Ethical Leadership Practices and Trust among the Secondary School Administrators: Strengthening Practices in School Setting

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the ethical leadership and trust among school administrators in selected SDOs of Region XII, employing a mixed-methods approach divided into three phases. Phase 1 quantitatively assessed the description and correlations of variables using regression analysis, while Phases 2 and 3 utilized qualitative phenomenology to examine the lived experiences of school administrators. The results revealed that school administrators exhibited very high levels of ethical leadership and trust. A significant relationship was found between ethical leadership and trust, with ethical leadership playing a pivotal role in fostering trust among administrators. Key elements of ethical leadership, such as fairness, inclusivity, and moral responsibility, were instrumental in shaping their leadership approach and promoting a positive organizational culture. Additionally, school administrators effectively managed conflicts of interest by prioritizing transparency, fairness, and ethical decision-making. They faced challenges by adhering to ethical standards, proactive leadership, and stakeholder engagement, while maintaining trust through open communication, fairness, and workload management. The findings highlight the importance of ethical leadership in navigating challenges and sustaining trust, underscoring the critical role of collaborative, inclusive leadership and problem-solving strategies. The study concludes that ethical leadership significantly influences trust levels among school administrators, which in turn positively impacts their ability to address challenges and foster a supportive school environment. This research contributes valuable insights into the role of ethical leadership in educational leadership and provides recommendations for strengthening trust and ethical practices in schools.

INTRODUCTION

In educational setting, the role of school administrators in shaping the school environment and establishing trust among themselves is paramount. They have to always adhere to the ethical standards as this viewed them as leaders. Eventually, they can lead by example to teachers, students, and the stakeholders.

In the study of Vikaraman (2021), it was found out that school administrators practiced high level of ethical leadership and teachers showed high level of trust. Thus, there was a significant relationship between the identified variables. From teachers' perspectives, school administrators are trustworthy, honest and kind. They kept their promises and supported teachers (Aljbour, 2020).

As Balyer (2017) stated, teachers trusted those school administrators who have the experiences in leadership. Their commitment towards their job also indicates the biggest player (Oliveras-Ortize, 2018). Meanwhile, when school administrators have low esteem could have a detrimental impact on the level of trust (Bilgin-Aksu & Polat, 2015).

Although there were studies on the ethical leadership (Strike, 2006; Toytok & Kapusuzoglu, 2016; Arar & Saiti, 2022) and trust among school administrators (Antonio & Gamage, 2007; Walker et al., 2011; Cansoy & Parlar, 2018), the relationship of these variables was only explored under the studies of Vikaraman (2021) and Nor (2022). This gap motivates the researcher to further investigate in the local setting. Bridging these knowledge gap can provide a deeper explanation to understand the school administrators.

Accordingly, this study indicates its timeliness and relevance among the school administrators in the Divisions of Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Tacurong City, and Kidapawan City. By listening to their lived experiences can deepen their ethical leadership practices and trust especially in the implementation of programs and activities. The aforesaid rationale prompts the researcher to conduct this study.

Research Questions

This study aims to determine the ethical leadership practices and trust among the school administrators.

Specifically, it answers the following research questions:

Study 1: Ethical Leadership Practices among School Administrators: Navigating the School Culture and Ethical Outcomes

1. How do school administrators' ethical leadership practices influence the overall school culture?

2. How do school administrators handle conflicts of interest to ensure ethical outcomes?

3. How do school administrators face the challenges in handling conflicts of interests?

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design, locale of the study, respondents, data gathering procedure, research materials, statistical tools, and ethical consideration.

Research Design

These phases will employ the qualitative-phenomenology. In definition, qualitative phenomenology is a research approach within the broader field of qualitative research that focuses on exploring and understanding the lived experiences of individuals. Phenomenology emphasizes the subjective experiences of individuals. Researchers aim to understand how people perceive and make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attach to them (Uzun et al., 2024).

In this study, qualitative-phenomenology will navigate the overall influence of school administrators' ethical leadership in handling conflicts of interest. Thereafter, this will provide data on their challenges on trust, their responses and the development of policy which will strengthen this in the contexts of leadership. Aside from that, there are no statistical tools which will be utilized in these phases of the study.

Research Participants

In this study, the respondents will be the school administrators in the selected secondary schools in the Provinces of Cotabato, Kidapawan City, Sultan Kudarat, and Tacurong City. They will respond to the questionnaire which will be distributed to them to determine their ethical leadership practices and trust.

