

Understanding the Practice of Ethical Leadership amongst School Principals: Evidence from Malaysia

Sharmini Siva Vikaraman^a, Azlin Norhaini Mansor^{b*}, Mohd Izham Mohd Hamzah^c, Nitce Isa Medina^d, Vasanthan Gurusamy^e, Mohamed Yusoff Mohd Nor^f, ^aEnglish Language Teaching Centre, Ministry of Education, ^{b,c,f}Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, ^dSMK Convent Sentul, Ministry of Education, ^eFaculty of Human Sciences, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Email: ^{b*}azlinmansor@ukm.edu.my

Ethical leadership is a type of value-based leadership that greatly aids in balancing the principal's role as a manager and leader in schools. Studies have shown the impact of practicing ethical leadership towards building trust, positive workplace behaviour, increasing innovative workplace mindset and organisational performance. The emerging leadership style has found strong roots in the international platforms but not in Malaysian local school leadership. 3 secondary school principals were selected for this study based on the ethical leadership level as perceived by their teachers from a previous study by the researcher., which shows that principals have high to moderately high level of ethical leadership practice in schools. This case study caters the findings on the understanding and practises of ethical leadership style among the principals as perceived by the principals themselves. The study also explores the seven dimensions of ethical leadership as being practised amongst principals. A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect relevant data. The interview is transcribed and analysed thematically. The principals revealed that they lacked an understanding of ethical leadership style but practised several dimensions of ethical leadership in their daily school administration tasks. The findings suggest that ethical leadership has ample room to be integrated into current school leadership practises and develop an understanding of its impact on improving teacher work performance.

