

**EXPLORING SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS' ETHICAL LEADERSHIP
PRACTICES IN MANAGING SCHOOLS IN TSHWANE WEST DISTRICT 15,
GAUTENG PROVINCE**

by

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DECLARATION

Date: 04 June 2025

I, Freddy Abilio Mlambo, declare that the work titled "Exploring School Management Teams' Ethical Leadership Practices in Managing Schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province" is my original creation, and all sources utilized or cited have been duly referenced and acknowledged. I hereby affirm that I have not previously submitted this work, or any portion thereof, for examination at UNISA for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



Signed

Date: 04 June 2025

DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my deceased father, Victor Mshiyeni Mlambo, and my mother, Angeline Winase Mlambo, who instilled in me the principle that even the most formidable tasks may be achieved incrementally. I dedicate the successful completion of this thesis to my beloved wife, Tebatso Mavis Mlambo, and my daughters, Lesego and Keorapetse.

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ABSTRACT

Many educators, policymakers, social leaders, researchers and other stakeholders may question the relevance and efficacy of ethical school leadership and management in shaping a moral leadership trajectory for education, given the significant ethical leadership deficiencies across various societal sectors. The study examined school management teams (SMTs)' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. It investigated how SMT leaders and decision-makers apply honesty, fairness, transparency, accountability and respect. The study used a qualitative research methodology to examine SMT ethical leadership in the socio-educational setting. This study used a constructivist research paradigm because participants' worldviews, environmental understanding and interpretation provided insights. Twenty-four study participants had semi-structured interviews. Participants included teachers, department heads, principals and deputy principals. The study employed a qualitative technique to analyse and report results from a desktop-gathered methodology that also included various educational ethics, leadership and management policies. The goal of this research was to create a typology of ethical school leadership and management practices. It also sought to provide a fresh and complete view on ethical school leadership in the dynamic environment of school management and leadership, influenced by Ubuntu model. The model's four concepts of Respect, Service, Justice, Community Building and Honesty supported by seven ethical leadership values of Fairness, Morality, Trust, Accountability, Equality, Mutual Respect and Social Justice, revealed new ethical leadership possibilities and approaches for school research, practice and development. Several recommendations from the findings included SMT ethical principles that must conform to the Department of Basic Education's guidelines on ethics and leadership. The study also recommends establishing an SMT community of practice, ongoing ethics and awareness training, establishment of a staff-focused ethical awareness grid, and adoption of a comprehensive school ethics operational model to infuse ethical principles across all school leadership, management, and daily practices. Based on literature contributions and theoretical frameworks, the study concluded that ethical school leadership can continue to mediate between the emotional moral ownership of knowledge and the ethical concealment of knowledge by school leaders.

Keywords: Ethical school leadership; school management, leadership management, leadership practices, leadership traits; school management teams

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AULM	Affective Ubuntu Leadership Model
DBE	Department of Basic Education
EDLM	Education Development Leadership and Management
ELM	Ethical Leadership Management
ELS	Ethical Leadership Survey
ESL	Ethical School Leadership
EWB	Employee Work Behaviour
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
ILO	International Labour Organization
LSEN	learners with special needs
MRM	Moral Regeneration Movement
NDoE	National Department of Education
NDP 2030	National Development Plan 2030
NTI	National Teachers Institute
NUT	Union of Teachers of Nigeria
OCB	Organizational Citizenship Behaviour
PAM	Personnel Administrative Measures
SACE	South African Council for Educators
SBM	School-Based Management
SDP	School Development Plan
SDG4	Sustainable Development Goal number 4
SLT	School Leadership Team
SMT	School Management Team
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNISA	University of South Africa
UNSDG	United Nation's sustainable development goals

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the research study was to explore school management teams' (SMTs) ethical leadership in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. The study examined how SMTs understand, implement and uphold ethical principles, namely, honesty, fairness, transparency, accountability and respect in their leadership roles and decision-making processes. This study also sought to identify exemplary ethical leadership practices and obstacles globally that may hinder the advancement of ethical standards in school administration within the international, African and South African contexts. The aim was to attain a deeper comprehension of how ethical leadership enhances effective school leadership practices, elevates staff morale and strengthens student outcomes.

Ethical leadership in educational institutions is essential for shaping a school's climate, culture and general effectiveness. The education system in South Africa faces challenges such as resource disparity and governance issues, underscoring the need for ethically principled school leadership. The Gauteng Province, particularly Tshwane West District 15, illustrates these national issues, serving as a relevant context for examining the expression of ethical leadership by SMTs in their daily functions. Moreover, this study sought to examine the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in the governance of schools within the Tshwane West District 15. Ethical leadership, characterised by honesty, fairness, transparency, and accountability, is crucial for fostering trust among stakeholders, improving learner achievement and ensuring equitable decision-making processes. This research aimed to clarify good practices and pinpoint areas for improvement by analysing how SMTs comprehend and use ethical principles in their leadership positions. The investigation is based on the belief that ethical leadership is both a set of aspirational ideals and a practical framework that directs decision-making, conflict resolution, people management and community engagement. Understanding these strategies within the specific social and administrative setting of District 15 may yield valuable insights for the broader discourse on educational leadership in South Africa.

Arar and Saiti (2022) define ethical leadership as the ability to influence individuals to behave morally and guide them in that direction. Ethical principles encompass fairness, morality, ethics, trust, honesty, accountability, equality, mutual respect and social justice, among others. SMTs have numerous problems in their leadership of educational institutions. The principal, as the leader of the team, is entrusted with professional management responsibilities in accordance with the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1994, under the authority of the Head of Department at the district or regional level, to operate the school in a professional and ethical manner. SMTs are increasingly inadequate or confronted with challenges in this respect. The issue is whether these ethical leadership dilemmas are intensified by unethical leadership practices, which manifest in various forms of behavioural, systemic, transformational and resource-related or by a lack of comprehension or appreciation of the authority granted by the SASA Act under the principal's direction. This study aimed to investigate the ethical leadership behavioural practices of the SMTs in managing these schools, while acknowledging the foregoing problems. Concerns regarding the diminishing ethical leadership standards within South Africa's Department of Basic Education (DBE) have garnered significant attention (Corruption Watch Report, 2019). This research report underscores that many South African schools are becoming incubators of unethical conduct and inadequate management, with the report lamenting that school principals and their leadership teams are the primary perpetrators. The background of the study, problem statement, purpose and rationale for the study, significance of the study, main research question, sub-questions, research objectives, preliminary literature review, and research methodology, demarcation of the study and the definition of key concepts are discussed in this chapter.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted at six secondary schools within the Tshwane West area of Gauteng Province. The overall pass percentage and present managerial performance of the schools under review were not factors in the selection of the schools. Thien, Adams, Kho and Yap (2022), in their research on the perspectives from school leaders exploring value-driven leadership, assert that although school leaders may adhere to several ethical rules established

by various regulatory bodies and professional organisations, moral educational leaders are obligated to uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct. In the South African setting, individual principals and their management teams must recognise that their unethical conduct may adversely affect the future of the learners in their charge, many of whom may be under the care of unemployed caregivers, guardians or parents. Corruption Watch (2020) reports that over 900 charges of unethical leadership practices in schools have been recorded since the organisation's establishment in 2012 and its subsequent concentration on these matters. Corruption Watch (2020), in their exposé on greed and spurred long needed action against corruption in schools, reveal that the primary forms of unethical behaviour within the school setting significantly involve the misappropriation of school finances, assets or property, followed by the embezzlement of school feeding and transportation programmes, nepotism through improper staff appointments, favouritism in procurement practices, and the mismanagement of the assessment process. In 2009, Mr Trevor Manuel, the then Finance Minister, overtly lamented on the misconduct of the principals and their leadership teams, driven by unethical conduct and poor leadership practices. The DBE and other regulatory authorities provide comprehensive policies to govern the conduct and behaviour of SMTs and teachers. The SASA, No. 84 of 1996; the Employment of Educators Act, No. 76 of 1998; the South African Council of Educators (SACE) Code of Professional Ethics (2003) and the South African Standard for Principals (South African Government, 2016) are among the pertinent legislation in this domain.

Despite the existence of comprehensive rules and regulations, the DBE and other regulatory bodies in South Africa exhibit a notable deficiency in ethical leadership practices and moral conducts and the lack of commitment to implement these practices and decisions. No educator in South Africa may claim to be ignorant of the prohibition of physical punishment as recognised by the SASA, No. 84 of 1996. Nonetheless, this immoral and unethical practice is still often witnessed in most rural and township schools. Heekes, Kruger, Lester and Ward (2022), in their research work on a systematic review of corporal punishment in schools and investigation on its global prevalence and correlates, posit that certain SMTs perceive themselves as powerless to monitor and intervene on this unethical conduit, owing to persistent disputes between some teacher union leaders and the DBE regarding issues arising

from the illegal administration of corporal punishments and other prevalent unethical leadership practices. Corruption Watch (2020) asserts that the South African education system faced not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also a pervasive local plague of entrenched moral leadership difficulties that impede ethical leadership within educational institutions. Jones, Pillay, Reddy and Zondi (2022), in their study on ethical leadership and effective government in South Africa, drawing insights from political leadership in Africa, remark that there is an increasing global expectation among citizens for government institutions, such as schools, to uphold high standards of professional ethics, and for school leadership to exhibit exceptional integrity and impartiality in their service. Mohiuddin and Hossain (2016) and Jones et al. (2022) assert that the prevalence of unethical behaviour, including fraud and corruption, in modern public sector institutions such as schools significantly affects ethical leadership, thereby underscoring the critical importance of good governance and ethical leadership. Consequently, the notion of ethical school leadership in educational institutions continues to elicit academic discourse and investigation. Therefore, the study aimed to investigate the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) define a research problem as a discussion or concern that initiates a study or research endeavour. Elliot (2021) further illuminates this assertion by McMillan et al., (2014) in the study on research problems, posit problem statement as a condition in which something esteemed is damaged or impeded from achieving a desired and designated outcome. The researcher clarified that the problem statement allows users to evaluate a research-worthy issue based on its expected significance and potential detriment to individuals or society. Younas, Durante and Fàbregues (2024) define problem statement as any circumstance perceived as unsatisfactory or distressing, a challenge of some nature, a scenario necessitating alteration or anything that fails to operate as intended. A challenge represents a focal point for researchers: the conditions they aim to modify, the barriers they intend to remove and the inquiries for which they pursue solutions.

Furthermore, Younas, et al., (2024), in their research work on understanding the nature of and identifying and formulating a research problem, redefine the notion of research problems as a dialogue or issue that prompts a study or research initiative triggered by an actual or hypothetical social problem or event. They further underscore the critical importance of a research problem in this domain of ethical leadership and provide a conceptual and methodological framework for delineating and characterising research issues for exploration within socio cultural contexts. Younas et al., (2024) maintain that identifying researchable problem statements is instrumental for studying a particular phenomenon and discerning the appropriate methods for research. Consequently, it helps in the effective use of time, resources and efforts and reduces the chances of research failure. The Corruption Watch Report (2019), in their report on corruption in schools, shows that corruption in South African schools is a significant issue. This research report indicates that Corruption Watch has documented more than 1,000 allegations of purported wrongdoing in schools since 2014. The Corruption Watch Report (2020) laments that corrupt practices thrive in institutions characterised by immoral leadership. The Corruption Watch Report (2020) presents the following statistics on school corruption in South Africa: Eastern Cape 18%, Free State 19%, Gauteng 22%, KwaZulu-Natal 16%, Limpopo 5%, Mpumalanga 6%, Northwest 3%, Northern Cape 1%, and Western Cape 3%. In the remaining 7% of reports, the location was unspecified.

The report indicated that 32% of corruption in schools pertained to financial mismanagement, 20% to embezzlement, and 13% to procurement corruption. The Corruption Watch Report (2020) asserts that in 2019, there were 2,800 allegations of corruption, averaging eight complaints daily. About 58% of these allegations were identified as instances of corruption resulting from unethical conduct. The public sector is significantly impacted by the prevalence of corruption and other unethical conduct, alongside the education sector (Corruption Watch, 2020).

This study is relevant to the literature and discourse on the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in challenging circumstances, as it contests this contextual assertion. A significant portion of these grievances originates from the national local districts of Johannesburg and Tshwane, with Gauteng Province representing most of these unethical behaviours.

SMTs can achieve educational objectives by fostering an effective and supportive learning community, founded on sound moral principles and maintained through ethical leadership practices, including honesty, open-mindedness, humility, determination, righteousness and adaptability. Jones et al. (2022) contend that the leadership acts or behaviours of certain SMTs in South Africa and internationally are marked by various unethical practices that are important in managing schools. Secondary school educators and administrators, both locally and globally, frequently express dissatisfaction with the severity, inflexibility and ethical leadership practices of SMTs, as well as their exclusion from significant decision-making processes in the school setting. The commitment of teachers to achieving these educational objectives remains uncertain when school leadership makes unilateral ethical decisions. The profound moral ignorance and insufficient educational advancement currently evident in secondary schools globally seem to be provoking an escalating public outcry of discontent, disdain and frustration. This assertion is echoed by Kern (2025), who asserts that the decentralization of authority within the South African education system is a serious concern, particularly with the perceptions of inclusion among parent members of the SGB, of which principals are ex officio members. Khan, Ullah, Sami, Kukreti and Shaukat (2025) noted that in Africa, conflicting cultural practices, ethical beliefs, and workplace expectations pose challenges to school leadership and management, thereby fostering a paradoxical ethical leadership mindset that should encourage transformative learning environments and practices essential for effective school management. Mincu, Colman, Day, and Gu (2024) highlight several obstacles to effective ethical school leadership practices in school management in their research on two decades of effective school leadership in England, employing a humanistic perspective. Corruption Watch (2020) Report on the long-needed action on school corruption activities notes that there appears to be a rise in disciplinary issues in schools, including tardiness, dishonesty, bullying, vandalism of school property, severe and persistent absenteeism, and inappropriate attire exhibited by both teachers and learners. The researcher notes that these behavioural acts have caused a deterioration in moral and ethical behaviour inside the school environments. These conditions may hinder the achievement of school objectives and raise questions about whether the school leadership adheres to ethical leadership principles for achieving its goals.