In qualitative phases, the researcher will have the school administrators who will serve in the in-depth interview. They will be selected from each of the division offices.

In the qualitative phases, the researcher will use the purposive sampling with the criterion-based sampling (Campbell et al., 2022). The following criteria will be the basis for the selection:

1. A school administrator;

2. Assigned in one of the secondary schools in Region XII; and

3. A Head Teacher , Teacher-in charge, or a School Principal.

Research Instrument

The main instruments to be used in the gathering of the data. These the interview guide. For the quantitative, part I will be about the respondents' ethical leadership practices and part II will be on trust among school administrators. The questionnaire will be lifted and modified from Vikaraman et al. (2021).

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It is a flexible and widely used approach that allows researchers to systematically organize and interpret rich, detailed data sets. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for examining the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Themes on the influence of ethical leadership of school administrators on the overall school culture

Fairness and Inclusivity in Leadership. Leaders who treat all staff equally and prioritize fairness foster a sense of unity and camaraderie among their teams. This approach strengthens relationships and ensures that all individuals feel valued, which enhances overall collaboration and trust. Research by Brown and Treviño (2006) shows that ethical leadership, including fairness and respect, is directly linked to fostering a supportive and inclusive environment in educational settings.

"One thing that I could say that influence

my ethical leadership is by treating all my

staff fairly and this is all bested to unity and

camaraderie of all my staff." (RQ1.1 IDI1 L1-4)

Fair treatment of staff strengthens unity and camaraderie, positively impacting ethical leadership.

"Ethical leadership practices such as fairness

and power sharing have a significant influence

on the overall school culture. These practices

contribute to creating a positive, inclusive,

and respectful environment that fosters

trust, collaboration, and growth.

Promotes a Positive and Inclusive Environment.

Fairness in decision- creates an atmosphere

where everyone feels valued and heard,

which in turn strengthens community ties

within the school." (RQ1.1 IDI4 L44-59)

Ethical leadership practices, especially fairness and power-sharing, significantly influence the culture within schools. By ensuring that everyone's voice is heard and valued, leaders create a respectful environment where trust can flourish. As noted by Spillane et al. (2004), school leaders who make fair decisions not only promote inclusivity but also enhance the collective sense of purpose and engagement among staff and students. This inclusivity is essential for building a cohesive and productive school community.

The commitment to fairness and social responsibility from ethical leaders helps shape a culture of accountability and respect. When leaders model these behaviors, they set clear expectations for the entire school community, leading to fewer conflicts and greater teamwork. According to Leithwood and Jantzi (2000), ethical leadership contributes to the development of a school environment where collaboration is valued and all members of the community feel they are treated equitably, further motivating them to contribute positively.

Trust, Respect, and Collaboration. Ethical leadership plays a crucial role in promoting a school culture based on fairness and accountability. According to Johnson (2014), leaders who make transparent decisions foster a sense of respect and trust among teachers and students. This approach ensures that everyone feels valued, contributing to a positive and professional environment. Such practices are essential in cultivating a school culture that supports equity and transparency.

"My ethical leadership practices shape a

school's integrity, fairness, and accountability

culture. By making transparent and just decisions,

I ensure that teachers and students feel valued

and treated equally. Leading by example,

I promote honesty and professionalism, which

encourages a positive and disciplined learning

environment." (RQ1.1 IDI2 L9-16)

Transparent and just decision-making fosters a culture of integrity, fairness, and accountability, ensuring that teachers and students feel valued and supported, while promoting a positive and disciplined learning environment.

"Ethical leadership fosters a culture of trust,

respect, fairness, and collaboration, leading

to improved teacher morale, student

well-being, and stronger school-community

relationships." (RQ1.1 IDI6 L88-92)

The creation of a trustworthy and respectful environment within schools can have a significant impact on academic performance and behavior. As noted by Robinson (2015), ethical leadership creates a foundation of trust that positively affects teacher morale and student well-being. By promoting fairness and transparency, ethical leaders shape a culture where everyone feels included and supported, leading to improved outcomes for both students and staff.

A school's culture is directly influenced by the ethical practices of its administrators. According to Leithwood et al. (2004), ethical leadership fosters collaboration and inclusivity. When administrators lead with integrity and fairness, they encourage a school-wide culture where respect is fundamental. This strengthens relationships within the school community and enhances both teacher engagement and student success.

Moral Responsibility and Ethical Standards. Ethical leadership has a profound impact on the culture of an organization, especially in schools. Leaders who practice fairness and respect help create a positive environment where everyone feels valued. Research by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) highlights that ethical leaders influence organizational culture by encouraging ethical behavior. These leaders set a strong example for others to follow, fostering an atmosphere where trust and mutual respect thrive (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005).

