Establishing ethical workplaces: Insights from independent school leaders and educators

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Abstract

The researchers viewed and analysed the data through a Christian lens. A qualitative ethnographic case study approach was used within an interpretivist paradigm to investigate how school leaders and educators understand and practise ethical leadership to foster an ethical working environment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, deputy principals, and educators from two independent schools, presenting rich insights into participants' lived experiences of their school environment. The conclusions from the data indicate that ethical leadership is most effective when grounded in values such as integrity, accountability, and servant leadership, which are associated with Christian principles. Such leadership is a prerequisite to fostering an ethical work environment typified by trust, respect, and a shared moral purpose. The study also exposed trepidations within faith-based schools, specifically where institutional Christian identities overlap with managerial or market-driven imperatives. In addition, there was an unwillingness to raise discontent with leadership conduct, which underlines concerns about voice, agency, and the presence (or absence) of a "speak-up" culture.

Keywords: accountability; ethical culture; ethical leadership

Opsomming

Die skep van etiese werksomgewings: Insigte van onafhanklike skoolleiers en opvoeders

Die navorsers het die data vanuit 'n Christelike perspektief bestudeer en geanaliseer. 'n Kwalitatiewe, etnografiese gevallestudiebenadering is binne 'n interpretivistiese paradigma gebruik om te ondersoek hoe skoolleiers en opvoeders etiese leierskap verstaan en beoefen ter bevordering van 'n etiese werksomgewing. Data is ingesamel deur middel van semigestruktureerde onderhoude met skoolhoofde, adjunkhoofde en onderwysers van twee onafhanklike skole, wat waardevolle insigte bied ten opsigte van die deelnemers se beleefde ervarings en leierskapspraktyke. Die bevindings toon aan dat etiese leierskap die doeltreffendste is wanneer dit gegrond is in waardes soos integriteit, aanspreeklikheid en dienende leierskap, dit wil sê waardes wat in ooreenstemming met Christelike beginsels staan. Sodanige leierskap is 'n voorvereiste ter bevordering van 'n etiese werksomgewing wat deur vertroue, respek en 'n gedeelte morele doel gekenmerk word. Die studie het ook bekommernisse binne geloofsgebaseerde skole aan die lig gebring, veral daar waar institusionele Christelike eienhede met bestuurs- of markgedrewe imperatiewe oorvleuel. Verder was daar 'n onwilligheid om ontevredenheid oor leierskapsgedrag te opper, wat kommer oor seggenskap, agentskap en die teenwoordigheid (of afwesigheid) van 'n laat-jou-stem-hoor"-kultuur benadruk.

Sleutelwoorde: aanspreeklikheid; etiese kultuur; etiese leierskap

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership is a cornerstone of effective school governance, vital for fostering a culture of accountability, trust, and moral integrity. As a strategic approach to decision-making and organisational conduct, ethical leadership significantly influences the moral climate and overall performance of schools (Mey, Lloyd & Ramalingum, 2014:571). Bachmann (2017:211) asserts that ethical leadership––characterised by virtues such as integrity, honesty, reliability, justice, motivation, and altruism––is essential in establishing ethical workplace environments. Such leadership not only guides institutional practice but also inspires ethical behaviour (Bajpai, Dabral, Singh, & Purohit, 2024:315). In this regard, it's important to point out that it is not only the prerogative of school leaders who must inculcate an ethical culture in the school; post-level 1 educators are also expected to demonstrate ethical leadership qualities, not only in the classroom but around their institution on a day-to-day basis (Armando, 2022).