Against this background, these conditions necessitated a study aimed at exploring the ethical leadership practices of management teams in these institutions. The study aimed to investigate the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in the management of schools within the Tshwane West District 15 of Gauteng Province.

1.4 THE PURPOSE AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of SMTs in ethical practices related to school management. The purpose further sought to explore how SMTs understand, implement and uphold ethical principles, namely, honesty, fairness, transparency, accountability and respect in their leadership roles and decision-making processes. Jones et al. (2022) lament that South Africa is among numerous nations grappling with moral and ethical deterioration, alongside a drop in trust in organisational and national leadership. It has become prevalent in educational environments to face workers with varying interpretations of ethics or who have not accepted established ethical guidelines, despite a consensus regarding such norms and conduct within the school environment.

This has resulted in the prevalence of evident immoral behaviours such as hostility, intentional disruption of school activities, retribution and betrayal of others. Tan (2024) posits that research on ethical leadership, which integrates moral character and ethical management, predominantly centres on personnel. Nevertheless, there are studies indicating that leaders also exhibit or deliberately incite similar behaviours. This research study aimed to enhance the existing literature by analysing the mediating role of ethical leadership in the relationship between the ethical leadership style of SMTs and the implementation of essential ethical leadership practices in school management.

The researcher has participated in multiple school governing bodies as a member, where one successfully identified various ethical leadership difficulties faced by SMTs. For instance, SMTs would disapprove of individuals who confront acts of despotism, misconduct, unethical behaviour and general negligence by the SMTs. The issue of ethical leadership deficiencies and contradictions is pervasive.

A burgeoning corpus of evidence suggests that the challenges of ethical leadership have become a significant concern for SMTs, therefore, igniting the rationale for this investigation.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research study was essential for advancing the exploration of current literature on ethical school leadership and for establishing a new body of knowledge. Pramodini (2022), in the research on evaluation of importance for research in education asserts that the significance of research in education or any context, aimed at analytically contributing to the body of academic knowledge, offers numerous advantages and well-structured research should emphasise this. The outcomes of this research study should ideally prompt modifications in approaches or ethical leadership behaviours that would be beneficial and address potential ethical leadership deficiencies in schools. From the researcher's viewpoint, its importance to new knowledge lies in our exploration of topics that prickle our curiosity or ignite our passion. In the quest to align the study's relevance, we conduct research as a fundamental component of the ongoing advancement of knowledge to influence society. The relevance, both individually and collectively, is in the capacity to contribute to educational research in the pursuit of meaning.

This study aimed to augment the foundations of knowledge, encompassing both linguistic and theoretical significance, which are occasionally both individual and context dependent. Unresolved conflicts inside the organisation can prompt people to question whether a leader has exhibited an effective and unbiased position. The increase in organisational scandals, a decline in ethical leadership, work quality and productivity, and the pursuit of optimal ethical leadership practices constitute an ongoing endeavour to mitigate challenges in organisational governance and leadership. Awodiji and Naicker (2024), in their study on the comparative assessment of the leadership development requirements for basic school leaders, advocate for proficient leaders to incorporate ethics and promote values in addressing organisational ethical challenges.

They further argue that the discourse on ethical leadership as an alternative or integrative approach to contemporary practices is currently of paramount importance. This study is significant given the disheartening portrayal of leadership and ethics in the public sphere, especially within education. The researcher needed to enhance the comprehension of the ethical issues encountered by SMTs while executing their responsibilities in intricate educational environments.

The researcher examined the probable responses of these teams to the ethical leadership challenges. This study aimed to elucidate the application of ethical leadership theories to improve school leadership and administration. This was conducted to examine the moral leadership tactics employed by SMTs in administering schools within the Tshwane West District 15 of Gauteng Province.

1.6 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

The study aimed to explore the experiences of SMTs with ethical practices in school management. The following main research question was explored, namely:

- What are the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province?

1.6.1 Sub-Questions

The following critical sub-questions underpinned this study:

1.6.1.1 How do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

1.6.1.2 What are the teacher's experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools?

1.6.1.3 What is the perspective of teachers on how the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders?

1.7 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following objectives underpinned this study:

1.7.1 To explore how SMTs maintain ethical conduct.

1.7.2 To explore the teachers experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools.

1.7.3 To explore the perspective of teachers on how the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders.

1.8 PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

The study concentrated on one of the three most prevalent and modern leadership theories: Ethical, Authentic and Servant leadership. The study was theoretically underpinned by Ethical Leadership as the foundational notion of this study. The research examined the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in the management of schools within the Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. The theory of ethical leadership is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions, articulated differently by various authors and experts in diverse contexts and circumstances. In this study, the researcher embraced Simha's (2022) assertions, which define this theory as a philosophy centred on self-awareness. The author delineates a major difference between this theory and the two prevailing ideas of genuine and servant leadership, asserting that ethical leadership prioritises moral management, whereas authentic and servant leaders are not inherently transactional in nature. As the principle that exemplifies morally acceptable behaviours in both personal and interpersonal conduct, Arar and Saiti (2022) further elucidate the ethical leadership theory underpinning this study.

This approach aims to strengthen relationships, encourage and display such behaviours among groups in any organisation through interactive dialogues, reinforcement and decision-making processes within workplace, educational or social environments. The notion is further upon in relation to how SMTs, via their everyday interactions, either personal or interpersonal, exemplify and encourage normatively proper behaviour.

Moral management and moral identity are essential in the integration of this theory with these features. This study investigated the ethical school leadership philosophy, which encompasses five fundamental features along with additional components and constructs that elaborate on the main research question and sub-questions defining the essence of this inquiry, grounded in leadership theory. The five core concepts outlined next are respect, service, justice, community building and honesty.

1.8.1 SMTs' Ethical Leadership Practices in Managing Schools

The ethical leadership practices of SMTs are essential to fostering an organisational climate characterised by trust, fairness and integrity within educational institutions. Ethical

leadership directly influences teachers' organisational citizenship behaviours (OCBs) and overall school performance (Ahmed, 2025). Principals, acting as both managers and ethical leaders, must embody transparency, fairness and responsible management to set a moral tone for the entire institution (Karim et al., 2025).

Research reveals that effective SMT leadership hinges upon balancing managerial tasks with moral stewardship. Principals, in both public and boarding schools in Indonesia, for example, were found to adopt situational, collective and inspirational leadership models that reflect ethical sensitivity and responsiveness to their educational environments (Karim et al., 2025). Similarly, ethical leadership typologies, including duty-based, care-based and justice-based leadership styles, are critical for understanding how SMTs navigate complex moral decisions (Watkins, 2024).

The role of ethical leadership is particularly crucial during periods of turbulence, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, where school leaders needed to adapt by maintaining transparency, collaboration and trust, even as systemic pressures drove many towards top-down, autocratic decision-making (Acton, 2025). Ethical leadership during such crises underscores the necessity of adaptive leadership qualities grounded in moral principles. Furthermore, Quynh, Alang and Le (2025) emphasise that promotion-focused ethical leadership positively correlates with employee engagement and organisational citizenship behaviours. In educational contexts, this suggests that SMTs who foster an ethical culture enhance teacher motivation and participation beyond contractual obligations, thereby improving school outcomes.

The importance of ethical leadership extends to knowledge management. Ghezelseflo and Bay (2025) found that ethical leadership among principals positively influences knowledge-sharing behaviours among teachers, mediated by psychological ownership. This relationship emphasises how ethical school leadership nurtures professional growth and collaboration among staff. Additionally, Yan, Lin and Wang (2025) demonstrate that perceived organisational support, fuelled by ethical leadership, significantly enhances teachers' work engagement, further confirming that ethical practices at the leadership level cascade positively throughout the school ecosystem.

Collectively, these studies highlight that SMTs must cultivate ethical leadership through transparency, fairness, collaboration, knowledge empowerment and respect for organisational and societal values. Ethical lapses among SMTs not only undermine institutional trust but also erode the moral foundation essential for student development and school excellence.

1.8.2 The manner in which SMTs maintain ethical conduct

SMTs maintain ethical conduct through a combination of personal virtues, strategic organisational practices and the cultivation of an ethical culture among all staff. Central to ethical leadership are traits such as genuineness, honesty, dependability, transparency, concern, reasonableness and ethical decision-making (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison, 2005; Kanungo, 2001). Ethical leaders not only model these characteristics personally but also actively foster ethical awareness and behaviour in their teams by communicating clear ethical standards, rewarding ethical conduct and holding individuals accountable for unethical actions. One of the principal methods used by SMTs is the cultivation of a positive organisational climate.

Research highlights that a positive climate enhances employees' motivation, organisational duty, and sense of purpose, fostering collaboration and ethical behaviour throughout the school (Wardana, Sudirman, Rachman, Paramansyah, and Ramli, 2024). Ethical leaders achieve this through consistent communication of values, maintaining transparency in decision-making and promoting justice and fairness among staff and students. Furthermore, the adherence to the "ethic of care," the "ethic of critique," and the "ethic of justice" is essential.

These dimensions are crucial for addressing the diverse ethical challenges SMTs face, emphasising empathy, critical reflection on inequalities and the fair treatment of all school community members. Social learning theory explains part of the mechanism: followers imitate the behaviour modelled by ethical leaders, learning to value honesty, accountability and integrity through reinforcement mechanisms such as recognition and sanctions (Brown et al., 2005).

This learning environment not only cultivates ethical practices but also institutionalises them, ensuring that ethical leadership is a shared responsibility rather than the sole purview of individual leaders. Moreover, the implementation of structured ethical leadership development programmes has proven to be vital. Recent studies emphasise constructing leadership assessments and moral leadership training (Arjanto et al., 2025), which systematically evaluate and reinforce ethical behaviours among school leaders. In educational settings particularly, SMTs must focus on establishing shared visions that integrate ethical considerations into every aspect of school management from teacher evaluation to resource distribution and student discipline.

According to Yan, Lin and Wang (2025), ethical leadership in educational institutions significantly correlates with increased teacher engagement and professional commitment, demonstrating that ethical school management directly influences school effectiveness. By setting clear ethical standards, providing professional development, modelling appropriate behaviour, rewarding ethical actions and fostering inclusive participation, SMTs ensure that ethical leadership is not an abstract ideal but a daily, lived reality within their schools.

1.8.3 Teachers' experiences regarding the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools

Teachers' experiences regarding the professional growth of SMTs reflect a crucial dimension of school improvement and ethical leadership practices. The evidence from multiple studies underscores that effective leadership development among SMTs significantly enhances both leadership capacity and ethical school environments. Transformational leadership traits among school principals are particularly impactful in promoting teachers' innovative behaviours and professional growth. Yilmaz and Tore (2025) found that school principals who display transformational leadership traits positively influence teachers' innovative work behaviours through the mediating effect of self-efficacy, highlighting that strong moral leadership promotes teacher empowerment and professional advancement. Similarly, ethical leadership strongly correlates with teacher motivation and commitment. A study conducted in Portuguese public schools revealed that ethical leadership by school management fosters intrinsic motivation and organisational commitment among teachers, while despotic leadership behaviours have the opposite effect (Neves, 2025). This suggests that the ethical

growth of SMTs plays a direct role in fostering teacher loyalty, motivation and professional dedication.

Sagragao, Salva and Ferenal (2025) also emphasise that outstanding leadership practices by school heads correlate significantly with improved teacher performance. Teachers reported that leadership focusing on strategic management, relationship building and personal growth development contributed to their own performance improvements, indicating that professional growth within SMTs enhances both teacher satisfaction and student outcomes. From a justice and equity standpoint, Shaked (2025) demonstrates that principals who emphasise organisational justice such as distributive, procedural and interactional fairness strengthen teachers' perceptions of ethical treatment within schools. These practices foster ethical school environments where teachers feel respected and valued, resulting in increased engagement and professionalism.

Muller (2024), in the research work on the role of SMT in the provision of care and professional support, highlights the role of senior leadership teams in promoting teacher well-being, identifying open communication, supportive leadership, workload management and the provision of mentorship, professional development as well as guided ethical communication through listening and speaking as important caring roles and responsibilities for sustaining professional development and ethical conduct. Collectively, these findings reveal that teachers perceive SMTs' professional growth particularly in ethical leadership and moral conduct as vital for fostering innovation, motivation, well-being and trust. Teachers consistently emphasise the importance of supportive, transformational and ethical leadership in sustaining an environment conducive to professional development and high educational standards.

1.8.4 Perspective of teachers on how the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders

Teachers believe that the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies must establish and enforce clear ethical leadership standards to effectively address unethical conduct among school leaders. According to research, ethical leadership requires active engagement with integrity, transparency and fairness, not only in decision-making but also in daily school administration (Greenfield, 1991; Starratt, 1991). It is recommended that regulatory bodies

reinforce continuous professional development focusing on moral literacy and ethical decision-making frameworks. Studies have emphasised the need for systemic training that supports leaders in prioritising communal well-being over personal or organisational gains (Oduol and Cornforth, 2019).

Accountability mechanisms such as independent audits, ethical leadership assessments and confidential reporting systems should be normalised to detect and rectify unethical practices promptly. Research highlights the necessity for decentralised disciplinary frameworks that empower teachers and staff to participate actively in ethical oversight, thereby reducing excessive hierarchical power that can shield unethical leaders (Shaw, Li and Guo, 2025). The literature also advocates for promoting a positive school climate anchored in ethical leadership, where school leaders are evaluated not just on educational outcomes but also on moral and ethical leadership competencies (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Hammeduddin and Engbers (2021). Finally, teachers assert that the DBE must introduce policies aimed at minimising hierarchical power distances in schools, which, if left unchecked, could encourage unethical behaviours (Hashemi et al., 2021)

1.8.5 Respect

Principled leadership is deeply anchored in the practice of thoughtfulness and respect towards followers, serving as an ethical foundation for effective school management. Respect within leadership is not merely a courtesy; it is an ethical imperative that directly influences organisational culture and outcomes (Cholbi, 2025). The SMT's approach to respect is critical; it reflects not only their personal values but also shapes the ethical climate of the school.

