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Core values of ethical leaders in South African schools

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In the research reported on here we explored teachers' understanding of what they perceived as core values of ethical leadership in education. Using qualitative research within an interpretivist design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and school management team (SMT) members and analysed using Tesch's coding method. The theoretical underpinnings of the paper are grounded in 3 distinct ethics of care, justice and critique. The findings cannot be generalised since the results highlighted in this article only report on those applicable to this small qualitative sample. The main themes that emerged from the findings included the participants' understanding of 3 core values of ethical leadership. They emphasised trust, respect and transparency as vital components of ethical leadership. Recommendations include more training and research for secondary school teachers who are not well equipped with the knowledge, skills and tools to approach the needs of disenfranchised and disadvantaged learners at their schools. A more nuanced understanding of transparency in schools, policy and practices is needed.

Keywords: critique; ethical leadership; ethics of care; justice; school culture

Introduction

Much has been researched about educational administration, management and leadership. Lately there seems to be more literature emerging on the importance of ethical leadership in educational settings (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). Unethical leadership in the education sector is widespread and characterised by organisational inefficiency, mismanagement and corruption (Serfontein & De Waal, 2015). While we do not intend to expound on the current situation in South Africa regarding corrupt or unethical practices that produce harmful effects on people and institutions, we do note that South Africa is one of many countries struggling with an ethical decline in society, politics and education (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). The cessation of trust in educational leadership from the national to the organisational and school levels is of great concern (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). Education systems worldwide face insurmountable challenges that now experience collateral damage because of unethical and corrupt leadership (Mlambo, 2021; Naidoo, DEM 2015). Bush (2007) alerts us to unacceptable ethical practices in South African schools. The Department of Basic Education (DBE) reports an education system lacking a positive ethical leadership trajectory (Mlambo, 2021). Specifically, in post-apartheid South Africa, ethical leadership is critical for a country that experienced injustices during the apartheid regime. To address the ethical expectations in education, the South African Council of Educators (SACE) was established in 1995 to improve the status of the teaching profession. It purposely focuses on professional development and a code of ethics for all teachers (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2000).

Public school principals are essential in leading their management teams. The DBE often view them as essential agents of change in leading their schools (RSA, 2007:16A (1) (c) (i)) and for improving schools' academic performances. Ulvik, Smith and Helleve (2017) identified the link between schools' organisational culture and their academic performance. The public looks to ethical leaders to deal with the social ills of society. Ethical leadership in education should create an environment that cares for learners and staff members so that they are able to commit to achieving the organisational goals (Henry, 2009). Hester and Killian (2010) stress the importance of ethical leadership in protecting and promoting the welfare of all. Leaders need to reflect on and reconsider their practice seriously.

In this article we explore how teachers in two schools understood the core values of ethical leadership practices within their educational environment and why these are valuable. The findings ultimately should be of interest to local and international readers. Educational leadership research identifies a relationship between school leadership and organisational outcomes (Cheteni & Shindika, 2017). Lepholltse (2008) and DEM Naidoo (2015) assert that the role of ethical leadership is critical and central to deal with the moral decay and ethical decline experienced in schools. For example, ethical leaders can significantly influence education outcomes (Naidoo, DEM 2015). Bush (2007) stresses that school leadership, when guided by core ethical values

and practices, has the potential to ameliorate current conditions in the South African school system that are in decline.

Research Question

What are teachers' perceptions and experiences of ethical leadership's core values in selected secondary schools?

Research Objectives

Our objectives with this research were to determine how ethical leadership is practised in secondary schools in the Ekurhuleni education district. More specifically, we wanted to determine whether the participants were able to identify some core values of ethical leadership and explain why these ethical values were important to them.