In the South African context, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) recognises school principals as key agents of educational transformation, entrusted with the responsibility of exemplifying ethical leadership (RSA, 2007:16A(1)(c)(i)). Similarly, within the independent schooling sector, principals are regarded as central figures in cultivating and sustaining an ethically sound organisational climate (Van Jaarsveld & Mentz, 2021:22). Ethical leadership, in this context, transcends procedural compliance; it functions as a proactive force that cultivates staff well-being, supports academic achievement, and safeguards against misconduct and abuse of power (Henry, 2009). This requires leaders to engage in continuous self-reflection (Hester & Killian, 2010:5). South Africa has a strong foundation set in the constitution and legislation that promotes ethical leadership in education. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996a (Act 108 of 1996), enshrines foundational values, including human dignity, equality, non-racialism, non-sexism, and the rule of law (RSA, 1996). These legal principles are consistent with Christian ethical teachings that give precedence to humility, stewardship, and the ethical responsibility to serve others (Philippians 2:3–4; Proverbs 11:3), thereby strengthening ethical leadership as both a statutory duty and a spiritual vocation.

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 propagates participatory and transparent governance, which are key aspects of ethical school governance. Independent schools must also function within these legal boundaries. Important provisions of the Act include the democratic election of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) as stipulated in Section 23 (with the equivalent structure in independent schools typically being the Parent-Teacher Association), no toleration of any form of discrimination as outlined in Section 6B, and rigorous prerequisites for ethical and liable management as stipulated in sections 20(1)(a), 36, and 37 (RSA, 1996a). In addition, Section 8 highlights the crucial role of upholding discipline in the educational environment through the implementation of a learner code of conduct. In the context of independent schools, the responsibility for ethical governance is vested within the board of governors (McCormick, Barnett, Alavi & Newcombe, 2006:431).

Additional legislation that supports these obligations is the South African Council for Educators Act 31 of 2000, which requires educators to register with the South African Council for Educators (SACE) and, in doing so, holds educators accountable for upholding ethical standards in public and independent schools (SACE, 2020). Similarly, the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 reinforces this ethical framework by establishing criteria for professional conduct, facilitating educator registration, and providing a necessary platform for reporting ethical violations (SACE, 2020).

Despite broad regulatory structures in place, unethical conduct in South African schools remains a problematic issue, with incessant toxic leadership still undermining school integrity. As a result, school climates are characterised by mismanagement, corruption, and desensitizing to unethical behaviour (Serfontein & De Waal, 2015:3). Empirical research established a concerning upsurge in unethical leadership, which fosters cultures of intimidation, obscurity, and general disarray within schools (De Wet, 2014:1). The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has recognised the absence of a unified framework for ethical leadership as a shortcoming in addressing these systemic challenges (Mlambo, 2021:170). Within this climate, individuals who initially demonstrated ethical leadership may become perpetrators of toxic behaviours, suppressing dialogue and obstructing collaborative problem-solving practices that exacerbate organisational dysfunction (Mahlangu, 2023:315). The cumulative effects of such leadership styles manifest in heightened workplace deviance, diminished job satisfaction, and psychological distress, all of which severely compromise the ethical foundations of educational institutions in South Africa (Bush, 2007:397).

In light of these challenges, the following is evident: Despite legislative frameworks and policy provisions that support ethical leadership, independent schools in South Africa continue to experience unethical practices, toxic leadership, and diminished organisational integrity. This highlights a critical gap between prescribed ethical standards and their practical enactment within school environments. Accordingly, this study seeks to explore how independent school leaders and educators perceive and implement ethical leadership, to understand how such leadership can foster and sustain ethical workplace environments that promote accountability, trust, and moral integrity.

2. Research problem

Chapter 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996a) requires that public administration be reinforced by democratic values and principles, which incorporate the encouragement and upholding of a high standard of professional ethics (RSA, 1996).

In support of this constitutional directive, the Code of Professional Ethics of the South African Council for Educators (SACE) compels educators to maintain the dignity and status of the teaching profession and to abstain from any behaviour that may tarnish its image. Likewise, the Fourth King Report on Corporate Governance (King IV) underlines the importance of ethical leadership in good governance. Principle 1 of the report highlights the priority of promoting leadership qualities such as integrity, competence, responsibility, accountability, fairness, and transparency, as these are indispensable in establishing an ethical climate at the top and confirming that governance practices mirror the moral character of those in leadership positions (IoDSA, 2016:43).