Respect, understood as recognising the dignity and autonomy of others, requires school leaders to engage thoughtfully and critically with their colleagues and students. As Neufeld and Kassam (2025) note, respecting autonomy fosters intrinsic motivation and well-being, both vital for sustainable educational success. In the absence of respect, a school environment becomes susceptible to unethical practices, eroding trust and professional integrity (Neufeld and Kassam, 2025).

Delegation and oversight within the SMT are central to the practical embodiment of respect. Effective delegation involves entrusting others with meaningful responsibilities and recognising their professional capacities. However, when SMT members are intolerant of disagreement, it reveals an authoritarian leadership style incompatible with ethical leadership principles. Cholbi (2025) highlights that respect entails treating individuals as rational agents capable of self-governance, thereby necessitating openness to dissent and dialogue rather than dominance. Furthermore, fostering a culture of mutual respect within the school aligns with educational practices promoting inclusive environments. Respect Education initiatives emphasise that tolerance, shared responsibility and acknowledgment of diversity are foundational for reducing conflicts and unethical behaviours in schools (Meilani and Fitri, 2024). Schools must create systems where respect is not optional but integral to every aspect of administrative and educational practice.

Failure to prioritise respect not only undermines ethical leadership but also perpetuates hierarchical, authoritarian environments detrimental to student development and teacher engagement (Marquet et al., 2025). Educational leaders must therefore recognise respect as an operational, relational and moral necessity, framing their leadership strategies to embody this value authentically and consistently.

1.8.6 Service

The aspiration of the SMT to effectively serve their constituents is a critical facet of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership emphasises service over status, where leaders are envisioned not as rulers but as stewards responsible for the collective welfare of their institutions (Peterson, Robinson and Rideaux, 2025). In the school context, this requires SMT members to embrace a service-oriented mindset, engaging with humility, fairness and accountability, irrespective of the hierarchical positions their followers may occupy.

True ethical leadership involves acting as stewards of community values, ensuring that justice, care, critique, guides all administrative practices and attentiveness to the local community context (Peterson et al., 2025). It demands consistent ethical communication and the reinforcement of shared moral standards within the institution. Quynh, et al. (2025) illustrate that ethical leadership correlates strongly with organisational citizenship behaviours

(OCBs), where leaders' ethical stewardship promotes intrinsic motivation among employees to act beyond formal job requirements, strengthening institutional loyalty and cohesion.

Conversely, a failure to embody ethical stewardship within the SMT can lead to an environment plagued by unethical practices such as favouritism, disengagement and demotivation. Neves (2025) emphasises that despotic leadership—where leaders act for self-interest rather than collective well-being—negatively impacts teacher motivation and organisational commitment. Similarly, Slagle, Chatham-Carpenter and Williams (2025) discuss how in moments of institutional crisis, ethical leadership becomes paramount: leaders must not merely repair reputations but rebuild institutional integrity through learning, transparency and proactive visioning.

The practical implementation of ethical versus immoral behaviours by SMTs fundamentally reflects on the ethical health of the entire school ecosystem. As shown by Neves (2025), ethical leadership fosters environments where autonomy, justice and organisational commitment are prioritised, directly influencing the intrinsic motivation of staff. Therefore, school leaders must consistently evaluate their practices against ethical standards, reinforcing values-based leadership as both a moral and practical necessity for sustainable educational management.

1.8.7 Justice

Moral leaders bear the responsibility to exemplify justice and ensure impartiality in their treatment of followers. Within a school environment, the SMT must enforce discipline consistently, as this reflects the ethical standard of justice necessary for cultivating a trustworthy and morally sound atmosphere (Awan et al., 2025). Inconsistent application of sanctions or rewards fosters perceptions of favouritism and undermines ethical leadership, leading to distrust and potential unethical behaviour among staff and students.

Justice in leadership encompasses fair decision-making processes, transparency and proportionality in disciplinary actions. Ethical leadership, therefore, demands that sanctions for unethical behaviour correspond appropriately to the severity of the misconduct and that rewards for ethical behaviour are administered impartially (Jeong, Sun and Yam, 2025).

As shown in the findings of Nguyen (2025), when ethical standards are communicated clearly and consistently through leadership actions, followers demonstrate higher levels of thriving and moral engagement in their organisational roles. Moreover, the perceptions of fairness held by subordinates are critical. When followers perceive fairness in the application of justice by leadership, it reinforces an ethical climate that encourages self-regulation and collective ethical behaviour (Nguyen, 2025; Yan, Lin, and Wang, 2025). Ethical leadership is not just about personal integrity but also about creating an organisational structure that systematically rewards ethical behaviour and deters misconduct (Lu et al., 2025).

Experiences and perspectives from within educational leadership demonstrate that when SMT members engage in fair, consistent and justified disciplinary practices, schools witness greater levels of work engagement and ethical commitment from teachers (Yan et al., 2025). Conversely, a leadership approach that appears arbitrary or self-serving severely erodes morale and organisational trust, potentially leading to higher incidences of unethical conduct (Nguyen, 2025; Kyambade and Namatovu, 2025). Therefore, the consistent and transparent enforcement of discipline, aligned with principles of justice, is not merely administrative but a crucial manifestation of ethical leadership within school management.

1.8.8 Community Building

Ethical leadership demands a prioritisation of the welfare of all individuals within the school, with a dedicated focus on the collective good and the realisation of shared objectives. Establishing a cohesive and ethical school community is rooted in values such as trust, honesty, respect and recognition of everyone's unique contributions (Awan et al., 2025). Without these ethical foundations, schools risk becoming environments where bullying, intolerance, disrespect and unethical behaviour thrive, ultimately leading to organisational dysfunction and moral decay.

The SMT plays a pivotal role in modelling and sustaining ethical practices within the school. Ethical leadership is not only about setting moral examples but also involves fostering environments where every member feels valued, respected and motivated to contribute to the school's mission (Nguyen, 2025).

Ethical leadership practices influence followers' attitudes and behaviours through mechanisms such as trust-building, ethical communication and organisational support (Yan, Lin and Wang, 2025). By ensuring that the behaviour of the SMT aligns with ethical standards, leaders can cultivate a school climate characterised by mutual respect and moral engagement. Moreover, ethical leadership significantly shapes the emotional and motivational dynamics within an institution. Jeong et al. (2025) argue that moral emotions triggered by ethical leadership enhance organisational citizenship behaviours and promote proactive engagement, crucial for maintaining a respectful and morally aware school environment. These ethical behaviours are amplified when leadership is practised transparently and consistently, creating a culture of integrity and moral excellence (Peterson, Robinson and Rideaux, 2025).

Ethical leadership is particularly critical in times of social tension and institutional challenge. Slagle, Chatham-Carpenter and Williams (2025) highlight how leadership responses grounded in ethical principles, particularly during crises, can foster organisational renewal and resilience, which are equally important in schools facing cultural and ethical challenges. Therefore, the SMT must deliberately foster ethical awareness not only through disciplinary measures but also through everyday modelling of honesty, inclusivity and respect, therefore, embedding these values into the very fabric of the school culture.

In short, the contribution of ethical leadership by the SMT is indispensable in creating a unified, ethically aware school community. It demands consistent ethical behaviour, proactive engagement with moral challenges and an unwavering commitment to fairness and respect for all school members.

1.8.9 Honesty

The SMT must demonstrate honesty and uphold integrity in their communications and engagement with stakeholders. Transparency and honesty foster a collegial environment in the workplace and eliminate any unethical behaviour within the group. Integrity and honest behaviour are essential for fostering a morally conscious workforce inside the school setting.

This ethical characteristic of trust is further analysed in relation to SMT ethical leadership in school management.

Maina (2022) elucidates essential principles underpinning the theory of ethical leadership, as reviewed from Northouse (2021). Numerous theoretical frameworks have been proposed, suggesting that leadership is a complex phenomenon devoid of a singular, simplistic approach applicable in all contexts. The primary rationale for the researcher's investigation was to examine the utilisation of ethical leadership techniques by SMTs in the efficient administration of secondary schools.

Maina (2022) asserts that ethical leadership is undeniably an ethical phenomenon, and its development is significantly influenced by initial exposure. The necessity to investigate the theory of ethical leadership within the realm of school management has become increasingly vital for fostering a positive ethical culture in educational institutions. This study examination encompasses the principles of ethics in leadership, managerial behaviour, behavioural integrity, communication and delegation and sharing in the school environment. Observations in public schools in Gauteng Province indicate that SMTs are struggling to foster an enabling environment for goal attainment, attributed to various unethical leadership practices.

When teachers who are at the forefront of implementing the school's academic agenda and educational policies are not appreciated and supported by school leadership, they are likely to view themselves as marginalised and may prioritise personal success over that of the institution. Obiekwe, Ifeanyi and Mbonu (2021), in the investigation of ethical leadership practices of principals for the achievement of objectives in public secondary schools, assert that ethical leadership practices are characterised by the behaviours exhibited by principled leaders in the execution of their leadership duties.

Conversely, Obiekwe and Ezeugbor (2019) researching on teacher's perspectives on the extent of principals' ethical leadership behaviours in secondary schools, previously asserted that unethical behaviour is likely to adversely affect the attainment of long-term organisational objectives and performance. Morality is essential and obligatory at all organisational levels, particularly for leaders who exemplify ethical behaviour for their

employees, such as the SMT. Moral leadership engenders and shapes trust, as individuals are more inclined to follow moral leaders, confident in their ability to act ethically and provide the necessary outcomes.

Drawing from the historical seminal research of esteemed scholars such as Brown, Trevino and Harrison (2005), who previously defined ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate behaviour through personal actions and interpersonal interactions, as well as the promotion of such behaviour in followers via reciprocal communication, reinforcement and decision-making. Pringle, Sun and Carlson (2024), in their research analysis of the common and distinct viewpoints of moral character and what are the characteristics of a moral individual, subsequently proclaim that a moral individual is characterised by the adherence to elevated ethical norms, exemplified by their honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, inspiration and dedication to social justice.

According to d'Amato, Murugavel, Medeiros and Watts (2024), in their research work on the assessment and development of a moral person and moral manager dimensions, a moral leader is an ethical leader who positively influences the attitudes, behaviours, practices and conduct of subordinates through their leadership actions. In examining the idea of ethical leadership that underlies this study, Mostafa and Bottomley (2020) corroborated this assertion by investigating the role of social capital in the connection between altruistic ethical leadership and employee behaviour. When the SMT, serving in various leadership roles, cultivates an environment that promotes and enhances the quality of social relations within the school and the broader community, yet the community fails to reciprocate these initiatives, it is probable that the community will recognise the ethical measures implemented by the management team to foster social capital.

Therefore, it may be anticipated that social capital will mediate the relationship between the SMT's ethical leadership practices in school management and its performance. Ethical SMTs possess the ability to cultivate and promote a positive ethical climate within the school, fostering productive interactions at three levels: the individual, the team and the entire school environment. Fostering relationships and upholding strong ethical standards at each level of the school can yield positive outcomes and advantages for ethical leaders. Ethical leadership

is characterised by the promotion of the dignity and rights of others, and adherence to moral principles. Consequently, it is associated with concepts such as charisma, equity, justice, integrity and thoughtfulness.

Ethics examines the diverse morals and values that individuals or communities consider essential or commendable. Furthermore, individuals' morals and goals are intrinsically connected to ethics. The ethical development of a leader influences their moral choices. This study is grounded in social learning theory, as defined by Simha (1977), which posits that new behaviours can be acquired through the observation and imitation of others. Accordingly, SMTs serve as the principal leaders for the entire institution. Behaviour is monitored and then emulated, including the adherence to ethical leadership principles and the cultivation of ethical judgments. A second chance for social learning is established through the leader's incentives and sanctions, which indicate appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. In this study, the words SMT and school leadership are utilised interchangeably.

1.9 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The objective of this research approach was to ascertain the influence of ethical leadership by SMTs on effective school management. This study utilised a qualitative research methodology, supported by a literature analysis and empirical inquiry. Singh (2022) characterises it as a methodology focused on qualitative phenomena, wherein the study objective is based on uncovering core reasons and aspirations through in-depth interviews.

Dubey and Kothari (2022) assert that the research technique selected by the researcher comprises a series of actions aimed at examining and finally enhancing a model or procedure to analyse the outcomes of a typical problem, underpinned by a literature review and data analysis. Consequently, these objectives are refined and further ideas for their implementation are provided. Kanholkar and Dharkar (2022) describe research as a genuine voyage of revelation, emphasising that the proper optimisation of methodology in this

process is an academic endeavour. The author further asserts that this process must facilitate the establishment of connections between factors and analyse interactions that encompass various research activities, which are crucial and persuasive in selecting research topics, articulating hypotheses, specifying research frameworks, collecting and interpreting data.

1.9.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, appropriate for exploring the ethical leadership practices of SMTs within the socio-educational context of Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province. Qualitative research is well-suited for examining complex social phenomena and uncovering deep insights into human behaviour, values and practices particularly those rooted in context, meaning and personal experience (Köhler, Rumyantseva and Welch, 2023). In alignment with interpretivist epistemology, this research sought to understand how SMTs perceive and enact ethical leadership. The emphasis is on the lived experiences of educational leaders and the ethical considerations that guide their decisions. This aligns with Goundar (2025), who emphasises the importance of researcher positionality in qualitative inquiry, arguing that a researcher's values, identity and social position influence both the design and interpretation of the study.

