school, while others are junior high school graduates who did not continue to high school. The blame for these crimes has been placed on schools, which are seen as failing to instill proper values in students. It is believed that a positive school ethical climate can help reduce the incidence of violence and disrespectful behavior among students (Utari et al., 2022).

In the Philippines, the ethical climate in schools has come under scrutiny due to various transgressions committed by teachers. As highlighted by Cruz (2008) in the *Philippine Star*, corruption in education often begins with teachers. Teachers wield significant power over student grades, leading to a high temptation for corrupt practices. One of the most egregious behaviors is sexual harassment, where some teachers demand sexual favors in exchange for high or even passing grades. Additionally, the unethical climate extends to the education system itself, characterized by inadequate preservice and in-service teacher training, which often fails to meet the demands and skills required in the education sector. This issue includes a mismatch between teacher specializations and the subjects they teach, leading to a lack of mastery among students and the failure to achieve target competencies within a given quarter (Yu, 2023).

In the Division of Davao de Oro, a poor school ethical climate has been observed. There are frequent instances of cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic dishonesty among students, indicating a lack of ethical values and integrity within the school. Additionally, repeated violations of school rules, policies, and codes of conduct by students, teachers, and staff members have been noted. Unethical behavior by teachers or staff, such as unfair grading, inappropriate relationships, and misuse of resources, is also present in the schools.

Nevertheless, the circumstances mentioned were purely observations and had not yet been validated by research. In this context, the researcher felt compelled to explore the status of the ethical climate in the school, taking into account the relational leadership styles of the principals. The study revealed correlations between these variables and identified specific dimensions of the principals' relational leadership styles that significantly influenced the school's ethical climate. Moreover, this effort provided policymakers with valuable insights, allowing them to develop policies, programs, interventions,

projects, and activities that promote a strong foundation of relational leadership among school leaders. This, in turn, would create opportunities for all members of the school community to cultivate an ethical climate that students truly deserve.

This study was primarily based on Burns' (1978) Transformational Leadership Theory. This theory offered a valuable framework for comprehending the role of school heads in cultivating an ethical climate. It is crucial to recognize that the efficacy of leadership approaches can differ based on the particular context and requirements of the school community. Leaders should tailor their strategies to correspond with the distinct characteristics and obstacles present in their school environment.

Relational leadership refers to a leader's approach to guiding an organization's growth by employing various strategies, such as care, tolerance, empowerment, and fairness towards subordinates. This leadership style is centered around people and aims to foster a harmonious atmosphere among employees. It typically involves maintaining positive interpersonal relationships with subordinates, creating a caring and human-focused organizational environment, and granting subordinates space for independent development (Zhang & Yao, 2019).

Another theoretical framework supporting this study was Hollander's Relational Theory (Hollander, 1978). Hollander was among the pioneers in emphasizing leadership as a relational process, tracing back to his earlier work in 1958 (Hollander, 1958). He viewed leadership as a reciprocal influence and social exchange dynamic between leaders and followers (Hollander, 1979). According to Hollander and Julian (1969), leadership is a process characterized by influence relationships, where the leader is just one participant in this interaction, and there are ongoing "transactions" or exchanges between leaders and followers, rooted in the expectation of receiving rewards for benefits provided (Homans, 1974; Jacobs, 1971). Hollander's model emphasizes relational dynamics and process, yet it examines this process from an individual standpoint, representing an entity-oriented approach. In the context of the study, the relational leadership of school heads contributes to the establishment of an ethical climate.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach, specifically employing a descriptive correlational technique. Quantitative research methods entail the gathering of numerical data followed by its mathematical analysis, often incorporating statistical tools. Such an approach is utilized to elucidate and provide explanations for specific problems or phenomena, as noted by Apuke (2017). Within the realm of descriptive correlational investigations, the primary focus is on delineating variables and the inherent relationships that arise among them, as outlined by Davis (2021). This study was classified as quantitative due to its reliance on numerical data for analysis and interpretation. It was descriptive in nature as its aim was to assess the relational leadership styles of principals and the ethical climate. Additionally, it was correlational since it examined the relationship between the relational leadership styles of principals and the ethical climate in public secondary schools within the Davao de Oro Division.

Research Respondents

A total of 150 public secondary teachers were invited to participate in this study. It was noted that for simple regression analysis, a minimum of 50 samples is required, with a general recommendation of 100 samples for most research scenarios (Hair et al., 2018). Therefore, the inclusion of 150 respondents was deemed sufficient to fulfill the objectives of this study. In terms of inclusion and exclusion criteria, secondary teachers with a minimum of 2 years of teaching experience were selected for this endeavor. This criterion was chosen because their tenure in public schools allowed them to assess the relational leadership styles of principals and their impact on the ethical climate. Participants who felt uneasy or uncomfortable answering the survey questionnaire were given the option to withdraw from the study without any coercion. Their decision to withdraw was respected, emphasizing the importance placed on the welfare of the respondents during the study's implementation.