Furthermore, Principle 2 of King IV advocates for the systematic governance of ethics within organisations, seeking to promote and institutionalise an ethical culture. This approach goes beyond basic ethical management and entails developing and implementing an ethics plan, applying codes of conduct, providing ethics training, and establishing secure procedures for reporting unethical behaviour. The main objective is to embed ethics into the organisational culture, thereby influencing conduct and decision-making practices at all levels of the institution (IoDSA, 2016:43-44).

However, despite clear legislation and policies that provide ethical guidance in the workplace, unethical behaviour in South African school leadership remains common. The literature is saturated with research regarding unethical behaviour that occurs in schools, for instance, corruption and fraud, lack of transparency in school leadership, greediness among school principals, negligence, fruitless expenditure, non-compliance with policies and laws, educator tardiness, exam irregularities, abuse of authority and bullying in the workplace, nepotism, and favouritism in employment and promotion procedures (Corruption Watch,

2014:10-11 & 2018:13; De Wet, 2014:1; Ntshangase, 2024:261). These unethical leadership practices undermine the integrity of the education system, leading to a climate of distrust and unmotivated educators and sustaining the sector's dysfunction. In this regard, the researcher explored the question:

> ***How do independent school leaders and educators in South Africa perceive and enact ethical leadership to establish and sustain ethical workplace environments?***

3. Research design and methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore ethical leadership, accountability, and ethical culture in two South African independent schools following a Christian philosophy. The two independent schools were purposively selected for their Christian ethos, which provides a relevant context for exploring how faith-based values influence ethical leadership and the cultivation of ethical workplace environments. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate approach to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of school leaders and educators within their institutional contexts (Muzari, Shava & Shonhiwa, 2022:15). The researchers applied an ethnographic approach to gain an understanding of how ethical leadership is implemented in the daily operations of the school environment, allowing the researchers to investigate cultural customs, values, and day-to-day inherent forces.

A case study methodology reinforced the in-depth exploration of nominated schools that exhibited different leadership styles and ethical challenges. Purposeful sampling assisted in gathering rich data through interviews, observations, and document analysis, validating triangulation and enhancing credibility (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012:180). The research was grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as socially created and modelled by individual lived experience (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022:423).

3.1 Selection of participants

This study implemented a stratified, purposeful, and criterion sampling strategy to nominate participants, which provided the researchers with rich, content-specific perceptions appropriate to the research objectives (Palinkas, Garcia, Aarons, Finno-Velasquez, Holloway, Mackie, Leslie & Chamberlain, 2016:552). The participants were selected from two schools sharing the same premises (a preparatory school and a high school). The decision to include both headmasters and deputy-heads, as well as educators with different levels of experience, aligns with the study's purpose of probing the influence of leadership on the creation of an ethical culture and working environment. Headmasters were selected as the main participants because of their predominant role in shaping ethical leadership, which has some bearing on the overall school environment. Correspondingly, deputy-heads were selected for their involvement in routine operations and for their anticipated impact on the school's ethical climate. These leaders are key players in implementing policies, managing staff, and setting the ethical tone of the institution. The inclusion of two post-level 1 educators per school, one with significant years of experience and one with fewer years, was considered to encompass a broader range of experiences and perceptions. Experienced educators (e.g., those with 15–30 years of experience) present important historical views on changes in school culture and leadership practices over time, while those with fewer years of experience (e.g., 2–5 years) offer a new outlook on the present state of ethical leadership and the challenges faced in present-day educational environments.

3.2 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at locations selected by the participants and served as the primary data collection method. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with a digital voice recorder. According to Alshenqeeti

(2014:40), this interview format affords researchers greater flexibility to probe participants' responses through a combination of predetermined and follow-up questions, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive and nuanced examination of the research topic.

3.3 Analysing the data

Following the completion of the semi-structured interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim before the analysis commenced. Data coding was subsequently undertaken to examine the interview transcriptions. The coding process began with the identification of significant segments (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:398), from which meaningful words or phrases were derived and organised into categories. These categories represented central ideas used to convey the meaning embedded within similarly coded data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:398). Thereafter, the categories were consolidated into themes, which were, in turn, organised into clusters of related themes. Finally, the themes and thematic clusters were examined for recurring patterns, each reflecting the conceptual connections established among the categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:398).