Researcher reflexivity is central in this design. As Goundar (2025) explains, being transparent about the researcher's role whether as an insider, outsider or somewhere in between ensures ethical rigour and enhances trustworthiness. Clarifying positionality helps guard against bias and improves the credibility of the findings (Holmes, 2020; Bourke, 2014).

Köhler et al. (2023) argue for the importance of qualitative designs in generating new theory and challenging existing assumptions through "retheorizing." While their focus is on restudies, their argument supports the broader value of qualitative approaches in reinterpreting social dynamics such as leadership ethics in education.

This research also integrates elements of descriptive design, aiming to portray how SMTs interpret and apply ethical principles in practice. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, observations and document analysis. These methods enable flexibility while allowing the researcher to delve into sensitive ethical issues and capture rich, contextualised data (Slater and Hasson, 2025). The interviews explored themes such as fairness, integrity,

transparency and accountability in school management. As recommended by Wilson et al. (2022) and Yip (2024), ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was ensured for all participants. The research design emphasises voluntary participation and confidentiality. Transparency in reporting and analysis was maintained to reflect the voices and experiences of participants accurately.

According to Baruth (2013), a research design is a comprehensive strategy delineating the execution of the research study. The author posits that it constitutes a holistic approach to data collection and analysis. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) assert that the study design establishes a comprehensive framework for the measurements or activities undertaken by the researcher, the data collected and the analysis conducted. Maree (2016) defines research design as a methodology that delineates the selection of respondents, the preferred data collection techniques and the subsequent data analysis following the examination of causal philosophical assumptions. This study adopted a descriptive research strategy as outlined by Dubey and Kothari (2022), who posit that a descriptive study must gather data for a specific objective to maximise profit. The authors further state that a specific hypothesis serves as a guide when descriptive investigations vary in degrees, contingent upon the research challenge, thereby enabling the assessment of both implicit and explicit hypotheses.

Descriptive studies often delineate the magnitude of an issue and the attributes of the population or individuals involved. In contrast, as argued by Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), this paradigm highlights the oversimplifications of universal patterns while simultaneously acknowledging the intricacies of individual realities and coherent explanations. Interpretivism also considers the complexity of society.

Collins and Bohonos (2021), in their work on phenomenology and autoethnography as potential research methodologies, assert that idealistic ethical perspectives such as hermeneutics, phenomenology and social constructivism are associated with interpretivism. These approaches reject the objectivist notion that connotation exists in the world independently of awareness.

1.9.1.1 Research Paradigm

This study employed a constructivist research paradigm owing to the insights derived from participants' worldviews and their comprehension and interpretation of their environment. Consequently, it is unpredictable. Their perspectives, aspirations and interpretations of moral leadership influenced the focus that delineates the research paradigm. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) assert that the ontology of the interpretive paradigm recognises social reality as a product of an individual's comprehension of the world. This study, therefore, examined the SMTs' ethical leadership behaviours, views, attitudes, and experiences in selected Gauteng secondary schools.

1.9.1.2 Research Approach

Scientific research tends to utilise several methodologies. This study employed a qualitative research methodology. It has prioritised elucidating social phenomena above validating them, relying on actual human behaviour to generate meaning in daily interactions. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) corroborate this assertion. The objective of the qualitative method, as posited by Maree (2016), is to comprehend the world via the perspective of the participant, who is likely to serve as a valuable source of information. Furthermore, the author characterises qualitative research as a form of genuine investigation aimed at comprehensively understanding social processes within a natural context.

1.9.1.3 Research Strategy

This study utilised phenomenology as a qualitative research paradigm. Phenomenology, as articulated by Li and Fu (2023), is an investigative methodology that allows the researcher to thoroughly examine the experiences associated with a particular case or incident. The authors further delineate this technique as an interpretation of educational events from the standpoint of life and experiences of SMTs, as well as both teachers and students within the school environment.

Patton (2014) asserts that phenomenology emphasises the ways individuals perceive, appreciate and interpret their experiences. Conversely, Best and Kahn (2016) characterised phenomenology as a method that elucidates the present circumstances or investigates and analyses the interplay among the diverse variables affecting change and development.

To examine the experiences of SMTs and teachers concerning moral and immoral leadership behaviours within the school, the researcher chose phenomenology as the suitable research method. This research technique, as articulated by Gulay and Altum (2022), is a methodology aimed at comprehending individuals' perceptions of an event, situation or concept, together with the internal and external relationships associated with the notion derived from these experiences. As Creswell (2012) accentuates, "We have the opportunity to conduct a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon, which we currently understand only superficially, due to phenomenology." This study used a multiple case study approach including six secondary schools in Soshanguve as its research strategy.

A case study is a research method that entails a comprehensive and detailed evaluation of a subject, encompassing the case itself and pertinent contextual factors, as posited by Milfs, Durepos and Wiebe (2010). The benefit of employing a case study lies in its flexibility to accommodate various research approaches, unbound by a singular research plan. A semi-structured interview methodology and document analysis were utilised to interview the SMTs and teachers from six distinct secondary schools.

1.9.2 Research methods

This part addressed the methodology underpinning the emphasis of this investigation. The participant selection procedure, data collection strategy, data analysis, reliability, and ethical considerations of the study are explained in the subsequent sub-sections.

1.9.2.1 Participant Selection/Sampling

Sampling involves the gathering of contributors from which generalisations about the population are derived, based on a representative subset and extrapolations from that sample. Twenty-four individuals in this study engaged in semi-structured interviews. The participation groups comprised teachers, departmental heads, principals, and deputy principals.

The participants were selected based on their leadership roles, seniority as teachers, leadership experiences, attitudes, behaviours, skills, and competencies in leadership. The participants were presumed to have the necessary skills and competences owing to their leadership roles and positions as teachers in the schools.

A goal-directed sample, defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2015) as a non-representative subset of a wider population, was utilised in the study to fulfil a specific requirement or objective. Virtual interviews were administered. The interviews were recorded, and notes were documented. The exact words articulated by the participants during consultations were then documented via transcription. The study was conducted in the Tshwane West Circuit of the Tshwane Education District in Gauteng, South Africa. Six secondary schools were intentionally selected from the Tshwane West Circuit. The sample comprised six principals, six deputy principals, six departmental heads, formerly referred to as heads of departments, and six teachers.

1.9.2.2 Data Collection

The study was conducted in two phases involving document analysis, interviews and observations. Phase 1 of the study encompassed document analysis, which entailed scrutinising the following materials from each school: the vision and mission statements of all the schools and the district, the code of ethics, publicly accessible departmental disciplinary records of the circuit or district and school policies. The researcher also selected pertinent policy and governance documents that complied with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) [No.4 of 2013] a comprehensive data protection regulation in South Africa that gives effect to the right to informational privacy derived from the constitutional right to privacy for analysis.

Conversely, Phase 2 encompassed individual interviews and subsequent follow-ups with all participants to investigate their experiences, behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, values and viewpoints about their collaboration with staff and colleagues at their different schools, both as leaders and non-leaders. Online observations were undertaken during interviews to assess the posture and attitudes of all participants.

1.9.2.3 Data Analysis

The design of data analysis is adaptable and significantly shaped by the type and methodology of data employed in qualitative research. This study employed a qualitative approach for analysing and presenting results, wherein the researcher scrutinised various texts available in both public and private sectors, gathered through a desktop methodology.

The importance of the documents examined by the researchers was determined through a systematic evaluation of the gathered data, based on their relevance to the study.

The participants' viewpoints were utilised to discuss and evaluate their remarks concerning ethical leadership roles, capabilities and competences, along with variables that hinder success. A methodological instrument for continuous comparison was employed to formulate theory through explicit coding and analytical approaches. Furthermore, as asserted by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011), data are perpetually compared across various situations, occasions, demographic groups and approaches. Moreover, thematic data analysis was employed because of its flexible methodology, which can be customised to meet the study's requirements, enabling the researcher to provide a comprehensive and detailed explanation of the data. As noted by King (2004) and Braun and Clarke (2006), this analytical approach is effective for exploring the viewpoints and experiences of diverse research participants, emphasising both similarities and differences, and yielding unforeseen results.

1.9.2.4 Trustworthiness

Kimmons (2022) remarks, referencing Guba (1989), that in qualitative methodologies, researchers must provide sufficient clarification, transparency and proof to ensure the authenticity of their results. The author asserts that qualitative inquiry can be ambiguous, frequently relying on a limited number of participants' accounts, which may lead to significant interpretation by the researcher. Consequently, the researcher, although elucidating the qualitative technique, exercised caution in both the execution of the study and its reporting, ensuring that the process was rational and the results credible. Qualitative researchers must, therefore, generate dependable research outcomes.

The validity of the data analysis method, specifically with the investigation of ethical school leadership practices in Gauteng school management, established the basis for trustworthiness.

The researcher's ability to document the diverse experiences of study participants in the included schools was evaluated. Maree (2016) emphasises that qualitative researchers illustrate the credibility, transferability, confirmability and dependability of their study's conclusions, often avoiding instruments with established metrics for validity and reliability.

1.9.2.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher sought approval from the University of South Africa's (Unisa) College of Education Ethics Committee (CEDU EC) prior to initiating data collection. The submission was first be approved before the researcher can conduct the research in accordance with the established ethical standards and procedures. Consequently, issues pertaining to informed consent, voluntary participation and protection from harm, participant privacy, and data integrity were handled with the highest regard. All relevant research information was supplied to the participants as required. Kumar (2014) postulates that ethical considerations are essential for ensuring research accountability to participants by safeguarding them throughout the investigation. Consequently, it is essential to utilise public finances judiciously in research when required and to secure pertinent public support. Owing to the researcher's dedicated effort to acknowledge and maintain ethical norms, ethical considerations were prioritised in this work.

The study emphasised the safeguarding of participants' rights to autonomy, privacy, confidentiality, equitable treatment, protection from harm, the option to withdraw, and all other rights pertinent to ethical considerations. Furthermore, the procedure for acquiring informed consent and institutional review, namely, Unisa ethical approval, was adhered to. The researcher then furnished comprehensive information regarding these facets. All participants, the Tshwane West District and the relevant authorities granted their informed consent.

1.10 DEMARCATION OF THE STUDY

This study consists of six chapters, detailed as follows:

This chapter addressed the introduction and background of the study, the study's focus, the problem statement, the purpose, the rationale and its significance. This chapter further elucidated the study's aims and objectives, significance, research methods and pivotal research questions that guided the study. It also elucidated essential concepts, articulated the organisation of the thesis and summarised the chapter.

Chapter Two analyses domestic, continental, and international literature that substantiates the phenomenon of ethical school leadership.

Chapter Three presents a review of the theoretical framework that supports this investigation.

Chapter Four delineates the research methodologies and design selected for the study.

Chapter Five present data and a thorough investigation of the conceptualisations, behaviours, and experiences of SMTs and the teachers about ethical leadership in schools

Chapter Six presents the study's conclusions, detailing how it answered the main research questions and objectives, its implications, recommendations, and additional hypotheses for future research.

1.11 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.11.1 Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is a complex term that encompasses various characteristics and lacks a standard definition. Minkes, Small, and Chatterjee (1999) highlight that ethics is derived from a Greek word “ethos,”, signifying tradition or nature. Furthermore, Arar et al. (2022) describe ethical leadership as a concept that encourages the exhibition of ethically acceptable behaviours by organisational stakeholders through reciprocal communication, reinforcement and decision-making processes. This principle is exemplified in individual behaviours and social interactions. Ethical leadership, a form of principled-based leadership, is crucial for balancing the tasks of the SMT as both managers and leaders.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the influence of ethical leadership on fostering trust, enhancing positive organisational behaviour, promoting a continuous increase in innovative workplace mentality and improving workplace performance. Zaim (2021) asserts that ethical leadership is a crucial and impactful determinant of corporate success. The author contends that throughout the last two decades, academics and experts have maintained significant interest in ethical leadership, attributed to the public's noticeable erosion of trust in corporate governance and the diminishing influence of leadership experience. Zaim (2021) and Arar et al. (2022) buttress that the concepts of ethical leadership and trust are often used interchangeably within the educational context. To explore their interconnection, it is essential to differentiate these principles of school ethical leadership. This assertion posits

that there are appropriate and inappropriate behaviours contingent upon philosophical principles, aiming to elucidate and advocate for ethical necessities and conduct.

Additional definitions of ethical behaviour encompass actions deemed morally honest and appropriate in all situations, in contrast to immoral or wrong conduct (Arar et al. 2022). The writers define ethics as the codification of moral principles and concepts that guides an individual's or group's conduct on good and wrong. Trevino, Butterfield and McCabe (2021) assert that ethical leadership behaviour is justifiably and morally acceptable to society, regardless of the organisational context. The authors contend that moral dilemmas are likely to arise under particular conditions when the diverse interests, values and beliefs of several stakeholders are in conflict.

1.11.2 Behavioural Integrity

This term includes the integrity and dependability of expressions, actions, behaviours, practices and virtues associated with sincerity and ethics. This is according to Treviño, den Nieuwenboer and Kish-Gephart (2024) in their research work on a constructive ethical framework on organisational integrity. Cao, Swain, Sirisomboonsuk and Gu (2024) in their research on the impact of authentic leadership, behavioural integrity and project governance on project performance, define behavioural integrity as the congruence between an individual's actions and their articulated ideals, including aspects such as fidelity to promises, courtesy and respect.

These authors further posit that subordinates can perceive the consistency of ethical leadership in the alignment of school leaders' words, actions and demeanour, hence demonstrating respect for their moral integrity.

Younas, Wang, Javed and Zaffar (2021) present a persuasive case, asserting that integrity is evaluated by examining past behaviours, character, the alignment between the leader's actions and the subordinate's fundamental beliefs, and the consistency between expressions and behaviours. Conversely, Ete, Epitropaki, Zhou, and Graham (2021) also propose Behavioural Integrity in their examination of Simons' (2002) work, where the author presented the idea, asserting it as a discernible correlation among an individual's words, deeds

and actions. They elaborate on the notion of behavioural integrity, emphasising the purported alignment between espoused and supported ideals and the perceived fulfilment of promises.