Research Instruments

As to the form of gathering data, this study utilized an adapted survey questionnaire. The questionnaire that was employed in this undertaking was divided into two sets. The first set was focusing on relational leadership styles of principals while the second set was about ethical climate

The questionnaire on relational leadership styles of principals was adapted from Carifio (2010). The instrument consisted of 25 items. It had five indicators, namely: inclusive (1-5), empowering (1-5), caring (1-5), ethical (1-5), and vision and intuition (1-5). The questionnaire was subjected to a pilot testing having a result of .71 suggesting that the items have relatively *high* internal consistency.

The ethical climate questionnaire was adapted from Maesschalck (2005). The instrument consisted of 25 items. It had the following indicators, namely: efficiency (1-4); friendship (1-4); team interest (1-4); stakeholder orientation (1-4); personal morality (1-4); and rules and laws (1-4). The questionnaire was subjected to a pilot testing having a result of .73 suggesting that the items have relatively *high* internal consistency. The instruments in this study were contextualized to achieve the purpose of this study. The researcher integrated all the comments and suggestions of the adviser, panel members and expert validators for the refinement of the tools and to achieve construct validity.

Table

Table 1

Summary on the Extent of Relational Leadership Styles of School Heads

| No | Indicators | Mean | Descriptive Equivalent |
|----------------|----------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Inclusive | 3.46 | Extensive |
| 2 | Empowering | 3.97 | Extensive |
| 3 | Caring | 3.45 | Extensive |
| 4 | Ethical | 3.96 | Extensive |
| 5 | Vision and Intuition | 4.01 | Extensive |
| Overall | | 3.77 | Extensive |

Table 1 provides the summary on the extent of relational leadership styles of school heads. It is exhibited that the overall mean of relational leadership of school heads is 3.77, which is in an extensive level. This means that relational leadership styles of school heads are oftentimes evident.

Data show that all five (5) indicators are in an extensive level. As arranged chronologically, vision and intuition has the highest mean score (4.01). This is followed by empowering (3.97), ethical (3.96), inclusive (3.46), and caring (3.45).

The results of the study suggest a pervasive manifestation of relational leadership styles among school heads, as indicated by the extensive levels observed across all five indicators. When arranged chronologically, vision and intuition emerged as the most prominent aspect. This was closely followed by empowering, ethical, inclusive, and caring. The sequential order of these indicators reflects the nuanced dimensions of leadership styles adopted by school heads, showcasing a robust presence of visionary and intuitive qualities, followed by a commitment to empowerment, ethical considerations, inclusivity, and caring attributes. These findings highlight the multifaceted nature of effective leadership within educational settings, emphasizing the importance of visionary thinking, empowerment, ethics, inclusivity, and care in fostering a conducive and supportive environment. The comprehensive nature of the data underscores the need for educational leadership that encompasses diverse qualities to address the complex challenges faced by schools today.

With the extensive practice of relational leadership by school heads, this reaffirms the perspective of Priyono and Anggorowati (2024) asserting that a principal's role extends beyond that of a mere manager to that of a relational leader. Recognizing that schools are integral to shaping individuals, effective principals understand that within the school environment, all individuals—be they leaders or followers, teachers or students, principals or teaching staff—are engaged in relationships, interacting with numerous individuals, objects, and ideas on a daily basis. Consequently, they strive to cultivate a positive relational atmosphere conducive to fostering high levels of learning among all members of the school community.

White (2023) posited that if a leader desires teachers to interact respectfully with students as individuals rather than merely as academic subjects, they must first engage in respectful and conversational interactions with their staff, treating them as individuals rather than mere pawns in a managerial game. As underscored by Perez, Russon, and Painter (2020), the role of a relational leader transcends traditional decision-making or managerial functions; instead, it involves fostering genuine, trust-based relationships across the organization. For school leaders, this necessitates a shift away from a hierarchical, top-down leadership style towards one characterized by reflexivity, dialogue, and collaboration. Given the diverse perspectives present within the school environment—including those of teachers, administrative staff, parents, and students—effective leadership involves adeptly navigating these perspectives. As relational leaders, school heads must actively promote open dialogue that embraces and values this diversity of viewpoints. This aligns with the perspective of Cleary et al. (2018), who advocate for the establishment of processes that respect and incorporate various perspectives.