Literature Review

Ethical leaders and core values

Emphasis on ethics among leaders inherently builds trust in role players, reshapes the moral compass of leaders, and realigns the school towards healthy and productive outputs (Argyropoulou, 2011). With the literature review we aimed to conceptualise and illuminate what ethical school leadership means for scholars and teachers in South Africa. While this is an ambitious goal, mainly when ethical leadership may differ around the globe and in different contexts, our interest was primarily in identifying which core values of ethical leadership our participants found useful within their South African secondary school context. G Naidoo (2012:106) states that "leaders need to demonstrate ethical leadership in their daily behaviours, decisions and actions. By sending out strong messages about ethics and establishing clear reward and sanction systems to hold public sector employees accountable for their actions, leaders can do a lot to promote good governance in the public sector. This may need to be linked to values inherent in certain uniquely cultural and South African traditions."

Ethical leaders do not necessarily follow a particular leadership approach but rather use core ethical values as a guide. Ethical decision-making is based on core values like fairness, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, and good citizenship. Ethics offers guiding principles for how people can work relationally in their community, society, organisation or family. Work by the Josephson Institute for Ethics suggests six core values: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Seel, 2005). By using these core ethical values, shifts in discourse and practice can happen in schools. More meaningful conversations are being had around caring, responsibility and respect as the foundation of community. The importance of trustworthiness and fairness drives discussions and actions oriented at building relationships that would result in a more civil society.

Although these core values are generalised, we believe that each environment can yield equally meaningful core values unique to their educational context. While the definitions of what ethical leaders do have nuanced differences, there seems to be agreement in the literature that ethical leaders foster the dignity and the rights of others through trust, honesty, transparency, caring, respect and fairness. Influential leaders are interested in creating, processing and achieving a morally good vision for society. Influential leaders are more interested in the "how" or how to improve the organisation's culture. It is essential to understand that in attempting to define ethical leadership, we constantly redefine ethics and leadership in response to the context within which it is practised. Nicolaides and Duho (2019:1713) present a holistic understanding of ethical leaders by positing that "ethics is a collection of principles or standards of expected human conduct that guide leaders' decision-making."

We also begin to see the intersection of ethics and leadership and the importance of ethical leadership, which is the topic of this article. Ethical values that appear in the South African literature include a vision of how to lead and values interconnectedness, how to project honesty, transparency and accountability, and how to foster trust, dignity, respect and caring within organisational cultures (Nicolaides & Duho, 2019). Indeed, the research objectives of this study were to identify what teachers perceived as core ethical values necessary to their school environments. The challenges to achieving a sustainable, ethical vision in a school can be attributed to leaders' difficulty in defining a set of principles and values (Nicolaides & Duho, 2019). Although we see that slightly different meanings have been constructed, much of the literature on ethical leadership agree that ethical leaders foster relationships with their followers (Mlambo, 2021). Policy level initiatives are in place to assist leaders. Mlambo (2021:4) and DEM Naidoo (2015) argue that "such legislation and the proliferation of ethical codes of conduct would still be unlikely to put unethical behaviour to an end and suggested that, through appropriate training, public officials could develop attitudes and virtues for guiding human conduct. Integrity training is integral in providing efficient, ethical and accountable services." Most recently, in May of 2023, The Conscious Leadership and Ethics Summit held in South Africa advocated trust, humanity, honour, ethical behaviour and change as the key drivers for South African organisations and institutions, including the education system (Kali, 2023).

The intersection of leadership and ethics

Several leadership approaches (transformational, servant and authentic leadership) point towards the

ethical orientation of leadership (Blane, 2017; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). These leadership approaches seem to have in common their affinity to an ethics of care, justice and critique (Starratt, 2004). For example, transformational leadership is grounded in empowerment, respect, trust, communication and transparency (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000). Servant leadership focuses on humanness, love, altruism, care, service and trust. It emphasises the needs, respect, well-being and welfare of others, all of which serve as a foundation for ethical practice (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022). Finally, authentic leadership fosters a positive, respectful and trusting ethical school environment (Crawford, Dawkins, Martin & Lewis, 2020).

What do these leadership approaches have in common?

While ethical leaders do not use a specific leadership style, we see above that some leadership styles intersect better than others with the practice of ethical leadership. While we do not explore the leadership styles mentioned above in depth, we use the reference to these leadership styles as the grounding of an intersection between leadership and ethics for leaders. In particular, leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers, and we can glean from these leadership styles some common core values relevant to this study, namely, trust, respect and transparency.