For school leadership to embody integrity and uphold valuable values that they are prepared to act upon, it is essential that these concepts are prioritised in the quest of behavioural integrity as the primary moral lesson imparted. Nevertheless, a lack of integrity in school leadership will lead to skepticism regarding authenticity. Behavioural integrity is defined by Wang, Han and Zang (2025) as the extent to which employees perceive that an organisation's leadership adheres to its stated principles, reflecting the alignment between leaders' words and actions and. These researchers' study focused on educational leadership and teacher ethics, exploring on who is capable of leading and what are the essential attributes required of a leader with behavioural integrity.

1.11.3 Managerial Behaviour

Theoretical perspectives on management behaviours have a long history, with many significant contributions arising following the industrial revolution. Henri Fayol's early work in 1916 on the four fundamental characteristics of management has been widely featured in management literature over the years. Conkright (2015) historically delineated these as planning, organizing, leading, and controlling. Fayol's work historically articulated management behavioural efficiency as the extent to which the foregoing four managerial principles are implemented and duplicated in appropriate workplace behaviours.

Behaviourism is presently characterised by Kimmons (2022) as a branch of psychology that emphasises the observation and analysis of how manipulated environmental alterations influence behaviour. This definition is grounded in the contributions of several prominent psychologists, including Ivan Pavlov, Edward Thorndike, John B. Watson, and B.F. Skinner. The researcher asserts that this concept is essential for fostering trust in the interactions between school leadership and staff within an educational setting. The researcher asserts that a school is an appropriate organisational setting.

Alongside the essential managerial behaviours associated with the roles and functions of SMTs, ethical managerial behaviours tend to influence numerous leadership figures, necessitating the elucidation of visionary, transformational, charismatic and transactional

leadership styles. Day, Sammons and Gorgen (2020) assert that the idea of management behaviour encompasses the conduct anticipated from school leadership, which is increasingly acknowledged as the attitudes, behaviours, and practices essential for promoting ethical conduct within the educational environment.

1.11.4 Communication

All workplace members tend to articulate their views on the morality of their leaders and the presence of ethical leadership qualities in their interactions. Consequently, communication in leadership can be perceived as a collaborative element that enhances relationships within a group and among employees. These subordinates, regardless of their bosses' willingness to include them in decision-making processes, are likely to express their opinions individually or collectively.

They are likely to advocate for open communication in the workplace if they notice its absence. These employees or subordinates would similarly prioritise the capacity to communicate freely without fearing that their comments and ideas could endanger their status. The workforce may become more interested in sharing and implementing their original concepts owing to these significant possibilities and the deliberately fostered secure communication environment. Shafique, Kalyar and Ahmad (2018) explicitly expressed the significance of communication in an ethical setting, in their work on the interconnection of ethical leadership, job performance and turnover intention on the mediating influence of job satisfaction.

Furthermore, Stajkovic, Bandura, Locke, Lee and Sargent (2018) focused on communication on their examination of three conceptual frameworks on the impact of the Big Five personality traits and self-efficacy on academic performance as a meta-analytic route analysis. In their research work on the influence of communication on ethical leadership on job satisfaction, Freire and Bettencourt (2020) assessed the mediating role of work family conflict. In contrast, Lee, Tao and Sun (2020) in their study on capacitating employees' knowledge exchange via diversity-focused leadership and smart internal communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is anticipated that if the concept of communication is intentionally and effectively implemented, the employee's perception of ethical leadership will correlate with the unimpeded performance of the workers or followers. In the research work on the compassionate leadership, Döner (2024) identifies communication as a significant input variable in enhancing trust among subordinates, while others suggest that a team without trust fails to share knowledge and remains closed to conversations, even internally. Talukder and Atinc (2024) focused on enhancing understanding on the influence of communication and its role as a motivating language, and the mediating function of trust in the communication process. These authors accentuate that ethical leadership trust is a necessity for open communication and is influenced more by actions than by words. Consequently, Lee et al. (2020) assert that the capacity of followers to communicate openly with the leader enhances the perception of consistency in the moral activities of a trustworthy leader. Tulshyan (2020) posits that organisational openness fosters leader approachability and effective listening, resulting in followers feeling secure and at ease when communicating both positive and negative feedback to their leaders.

According to social exchange theory, which is integrated into this study, school leaders who actively communicate and share information with their subordinates would experience an enhancement in trust levels and development. These authors further assert that, trust positively influences behaviours such as communication, cooperation and information sharing, along with leaders' perceived efficacy and satisfaction.

The authors assert that various elements influence perceptions of trustworthiness in the communication process, particularly with the transmission of accurate information, rationale for decisions and integrity. Therefore, transparent and candid communication channels, both top-down and bottom-up, are essential for implementing necessary adjustments or fostering the requisite understanding and cohesion when teams or groups in the workplace fail to interact effectively.

1.11.5 Sharing and delegation of control

This component enables school leaders to engage actively and progressively in crucial decision-making processes and to seek guidance freely from their followers or subordinates. This idea enables leaders to equitably delegate stimulating and difficult responsibilities,

providing all personnel in the school the opportunity to formulate their objectives and execute their assigned tasks and activities to the best of their capabilities. Shaturaev and Bekimbetova (2021) assert that the beliefs regarding trust, which encompass shared control, participation in decision-making and delegation within an organisation like a school, are fundamental components of trustworthy behaviour. Arar et al. (2022) assert that ethical decision-making leaders consistently uphold a robust framework of ethical principles and standards, so striving to maintain impartiality and fairness. Trust is perceived to facilitate and enhance information exchange owing to their position.

Gunnulfsen (2024) asserts that the extent to which school administrators involve other staff fosters the cultivation and enhancement of trust and the collective care for the self. Cao et al. (2024) posit that research indicates that when employees engage in determining their work roles, their engagement in decision-making tends to increase significantly, along with a substantial rise in their trust levels. Butterworth, Black and Terry (2024), in their research work on authentic leadership measures, posit that moral leaders are perceived as promoting transparency in information sharing and delegation within their relationships with followers.

Mulford's (2003) research on decision-making, delegation and control in Australian secondary schools revealed that a more favourable perception of these processes among followers or teachers significantly enhances their experiences of influence and control by senior educational staff.

The researcher posited in the thesis regarding the difficult roles and their effects on teacher and school effectiveness, leadership for learning group, remarking that teachers' experiences with a well-coordinated decision-making process in schools, characterised by collegiality, cooperation, consultation, and ample opportunities for participation, are likely to result in positive learning experiences for students regarding their school and teachers. Unlike top-down decision-making scenarios, these techniques, as posited by the author, integrate teachers' relationships with students and their individual achievement. Consequently, leaders typically make decisions that impact the lives of their followers.

Arar et al., (2022) postulate that ethical decision-making becomes a norm within an organisation and may positively influence the workforce about their social identity. Organisations are recognised for making morally correct decisions, seen not only in the behaviour of ethical leaders but also among their followers. Furthermore, leaders may leverage motivating forces that encourage organisational members to align their self-belief with the organisation's identity. The variety of leadership models by which leaders distribute and delegate authority tends to characterize forms of distributive, moral and collegial leadership, as stated by Bush (2020) in the research on the theories of educational leadership and management.

1.12 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter offered a comprehensive review of the research study, examining studies on SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. This study's introduction aimed to establish the school principal as the leader of the entire team, in accordance with SASA 84 of 1994, and delineates the SMTs' professional management and ethical leadership responsibilities, under the guidance of the Head of Department at the district or regional level, to ensure the school's operation in a professional and ethical manner. The background of the study outlined its location, while the problem statement explicitly identified the controversy or concern that prompted this research.

The study's goal and rationale emphasised the need to address a knowledge gap in the literature by investigating the mediating mechanism of ethical school leadership. This study's contribution to the body of knowledge is outlined, followed by a listing of the research goals and objectives. The chapter delineated the research methods and scope of the study. This study defined, analysed and substantiated the foundational principles of ethical leadership, behavioural integrity, managerial conduct, communication, collaboration, and delegation of authority, drawing on relevant literature from both historical and contemporary sources to elucidate their significance.

Historical references were deliberately utilised to establish a foundation for the contemporary literary idea. The next chapter focuses on the literature review of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of a literature review, as contemplated by Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Lalani, Rudolph, and Sabu (2024), is to situate the research within the framework of previous studies, theories or literature pertaining to the same or analogous subject matter. In the context of this study, this encapsulates ethical school leadership, management, practices and behaviour. A literature review assesses the current understanding of ethical leadership and managerial behaviour, identifies gaps in knowledge and delineates the contributions of the study to the existing research on ethical school leadership as demonstrated by SMTs (Crawford, et al. (2024). A literature evaluation facilitates foundational contemplation regarding ethical leadership and management, enabling a study to provide methodologies or theories to address knowledge deficiencies concerning a certain problem (Crawford et al., 2024). Creswell (2017) further elucidates that a literature review serves as a mechanism to delineate or regulate the scope of research. This yields a study that not only examines pertinent literature material but also establishes suitable parameters to concentrate on the specific subject matter.

Compelling evidence indicates that ethical leadership and management are essential in the education system, both in South Africa and globally. The prospective advantages of ethical school leadership necessitate additional examination. This literature study examines ethical leadership in South Africa, Africa and international. This section will emphasise the significance of transparency in ethical leadership and its impact on education. A literature review is a crucial element of academic research that entails the methodical examination, summarisation and analysis of current scholarly literature on a particular subject. It functions as a rigorous assessment of the current information, hypotheses and research outcomes pertinent to the study question or topic being examined. Moreover, the principal aim of a literature review is to furnish a thorough overview of the prevailing knowledge on the topic, pinpoint deficiencies or contradictions in the available literature where necessary and underscore areas necessitating future investigation.

It enables researchers to delineate the context and importance of their study, recognise essential concepts and theories, and ascertain suitable research procedures or approaches. A meticulously executed literature review encompasses several essential steps: defining the research question or topic, performing a systematic search for pertinent sources, critically assessing and analysing the chosen literature, and synthesising the findings to deliver a coherent and comprehensive review. Utilising genuine and renowned sources, including peer-reviewed journals, academic texts, and esteemed conference proceedings, is essential. Through a literature review, researchers can acquire a comprehensive overview of the current knowledge in their discipline, pinpoint gaps or conflicts that their study may resolve, and confirm that their work is original and enhances the existing body of knowledge. A literature review assists researchers in refining their study objectives, formulating hypotheses and designing their research technique. A literature review is essential for directing and informing the research process, establishing a foundation for the study and affirming the researcher's credibility and knowledge in the discipline. Recent years have witnessed extensive discourse around ethics in leadership conduct and the influence of ethical considerations on the decision-making process.

This study investigation will specifically examine the ethical difficulties encountered by school leadership in decision-making processes. The empirical research on the critical topic of ethical leadership and decision-making is rather limited. The significance of ethics in decision-making has led scholars to propose diverse theories to enhance comprehension of the ethical aspect and its influence on decision-making. Starratt (1991) posits that numerous theories concerning ethical leadership behaviour have emerged. However, these theories offer a foundation but lack adequate guidance for their application, particularly in addressing complex issues characterised by an increasing array of ethical dilemmas, which represent a significant challenge in the decision-making process. Ethical leadership challenges are typically addressed by embracing the broadest social agreement. However, this does not inherently imply that it leads to the best conclusion for moral conduct, as consensus in the decision-making process may incorporate components of compromise, which is an inadequate foundation for the cultivation of moral behaviour. An individual's moral conduct is influenced by their values.

In recent history, the topic of ethical school leadership has generated significant awareness and greatly contributed to the advancement of literature in the field of ethical leadership. This chapter would endeavour to elucidate ethical values encompassing respect, service, fairness, community development and honesty. This study also demonstrates a superficial presence of other ethical values, including fairness, morality, trust, responsibility, equality, mutual respect and social justice. In the domain of ethical school leadership, DuBrin (2024) asserts that an individual's value system influences the extent of morality in their conduct, as evidenced by study on leadership humility. Consequently, ethical decision-making is intricately linked to an individual's values.

A question emerges regarding the aspects of ethical leadership behaviours and the proper methods for addressing the moral dilemmas faced by leaders who exhibit such actions. Extensive research has been conducted on ethical leadership, including the studies by Dempster, Carter, Freakley and Parry (2004), Cambron-McCabe, Nelda and McCarthy (2005), Langlois and Lapointe (2010) regarding the learnability of ethics, Arar and Saiti (2022) on ethical leadership dilemmas, and Hughes and Burnes (2023). Nevertheless, the reviewed literature indicates a significant scarcity of studies linking ethical leadership to ethical challenges in the decision-making processes of school leaders. In recent years, authors such as McKay, MacDonald and Longmuir (2024), in their scoping study on the emotional intensity of educational leadership, have also sought to illuminate the ethical dimension of the decision-making processes employed by educational leaders. Continuous recognition that the decisions and actions of SMTs significantly influence the school community (learners, teachers, parents, staff) is integrated into an ethical leadership framework designed to assist educational leaders in navigating complex and multifaceted ethical dilemmas, thereby establishing a foundation for a sustainable and inclusive school.

Hughes et al. (2023) assert that a decision is considered rational when the utility or value of the selected ethical option among available alternatives is optimised to maximise benefits for the educational organisation. They further argue that a leader with strong moral values will inevitably encounter ethical dilemmas during the decision-making process.