Table 2

Summary on the Extent of Ethical Climate

| No | Indicators | Mean | Descriptive Equivalent |
|----------------|-------------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Efficiency | 3.47 | Extensive |
| 2 | Friendship | 3.68 | Extensive |
| 3 | Team Interest | 3.71 | Extensive |
| 4 | Stakeholder Involvement | 3.68 | Extensive |
| 5 | Personal Morality | 3.58 | Extensive |
| 6 | Rules and Law | 3.63 | Extensive |
| Overall | | 3.63 | Extensive |

Table 2 provides the summary on the extent of ethical climate. It is exhibited that the overall mean of ethical climate is 3.63, which is in an extensive level. This means that the ethical climate is oftentimes evident.

Data show that all six (6) indicators are in an extensive level. As arranged chronologically, team interest has the highest mean score (3.71). This is followed by friendship (3.68), stakeholder involvement (3.68), rules and law (3.63), personal morality (3.58), and efficiency (3.47).

The study's results indicate a consistent and widespread presence of an ethical climate within the organizational context, as evidenced by the extensive levels observed across all six indicators. When arranged chronologically, team interest emerged as the most prominent ethical dimension. Following closely are friendship and stakeholder involvement, indicating a significant emphasis on collaborative relationships and consideration for stakeholders. Rules and law underscore the importance of adherence to legal standards, while personal morality reflected a value placed on individual moral beliefs. Efficiency highlights a moderate emphasis on achieving organizational goals in a resource-effective manner. These findings collectively suggest a well-rounded ethical climate within the organization, emphasizing various dimensions such as teamwork, interpersonal relationships, stakeholder engagement, legal compliance, personal morality, and organizational efficiency. The hierarchical arrangement of these indicators provides insights into the organization's priorities in ethical considerations, offering valuable information for cultivating a comprehensive and principled organizational culture.

The positive findings of this investigation are in line with Mutonyi et al.'s (2022) assertion that organizational climate reflects the true values held by an organization, as evidenced by employees' shared perceptions of behaviors that are encouraged, supported, and rewarded. Culibrk et al. (2018) argued that this collective understanding of expectations and associated rewards offers a clear framework for guiding employee behavior. Teresi et al. (2019) emphasized that in the context of ethics, the organizational ethical climate pertains to the shared perceptions of organizational practices and procedures that define what is considered right or wrong within the organization.

Van Rooje and Fine (2018) stressed that the ethical climate does not delve into the fundamental assumptions of the organization, typically associated with core elements of organizational culture. Instead, it is connected to the collective beliefs and values shaped by employees' varied perceptions. Additionally, Auzoult and Mazilescu (2021) highlighted that an ethical climate indicates that business operations and applications are conducted with consideration for ethical values within the organization, with several key factors influencing its development, including norms, culture, ethical standards, and practices. Al-Halbusi and Omar (2021) noted that employees' understanding, adoption, and application of ethical values serve as indicators of the acceptance of these values within the organizational climate.

Table 3

Significance of the Relationship Between the Extent of Relational Leadership of School Heads and Ethical Climate

| Relational Leadership of School Heads Indicators | Dependent Variable | r-value | p-value | Decision on Ho |
|--|--------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|
| Inclusive | | 0.433 | 0.000 | Rejected |
| Empowering | | 0.440 | 0.000 | Rejected |
| Caring | | 0.428 | 0.000 | Rejected |
| Ethical | | 0.438 | 0.000 | Rejected |
| Ethical Climate | | | | |
| Vision and Intuition | | 0.444 | 0.000 | Rejected |
| Overall | | 0.437 | 0.000 | Rejected |

*Significant at 0.05 significance level.

Presented in Table 3 are the data on the significance of the relationship between relational leadership of school heads and ethical climate. Reflected in the hypothesis, the relationship was tested at 0.05 level of significance. The overall r-value of .437 with a p-value of <0.05 signified the rejection of the null hypothesis. It means that there is a significant relationship between relational leadership of school heads and ethical climate. This shows that relational leadership of school heads is correlated with the ethical climate.

Doing a pairwise correlation among the measures of both variables, it can be gleaned that inclusive, empowering, caring, ethical, and vision and intuition revealed computed r-values of 0.433, 0.440, 0.428, 0.438, and 0.444 respectively with p-values which are less than 0.05 in the level of significance. This implies that as inclusive, empowering, caring, ethical, and vision and intuition increase, the ethical climate increases.

In testing the hypothesis at a significance level of 0.05, the obtained overall correlation coefficient (r-value) of .437 with a p-value <0.05 led to the rejection of the null hypothesis. This result indicates a statistically significant relationship between the relational leadership of school heads and the ethical climate. The correlation analysis, conducted through pairwise correlations between the measures of both variables, further supports this finding. This signifies that as the relational leadership qualities of inclusivity, empowerment, care, ethical considerations, and visionary intuition increase, there is a corresponding increase in the ethical climate. These results offer empirical support for the hypothesis, emphasizing the interconnectedness between specific aspects of relational leadership and the ethical climate within the organizational context of schools, shedding light on the crucial role of leadership behaviors in shaping ethical climates.