4. Literature review

An understanding of ethical leadership, accountability, and ethical culture is essential for fostering a positive, effective work environment, particularly in the education sector. Therefore, it is crucial to examine these concepts to better understand how they influence leadership practices and institutional outcomes.

4.1 Exploring ethical leadership, accountability, and ethical culture

4.1.1 Ethical leadership

Buthelezi (2022:10; italics added) defines ethical leadership as the *"practice of holding the interest of the group that someone is leading, aligned to their interest but never above the interest of the broader society."* Being an ethical leader means always aligning the many defined and undefined interests of stakeholders with the goals one is leading. It is about an approach centred on sound principles and values, where right is right and wrong is wrong (Buthelezi, 2022:10).

Buthelezi (2022:10) further explains that ethics is stakeholder-focused and involves meeting the organisation's goals in a responsible and sustainable manner. Therefore, it might be necessary to spell out what the characteristics of ethical leadership are, using ICRAFT, pertaining to an ethical leader:

- **I -** Integrity: The leader must act in good faith and in the best interest of others, and they should set the tone for an ethical culture in the organisation.
- **C -** Competence: The leader must have sufficient work knowledge of the particular working environment.
- **R -** Responsibility: The leader should exercise courage in taking risks and capturing opportunities, and doing so in a responsible manner, in the best interest of others.
- **A -** Accountability: Even when the leader delegates duties, the leader must be willing to take responsibility for them.
- **F -** Fairness: The leader should adopt stakeholder-inclusivity (balancing of all material stakeholders in the best interest of others).
- **T -** Transparency: The leader should be transparent in how they exercise their role and responsibilities (Buthelezi, 2022:10-11).

4.1.2 Accountability

Hall, Fink and Buckley (2017:205) argue that accountability is crucial for maintaining social order and serves as a foundational principle of good governance. Extending this idea to the organisational context, Natria, Samian and Riantoputra (2022) define accountability in the workplace as the degree to which employees are answerable for their decisions, behaviours, and performance outcomes, and are expected to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions within the organisation. When linked with ethical leadership, accountability becomes a key mechanism for translating moral values into practice. Ethical leaders model integrity, fairness, and transparency, creating an environment where employees are encouraged and expected to be accountable for their actions. In this way, accountability not only reinforces ethical behaviour at the individual level but also strengthens the ethical culture of the organisation as a whole (Ashfaq, Abid & Ilyas, 2021).

4.1.3 Ethical culture

According to Chadegani and Jari (2016:53), an ethical culture comprises eight dimensions. These virtues are:

Clarity: the extent to which ethical anticipations are unambiguously defined to make them more understandable for the employees and management

Management congruency: the importance of aligning the conduct of executive and middle management with the ethical standards on which the organisation was founded

Supervisory congruency: the degree to which management adheres to the organisation's ethical expectations

Feasibility: the accessibility to appropriate resources, management, authority, and assistance to facilitate ethical conduct

Supportability: the organisation's dedication to strengthening ethical conduct between staff and management

Transparency: the visibility of ethical and unethical actions to relevant stakeholders

Discussability: the degree to which ethical matters can be honestly deliberated about in the organisation

Sanctionability: the perceived fairness and consistency of rewards and sanctions related to ethical behaviour

In summary, these dimensions collectively illustrate that an ethical culture is not only established through formal policies but also depends on consistent leadership behaviour, adequate support systems, and open communication that together encourage ethical decision-making across all levels of the organisation.