In this setting, an educational ethical leader fosters a climate of ethical conduct and establishes an ethical culture within the organisation (Arar et al., 2022). Recent literature studies have emphasised the necessity to enhance theories concerning leadership, specifically by investigating the relationships between ethical leadership and organisational success. McKay, et al. (2024) argue that the theory of ethical leadership, when examined through an ethical perspective, connects leadership with diverse stakeholders. Previous scholars of ethical leadership include Burns (1978), Rost (1993), Bass (1998), and Riggio and Harvey (2011) and Blom (2016), as cited by Burnes et al. (2023), who argued for the implementation of varied leadership techniques and dimensions to bridge the gap between the research on corporate ethical social responsibility and leadership theory. These experts posit that ethical leadership encompasses honesty, integrity, the enforcement of elevated ethical standards among employees, and the respectful treatment of individuals. Although ethical school leadership is acknowledged as a catalyst for organisational success, particularly in enhancing employee performance, there is a rarity of literature examining the impact of ethical school leadership on the efficacy of organisational social responsibility in producing positive educational outcomes. This chapter will examine prior research and literature reviews compiled from articles in scholarly journals, books, dissertations, and other primary and secondary sources pertaining to ethical leadership practices in school management and leadership. These sources will be examined to offer an alternative narrative and to further investigate the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in school administration.

These literature assessments will be utilised to synthesise and evaluate the current knowledge of the topic to offer fresh insights therein. This integrative literature review will facilitate the synthesis of knowledge from several research methodologies within this fragmented domain of ethical school leadership. The chapter will further assert that fragmentation is a primary target within the research questions outlined in this study, which will be substantiated by the significant effect elements of the sources linked.

The research questions regarding SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools, SMTs' maintenance of ethical conduct, the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of ethical leadership and moral conduct in schools as well as how the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders constitute the foundation of the research topic. The chapter examines empirical and theoretical literature that substantiates the hypothesis, research questions and objectives outlined in this study. The terms organisation, educational institution and school are occasionally used synonymously in relation to a school environment or its context. The terms students and learners are utilised interchangeably. The soul of ethical leadership in school, distinguishing features, challenges and best practices and the research on ethical school leadership lay the foundation for discussion in this chapter. They are amplified in literature review by the following core topics: SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools; SMTs' maintenance of ethical conduct; the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of ethical leadership and moral conduct in schools as well as how the DBE; and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders.

2.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review was systematically analysed in chronological order to maintain scholarly coherence with the primary research questions, sub-questions and objectives of this inquiry. The review focused on examining the experiences of SMTs with ethical leadership practices, emphasising the alignment of their conduct with established ethical standards. The analysis aimed to interrogate three fundamental areas: ethical conduct among SMTs, teachers' perceptions regarding SMTs' professional development in ethical leadership and the effectiveness of the DBE and other regulatory bodies in addressing unethical behaviour among school leaders (Awan et al., 2025; Nguyen, 2025). In reviewing the essence of ethical school leadership, the literature emphasised the critical role of trust, transparency and integrity in creating educational environments conducive to ethical conduct (Peterson, Robinson, and Rideaux, 2025).

Distinguishing characteristics of ethical leadership include commitment to fairness, consistency in decision-making and prioritisation of the collective good over personal interest (Yan, Lin and Wang, 2025). Key challenges identified involve resisting unethical pressures, managing conflicts of interest and maintaining professional standards amid systemic and cultural obstacles (Lu et al., 2025).

The literature also explored best practices in ethical leadership, such as fostering a culture of accountability and modelling moral behaviour (Jeong et al., 2025). Transparency in decision-making, responsible management of school resources, and strict adherence to relevant laws and regulations are repeatedly highlighted as non-negotiable elements of ethical school management (Nguyen, 2025; Peterson et al., 2025).

The review encompassed domestic, continental and global perspectives, thereby providing a holistic understanding of the ethical leadership practices of SMTs. International studies reinforced the idea that ethical leadership practices are universally crucial but contextually nuanced depending on regional socio-political factors (Slagle, Chatham-Carpenter, and Williams, 2025).

Critically, the literature underscored the need for continuous professional development for SMTs, focusing on ethics, leadership and governance (Quynh, et al., 2025). Teachers' perceptions point to a gap between the ethical ideals taught in leadership programmes and the real-world practices observed in schools (Yan et al., 2025). Lastly, the role of the DBE and regulatory bodies was examined. Literature calls for these institutions to implement more robust oversight mechanisms and targeted intervention programmes to counteract unethical leadership behaviour effectively (Awan et al., 2025; Peterson et al., 2025).

In sum, the literature review provided a comprehensive foundation for understanding the pivotal attributes of ethical school leadership and mapped the landscape for examining how these practices can be cultivated, reinforced and regulated within the educational sector.

2.2.1 The soul of ethical leadership in schools

The responsibilities of school leaders are emotionally demanding and this intensity directly impacts their health, welfare, personal and professional relationships. This study inquiry conducted a scoping examination of the often undervalued or neglected parts of ethical school leadership attributes rooted in emotions, relationships and the ethics of caring.

Global ethical school leadership practices are in a state of crisis. Statistics indicate an impending scarcity of leaders who embody these leadership qualities and those willing to assume such roles, as asserted by Thomson and Blackmore (2024) in their study on resistance in educational leadership, management and administration. They emphasised that these leaders must navigate intensified emotions daily, both their own and those of their subordinates and other personnel within the educational setting.

In their research on the influence of ethical leadership on employee behaviour and organisational commitment, Serang, Ramlawati, Suriyanti, Junaidi and Nurimansjah (2024) buttress that ethical leadership has become increasingly essential in the corporate sphere owing to scandals involving ethical dilemmas. This demand establishes elevated standards for ethical practices and moral values through leaders' actions, attitudes, behaviours and decisions, which can significantly affect team behaviour and performance. Since the late 1990s, the examination of organisational ethics has primarily focused on defining a theory and practice of ethics pertinent to the unique characteristics of work organisations, which serve as predominant social institutions, such as schools, as posited by Riley (2022) in the research on compassionate leadership for fostering school belonging.

The specificity pertained to the escalating power and influence organisations wielded over the rising number of individuals employed by them and the societies in which they function. This is directly pertinent to organisational ethics. It reinstates the potential and imperative for formal administrative ethical frameworks, which coexist and may even conflict with morally and politically engaged emotional connections. The stipulation is that any formal organisational ethics must consistently acknowledge its basis in an 'ethics of ethics.' To gain a deeper understanding, one must first examine the relationship and distinction between the practice of ethics and the ethics of ethics within the educational context.

Accordingly, this research inquiry delineates a crucial distinction within educational contexts: an individual relinquishing their moral autonomy to the characteristics of a school environment versus an active subject reclaiming ethical control to demonstrate care and compassion towards others on a personal and emotional basis.

A pivotal question in this research inquiry is whether the ethical leadership expected from school leaders constitutes a deliberate moral choice to engage in ethical actions, or if it arises from an affective and compassionate response to the needs and demands of others within the school and its environment. This assertion is reiterated in Butler's (2024) research, which argues that there exists a subtle tendency in the behaviours of school leaders, as indicated by studies exploring their self-efficacy in management, instructional and moral leadership practices, who inadvertently operate under the assumption that ethics originates with agency. Moreover, unethical conduct is condemned when executed by a school leader in a position of authority and imposed by bureaucratic means. Such actions are likely to be severely reprimanded when undertaken by subordinates inside the educational environment.

In deepening the analysis and aligning this action with Levinas' philosophy of organisational ethics, the premise that ethics constitutes a form of agency, irrespective of the individual exercising it within the confines of the school, necessitates rigorous examination. Therefore, it follows that only individuals, rather than organisations, possess the capacity to implement ethics. Organisational ethics presents itself as both essential and unattainable. The study investigation in ethical school leadership has not yet thoroughly addressed this fundamental contradiction, either philosophically or empirically. This research posits that certain types of interpersonal relationships established by school leaders may be intentionally chosen as an ethical practice. This perspective tends to acknowledge the fundamental and addressable discrepancy between organisational ethics and individual ethical behaviour. This uncertainty stems from the notion that school leaders are not compelled to engage in ethical considerations in their interactions with subordinates, even though such neglect is ultimately counterproductive to the objective of fostering an ethical school environment. The moral and ethical pursuit constitutes the core aim of school leaders, as the ethics of the institution hinges on an active and fundamental obligation to the entire school community.

Schools are crucial to ethics; nevertheless, management teams must remain cognizant of this reality and avoid undermining ethics through their management strategies and programmes, or through the misuse of their leadership authority. This assertion serves as the foundation of the recognised moral compass, as delineated by the ethical leadership and historical roots research (Hubbard, Thatcher and Barrett 2025). Their study identified historical leadership traits such as respect, trust, accountability, and honesty, which can be utilised to explore and theorise how a management-inspired ethics of school ethics may influence practices within school leadership. Although this hypothesis represents a substantial theoretical advancement in the examination of ethical school leadership, it nonetheless embodies a lingering humanism that positions school leaders as the focal point of ethical endeavours.

This research investigation theorises the ethics of a school organisation, extending the ramifications of unethical leadership conduct in the educational setting, while transcending a concern with the moral self and its actions, yet still valuing them. This ethical framework embodies a humanism that recognises the self as neither independent nor in command of its own ethicality; instead, it is receptive to the ethical imperatives of others and the expectations imposed within the educational environment.

This analysis contended that, notwithstanding its accomplishments, the current literature on ethical school leadership has uncritically merged ethical subjectivity with moral agency as exercised by school leaders within organisations. The unexamined presumption in the analysed literature is that ethics emerges from the deliberate autonomy of decision-making individuals who make choices inside, and often in opposition to, bureaucratically governed institutions like schools.

The validity and truthfulness of this premise, as posited by the researcher, may be challenged as it excessively elevates an individual's ontological standing as the foundation for ethics, thereby imposing upon ethics the notion of an autonomous moral person adrift in a power-laden educational environment. Incorporating the literature study findings of Ramírez-Montoya, Castillo-Martínez, Sanabria-Z and Miranda (2022) about complex thinking within the educational framework, it is asserted that ethics emerges from one's obligations to others before prioritising oneself.

The assertion by these authors challenges the anthropocentric concept inherent in the presumed supremacy of ethical autonomy that has prevailed in Western ethical discourse, especially within educational institutions as organisations.

The authors asserted in their literature study that the ethics of ethics is rooted in one's relationships with others, preceding ontology and the presumption of a shared common ideal of existence among individuals. The researchers argue that the unexamined consequence of this claim is the potential dismissal of formal school ethics as lacking inspiration, information or connection to ethical school leadership in general. Consequently, official school ethics should not merely be perceived as an impediment that educational leaders, as genuine ethical agents, must manage, reject or contest. The literature review implied that school leaders should forgo managerially sanctioned or collectively organised ethics, allowing everyone within the school to act according to their moral inclinations, as they deem ethically justified. This implies that while ethics emerges from the emotional connections among individuals, attempting to systematise it through specific programmes and processes may be both ironic and ineffective. The possibilities derived from the literature of these authors suggest that, according to the researcher, the assertion that ethics is confined to an individual's interaction with the other may be inherently restrictive.

This perspective is likely to be self-limiting unless the SMT demonstrates resolute leadership and exemplifies the standards of ethical conduct expected within the school's boundaries and its environment. In contrast, Lane, Everts, Hefner, Phillips, and Scott (2021), in their research on the Crises of Care, assert that the essence of ethical leadership within the educational context is fundamentally the human endeavour of translating ethical principles into practical actions as the ethical subject interacts with others in both the school and the broader world. Ethical practices are dedicated to one another, whereas ethics is inherently interpersonal and social. Implementing ethics in the school necessitates translating individual ethical behaviour into a communal framework, encompassing various manifestations of ethics within the educational environment. To effectively embody the essence of ethics in an educational environment, it is essential to make a pragmatic decision regarding to whom one should extend respect, care and hospitality.

As previously stated, most authors referenced in this research posit that ethics must transition to justice for practical implementation. In social contexts within the school, the necessity for collective moral conduct, collegiality and respect supersedes the individual requirements of any single person within the institution.

The question subsequently focused on equality, reciprocity, distribution, hospitality and generosity from school leadership, if the essence of ethical leadership within the school environment is to be actualised. Marquardt, Casper and Kuenzi (2021) assert in their literature review on ethical leadership that the ethical imperative for justice, leader goal orientation and ethical leadership necessitates the establishment of an ethical framework within organisations, enabling the formulation of equitable procedures to ensure individuals are treated impartially, devoid of bias or discriminatory favouritism.

This is evident, for better or worse, in organisational programmes and policies concerning equitable treatment, fair remuneration, competitive recruitment, grievance procedures, equity initiatives and similar matters. In addition to managerially approved methods of organisation within the educational environment, the pursuit of justice in the school organisation should also be evident in the interpersonal dynamics between the SMT and their subordinates. If the school restricted ethics to direct inter-subjective embodied relationships inside its environment, the likelihood of an active spirit of ethical leadership would be non-existent.

The essence of ethics and its systems inside organisations is that the relationships between SMTs and subordinates must be situated within properly defined hierarchical frameworks to prevent unjustified ethical disputes. These systems possess an ethical dimension as they aim to guide behaviour according to established rules and processes rooted in morality. Ethical practice does not depend on uncritical compliance with ethical norms, but rather on a dynamic interplay between those rules and the foundational ethics of the institution, that informs their preservation and evolution. The dilemma is that for ethical principles to be effectively implemented in schools, they must be systematically organised and uniformly applied.

However, the institution must also honour its foundational commitment to care for and respect the uniqueness of each person within the educational environment, recognising his or her distinct moral and ethical behaviours. Managerially sanctioned organisational ethics may necessitate adherence to its authority, potentially leading to opposition based on ethical considerations, as noted by Dadvand (2024) in the study on reconciling the contradiction of excellence and equity in school leadership.

Nevertheless, the researcher, upon reviewing the literature, refrains from concluding that such organisational ethical inconsistencies are trivial, unethical and warrant abandonment, particularly if they do not constitute the core element of the school's ethical framework and its surrounding context. The essence of ethical leadership in schools should render the formal organisation of ethics unnecessary owing to its emotive nature.