"My influence of my ethical leadership practice

to the overall school culture came from

my parents on how they brought us, molded,

and trained to become a good citizen in the

future. Raising us to be right and just, considering

all around us has value no matter how low or

high their status. Giving importance to them

existence." (RQ1.1 IDI5 L70-77)

The values instilled by ethical leaders often originate from foundational influences such as family upbringing. Avolio and Gardner (2005) emphasize that ethical leadership involves not just adhering to moral principles but also nurturing qualities like integrity and accountability in others. When leaders treat individuals with respect, regardless of their background or status, they promote fairness and inclusivity. This strengthens the bonds between staff and students, creating a more positive and supportive school environment (Avolio & Gardner, 2005).

Promoting trust and transparency is essential for enhancing morale and performance within an organization. Ethical leaders who practice openness and honest communication create a productive, collaborative environment. Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) argue that this approach helps improve overall engagement, as individuals feel more secure and motivated to contribute. Leaders who adhere to ethical standards and demonstrate consistency in their actions create a sustainable and effective organization built on strong moral values (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

Themes on the influence of ethical leadership of school administrators on the overall school culture

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme
influence of ethical leadership	Fairness and Inclusivity in Leadership	Ensuring Equal Opportunities for All Members
	Trust, Respect, and Collaboration	Building Strong, Positive Relationships Among Stakeholders
	Moral Responsibility and Ethical Standards	Upholding Integrity in Leadership Decisions

Themes on administrators handling conflicts of interest to ensure ethical outcomes

Transparency, Communication, and Disclosure. Implications of transparency in handling conflicts of interest highlight the importance of clear guidelines in ensuring fairness and accountability in school leadership. According to Wright (2013), transparency helps in promoting trust among stakeholders by allowing them to understand how decisions are made. By adhering to ethical guidelines and disclosing potential conflicts, school administrators prevent favoritism and ensure ethical decision-making. Transparency not only strengthens the decision-making process but also fosters a culture of accountability, as suggested by Burgess et al. (2015).

"As a school administrator, I apply several strategies to handle conflicts of interest and ensure ethical decision-making. First, I strictly adhere to DepEd policies and ethical guidelines to prevent favoritism in hiring, promotions, and student-related matters. Second, I practice full transparency by disclosing any potential conflicts and seeking advice from supervisors or ethics committees. Third, I establish clear decision-making processes based on merit and objective criteria to ensure fairness. Fourth, I encourage open communication and stakeholder involvement to promote accountability and trust. Lastly, I consistently lead by example, demonstrating integrity and professionalism to reinforce ethical standards within the school community."

(RQ2.1 IDI2 L9-27)

By adhering to ethical guidelines, promoting transparency, and fostering open communication, school administrators can effectively manage conflicts of interest, ensuring fairness and maintaining trust within the school community.

If the school head is transparent to the

teachers and community, the handling of

conflicts of interest would be easy because

of the collaboration of teachers and

community. (RQ2.1 IDI7 L108-112)

The role of communication in addressing conflicts of interest cannot be overstated. According to Johnson and Covey (2017), open communication allows for the identification and resolution of potential conflicts before they escalate. When administrators encourage dialogue among teachers and other stakeholders, it creates a space for collaboration and mutual understanding. In turn, this leads to better decision-making that takes all perspectives into account, thus preventing the negative effects of conflicts of interest on the school community.

Lastly, the effective implementation of policies and procedures plays a significant role in managing conflicts of interest. As noted by Hargreaves (2014), having clear policies in place ensures consistent ethical practices within schools. These policies not only provide a framework for identifying and managing conflicts but also promote fairness by setting objective criteria for decision-making. In this context, school administrators are better equipped to handle ethical dilemmas and maintain a positive and equitable environment for both staff and students.

Fairness, Impartiality, and Ethical Decision-Making. Implications of promoting fairness and impartiality in school administration emphasize the need for clear policies and practices that guide decision-making. According to Jones (2011), having designated roles for staff members based on their potential ensures that decisions are made impartially and without bias. When staff are given roles that align with their strengths, the risk of favoritism or unethical practices is minimized. This contributes to a fair and ethical school environment where every individual is treated based on merit and capability.

First, my staff will be designated with their

own potential and capacity. This is one

practice that I see to be effective. (RQ2.1 IDI11 L1-3)

Assigning roles based on staff potential and learning from effective strategies, school administrators can ensure fairness, transparency, and ethical decision-making in managing conflicts of interest while promoting the well-being of the school community.