4.2 Conclusion

By viewing the above discussion of ethical leadership through a Christian lens, aspects such as integrity, responsibility, accountability, fairness, and transparency are rooted in biblical values. As Scripture teaches, *"to whom much is given, much will be required"* (The Holy Bible, Luke 12:48; italics added), emphasising the moral duty of leaders to act honourably. Ethical leadership, as defined by Buthelezi (2022:10), reflects the Christian quality of integrity, doing the right thing even though no one is watching you, aligns with Proverbs 10:9. The ICRAFT model's features of: integrity, competence, responsibility, accountability, fairness,

and transparency, reflect key Christian principles such as stewardship and righteousness (Buthelezi, 2022:10; The Holy Bible, Micah 6:8). Consequently, leadership becomes a sanctified conviction embedded in moral responsibility.

Similarly, the fundamentals of ethical culture as stipulated by Chadegani and Jari (2016:53), including transparency and discussability, replicate a biblically motivated community characteristic in which truth is expressed through affection (The Holy Bible, Ephesians 4:15) and ethical matters are communicated publicly. Accountability, as deliberated by Hall, Fink, and Buckley (2015:205) and further reinforced by Wallis and Gregory (2009:253) and Boiral (2016), aligns with Romans 14:12, which emphasises that, in the end, we are all ultimately accountable to God. As a result, accountability becomes not just a governance duty but also a spiritual obligation. In summation, ethical leadership and accountability, observed through a Christian perspective, are more than managing procedures; they become virtues of a Christian character driven to serve others with justice, humility, and integrity.

4.3 Barriers to ethical school environments

Unethical conduct in South African schools obstructs the promotion of an ethical working environment by corroding integrity, trust, and professionalism. This type of conduct has an undesirable influence on educators and learners and, at the same time, leads to poor service delivery (Singh & Twalo, 2015a:515). Authoritarian leadership, typified by exclusion and ambiguous communication, fosters an environment of fear and antipathy (Olabiyi, Du Plessis & Van Vuuren, 2024:3; Steyn & Singh, 2018:1030). Generally, it leads to distrust and the collapse of cooperation among staff (Mahlangu, 2014:319). Favouritism and bias exacerbate the situation by breaking down morale and initiating division (Olabiyi, Du Plessis & Van Vuuren, 2024:3). Nepotism further demoralises ethical leadership by weakening merit-based appointments and reducing credibility (Hofmeyr & Burns, 2012). Similarly, if there is no transparency in an organisation's financial matters and resource management, employees become alienated and obstruct the organisation's functioning (Singh & Twalo, 2015:516). The appointment of unqualified staff worsens the problem by lowering teaching standards (Mahlangu, 2014:315). Significant ethical violations, such as sexual misconduct, severely tarnish the professional image of the profession and put learners at risk (Davids & Waghid, 2016:5).

Furthermore, unwarranted parental influence, also known as parentocracy, defies professional autonomy and promotes biased decision-making (Human Sciences Research Council, 2024). Although literature underscores the importance of ethical leadership, accountability, and culture in schools, gaps persist between policy and practice. The empirical findings that follow explore how independent school leaders and educators experience and enact ethical leadership, highlighting the role of Christian values, organisational expectations, and individual agency in shaping ethical workplace environments.

5. Presentation and discussion of data

From the analysis of the data, the following sub-themes appeared:

5.1 Theme 1: Values-driven school leadership

The participants' responses reveal a strong commitment to ethical leadership practices grounded in personal values, professional standards, and accountability. Participant 1 emphasised, *"I believe in setting an example … being ethical in how I treat others, showing respect, and standing by my values no matter what. Learners and staff are always watching, and that's how we maintain ethical leadership."* This statement correlates with Buthelezi's (2022:10) ICRAFT model, specifically the pillars of integrity and responsibility, and resonates with Bachmann's (2017:211) emphasis on honesty and leaders' perception as moral role models.

Participant 2 noted, *"You can't lead ethically without trust. I'm transparent in how I make decisions, but I also don't shy away from being firm when it's needed. Everyone has a voice, but they also know there's accountability,"* reflecting Bachmann's (2017:211) and Buthelezi's (2022) frameworks, which highlight the centrality of trust, shared leadership, and decisiveness in ethical decision-making.