To actualise this concept, the soul of ethical leadership in schools must extend beyond mere rational ethical frameworks, which are often perceived as obstacles to ethical behaviour. Instead, these frameworks should be acknowledged and made enforceable. For ethics in the school to be readily apparent, moral laws and processes should be antithetical to ethics; however, if the school leadership is selfless, transparent and magnanimous, the likelihood of a highly ethical school environment is feasible. Rhodes (2023), in the examination of "the ethics of organisational ethics," postulate that although scholars have debated whether ethics is affective or legislative, revisiting the ethics of organisational ethics suggests that this assertion need not be framed as an either-or proposition. Passive ethical behaviour by school leadership may manifest as unjustified interpersonal gestures of kindness and result in disorganised regulations and cultural norms.

Any implementation of an undesirable ethical framework inside the school will be flawed, therefore, rendering any expectation of consistency among the various expressions of ethics unwarranted. Assuming that the ethics of individual school leaders are authentic while the school's ethics are not highlights the inherent, if misguided, corruption and individualism within the school's ethical culture, which fails to foster the essential spirit of ethical leadership in education. Emotions and relationality are intrinsically linked to the essence of ethical leadership within the school settings.

Most literature reviews and research predominantly focus on three primary types of relationships that ethical school leaders cultivate: those with subordinates, specifically teachers, parents and communities. These three forms of partnerships have also exhibited some focus on student relationships. Moral ties are essential to the essence of ethical and larger leadership discussions, significantly shaped by paradigms like instructional and transformational school leadership.

Against this background, this chapter discussed the relationship with the school community, emphasising the significance of teacher and student involvement in the educational environment as a crucial aspect of ethical leadership. Gerrard and Savage (2022) highlight the frequently required ethical objectives to improve school leadership relationships and foster teacher engagement in the learning process. The authors assert that school leaders must address and improve the intricate discourses overlooked in policy and practice, which further complicate the ethical discourse inside the educational environment. These discourses elevate conventional paradigms of ethical leadership that assume a capability and willingness for active participation in schools.

The researcher asserts that to effectively study and implement school ethics rooted in primary and pre-subjective duty to others, we must relinquish the prospect of definitive organisational ethics for both individuals and institutions. The essence of school ethics will entail acknowledging the evident link between its pre-subjective origin and its expression in the educational environment. Enduring this ambiguity and consistently engaging with the relentless inquiries that uncover the essence of school ethics, one acknowledges the inadequacy in raising awareness among the school community regarding ethical practices. The expected essence of the school's ethics may resemble concern and potential moral deterioration inside the educational setting. The researcher asserts that the manifestation of this tension as ethical unease within the educational environment may lead to an unproductive potential for further disorderly evolution of organisational ethics. The concept of the soul of ethical school leadership, expressed through worry and stress, may seem impractical or ambiguous, yet it is certainly valid. On the contrary, the narratives and expressions of soul ethical school leadership discussed in this part address both descriptively and normatively the practice of school ethics.

The literature reviewed significantly contributes by aligning school leaders' ethics with standard managerial and behavioural actions. This has shifted focus from the presumed moral authority of SMTs to active, emotive and embodied ethical agents who are capable of deliberating and selecting actions in the altruistic pursuit of their subordinates' well-being. Based on the literature analysis conducted by Jia, Zhu, Zhang, et al. (2022), the researcher concurs with the authors, who assert that the connections between ethical leadership, subordinate well-being and innovative work behaviour, rooted in sound moral principles, constitute essential components of ethical school leadership and are the bedrock for the soul of ethical school leadership.

2.2.2 Distinguishing features of ethical school leadership

Ethical school leaders serve as dependable role models for their subordinates, treating them with respect and decency. Numerous scholars characterise them as honest, compassionate and impartial decision-makers who engage in ethical considerations that promote the ethical well-being of subordinates by offering rewards, recognition and penalties based on their conduct. These attributes, among others, are essential for the effective operation of the school and its surrounding environment. Li, Yang and Akthar (2022) assert that the relationship between leaders and subordinates is strengthened when leaders exhibit essential traits such as respect, care and honesty in decisions concerning employees' overall interactions and wellness inside the educational environment. The ethical conduct of SMTs motivates followers, so enhancing organisational commitment and positively influencing employees' ethical work behaviour and attitudes, ultimately contributing to long-term sustainable performance. Sustainability has emerged as the foremost priority for social organisations such as schools, as it offers prospects for long-term growth and development, financial sustainability and competitive advantages. This is attested by Kim and Hall (2021) and similarly reiterated by Wang, Ren, Chadee and Chen (2024) in their study on employee ethical silence within the framework of exploitative leadership and the impact of job meaningfulness and moral potency.

Nonetheless, establishing and maintaining sustainable corporate operations can be arduous, necessitating widespread consensus and collaborative efforts among all stakeholders, akin to a school as an organisation. In both the educational environment and beyond, the ethical roles and responsibilities of school leaders are crucial for moral integrity, as they are tasked with formulating suitable ethical strategies, procuring and deploying essential resources, and directing staff to attain sustainable goals, objectives and requisite school performance. In their research on ethical leadership that self-efficacy and motivation, Flores and Zacarias (2024) are pivotal factors influencing the moral conduct of school leaders.

They further suggested that moral leaders cultivate a robust organisational ethical climate by exemplifying ethical behaviour and clearly articulating ethical expectations to promote dutiful conduct. By embodying the dual characteristics of a moral individual and a moral manager, the ethical leader reinstates ethical, moral and spiritual resonance through the endorsement of norms, policies, procedures and acts.

Ethical sustainability, as a principal aspect of ethical leadership proposed by Kim et al. (2021), is regarded as an ethical concern that ethical school leaders embody as a significant trait of moral individuals and leaders, serving as a pivotal influence in promoting sustainable ethical leadership performance and practice. The literature review from these authors indicated that leadership based on ethical standards develop and execute organisational ethical leadership policies, processes and practices that safeguard and enhance the school environment. The researcher has identified ethical characteristics of moral personality and leadership, as perceived by organisational members that foster and enhance the development of an ethical climate in the educational environment.

Sherchan, Baskota and Saud (2024) elucidated this claim of the researcher in their study on the ethical leadership perspective as a transformative strength and essential characteristic in education and management. The researcher's review of the literature indicated that the ethical concept and moral characteristic of 'doing the right thing' within the organisational ethical climate serves as a positive indicator that school leadership actively promotes responsible ethical behaviour in the educational setting.

As a profound sense of environmental consciousness develops concerning ethical standards within the school, employees become inclined to adhere to institutional rules and regulations and are voluntarily motivated to demonstrate ethical behaviours aimed at conserving school resources, shunning unethical conduct, acting with integrity, and undertaking ethical initiatives. Gusino (2024) posited in the study of leadership behaviour, administrative ethics, and educational service delivery in government schools that the ethical dimensions of task-oriented leadership behaviour, change-oriented leadership behaviour, and commitment leadership behaviour in relation to educational service delivery have garnered increased attention from scholars. Owing to persistent ethical leadership scandals in the education sector in recent years, researchers have begun to take note. The reviewed literature on ethical school leadership characteristics, including works by Kim et al. (2021), Flores et al. (2024) and Ahmed (2025), suggests that school leadership, as organisational leaders, must demonstrate morally sustainable principles that can stimulate employees' ethical behavioural intentions. This must be towards their environment and moral preservation, thereby enhancing sustainable performance and competitive advantage within the ethical framework of the organisation.

In the research on the characteristics and styles of educational ethical leadership, Žydžiūnaitė (2024) assert that effective leadership can foster mutual learning, ethical values and norms, thereby encouraging voluntary environmental ethical behaviour that enhances the organisation's dynamic capacity to attain superior performance across all ethical and societal dimensions necessary for an organisation.

The researcher concurs with the claims presented in the examined literature and asserts that school leaders, as the primary agents of the organisations, play a crucial role in initiating and executing leaders' ideas and values, as well as organisational goals and objectives, and can significantly influence organisational performance. Nonetheless, regardless of the perceptions and values held by leaders and employees, the implementation and attainment of ethical leadership characteristics, objectives and targets are contingent upon the availability of supportive organisational resources and an ethical atmosphere.

Consequently, it is essential to examine the collective distinguishing characteristics of ethical school leadership, employee values and organisational atmosphere to get the desired sustainable ethical performance of organisations.

In their study on a realist approach to leadership attributes, Carrington, Spina, Kimber, Spooner and Williams (2022) buttressed that support school improvement have identified various distinct leadership attributes and occasionally associate these with transformational and transactional leadership styles. The researchers subsequently examined if these qualities vary by gender and their intrinsic relation to the social learning theory as a foundation of ethical leadership. Attributes include accountability, flexibility, empathy, attentiveness, ethical collaboration, vision, innovation, commitment, ethical reflection, moral resilience, inclusivity, moral idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and management by exception. These aspects of ethical leadership are guided by values.

Carrington et al. (2022) asserted that moral ideals are predispositions that shape behaviour and inform reasoning, ultimately resulting in behaviours and outcomes. As previously stated, regardless of whether school leaders embrace a collaborative approach, one or more of these traits remain crucial to school success, as they influence the degree to which ethical school leaders cultivate trust among personnel. An additional component is the ethical school culture, which pertains to the perspectives and values shared by members of the school community, as articulated by Uddin, Biswas, Bhattacharjee, Dey, and Mahmood (2021). In their examination of the construct of "ethics," Harbatkin, Burns and Cullum (2024) refer to a related concept known as school climate, which includes the ethical quality of teaching and learning, ethical relationships within the school community, ethical organisational practices, and the ethical institutional and structural characteristics of the school environment, all of which are critical distinguishable elements in the enhancement of ethical school leadership.

The literature examining various aspects of ethical leadership in educational institutions frequently highlights the role of emotions in the responsibilities of school leaders. A review of this literature, primarily from critical research perspectives, uncovered issues of power and social justice intrinsic to the emotionally charged nature of school leadership, as

discussed by Kim et al. (2021), Li et al. (2022), and Gusino (2024), along with analyses of gender and race concerning the emotional labour of leaders, as articulated by Chen, Toprak, Karakus, and Kouhsari (2025).

The literature study by Awan, Zia, Khan, and Khurshid (2025) prominently discussed the assessment of ethical leadership characteristics of principals, highlighting distinguishable features of ethical moral explorations and critiques of leaders' emotional intelligence. Investigations into particular emotions and pivotal instances demonstrate that principals, as leaders of the SMT, frequently encounter profound emotional experiences in a demanding and high-pressure role, and their responses during these moments significantly influence their personal growth and future as leaders. The literature reviewed from this research indicates the impact of the school leadership demanding nature on leaders' emotions and how school leaders face the pressures of leading school communities. The reviewed literature further indicates that the pressures encountered by the principal and the leadership team are often associated with change management, a central concern for scholars investigating the ethical decision-making processes in school leadership and the impact of emotions on policy implementation strategies.

Significant attention is directed towards the emotional work of leaders and its effects on school improvement or student achievement. Research in the literature review about emotions and school leadership indicates efforts to assess, quantify or conceptualise the emotional labour of leaders. For instance, Wang, Gu, Wan and Zheng (2025) endeavoured to provide a framework for leadership decision-making and emotional dynamics, as articulated by Chen, Lin, Liu, and Chen (2025) who endeavoured to create and authenticate an inventory of the emotions experienced by school leadership.

Other scholars have likewise constructed models to forecast and assess the contributions of ethical leaders, as evidenced by the work of Ho, Welsh and Bush (2025). Their writings and research often demonstrate efforts to comprehend emotions to address ethical dilemmas confronting leaders, schools or the broader educational system.

The researcher observes that essential to their investigation and literature review on ethical leadership are critical explorations that incorporate a moral discourse regarding the implications for three pivotal components: the recruitment of suitable and ethical individuals, the subsequent process of human resource development and the crucial aspect of retaining ethical leaders. The researcher identifies specific areas of focus on these components, which, in alignment with the literature review, may directly affect the ethical perspective, health and ethical wellbeing of leaders, in their quest for an acceptable ethical school leadership culture and moral practice.

The literature review on the unique characteristics of ethical leadership in educational institutions, as presented by Heffeman, Macdonald and Longmuir (2022) in their scoping review regarding the emotional intensity of educational leadership, unequivocally illustrated the repercussions of the profound moral entanglement between principals and their communities. Principals reportedly endure and experience the diverse stresses of their communities, which subsequently influences the health and well-being of school leadership, stemming from their identities or sense of self-being intricately linked to their professional roles. The literature evaluated by the researcher analysed the unique characteristics of ethical school leadership, aiming to comprehend how the properties of ethical school leadership influence social mechanisms that result in diverse outcomes in school improvement.

Numerous literature investigations have uncovered evidence of contextual ethical leadership characteristics, including the appreciation of diversity, staff support, the cultivation of a collaborative ethical leadership approach, and the emphasis on teachers' professional learning and growth. These leadership attributes impacted ethical decision-making across different levels of school leadership and management practices. The researcher asserts, based on literature reviews, that in the absence of supportive leadership and the chance to witness the effects of pedagogical reforms, SMTs may struggle to engage in the ethical leadership process. Numerous research findings identified ethical leadership characteristics that fostered positive decision-making and actions, including the promotion of collaborative work and collective learning, underpinned by trust, respect, fairness, justice and commitment.

These exhibited distinguishable, several discernible characteristics of ethical school leadership are essential to the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in fostering an ethical culture, including the ethics of care, self-critique, accountability, justice and fairness.

2.2.3 Challenges and best practices of ethical school leadership

Research from multiple continents has endorsed numerous ethical leadership strategies to enhance the ethical awareness of school professionals and the academic achievement of students. European research endorsed best methods based on a democratic and transformative leadership approach. American research endorsed best practices emphasizing an integrated principal leadership approach to foster teamwork and collaboration among educators, hence enhancing student performance.