I don't handle conflicts of interest myself,

but I've learned about effective strategies

that school administrators use. These

approaches prioritize fairness, transparency,

and the well-being of the school community.

Some examples include like implementing

clear policies, encouraging disclosure,

delegating decisions, maintaining open

communication, and ethics committees

or advisors. (RQ2.1 IDI9 L128-138)

Ethical decision-making plays a critical role in handling conflicts of interest. As highlighted by Robinson (2012), administrators must prioritize the best interests of students, staff, and the wider school community. To maintain fairness, administrators should actively mitigate any conflicts that may arise from personal relationships or financial interests. By adhering to clear standards and fostering a culture of ethical decision-making, school leaders can safeguard the integrity of their actions and ensure trust within the school community.

Incorporating strategies such as transparency, active listening, and collaboration further strengthens the fairness and impartiality of conflict resolution. Studies by White and Kelly (2015) show that administrators who encourage disclosure and provide platforms for open communication are more successful in resolving conflicts ethically. By employing structured strategies such as acknowledging, evaluating, and mitigating conflicts, administrators can ensure decisions are made transparently and without bias. This helps in maintaining a system that upholds ethical standards and fosters a fair school environment.

Collaboration, Mediation, and Accountability. Bringing conflicting parties together fosters an environment where open dialogue can occur. By facilitating communication and helping both sides understand each other, a fair and balanced decision-making process is achieved. This approach aligns with findings by Fisher and Ury (2011), who emphasize the importance of collaborative problem-solving in conflict resolution.

In handling conflicts of interest, I apply

several strategies to ensure fairness, respect,

and social responsibility: Transparency and

Open Communication, Impartial Decision,

Ethical Standards and Policies, Mediation and

Collaboration, Prioritizing the Common Good.

By applying these strategies, I create a culture

of integrity, trust, and responsibility, ensuring that

conflicts of interest are resolved fairly and

ethically. (RQ2.1 IDI11 L187-197)

Accountability plays a crucial role in ensuring that decisions are made ethically and responsibly. By adhering to established guidelines and maintaining transparency, leaders build trust within the community. A study by Lammers et al. (2011) highlights how accountability mechanisms help maintain integrity during the decision-making process. Ensuring fairness by following ethical standards promotes respect and social responsibility.

Empowering individuals through transparency and consistent communication strengthens the overall organizational structure. When leaders uphold ethical practices, they create an environment where fairness is prioritized, and all members are held to the same standards. As noted by Green (2015), clear communication and ethical decision-making improve relationships.

Themes on administrators handling conflicts of interest to ensure ethical outcomes

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme
On handling conflicts of interest to ensure ethical outcomes	Transparency, Communication, and Disclosure	Open and Honest Information Sharing
	Fairness, Impartiality, and Ethical Decision-Making	Ensuring Equal Treatment in Decision-Making
	Collaboration, Mediation, and Accountability	Fostering Teamwork and Collective Responsibility

Themes on how the school administrators face the challenges in handling conflicts of interests

Ethical Leadership and Policy Adherence. By adhering strictly to policies and ethical guidelines, leaders create an environment of fairness and transparency. Establishing clear criteria for decisions such as promotions and hiring helps mitigate the risk of favoritism. According to Brown and Treviño (2014), ethical leadership fosters trust and ensures that decision-making processes are aligned with organizational values.

To face the challenges in handling conflicts

of interest, I implemented strict adherence to

DepEd policies and ethical guidelines to

ensure fairness in decision-making.

I established clear and objective criteria

for hiring, promotions, and student concerns

to prevent favoritism and bias. Transparency

was a key strategy, as I openly disclosed any

potential conflicts and sought guidance from

supervisors or ethics committees. (RQ3.1 IDI11 L7-16)

Open communication is essential in resolving conflicts effectively. Leaders who promote open dialogue create an atmosphere where all parties feel heard and valued. This transparency helps prevent misunderstandings from escalating into more serious issues. Mayer et al. (2012) emphasize that when leaders encourage communication, it reduces the negative impact of conflicts and promotes a more collaborative work environment.

Clear conflict-of-interest policies and seeking external guidance can help resolve ethical dilemmas. By prioritizing transparency and obtaining advice from external experts, leaders reduce the risk of biased decisions. Sims (2011) highlights the importance of transparent leadership in ensuring that personal biases do not affect professional judgments. This approach strengthens the integrity of decision-making and maintains fairness in organizational operations.