Firstly, Dladla (2020) stresses that trust is the most influential variable in organisational performance. A trusting relationship among team members is the foundation for effective and successful schools. Leaders should create and maintain trust with followers by applying lateral communication rather than a top-down leadership style. They should exhibit transparency and sincerity when undertaking their duties (Dladla, 2020). In their study, Hong, Cross Francis, Wang, Lewis, Parsons, Neill and Meek (2020) note that trust could lead to greater social capacity and resilience among staff. They determined that trust enabled school leaders to be more vulnerable with peers, share common goals for learners, believe in colleagues' abilities, and made them feel emotionally safe. Van Wart (2012) reports that their research revealed that the most crucial characteristic of ethical leaders was being trustworthy.

Secondly, Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki and Portin (2010) stress that in order to change school culture there needs to be an ethical foundation of respect for all and particularly respect for the profession. The ability to influence teachers and others is achieved by working harmoniously and respectfully with them. Respect is integral to ethical leaders' practice when working with teachers, learners and the community; approachability and

cooperation subsequently reinforce the feeling of respect.

Finally, the importance of transparency is expressed. "Transparency must be fostered by providing the public with timely, accessible and accurate information" (RSA, 1996b:s. 195(g)). The issue of transparency in schools is complex, with concerns about confidentiality (Protection of Personal Information Act [POPIA]; RSA, 2013), which means that schools must be careful about what information they gather and how they choose to share it. This means that implementing policies, measuring, or collecting data and the actions and decisions of teachers and senior management are all subject to the transparency test (Basic Conditions of Employment Act; RSA, 1997; POPIA; RSA, 2013) and all legislation that protects the rights of learners. Transparency is a concept well understood by participants who alluded to confidentiality and privacy issues and how transparency fosters a climate of honesty (Ingrams, 2017).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

We use a conceptual framework to explain three different types of ethics (care, justice and critique) (Starratt, 2004). In the literature review, we identified three common areas of trust, respect and transparency that emerged in leadership styles grounded in an ethical approach to leading. Some of these core values were also in the table that Seel (2005) presented at the Josephson Institute for Ethics. Leading and fostering trust, respect and transparency intersect suitably with the ethics of care, justice, and critique. These conceptual, ethical pillars by Starratt (1991) are viewed as part of a critical theory and informs the study in this capacity. Critique, justice and caring work together in paradigmatic unison. Starratt (2004:4) argues that "each ethic needs the very strong convictions embedded in the other ... Uniting themes from different theoretical foundations attempts to use the genuine strengths and the genius of each theoretical position in the interests of building a rich and vibrant ethical environment."

Begley (2004) asserts that extant theoretical and empirical studies are a human-centred relational activity – a collective undertaking influencing the moral fibre of society and organisations. Various leadership approaches give leaders the latitude to lead ethically using the pillars of ethics (Starratt, 2004). The ethical leader's task is to foster and sustain an environment where education can occur with trust, respect and transparency (e.g., principles found in transformational, servant, and authentic leadership). Starratt (2004) identified that these framing principles require the synthesis of three pillars of ethics: the ethics of critique, the ethics of justice, and the ethics of caring. The three

perspectives assist leaders in making ethical decisions with the issues more clearly delineated to move towards the better choice in their contextual circumstances.

Theory of three pillars of ethics

Starratt (2004) offers a critical lens to examine social arrangements through critical theory. He argues that the critical stance is to uncover which group has advantages over others and to expose how situations are structured and language is used to maintain the legitimacy of social arrangements.

The ethics of critique uncovers injustice found in the structures of the school system and challenges leaders to reconstruct unjustifiable systemic institutional practices (Starratt, 2004). An ethics of critique intends to challenge discriminating power structures and offer alternatives. Inequities related to social class, gender, and race among individuals and groups are revisited and leaders are encouraged to remain vigilant when dealing with them.