The results were consistent with the findings of Zhang and Yao (2019), suggesting that in a nurturing ethical environment that emphasizes collective welfare, emotional connections among members and the organization are strengthened through mutual aid and respect. Employees feel cared for and

supported by leaders and the organization to such an extent that they may overlook unethical aspects of their behavior, seeing such actions as a sacrifice for the organization's greater good.

Additionally, Scandura and Meuser (2022) are credited for their pioneering work on relational leadership, defining it as a process emerging from social interactions with a focus on enhancing the collective rather than the individual. This perspective inherently includes ethical implications by promoting values such as mutual respect, collaboration, and empowerment. Scholars like Morkeviciute and Endruilaitiene (2017) have also explored the relationship between leadership styles and ethical climates.

Xu et al. (2023) proposed that organizations led by relational leaders tend to have a stronger and more positive ethical climate. This is because relational leaders prioritize relationships, trust-building, and mutual respect, all of which are essential for creating an environment where ethical behavior is valued and promoted. Zacarias and Flores (2023) also noted that school leaders who actively cultivate strong interpersonal relationships are more effective in fostering a positive and ethical environment.

Regarding ethical climate, Melchert (2022) emphasized the importance of moral connections that unite members of the school community, stating that these connections play a crucial role in nurturing an ethical climate. Lipscombe, For, and Lamanna (2021) explored the leadership qualities of successful school principals and identified relationship-building as a key component. Their findings indicated that school leaders who prioritize building strong and positive relationships within their institutions inherently promote an ethical climate that values respect, trust, and integrity.

In a related study, Arar and Saiti (2022) discussed the ethical responsibilities of school leaders. They highlighted the relational aspect of leadership in educational settings, suggesting that ethical elements such as justice, care, and critique are interwoven into the everyday relational dynamics overseen by school leaders. By embracing these dimensions, school leaders have the potential to significantly influence the ethical climate within their institutions.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions were offered:

The prevalence of relational leadership styles among school heads is often apparent within the school environment. Indeed, all dimensions of relational leadership—such as inclusivity, empowerment, compassion, ethics, vision, and intuition—are frequently observed in school heads. Similarly, the presence of an ethical climate within the school is often noticeable. Specifically, indicators such as efficiency, camaraderie, collective interest, stakeholder focus, personal integrity, and adherence to rules and regulations are commonly observed. Based on the findings, there is a relationship between relational leadership styles of school heads and the ethical climate of the school. All domains of relational leadership styles exhibited by school heads are connected to the ethical climate of the school. Consequently, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Recommendations

The following suggestions were offered based on the conclusions of the study:

The higher officials in the Department of Education are urged to leverage and support the extensive relational leadership styles displayed by school principals, acknowledging their positive influence on the educational environment. Concurrently, efforts may be directed towards fortifying and maintaining the extensive ethical climate observed within schools. This entails providing professional development opportunities that reinforce relational leadership skills among school heads, fostering a culture of collaboration, empathy, and ethical decision-making. Furthermore, implementing and reinforcing ethical guidelines, alongside periodic assessments, can help institutionalize and sustain the observed ethical climate.

Moreover, school principals may actively embrace and further cultivate their extensive relational leadership styles, recognizing the positive impact they have on the school environment. Prioritizing inclusive, empowering, caring, ethical, and visionary leadership behaviors may contribute to a collaborative and supportive school culture. Additionally, given the observed extensive ethical climate, principals are encouraged to continue fostering ethical decision-making processes and maintaining a values-driven environment. Regular training sessions on relational leadership and ethical considerations can enhance the leadership skills of school principals, promoting a more cohesive and ethically grounded school community.

Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to actively engage and collaborate with the extensive relational leadership styles exhibited by school principals, fostering a culture of teamwork and mutual support within the school community. Recognizing the positive impact of inclusive, empowering, caring, ethical, and visionary leadership, teachers can contribute to the creation of a positive and collaborative learning environment. Moreover, in the context of the observed extensive ethical climate, teachers may align their practices with ethical principles and actively participate in promoting an atmosphere of integrity and shared values.

Lastly, future researchers may delve deeper into the specific mechanisms and practices through which the extensive relational leadership styles of school principals influence the extensive ethical climate within educational institutions. Employing mixed-methods research approaches, combining quantitative assessments with qualitative insights, may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the complex relationship between relational leadership and ethical climates.

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