For Participant 3, ethical leadership is rooted in everyday respect, stating, *"[i]t's the small things … how we greet each other, how we talk. When you respect someone, they respect you back. That's where ethical leadership begins."* This connects with Chadegani and Jari's (2016) notions of supportability and discussability, and Buthelezi's (2022:10) focus on fairness and transparency.

Participant 4 expressed a strict commitment to accountability: *"Ethical leadership also means enforcing the rules if a teacher uses foul language, they get suspended. There's no favouritism. Everyone is held to the same standard,"* echoing Hall *et al*. (2017:208), Wallis and Gregory (2009), and the sanctionability element in Chadegani and Jari's (2016:53) ethical culture framework.

Participant 5 declared, *"[m]y role is to protect children. Whether it's enforcing safety rules or handling school finances, I always keep fairness and integrity in mind … people trust you more when you're consistent,"* highlighting child protection and financial ethics, which are well captured by Buthelezi's (2022:10) themes of responsibility and fairness, and Chadegani and Jari's (2016:53) virtues of feasibility and transparency.

Participant 6 affirmed, *"[a]s a principal, you're always on display. You can't preach integrity in school and act differently in public. People will notice that, and you'll lose credibility,"* reflecting the importance of personal-public consistency, aligned with Buthelezi's (2022:10) notions of integrity and transparency, as well as Bachmann's (2017) insights on trust and visible ethical behaviour.

Participant 7 emphasised ethical communication and resource management, stating, *"We try to maintain respectful communication and make sure there's no misuse of resources. I encourage openness and transparency in everything,"* resonating with Chadegani and Jari's (2016:53) supportability and discussability, and Buthelezi's (2022) themes of fairness and accountability.

Lastly, Participant 8 was fixed on policy implementation that must be clear and consistently applied: *"[w]e have clear policies and we apply them consistently, even for things like dress code. It's about professionalism and setting the right example for learners and staff,"* which aligns with Chadegani and Jari's (2016:53) clarity and management congruency, as well as Buthelezi's (2022:10) competence and transparency. These considerations underline a multi-layered attitude to ethical leadership that incorporates moral behaviour, interpersonal trust, accountability, and dependable benchmarks in school governance.

5.2 Theme 2: Faith-inspired ethical leadership in schools

Incorporating faith-based beliefs into ethical leadership emerged as a central strand among participants, resonating with existing research on the moral grounds of effectual leadership. Mey, Lloyd, and Ramalingum (2014:898) maintain that ethical leadership provides a moral scope that promotes trust and shared belonging, predominantly within establishments that endorse religious or spiritual values.

This belief is reflected in Participant 1's expression that *"leadership always looks up to the church … a sense of belonging,"* demonstrating just how religious organisations influence leadership conduct by promoting inclusivity and moral solidity within school settings.

Bachmann (2017:211) elaborated on this perspective by highlighting that ethical leadership involves demonstrating justice and integrity in all facets of decision-making.

Participant 2 repeats this perception, affirming that the school *"has always been a space where people are encouraged to do the right thing … we are a Christian school,"* supporting Bachmann's explanation that faith-based settings fundamentally encourage righteous conduct. This supports Bajpai *et al*.'s (2024:315) argument that ethical leadership is inspirational and transformative when it is founded upon common moral values.

Buthelezi's (2022:10) ICRAFT model (Integrity, Competence, Responsibility, Accountability, Fairness, Transparency) correlates with this connection by finding tangible utterances in participants' accounts of leadership conduct. Participant 3, for instance, illustrates this alignment by emphasising *"responsible use of resources"* and *"transparency,"* clearly linking ethical management to Christian principles. Participant 4's mention of "open meetings" due to leadership blunders mirrors Buthelezi's call for accountability and transparency, essential to ethical leadership in religiously fixed settings.

From a cultural stance, Chadegani and Jari (2016:53) alluded that ethical culture is maintained through factors such as clarity, supportability, and transparency. These are illustrated in Participant 6's remark that *"management lets you know what is expected of you,"* suggesting an organised ethical context where expectations are known to everyone and spiritually aligned. The participant's focus on alignment with *"the school's spiritual value system"* supports the interdependency between faith and organisational culture.