The ethics of caring asks for an examination of the quality of relationships or interactions between individuals. Noddings (1992:23–24) states that individuals can “care for” and “care about.” The “caring for” aspect allows interpersonal relationships to form. “Care means liberating others from their state of need and actively promoting their welfare; care additionally means being oriented towards ethics grounded in empathy” (Walker & Snarey, 2004:4). Those who follow an ethics of care approach consider morality in schools to be critical to attain a healthy school culture (Bozalek & Winberg, 2018). While school rules may serve as a guide, decision-making often remains with the leader, so being guided by an ethics of care can help leaders make the right decisions that promote relationships of dignity and worth among teachers regardless of cultural background, disabilities, socioeconomic status or religion. This ethics reaches beyond concerns about rules and procedures to create a culture of respect and caring and to celebrate diversity. It is incumbent upon school leaders to emphasise care for those in their school, where all voices are acknowledged (Bozalek & Winberg, 2018).

The ethics of justice is concerned with the issues of governance and fairness. For those guided by the ethics of justice, a tendency to lean on rules and policies is more likely an avenue used to make ethical decisions. They may refer to equality through this process, thus highlighting that all within the organisation are subject to the same rules. A challenge for leaders is how to approach justice as a form of governance that does not create inequity and continue to serve both the collective good as well as the rights of the individuals in schools. The ethics of justice focuses on laws and

the rights of the people (Bozalek & Winberg, 2018).

In summary, an ethical framework like critique, justice and caring becomes a way to work towards initiating change. Starratt (2004:6) asserted that “from a critical perspective, no organizational arrangements in schools’ have to be that way; they are all open to rearrangement in the interest of greater fairness to their members.” Starratt (2004) highlights that the leader’s ethical duty is to address and, if necessary, reconstruct policies and practices that are unfair or unethical. Leaders committed to doing the right thing are considered ethical leaders (Puyó, 2022). Now, more than ever, the world needs great leaders. Educational institutions need leaders endowed with values, principles, and ethics to serve better those under their leadership, leaders who care about those under their authority, leaders who promote justice and fairness for all, leaders who listen, and leaders who make others feel heard. The institutions need leaders who reflect, welcome critique as another tool in the decision-making process, help and support others, and are able and willing to unite all people.

Methodology

Research Design

Using a case study design within an interpretive paradigm, we explored the perceptions of SMTs and teachers on what they deemed to be core values of ethical leadership. A case study is a unit of analysis used to gather data from a few situations/institutes/people (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). With a case study researchers intend to collect in-depth data from a small number of situations/institutes/people (Nieuwenhuis, 2007); thus, choosing who participates in a study is of great importance.

Interpretivism is a set of beliefs about paramount aspects of reality, which ultimately creates a specific way of looking at the world. This way of looking at the world is often difficult to prove, but an interpretive paradigm gives a lens through which one can interpret the reality in which one exists (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Sample

We conducted the study in Ekurhuleni, a municipal district in the east of the Gauteng province of South Africa. Members of the two schools (Schools A and B) were interviewed, and their responses were collected as data. We selected participants who worked at the same school for over 2 years. Staff at two secondary schools (one private and one public, government school) were interviewed and their responses were collected as data. Two deputy principals, two academic administrators, two heads of department, one school counsellor and three teachers were interviewed. A total of 10 interviews

were conducted for this research study. Thirty per cent of the participants in the study were male, and 70% were female. Most of the younger participants were teachers and deputy principals, averaging 50 years of age.

We intentionally chose a small sample size of two schools because, from information provided by high-ranking officials of the education district, these schools were led by highly reputable people. Instead of selecting more schools and simply interviewing the principal or another SMT member, the research may not have yielded such worthwhile results. We interviewed at least 10 participants from each school to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions of some of the core values they perceived as a guide for the ethical leadership styles of SMTs and teachers. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 crisis, two principals could not attend the online interview despite numerous attempts to reschedule.

Nieuwenhuis (2007) describes purposeful sampling as selecting participants who fit specific criteria. The aim with sampling, or selection of participants, is to provide the researcher with the opportunity for "depth and detail" by selecting a small number of participants purposefully instead of randomly.