Keywords: *Effective Leadership, Value-based Leadership, Ethical Leadership.*

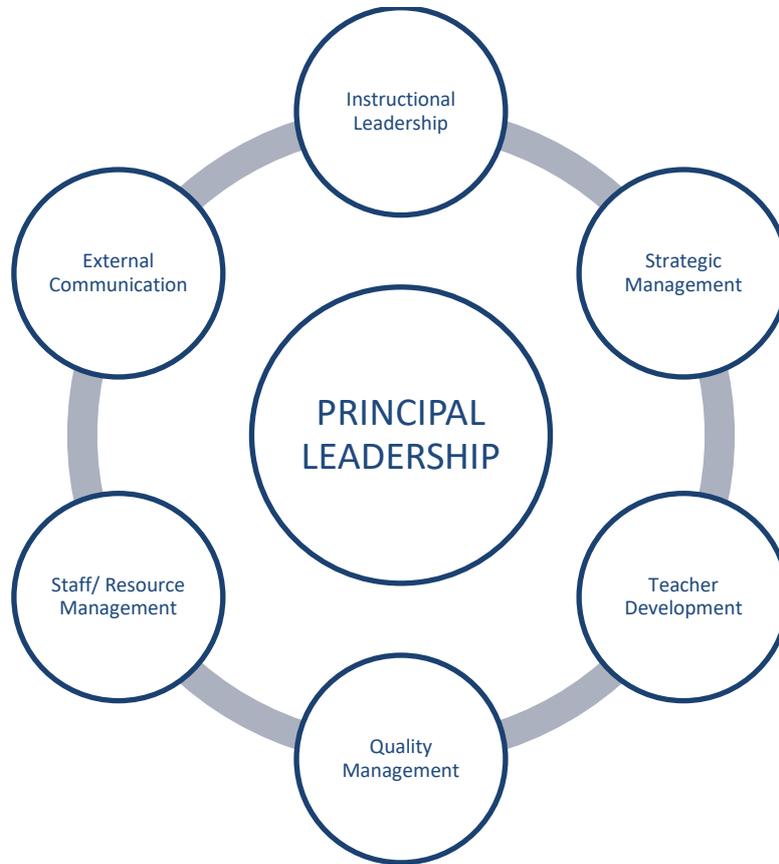


Introduction

The role of the school principal in the 4IR era differs from the past, where the focus on technology-based resources and human resource development needs equal attention for optimal organisational success. An effective principal will be skilful in balancing the role of a leader and a manager for the best school performance outcomes, leading people's practice towards professionalism and notable administrative measures (Mansor and Baki, 2007; Rizvi, 2008; Martin, 2019). Hamzah et al. (2010) report the need to integrate technology leadership practises into current practise as an alternative to traditional practices that can no longer serve a purpose. Traditional leadership styles no longer work in current complex situations and dilemmas in the school context. During recent years, leaders from private and public sectors have started integrating value-based leadership practises for better role credibility (Copeland, 2014) and role balancing initiatives. Nevertheless, being dependent on policy and higher authority demands, limits the idea of being innovative and self-manoeuvring ideas especially in the school leadership system. Therefore, ideas that uphold national education policies in line with instruction and leadership needs to be addressed when choosing best school principal leadership practises.

There are various factors to determine the best or rather most effective school principal leadership. Li, Hallinger and Ko (2016), present a very practical principal leadership model that integrates decision making, problem solving, taking responsibility in a situation or dilemma, being part of the problem-solving team, taking every problem in hand and handling it effectively as illustrated in Figure 1. This model supports good communication, reinforcing rules and guideline and good decision making as key approaches to effective leadership towards teacher professional development. The model is people orientated and requires highly knowledgeable leaders with a passion to lead. Effective leadership does not pertain to only being skilful in managing a school.

Figure 1. Principal Leadership Model (Li, Hallinger and Ko, 2016)

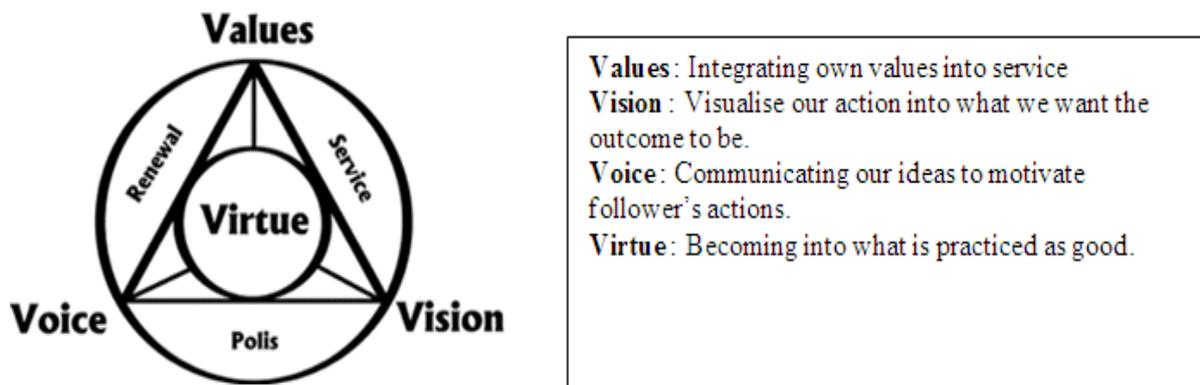


Value-Based Leadership (VBL) in Schools

VBL helps establish a climate conducive to effective teaching-and-learning practises and building trust as principals constantly face issues of dishonesty, unfairness, decision making and empowerment (Copeland, 2014). A value-based leader uses his or her values, beliefs or principles to plan strategies, approach a given situation and make decisions. VBL focuses on the well-being of all its members (Van Niekerk & Botha, 2017). In 2007, the founder of the Centre for Ethical Leadership developed the EL 4-V Model as presented in Figure 2. The Ethical Leadership 4-V model represents Values, Vision, Voice, and Virtue comprehensive of the entire concept of ethical leadership. Together with ethical leadership, several other leadership styles e.g. transformational leadership, authentic leadership, spiritual leadership (Copeland, 2014; Hendrikz and Engelbrecht, 2019) are also listed as value-based leadership style. Value-based leadership is finding its way into contemporary leadership practises for its core aim in integrating commonly practised leadership styles that are underpinned by moral values and principles. This is also due to fact that in recent years, commonly practised leadership styles have declined in the area of practising moral values and VBL has the potential