In addition, Participant 5 remarks that staff are *"honest and transparent … we are a faith-based school,"* reiterating the importance of integrity and fairness in faith-aligned environments. This consistency is in line with Chadegani and Jari's (2016) claim that ethical cultures are more efficient when ethical conduct is observed in the leadership structures of the organisation. In the same way, Participant 7 states that *"educators must be the role models… respect, empathy, trust, transparency go a long way,"* concurring with Bachmann (2017:211) and Buthelezi (2022:10) by declaring that observable ethical conduct is fundamental to an influential school culture.

Participant 8's assertion that *"if the school is rooted in Christian values, then it will automatically lead to an ethical working environment"* is particularly significant. It exemplifies the widely held belief that faith serves as a built-in ethical compass, guiding leadership and institutional integrity. This idea aligns with the South African Constitution (1996, 2007) and the acumen of Hester and Killian (2010:5), who maintain that ethical leadership in schools should complement constitutional and spiritual principles to stimulate learner well-being and social cohesion.

5.3 Theme 3: Tensions and silences in ethical school culture

Participant 1 drew attention to the conflict between financial pressures and ethical standards, stating, *"at times the school adopts business practices,"* referencing the common private school mindset of *"bums on seats*". This phrase might lead to the assumption that learner enrolment for profit targets to ensure economic survival will do away with ethical matters. In addition, Participant 1 made a remark relating to the parent community: *"there is a very vocal and at times entitled parent body,"* implying that disproportionate parental involvement could oppose school governance and disrupt ethical stability. These remarks echo the Human Sciences Research Council's (2024) criticism of parentocracy, in which disproportionate parental involvement creates ethical impasses and weakens professional authority.

In contrast, Participant 2 took a more affirmative stance, saying, "*I do like the ethical culture of the school,"* assigning this issue to the role of the governing Council. The participant explained, *"[t]hey influence the ethical culture through policies,"* while recognising that ethical culture is

"shaped by staff, students and ground staff". Although this implies a common understanding of collective responsibility, it could also reflect a dependence on organisational policy rather than lived behavioural practices, which may establish a rule-based rather than value-driven culture. As Olabiyi, Du Plessis, and Van Vuuren (2024:3) caution, an overdependence on top-down governance can, without doubt, lead to authoritarianism if all-encompassing engagement is absent.

Participant 3 described challenges rooted in broader societal trends, pointing out a decline in basic values at home. *"Parents are busy, therefore they don't educate their children on certain values,"* the participant said, before adding, *"[t]he words 'please' and 'thank you' are no longer instilled at a young age."* The implication here is that learners' ethical behaviour in school is directly influenced by home environments, echoing Davids and Waghid's (2016:5) position that the school is embedded within broader socio-cultural ecosystems.

The decline of foundational social norms was recognised as adversely affecting the culture of respect and accountability within schools. Participant 4 concentrated on in-house staff undercurrents and cooperative agency. While articulating optimism in management's objective by stating, *"[m]anagement has some work to do … they do mean well,"* the participant shifted the responsibility to staff, saying, *"Staff need to rally together and initiate conversations about the changes they want to see."* This emphasis on shared responsibility supports Buthelezi's (2022:10) promotion for ethical leadership that generates participatory spaces. However, the participant's framing also implied a slight reluctance to criticise management directly, opting instead for promoting peer-led reform.

Participant 5 similarly accepted ethical practices rooted in the school's customs: *"[t]he two weekly chapel services have a big impact,"* they noted. Yet, contradictions were also highlighted, particularly concerning cultural and religious tensions: *"The culture has been negatively affected because the school now has sports events on a Sunday."* The move is viewed by some as a disrespect for Sabbath observance, revealing a dissension concerning institutional decisions and stakeholder values, a discrepancy that Buthelezi (2022:11) maintains undermines trust and transparency in leadership.