The schools we chose were selected based on two purposeful criteria. Firstly, the Ekurhuleni district officer and the Independent Education Board identified the two schools chosen as having sound and ethical leadership. Secondly, both School A and School B were purposefully chosen because they had access to Wi-Fi, and thus, interviews could be conducted online. During the COVID-19 pandemic the government's COVID-19 restrictions had to be followed to ensure the researchers' and participants' safety. Thus, interviews could be conducted efficiently online with staff at both schools.

Data Collection

Participants were invited to participate on an online interview platform, and interviews were held after school hours. While face-to-face interviews would have potentially yielded richer data, the restrictions on accessing schools due to the COVID-19 government lockdown restrictions, which included limited access to schools and travel restrictions in the form of curfews, made that an unfeasible option. However, it was necessary to have face-to-face interviews with some of the participants to clarify any incoherent responses (Barbour, 2014) or to probe further to enrich the interview content (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Semi-structured interviews also allowed interviewees to be the focus of the data collection process, bringing forth issues that were significant to them instead of being limited by the questions set by us. This freedom for interviewees to share their experiences and remain

on point with overarching questions enabled the researchers to collect rich data.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using the three-step method of coding adopted by Tesch (1990), namely, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. All the interviews were transcribed so that specific concepts and themes could be placed into broad categories (open coding). This was done to organise the data using a spreadsheet to allow for later critique and analysis. The results of axial coding for this study revealed that certain participants, based on their leadership positions in their schools, had similar responses to questions in the interview. This allowed us to align the data into general themes (Williams & Moser, 2019).

The aim with data analysis is to find meaning within data. To find meaning one needs to consider data from multiple angles, drawing significance from it as one narrows it down to specific points of interest (Williams & Moser, 2019). By identifying salient themes guided by the research questions, we were able to focus on relevant literature that grounded our analysis in evidence as well as an appropriate, suitable, and seminal theoretical framework with conceptual ideas to provide a lens with which to sort, code and categorise the data into themes grounded in a critical theory paradigm. Ultimately, we aligned the research questions, the study objective, focused literature, and an appropriate theoretical framework with a description of the findings, a meaningful, rich discussion, and a conclusion with recommendations for future research.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics, in a research context, refers to the protection of "human subjects" (Creswell, 2016:48). Having a robust sense of ethics throughout one's research is essential as it ensures that those participating in the study are not threatened or exposed by what they say or do (Yin, 2014). The measures we took to conduct an ethical study are discussed below.

We obtained permission from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg and also from the Gauteng DoE. The ethical issue of informed consent was also considered, and we ensured that all interviewees agreed to participate and confirmed this by way of a consent form. In addition, each interviewee was provided with information about the purpose of the study, how the data would be used, who would have access to the findings, the parameters of confidentiality and evidence of permissions granted by the various formal school and departmental bodies. Permission for members of schools to participate in the study was obtained from the school board of governors, the school

governing body, and the heads of the school. A further ethical issue was the maintenance of the integrity of the data. This relates to accuracy, dedication and ethical oversight in the data analysis process. The safety in storage and privacy of raw data, including recordings, were rigorous as data were protected in a locked folder on a secure personal laptop. In addition, only the supervisor and researcher had access to the raw data. Finally, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time; this information was contained in the consent form and reiterated at the end of the interview.

Findings

The findings were framed around the research objectives and research question of this study. From the interviews, it can be inferred that participants had a common understanding of what they perceived as core values of ethical leadership. Their explanations included the necessity of transparency, feedback, open communication, being heard, confidentiality, and to the adherence to rules, guidelines and checklists. They emphasised respect and trust among leaders and their followers.

Trust and Respect

The participants listed various characteristics associated with ethical leadership. These characteristics included inclusivity, productivity, problem-solving, transparency, honesty, decency, fairness, honour, integrity and straightforwardness. The characteristics of trust and respect were underscored by most. The importance of trust was expressed well by an academic administrator from School A:

If you have an ethical leader, your staff is going to trust you; your staff is going to want to work with you and work for you. If they think that you are not ethical and they lose that kind of trust in your decision-making process, you're going to get questioned all the time. The systems that have been put in place are going to fall apart because if you're not being ethical, like I said, it comes down to this trust for me, ethics, and trust, go hand in hand.