to overcome “deficiency in leadership” (Van Niekerk & Botha, 2017). Furthermore, there is a misunderstanding about the fact that VBL will not be able to influence employees’ working habits and overall organisational success as much as it could in promoting good moral values (Copeland, 2014). Gurusamy and Thambu (2018) state that a morally sensitive human being makes effective decisions based on ethics and values in any critical situation. Multidimensional leadership features demonstrated by leaders practicing VBL lead to long-term organisational success (Kar, 2014). The concept of VBL stands a high chance of being integrated within current school leadership practises along with other government initiatives towards effective school leadership.

Figure 2. Four V model of Ethical Leadership (Centre for Ethical Leadership, 2007)



Ethical Leadership

Organisational disputes place everyone in doubt whether a leader has played an effective role. The increase in organisational scandals, a drop in work quality and performance and seeking best leadership practises is a never-ending process of problems in the field of organisational administration or management. Haq (2011) recommends skilled leaders to integrate ethics and nurture values into solving organisational dilemmas. At this point, the discussion on ethical leadership as an alternative or an integration measure to current practises is significant.

Ethical leadership has found its way into influencing various aspects of organisational leadership, administration and management. Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005), have conceptualised an ethical leadership model, presented a future direction of practising ethical leadership and define it as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making.” An ethical leader projects him or herself as a morally inclined person in the process of dealing with people, making decisions and strengthening organisational goals, rules or policies. The role of an ethical leader is further made clear as a moral leader and manager. An ethical leader is capable

of balancing levels of management, and leading followers towards better attitudes and behaviours. In other words, the role of an ethical leader is not bound by managing the office mindfully but also leading people with heart. Ethical leaders can be observed as kind hearted, people focused, civic-minded, fair problem solvers, honest communicators, acting on their words, trustworthy, sharing responsibilities and guiding others to be ethical (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Brown, et al., 2005; Kanungo and Mendonca, 1998). They reward and appreciate those who genuinely produce results, guiding the ones who are misled and do not tolerate the violation of ethics. According to Majeed (2018), currently even recruitment specialists pay attention to ethical qualities and moral values in their leadership selection procedures, bearing in mind for these leaders to become moral and ethical agents when carrying out their duties.

The influence of ethical leadership has been widely shared by many researchers but current knowledge lacks contribution to school leadership especially in Malaysia. Nevertheless, several models show that the impact of ethical leadership on work behaviours and performance is gradually assimilating into current practises upon understanding that these models have worked in private organisations (non-school context). According to Freeman and Stewart (2006), the first step for the development of effective leadership is to understand the need and impact of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership has been identified to be significantly influential on employee work patterns (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012), building trust in leaders (Bello, 2012; Engelbrecht et al., 2014; Yozgat, & Meşekıran, 2016; Yanik, 2018), improving work engagement (Lin, 2010; Engelbrecht et al., 2014), improving organisational commitment (Zhu, May, & Avolio, 2004; Poon, Rahid & Othman, 2006; Ilham, 2014; Yanik, 2018), ethical decision making (Arar, Haj, Abramovitz & Oplatka, 2016), job satisfaction (Yozgat, & Meşekıran, 2016; Yanik, 2018), individual innovative work behaviour (Yidong, & Xinxin, 2013), employee creativity (Mehmood, 2016), job involvement (Ghani & Jusoff, 2009), organisational performance (Khademfar, & Amiri, 2013) and quality job performance (Bello, 2012). Yukl (2002) and Majeed (2018) clearly present the criteria for judging ethical leadership in the workplace.

Being ethical means objectively following right conducts, practising integrity but even more making effective decisions, portraying characters that develop morality in the organisation and instilling awareness to the importance of being ethical. Yukl's (2002) criteria above share a spectrum of understanding regarding how ethical leadership could be lifted into educational leadership practice in a much deeper context.