What emerges across these responses is an acknowledgement of various external and internal pressures that make the nurturing of ethical culture difficult. Nevertheless, a critical issue that remained unaddressed by the participants concerns the ethical practices of the school leaders under whom they operate. The participants offered no indication as to whether these leaders exhibited ethical conduct. This silence may reasonably be interpreted as evidence that educators feel apprehensive or constrained when it comes to discussing such matters openly.. It could be out of fear of being victimised or bullied by leaders, of losing their jobs or work, of losing job security, or of being overlooked for promotion.

As Serfontein and De Waal (2015:3) remarked, ethical leadership prospers in settings where people feel safe to express their true feelings without fear of repercussions. The lack of response in this area suggests that, despite repeated commitments to an ethical culture, there might be covert undercurrents of mistrust or intimidation that stifle free speech, similar to the traits of unethical workplaces.

6. Findings

The findings are made through a Christian lens. In such a case, the conclusions infer that ethical leadership in independent schools is founded on faith and values, which are grounded in *"integrity"* (Participants 5, 6, and 8), *"accountability"* (Participants 2, 4, and 8), and *"servant leadership"* (all participants).

Participants on several occasions referred to the significance of *"respect"* (Participants 1, 3, and 7), *"consistency"* (Participants 5 and 6), *"transparency"* (Participants 3, 4, and 7), and *"trust"* (Participants 2, 5, and 7). These utterances correlate with Bible passages such as *"act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly"* (Micah 6:8; italics added). These values are also in line with Buthelezi's (2022) ICRAFT model and Bachmann's (2017:211) call for principled, visible ethical behaviour.

The declaration that "people are always watching" (Participant 1) underscores the importance of the understated inferences about influences and the personal experience of Christian ethical leadership taking place in the school. This confirms Starratt's (2004) concept of moral leadership and Bachmann's (2017:211) focus on trust as the foundation for ethical influence. Likewise, references to *"doing the right thing"* and *"setting an example"* mirror the Biblical ethic of integrity (Proverbs 11:3), underscoring moral leadership as a moral compass rather than just a managerial function.

Faith-based schools explicitly demonstrated a clear connection between institutional values and ethical leadership practices. Remarks like *"we are a Christian school"* and *"our chapel services shape our culture"* (Participants 2 and 5) confirm Mey *et al.*'s (2014:899) belief that moral communities promote greater cohesion and purpose. On the other hand, tensions such as the *"bums on seats"* frame of mind and *"sports on Sundays"* reveal ethical disparities when market or managerial benefits replace spiritual obligations, aligning with Buthelezi's (2022:11) apprehension about transparency and ethical consistency in decision-making.

Furthermore, the silence around direct critique of school leadership, despite broader discussions of ethics, points to possible cultures of concern, fear, or professional caution. Participants' unwillingness to evaluate leadership conduct may also suggest an absence of a *"speak-up"* culture, which Serfontein and De Waal (2015) argue is vital for ethical accountability. This silence could indicate that ethical norms are seen more as top-down codes than as shared, co-owned practices, rousing fears of authoritarianism, as warned by Olabiyi et al. (2024:3).

In conclusion, the call for staff to *"rally together and initiate conversations"* (Participant 4) shows a suppressed appeal for participatory ethics and shared moral agency. Nevertheless, this grassroots eagerness may remain suppressed if leadership does not actively create opportunities where ethical conversation is safe, valued, and incorporated into daily practice. As Chadegani and Jari (2016:53) suggest, supportability, clarity, and sanctionability are essential for an ethical culture to take root—not merely in policy, but in relational trust.

In the end, the conclusions confirm that ethical school environments must not be directed only through policies or faith-based identity. They must be lived and modelled authentically and consistently by leaders and communities alike.

7. Significance for further research

More research is required to establish how values become part of the daily leadership routines across various school settings, with a specific focus on where the school's values overlap with managerial or market-oriented requirements. Furthermore, the hush around complaints about leadership conduct highlights concerns about voice, agency, and the presence of a "speak-up" culture in schools.

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