This idea that ethical leadership evokes respect was encapsulated well when a deputy head from School B stated: *"I very much think that you have the respect of the community. I mean, the people know exactly where they stand with you. You have the respect of the parent community. You have the respect of the professional community, both internally as well as externally."* Head of Department (HOD) 1 from School B mentioned the benefits of being a respected ethical leader:

I think people respect you more, and the children respect you more because they pick up on a whole lot of things that others don't pick up. So, I think if you are an ethical leader, people come to you

without any reservations. They know you will give them an ear and that you might try and use some features to solve a problem rather than just avoiding the problem.

Transparency

Most of the discussions with participants focused on transparency in respect of what it meant to them, what it looked like in their schools and what some of the positive and negative consequences of transparency could be. One deputy head from School B described transparency as leadership being visible and transparent, including effective feedback and meaningful interactions: *"In my understanding, it would be how visible the values and beliefs that have been instilled in a person are in terms of whether they are transparent, provide a platform for feedback from a person, and allow other people to interact in their communication"* (Deputy Head 1, School B). The second spoke solely about confidentiality: *"I think ethical leadership would be ... the main word that would come to mind would be confidentiality"* (Teacher 2, School A). The third participant explained that ethical leadership was about rules and guidelines: *"... it would be guidelines that you would need to follow. You know, it's almost like a checklist"* (HoD 1, School B). Another participant (Deputy Head 2, School B) said: *"You've got the law on your side,"* indicating that an ethical leader sustains a successful institution by upholding the law. What most participants identified in ethical leadership was a person with a strong adherence to rules and regulations, ethics of justice, or the willingness to look out for their employees.

Many participants saw transparency as a form of honesty. HoD 2 at School A voiced his understanding of transparency in a more general way:

So, transparency for me is honesty, there's no smoke and mirrors. There's nothing to hide. It's in the interest of the good that the Head comes forward with information at meetings, it's an open platform. Transparency means that everybody's always able to access information which are directly related to the staff, I mean any information, within reason, of course.

Concepts like "openness" and "nothing to hide" were the most common responses articulated by the participants. Notably, participants indicated that most of the decisions made at their schools were less than transparent. A deputy head at School A pointed out that a lack of transparency manifests as exclusion in decision-making:

Staff may be superficially involved in decision-making through discussions or staff meetings. Still, your views were overtly excluded from the decision-making process if you were not in a senior management position. The senior managers applied contrived collaboration in sensitive decisions. This meant that they involved all the staff members in the discussion, but they discreetly made decisions that suited senior management.

A deputy head at School B echoed the above:

I think when we look at transparency at the school and decision-making, most of the time, the Head of the school discusses issues with us, but he has already made the decision. Unfortunately, you get into a situation with certain people get preferential treatment because they subscribe to the Head's views. Maybe we are not privy to that decision-making, or we don't understand it at that stage.

HOD 2 of School A supported this notion when she noted that: *"We know from whose desk the policy comes from, but we do not know, who sits around the table, if anybody, to put all these policies and practices together... it definitely feels like it's a small group of people."* Deputy Head 2 of School B articulated an ideal situation that seldom exists in her school:

There have been greater efforts to create open channels of communication. And we will be naïve to believe that instantly there are wonderful open channels of communication, and everybody has an appreciation of the channels of communication, where they are and how they exist. That's not going to happen instantaneously for different reasons. Sometimes it takes a little bit of practice to refine the channels, other times, you're not sure how exactly to go about it, and what's the exact medium, the correct medium to do it.

While participants at School A indicated that the management teams were transparent but only to a point, there was an appreciation that access to all information may not be the gold standard of transparency. The same participant went on to say: *"Management must ensure that the rights of learners are protected, and that does mean that not all information can be distributed to everyone within the school community."* While participants seemed to want to be involved in the decision-making process, this involvement was less about being in the room and more about understanding management's justification. Although the schools seemed primarily transparent, there were covert systems in place to withhold information from filtering down the workplace hierarchy. It seemed that the complexity for school leaders came from deciding what information should be comprehensive and what information needed to remain confidential and then making clear the justification for that decision.