Current Challenges

This study is motivated by the fact that there is a need to integrate a value-based leadership style into current leadership styles in practice and to balance the role of a school principal as

an effective leader and manager. Principals in the 21st century still face media critics and competency issues when balancing management and leading schools (Mansor,2006) which also includes curriculum and co-curriculum management issues (Hamzah & Ayob, 2015) student affairs, financial, office administration, human resources, community relationships, school environments and school infrastructure responsibilities (Alias et al., 2010). This study believes that, a value-based leadership style could be a panacea to several issues involving school leaders and their teachers. In addition, principals also facing issues regarding their integrity and accountability are frequently reported. This current study aims to bring forward ethical leadership which is a type of value-based leadership (Copeland, 2014; Hendrikz and Engelbrecht, 2019), into school management and administration as a means of solving the issues mentioned above. Ethical leadership seems to be a newfound term in the field of leadership that needs to be addressed in the public sector, especially in schools. Findings from previous studies in Malaysia show that ethical leadership practises based on the seven EL dimensions (Kalshoven et al., 2011) are high to moderately high (Vikaraman, Mansor & Hamzah, 2018). Nevertheless, the empirical data lacks information on the understanding of principals about ethical leadership and its impact on holistic organisational success. In order to follow up on these findings, this case study aims to explore the understanding of ethical leadership amongst three principals and how the seven dimensions are being practised in schools.

Research Question

What is the understanding of ethical leadership and how it is being practised by three national secondary school principals in Malaysia?

Methodology

This case study involves three secondary school principals. A semi structured interview protocol was developed and used to interview these Principals (informants) from three different types of national secondary schools. The three principals originate from:

Principal 1 (P1): *National Religious school – High performing, Fully Residential, Cluster School of Excellence*

Principal 2 (P2): *National type school – Low performing, academically ranked lowest in the district*

Principal 3 (P3): *National type school - Average performance, High student intake and feeder school for vernacular school students*

The interview protocol has six questions that explore the understanding of principals about ethical leadership and how ethical leadership dimensions are practised in their capacity in their

school. The interview protocol investigates the understanding the principals have regarding practicing ethical leadership based on the seven dimensions (Kalshoven et al., 2011). The bilingual semi-structured protocol was emailed to two experts for validation purposes before the interview \. After the experts reviewed the protocol, some suggestions were made on improving the terminologies in the protocol with very minor editing. Then, the interview protocol was pilot tested on one principal prior to this case study for feedback on understanding the protocol's content , to ensure that the informants would share their experiences in depth and the interviewer would be able to derive ample relevant information from the interview to answer the research question. The interview protocol was peer and content reviewed by respondents before the interview session. It was emailed to the informants before the actual interview took place. Therefore, the informants had plenty of time to think and prepare themselves for the interview. All three principals preferred to speak in Malay . The researcher translated the audio recording into English . The interview was audio recorded for transcribing and future reference. Upon the completion of the interview, the informants were given a letter of consent to be signed as approval to use the interview findings in this study. The data collected via the interview was transcribed, thematically analysed (based on the seven dimensions stated below) and cross case analysed. The seven dimensions adopted and adapted as reference themes into this study, to be functional for a school context consist of:

People Orientation: emphasises the relationship between the principal and teachers, two-way communication skills, building trust, showing care for teachers' welfare and making fair decisions.

Fairness: handling issues pertaining to teachers' work responsibilities, decision making, mistakes or problems, misunderstandings and providing space.

Power Sharing: empower teachers to contribute to critical decision-making processes and freely seek guidance from teachers, delegates challenging tasks equally and provide opportunity for all the teachers to plan their goals.

Concern for Sustainability: highlights principals' concerns towards providing a healthy and friendly work environment .

Ethical Guidance: explains work ethics and code of conduct expected at school.