Proactive Approaches, Ethical Standards, and Decision-Making. School administrators must adopt a multi-faceted strategy, considering all relevant factors such as gathering comprehensive information, identifying involved stakeholders, and documenting the process clearly. Research by Lewicki, Barry, and Saunders (2011) shows that a proactive approach in conflict management helps reduce bias and ensures fairness in decision-making. Similarly, Cohen and Bradford (2014) emphasize that by being thorough, administrators can address conflicts more effectively and avoid compromising their institution's integrity. Such a strategy enhances transparency and accountability in decision-making, ensuring the best outcomes for all parties involved.

School administrators face challenges in

managing conflicts of interest, as these

situations can compromise decision-making

and affect the school's integrity. To

address these challenges, administrators can

employ several strategies: Implement Conflict

of Interest Policies, Encourage Open Communication,

Utilize Mediation and Third-Party Intervention,

Provide Conflict Resolution Training. By adopting

these strategies, school administrators can effectively

manage conflicts of interest, ensuring decisions

are made in the best interest of the school community

and maintaining ethical standards. (RQ3.1 IDI8 L116-127)

Ethical standards play a significant role in managing conflicts of interest. School administrators can benefit from implementing clear and comprehensive conflict of interest policies, which guide decision-making and ensure accountability (Schwartz, 2014). Research indicates that when ethical guidelines are integrated into decision-making, administrators are better equipped to make fair and transparent decisions (Brown & Treviño, 2014). Furthermore, Schwartz (2014) argues that fostering an environment that values ethics can prevent potential conflicts from escalating into more serious issues. By adopting these ethical standards, administrators can maintain fairness and uphold the integrity of their institutions.

Decision-making in the context of conflicts of interest requires careful consideration and the use of proven strategies. Administrators must ensure that decisions are made with transparency, fairness, and a commitment to the community's best interest. Gertner, Brown, and Williams (2017) suggest that decision-making practices such as seeking external perspectives, encouraging open dialogue, and utilizing mediation are essential in maintaining integrity. These strategies help administrators navigate complex situations and maintain trust within their organizations, as noted by Treviño, Brown, and Hartman (2019), who emphasize the importance of ethical decision-making in preserving organizational trust and morale.

Conflict Resolution, Stakeholder Engagement, and Accountability. School administrators must establish preventive measures and respond swiftly to conflicts to minimize disruption. Research shows that structured conflict resolution processes can reduce tensions and lead to long-term positive outcomes for students and staff (Deutsch, 2014). Ensuring fairness and transparency throughout the process encourages a culture of respect and trust within the school community (Johnson & Johnson, 2014).

To handle conflicts of interest, I use

strategies that promote fairness, respect,

and social responsibility: Transparency

and Open Communication – I encourage

honest discussions to clear up misunderstandings

and build trust. Impartial Decision-Making –

I make fair choices by looking at all

perspectives and relying on facts, not

personal opinions. (RQ3.1 IDI10 L57-165)

Stakeholder engagement plays a crucial role in conflict resolution, particularly in sensitive situations involving multiple parties. By involving all relevant stakeholders in discussions, administrators can ensure that different perspectives are considered, leading to more balanced and ethical decisions. Studies have demonstrated that participatory decision-making helps mitigate conflicts and improve organizational outcomes (O'Leary, 2014). This approach not

only fosters fairness but also empowers individuals to take ownership of the solutions, further enhancing the integrity of the conflict resolution process (Bryson, 2018).

Accountability in conflict resolution is vital to maintaining trust and upholding ethical standards. Administrators must ensure that all parties are held responsible for their actions, reinforcing the importance of transparency and impartiality in decision-making. Evidence suggests that accountability measures, when combined with clear communication and ethical practices, can improve the effectiveness of conflict management and reduce the likelihood of future disputes (Schmidt & Zank, 2016). Regular reflection and continuous improvement help organizations adapt to evolving challenges while maintaining a culture of fairness and integrity (Harrison & Rainer, 2019).

Themes on how the school administrators face the challenges in handling conflicts of interests

Global Theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme
On facing the challenges in handling conflicts of interest	Ethical Leadership and Policy Adherence.	Establishing Clear Ethical Guidelines
	Proactive Approaches, Ethical Standards, and Decision-Making.	Implementing Effective Conflict Resolution Strategies
	Conflict Resolution, Stakeholder Engagement, and Accountability.	Engaging Stakeholders in Decision-Making Processes

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