Discussion

The findings describe what core values the participants perceived as necessary for an ethical leader to instil in schools. In responding to the research question, we used the theoretical lens of Starratt's (2004) three pillars of ethics (e.g., ethics of critique, care, and justice) to take a closer look at the implications of these findings that might inform us about which core values the participants valued and what, from their perspectives, the impact of these were in the school setting.

All teachers in South Africa must "maintain a high standard of professional ethics" (RSA, 1996a:2). It thus stands to reason that a clear understanding is needed of which core values of ethical behaviour and ethical leadership are needed to maintain high standards in education. From the data collected for this study, some apparent core values emerged, along with a discussion of their benefits, consequences and general application. This means that the pillars of ethics identified by Starratt (2004) could be engaged meaningfully in the analysis of the findings.

To view ethics in education from a holistic perspective, the ethics of justice, critique and care would have to be considered collectively to provide an appropriately rich and complex ethical perspective. The ethics of justice, critique, and care, as defined by Starratt (2004), outline the different ethical emphases within a broader concept of ethical leadership. While ethics of care is central to education, it cannot exist without some form of structure or guidelines. The most relevant ethical pillars of practice in this study were the ethics of justice and care. Participants believed that a leader needed to foster trust and respect to develop authentic and caring relationships based on honest, solid alignment. What most participants regarded as most important for ethical leaders was a firm adherence to rules (ethics of justice) and a willingness to always consider their employees (ethics of care) – that is, to develop a trusting and respectful relationship. Participants presented the ethics of care well when they spoke about the importance of trust and respect. The comment that leadership sometimes required nuanced decision-making and that trust is regarded as symbiotic both refer to the core of ethics of care: the voices of those not in power must be heard and valued.

It must be noted that the ethics of critique was not mentioned as an underlying moral approach for the development of trust and respect. While many participants did not refer to the nuances of ethical leadership in practice nor the importance of identifying the need to strike a balance between rules, care and critique, there was also an absence of any moral or ethical emphasis on whether the disenfranchised and disadvantaged were worthy of any particular focus beyond regarding them as part of the general population. Ethical leadership in education should create an environment of care for learners and staff members so that they commit to achieving the organisational goals (Henry, 2009). Hester and Killian (2010) agree that ethical leadership protects the welfare of all role players.

Furthermore, it was apparent from the data that there were many perceived positives as well as some negative consequences to ethical leadership in education. Ideas like inclusivity, productivity and problem-solving were mentioned by participants as positive attributes; the concepts of

trust and respect were mentioned most frequently. Trust within education has been linked to organisations being more transparent and running more efficiently and to the well-being of teachers, learners, and the community (Hosmer, 1995). In their 2020 study, Hong et al. (2020) noted that trust within a school can lead to greater social capacity and resilience among the staff. They also determined that trust within an organisation and in the leaders of said organisation allowed the leaders to be more vulnerable with their peers, share common goals for their learners, and develop greater belief in their colleagues' abilities, which made them feel emotionally safe (Hong et al., 2020).

Participants indicated that respect was a crucial component of ethical leadership. Butts (2012) notes that respect as a component of ethical leadership can often overlap with ideas like collaboration, active listening, or a willingness to stand up for the rights of others. The ability to influence teachers and other role players was achieved by working harmoniously and respectfully with them. Respect formed the basis for ethical leadership when working with teachers, learners, and the community. This approachability and cooperation subsequently reinforced the feeling of respect that role players may want of a leader.

Moreover, respect, be it of an individual or an organisation, is embedded in the culture of education (Butts, 2012). Knapp et al. (2010) state that respect for leadership is central to changing a school's culture, but a leader's care for the staff, the ethos and the profession may be even more critical. This symbiotic relationship that respect seems to have, that it must be given and received to be effective, is why ethical leaders must ensure that their actions are grounded in clarity, consistency and transparency. Butts (2012:140) states the following: "The respect that leadership must have requires that one's ethics be without question." Participants indicated that respect, as a stand-alone concept, was a crucial component of ethical leadership.