Role Clarification: clarifies the roles and performance expectations of each teacher, teachers' responsibilities and what is anticipated from working groups.

Integrity: demanding principals to hold on to their promises. Principals should be relied upon their actions and words and trusted to do the things they say .

Findings and Discussion

The Understanding of Ethical Leadership and how it is Being Practiced by three National Secondary School Principals in Malaysia.

According to the interview, it was identified that all three principals practiced ethical leadership. Nevertheless, the principal showed signs that they lacked an understanding of how ethical leadership influences teachers' work performance. Despite the practise of ethical leadership, it was found that principals still faced ethical challenges such as being watched by others, fair distribution, following religious standards, being caring to all, differences in approaching senior and junior teachers, teacher appraisals and rewards. The principals were asked "what are the key traits or behaviours that an ethical leader should have in a school context?"

Responses include the following:

"A principal must be sincere, fair and tolerant. I follow the 360° Leadership Style. It is a leading style that considers the well-being of all stakeholders...students and teachers." (P1)

"What is the meaning of ethical leadership? (Researcher explains)... "Being trustworthy, loyal and sincere at work." (P2)

"Ethics refers to our values or attitude and as a public servant we must practice positive working ethics. Key features of being an ethical leader are..." (P3)

There were statements about being ethical helped in building trust and therefore made things easier in the workplace to be implemented or discussed. They gave more support for teachers to have dedication towards school goals and individual performance. Being a good listener and understanding teachers problems were considered very important to build a good relationship with teachers. Principals took every teacher as an individual and respected their views in meetings or decision-making processes.

Integrity

Within the school context, principals agreed to practise integrity in terms of spirituality, financial management and the decision-making process. They admitted to following religious law, practising religion and trust and fear in God as practises of integrity. They managed finance lawfully by following the SOP set by the Ministry of Education and by equally distributing funds where most needed most in their school. When making decisions, the principals agreed to sticking to decisions made in meetings or with other teachers. They kept their words and were committed to their decisions .

Responses given include the following:

“Integrity is very important. I’m careful with money. I listen and make good decisions. I have far goals and high moral standards.... I like to maintain these. My duty is to fulfil what I say” (P1)

“Being trustworthy, loyal and sincere is important for me. Once trust is broken, people will get angry. If not with money, but our work. We must be sincere and not lie during our work. I also tell my teachers to follow this practise.” (P2)

“...leaders must be trustworthy, loyal....responsible towards their work and what they say.” (P3)

Fairness

Principals are quite aware that they have to practise being fair to all teachers. Fairness is practised by providing equal opportunity in making decision and listening without being judgmental or discriminating. Each teacher is given equal opportunity to share their ideas, knowledge, talent, skill and space to achieve personal goals. A decision is made after the principal discusses with the teachers, whereby they have equal chance to share their opinions and disagreements. The Principal listens to each idea, thought and suggestions carefully before making decisions and not necessarily accept everything the teacher say .

Responses include the following:

“I try to distribute work that they can do best...explain if they don’t understand or are reluctant to follow rules.. this is important in the long run. I’m responsible if they don’t know their work. I am lucky because I have vast experience and have gained enough knowledge to lead different groups of teachers.” (P1)

“I treat teachers equally. Every teacher has good points. They are given opportunity to share their knowledge. I try to reward them for their work.” (P2)

“I have strong respect for teachers’ rights, handle issues without discrimination or bias towards a culture or race...handle with calmness and avoid being harsh to all.” (P3)

People Orientation

The principals found people orientation to be very important in their management and administration practises in order to enable teachers to follow their instructions or decisions without any problems. The principals practised good listening habits, role modelling, collaborative decision making, trusting their teachers and occasionally having open discussions. They took heed in understanding teachers’ personal issues and paid a lot of

attention to their needs. They practise what they preach in order to develop trust in their capabilities to lead.

Responses to this question include the following:

“As a principal, you are alone, but you need the support of your subordinates. Due to respect, teachers may avoid you, but we have to make friends. We are a role model to all – our attendance, teaching and how we behave. We are being watched and observed so we have to be careful. They assume we are perfect.” (P1)

“I place myself as a role model. I demonstrate good values. I take care of how they feel, their welfare and advise them like a friend. I humble myself to their level. I don’t share their personal issues.” (P2)

“...able to work as a team, I have good communication habits – verbally and non-verbal, treat everyone with care because of the school size and number of teachers, I demonstrate humility and initiative to add knowledge...we are being watched, our clothes, how we dress-up, talk and behave.” (P3)

Power Sharing

Only one principal discussed sharing their commitments and power with their teachers especially with their assistant principals, department heads and subject panel heads. The principal also distributed work and responsibilities to their teachers when needed.

“I prefer teachers to share during meeting. Let everyone hear them talk and we make shared decisions.”“I practise 3600 Leadership style. From top down, we give rights for everyone to share and take responsibility.” (P2)

Ethical Guidance

Guidance was more focused on lesson preparation and school programs. There was a lack of ethical guidance given to teachers. Nevertheless, teachers were well briefed about work ethics as quoted by the Ministry of Education e.g. Kod Etika Kerja and Tonggak 12 as a reference to ethical codes to follow in schools.

“I advise my teachers to be loyal and sincere...always speak the truth.” (P2)

“The Principal must follow ethics to guide the teachers later on.” (P3)

Role Clarification

Clarifying the roles each teacher plays in an Organisation is also an ethical practice . The Principal clearly shares what is expected of a teacher . In this interview, two principals mentioned that they explain what they expect from their teachers and staff during staff meetings and classroom observation.

“I prepare guidelines on procedures to work on some things like desk files and work procedure manuals.” (P3)

Concern for Sustainability

Concern for sustainability at school focuses on providing a conducive and safe work place for teachers and staff to work in. In addition, valuing the importance of caring for the environment is also considered to be an ethical practice. Only one Principal spoke about providing a comfortable place for teachers.

“I try to provide a comfortable and safe place to work.” (P1)

Table 1 shows the summary of ethical leadership practises by dimensions as reported by the Principals. P1 practices 5 out of 7 dimensions, P2 practices 4 out of 7 dimensions and P3 practices 5 out of 7 dimensions of ethical leadership. There were 3 dimensions of ethical leadership which were identified as practised by all Principals (P1, P2 and P3): integrity, fairness and people orientation.

Table 1: Ethical Leadership Dimensions Practiced by Principals

Principals / Ethical Dimensions	P1	P2	P3
Integrity	√	√	√
Fairness	√	√	√
People Orientation	√	√	√
Power Sharing	√		
Ethical Guidance		√	√
Role Clarification			√
Concern for Sustainability	√		

Implications and Conclusion

It is evident that, there’s ample room to deepen the knowledge and understanding of ethical leadership style among Principals in Malaysia. In this case study, the Principals shared some



traces of their understanding towards what ethical leadership is, but lacked the knowledge of how ethical leadership influences teachers' positive work patterns or holistic school success. Though previous studies share strong findings that ethical leadership is highly practised amongst most Principals, when interviewed the findings reveal that practise still lacked understanding. Ethical leadership still appears as a newfound terminology. The findings may be taken as a benchmark towards sharing effective practises in the future as well as working towards understanding the impact of ethical leadership. Understanding ethical leadership practises will be meaningful in many ways to the School Principal if they understand the impact it has on employee work patterns, performance and behaviours. Traditional leadership practises can be adapted to ethical leadership. Ethical leadership may be perfectly integrated within other commonly practised leadership styles. As a branch of value-based leadership, ethical leadership can be included in future leadership training modules. Although recently much attention has been given to ethical leadership in the international arena, not much has been explored in the local context especially in schools. This study contributes to extending our existing understanding of ethical leadership development and the influence processes that enables Organisations to develop ethical as well as effective leaders.

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