Some participants alluded to the ethics of justice as a validation of why the ethical leader is worthy of respect. The ethics of justice articulates a solid adherence to laws and standards, often unwavering even when difficult decisions are taken. This was clear when many participants who spoke about respect being a crucial component of an ethical leader also recognised that leaders often needed to make difficult decisions that did not always please everyone. Ethical leaders need to have the unwavering support of their staff, even when decisions are not to their liking. The loyalty that followers have for their leaders is attributed to the respect that an ethical leader commands.

Finally, the data indicate that transparency as a concept was adequately conceptualised.

Education scholars and policymakers argue that decision-making in schools should be transparent, explicitly reporting who is responsible for making decisions and why limits are necessary (De Fine Licht, 2011). Concepts like "openness" and "nothing to hide" were the most common responses. However, from the data it seemed that transparency was a concept applied throughout a school but not checked in any way. Negative scenarios were described which showed an apparent lack of transparency when staff felt unheard and were only superficially involved in decision-making. This poses potential problems as it seems as though transparency is left to the discretion of the school leadership. If they are unethical, it leaves many channels for financial and procedural abuse.

Conclusion

With this study we aimed to identify the participants' understanding of specific core values that guide ethical school leaders. The aims and objectives of the study were primarily achieved. Ethical leadership is central to the management of South African schools. The current climate of unethical behaviour within the country, be it in government, the private sector or education, directly and indirectly has adverse effects on learners. Learners can be encouraged to be active and ethical citizens only with the ethical re-imagining by leadership within schools.

The ethics of justice and care were the most prevalent pillars in this study. Ethical leadership was understood to represent those individuals within the organisation who gained the respect and trust of their colleagues and staff. The ethics of justice articulates a solid adherence to laws and standards, often unwavering even when difficult decisions are taken. Finally, transparency as a concept was adequately conceptualised. In closing, it must be said that the participants all identified with the core values and practices synonymous with ethical leadership and transparency, and their interest and willingness to participate in this study reflected this.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons, which include evidence showing that ethical leadership positively correlates with a lower level of unethical behaviour (Naidoo, DEM 2015). While we did not attempt to define ethical leadership in this article, its value lies in its unique findings of the core values of ethical leadership that the participants found to be valuable working in a positive and productive environment. Teachers who follow these core values become critical players in contributing to a healthy school environment that can lead to less attrition, burnout, low morale, and student underachievement (Naidoo, DEM 2015).

The inclusion of leaders in this study is important, given that some principals are among the most corrupt members of a school community (Mestry, 2006). Schools are complex organisations with multiple leaders at multiple levels, all of whom, when left unchecked, have differing levels of autonomy that may lead to corruption. The responsibility to introduce change needs to be with individual leaders as well as with the organisation (Argyropoulou, 2011).

Recommendations

The inequality gap and rise in poverty and unemployment in South Africa is reflected in the disenfranchisement of secondary school learners. The ethics of critique, which is concerned with the representation of the disenfranchised and disadvantaged in society, was not identified as significant by the participants. We, therefore, recommend more school-based initiatives, professional development, workshops or formal training to explore how teachers can better navigate and equip themselves with the knowledge, skills and tools to deal with the equity gap.

Additionally, transparency is largely enforced in South African schools through legislation. However, our findings lacked in the area of uniform policy, groups, committees, or individuals responsible for ensuring transparency within a school. Nor was there a discussion of how to measure whether a school was or was not adequately transparent. We recommend that schools be provided with the resources needed to establish structures (committees), policies and processes of transparency, the process of confidentiality, and a process of accountability to relevant stakeholders.

Future Research

A larger sample size would result in a richer opportunity to conceptualise core values in ethical leadership in different contextual settings. An emphasis on ethical core values in tertiary leadership programmes and professional development initiatives is recommended. Further studies may consider exploring the topic of ethical leadership, its conceptualisation and application in other provinces and districts, and by comparing the results to those found in this study. There is also a need for further research into the application and upholding of transparency at schools and how positions, policies or committees can be introduced to ensure that schools are held accountable to the constitutional mandate of transparency.

Authors' Contributions

DE conducted the research study. MS managed the reviewers' queries and comments. RM, as supervisor of the research study, prepared the original manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Notes

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- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
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