African studies advocated for best methods rooted in democratic and participatory leadership styles. Several African school leaders endorsed an autocratic leadership style, albeit under circumstances where teachers and learners were compelled to conform. Asian studies promoted best practices grounded in a people-centric and transformational leadership approach. While the results of all the studies indicated enhanced academic performance, the ethical leadership difficulties associated with these techniques varied. The literature review indicated that there were no identical best practices, challenges or a comparable leadership style endorsed by the foregoing studies. The researcher suggests that the specific situations and contexts must be considered for a leadership style to succeed, due to the diverse social, economic, cultural, political and ethical challenges present across these different continents.

The literature reviewed in line with the assertions raised in the opening paragraph addressing challenges and best practices of ethical school leadership presents various perspectives on ethical challenges as evidenced in the seminal scholarly works of Harris and Chapman (2002), Suraya and Yunus (2012), Adeyemi and Bolarinwa (2013), Al-Safran, Brown and Wiseman (2014), Quin, Deris, Bischoff and Johnson (2015), Norman, Hasim and Shaik-Abdullah (2017), Ziduli, Buka, Molepo and Jadezweni (2018), and subsequently, in the comprehensive analysis by Cornelissen and Smith (2022), which addresses school leadership challenges and best practices in South Africa.

Mahamba (2023) addressed the leadership challenges in secondary schools in Tanzania, while Kilag, Diano Jr, Bulilan, Allego and Cañizares (2024) proposed the challenges of leadership strategies for fostering inclusive school communities and managing diversity through ethical school leadership.

Kim, Choi and Son (2024) investigated the relationship between peer team leader ethical voice and role modelling in relation to ethical leadership, as well as the significance of ethical voice in leadership. These assertions reinforce the argument that no singular leadership technique is best for achieving consistent enhancements in academic achievement. The literature review process identified inherent challenges, noting that the work of school leaders is emotionally taxing, which directly impacts the health and ethical well-being of principals and the entire leadership team, as well as their personal relationships.

This study inquiry aimed to conduct a scoping literature review on the frequently undervalued or ignored roles of SMTs, particularly those rooted in emotions, relationships and ethics of care. The researcher examining the literature reviewed by Azlan, Burhan, Johdi and Suhailawaty (2024) indicated in their multi-site case study on the leadership practices of school leaders and their influence on crisis-related problem-solving and decision-making, corroborated by Sheep (2025), aligned with their assertions, that ethical school leadership globally, is in crisis. Analysis of the literature reviewed from these scholars indicated a forthcoming scarcity of individuals willing to assume the role of ethical leadership, while principals and their leadership teams persist in managing intensified emotions daily, both their own and those of their subordinates.

The researcher contends that the challenges associated with a crisis-ridden ethical leadership decline are overlooked and undervalued, yet they constitute a crucial underlying condition for the potential deterioration of moral leadership and an extensive ethical downward spiral that may necessitate a crisis of care. Scholars from diverse paradigms and research orientations have acknowledged the intensity of SMTs or school leadership, as defined in various contexts and jurisdictions, as a crucial factor for the success of school leadership and management.

Literature analysis indicated that school leaders are doing emotionally hard job both individually and collectively within school environments. This is not a problem encountered solely by a limited group of persons.

Nevertheless, the proposed solutions frequently place the onus on SMTs, anticipating that they will handle their own care and ethical leadership capabilities, rather than focusing on the procedures and practices that have been ineffective due to a significant deterioration in the moral direction of the school.

The researcher also asserts that there are clear ethical leadership issues stemming from a lack of understanding of the emotional depth of school leadership responsibilities. Literature analysis indicates that principals and their leadership teams in Australia are 55% more likely to report mental health challenges compared to other school staff. This is evidenced in the State of Victoria report from Longmuir's (2017) research on principal leadership in high-advantage and improving Victorian secondary schools.

A recent study in England indicated that 65% of school leadership reported difficulties regarding the ethical consciousness concerns faced by personnel owing to the COVID-19 epidemic. Thomson, Greany and Martindale (2021) corroborated the researcher's assertions in their study concerning the emerging research data on school leaders during the pandemic and the leadership trust gap in England. The literature analysis from Turkey indicates that principals and their leadership teams are generally facing moderate degrees of burnout, with stress levels being more significant among these teams early in their leadership careers, as shown by Baş and Yıldırım (2012). In the United States, principals and their school leadership teams encounter elevated stress levels owing to unethical conduct, which poses a significant concern regarding retention and tenure longevity, as noted by Biddle (2022) on rural school leadership and Mahfouz and Richardson (2021) on principal preparation and ethical leadership welfare being at a critical juncture. These claims were further corroborated by Reid's (2022) phenomenological study, which examined the scarcity of African American males in educational leadership.

The researcher's supplementary literature review and meticulous analysis of other countries revealed that the challenges of elevated stress levels have also been identified in SMTs globally, including in India, concerning the leadership practices of head teachers, as posited by Singh and Allison (2016). In Turkey, Sayi and Kul (2020) examined the strategies utilised by school leadership to address leadership stress within the context of Istanbul.

According to Persson, Leo, Arvidsson, et al. (2021), Sweden demonstrates a cross-sectional analysis of school leaders who are helpful while implementing best practices under stringent management constraints and maintaining highly effective partnerships. In the context of Finland, as articulated by Elomaa (2021), focusing on the ethical well-being of school leadership, while in Italy, as reflected in the research by Diotaiuti, Mancone, Bellizzi and Valente (2020), the examination centred on principals at risk, their stress and the organisation of ethical mindfulness within the school environment. The researcher indicates that the stresses, best practices and challenges of ethical school leadership are not exclusive to these countries. Furthermore, the researcher postulates that numerous African nations also endure the detrimental effects of these challenges, exacerbated by resource limitations that hinder ethical school leadership.

In the African context, literature reviewed by Bedi and Kukemelk (2018) and McKay, et al. (2024) indicates that exemplary ethical leadership practices have resulted in innovative resource management strategies, effective community engagement practices, heightened ethical emotional intensity, and partnerships that assist school leaders in addressing challenges and fostering best ethical practices. They assert that the advancement and reinforcement of an ethical school culture and society necessitate ongoing ethical awareness initiatives to mitigate these problems and attain best practices in ethical school leadership. Literature reviewed underscores the significance of ethical leadership training programmes, mentorship and networking opportunities to augment school leaders' ethical competences and facilitate information exchange. The authors, in discussing the ethical leadership challenges and the optimisation of superior leadership practices within the African context, assert that policy and governance should profoundly influence ethical school leadership by mitigating challenges and enhancing best practices.

Their literature evaluations further underscore the necessity for explicit policies and regulations that foster ethical conduct, accountability and openness. McKay et al. (2024) elucidate best practices for enhancing ethical leadership governance frameworks and promoting collaboration between educational authorities and school leaders, which are deemed crucial for achieving best ethical practices.

Norman, Hashim and Shaik-Abdullah (2017), in their prior research on the challenges and best practices of ethical leadership, commented that varying national contexts of ethical leadership in Africa might limit leadership approaches. Consequently, education policymakers are advised to avoid 'borrowed' leadership models, positing that even within a single country, an effective leadership practice in one school context may not yield similar results in another. Therefore, SMTs should customise their ethical leadership strategies to align with the specific needs of their institution, regardless of their preferred leadership model. Mupa (2024), who investigated narratives from school leadership in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, supports this claim regarding their time management practices. While examining the disparate and occasionally conflicting literature on ethical school leadership challenges and best practices, the researcher focused on the inherent similarities between distributed and collaborative leadership, both of which can be situated on a continuum of 'shared' leadership approaches, (Crawford, 2025).

The author remarks that the de-professionalisation of teaching is a response to neoliberal influences in ethical school leadership, which seek to integrate free market principles into educational systems. This includes advocating for both internal and external privatisation of educational components that impact best ethical leadership practices and challenges, augmenting agency for school leaders, and reinforcing top-down management through surveillance and enforced ethical leadership performance metrics. The researcher, while analysing literature on the challenges and best practices of ethical school leadership, found two leadership concepts: collaborative leadership and transformational leadership. The two concepts in tackling the challenges of ethical school leadership and refining best practices possess the potential to elevate the ethical and moral conduct of the school management team in administering the institution.

The conceptual frameworks were examined in the literature by Bass, Frick and Young (2018) regarding the formulation of ethical principles for school leadership by Hameduddin and Engbers (2021) concerning the conceptualisation of ethical leadership as a process, and by Matos, Santos, Pais, Sousa and Vasconcelos (2025) in their empirical investigation on responsible ethical school leadership.

The collaborative leadership model entails school leadership engaging in decision-making regarding curriculum development, with other stakeholders actively participating in the formulation and assessment of the school's vision and objectives, whereas research on transformational leadership predominantly emphasises school staff and seldom incorporates parents or students. The researcher posits that the best practices of collaborative leadership require enhanced empowerment of all stakeholders within the institution. Transformational leadership challenges, for instance, can be disseminated within the educational environment, establishing a connection between collaborative and transformational leadership, presuming a significant conceptual overlap between the ethical challenges and best practices of transformational and collaborative leadership. In addressing ethical leadership challenges and optimising effective leadership practices, further analysis of the research conducted by Ramasobana, Tirivanhu and Tsotsotso (2023) on ancestral knowledge systems suggested that national cultural differences influence the best practices and inherent challenges associated with these two school leadership approaches in the context of ethical evaluation practices.

Distributed, honest, collaborative and transformative leadership may be unsuitable in nations with highly centralised, hierarchical education systems. Hence, distinct ethical leadership knowledge styles are likely to be shaped by diverse national cultural settings. The researcher concurs with this assertion and further posits that ethical school leaders, in their endeavour to manage school environments, strive to align policies, plans, structures, curricula, and surroundings with available resources and expected outcomes to mitigate ethical leadership challenges and to pursue best opportunities and practices. Ramasobana et al. (2023) posit that ethical leaders in the African context consistently engage in communication with their subordinates and value the exchange of ideas, fostering a positive moral learning and teaching environment embraced by all.

This characteristic is conducive to achieving best ethical leadership practices and mitigating unwarranted ethical challenges. Based on these literature results, the researcher asserts that ethical school leadership in Africa is a dynamic and changing area of study. This research review emphasized the importance of ethical ideals, decision-making, culture, and social justice in effective school leadership. It highlights the issues encountered by educational leaders in Africa and delineates essential effective practices. This review's findings establish a basis for more research and endorse the formulation of ethical leadership techniques that enhance good educational outcomes in Africa. The researcher posits that these connections are unavoidable owing to the intricacies of school leadership and the probability that leaders exhibit many models. The researcher's examination of the literature elucidates this complexity, concentrating on the more refined iterations of the two referenced leadership conceptions to elucidate these commonalities. This research and literature reviews highlight that caring, as a relational activity across various dimensions, is emotional and affects ethical leadership best practices and problems. This researcher's observation is elucidated in Mifsud's (2024) analysis of a comprehensive evaluation of distributed ethical school leadership research objectives, concepts and methodology pertaining to this topic from 2010 to 2022.

This claim is further evidenced in the research of McKay et al. (2024), who argue that ethical leadership is rooted in social justice, culture, emotions, relationships and the ethics of care. The literature evaluation indicates that inadequately led schools are susceptible to the detrimental influence of their unethical leader's low ethical standards affecting both staff and students. Reviewed literature indicates that a conceptual transformation in ethical school leadership is essential, recognising emotions as collectively and publicly constructed rather than as individual, private and independent psychological attributes and ethical states. In comprehending emotions in ethical school leadership, a relational perspective is essential, emphasising the problems and best practices of ethical school leadership as delineated by many authors, researchers and scholars in this literature study. The literature review further illustrated a variety of policy constraints on best school leadership practices and challenges that have been clearly articulated by nearly all the authors referenced herein.

2.2.4 Research on ethical school leadership

Chterev (2021) has proposed that ethical leadership serves as a precursor to employee well-being and advancement in the workplace. In their literature review on ethical leadership, Huang, Qui, Yang and Deng (2021) assert that it is favourably correlated with trust in management and the psychological well-being of employees. The connection between ethical leadership and employee well-being in educational settings is entirely mediated by organisational citizenship anxiety and the ethical disposition of school leadership. Fu, Lomh, He and Liu (2020) assert that subordinates' well-being within the organisation is predominantly a response to unethical conduct rather than a result of ethical activity. Ahman, Sohal and Cox (2020), who, in their literature study, identified a favourable and significant correlation between ethical leadership and employee well-being, corroborate this claim. Ethics is frequently asserted to be fundamental to leadership. The researcher notes, following a literature review, that a limited number of peer-reviewed publications exist at the intersection of ethics and leadership, a notion also articulated by Ciulla (2020) in the exploration of ethics and leadership, and subsequently reiterated by Cullen (2018) in the examination of moral recovery and ethical leadership. Notably, Brown and Trevino (2006) have historically proposed numerous definitions of ethical leadership, in their research review on the future of ethical leadership, and by Ko, Ma, Bartnik, Haney and Kang (2018) in their integrative review and future research agenda for ethical leadership. These researchers similarly defined ethical leadership as the exhibition of normatively suitable behaviour through personal acts and interpersonal interactions, and the encouragement of such behaviour to followers via two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making.

Scholarly publications on ethical leadership frequently referenced trends in the literature. Nevertheless, only a few have attempted to thoroughly assess this body of research work. In their literature review, Brown et al. (2006) characterized ethical leadership as an emerging idea and juxtaposed it with analogous methods identified in the literature on spiritual, transformative, distributive, collaborative and authentic leadership. The authors identified two primary sources of ethical leadership: situational antecedents and individual characteristics.

They proposed a 16-point research agenda advocating for further investigation into moral traits and practices, as well as the ethical behaviours of leaders, mentees, followers and their respective contexts. Bedi et al. (2018) and Voegtlin, Frisch, Walther and Schwab (2020) are among the few scholars who have examined the literature on the outcomes and responsibilities of ethical leadership through the lenses of social learning and social exchange theory, discovering positive correlations between ethical leadership and various attitudes and behaviours. Ko et al. (2018) indicated that, despite the increasing interest in leadership and ethics, the study of ethical leadership remains a highly fragmented domain. Brown and Trevino (2006) similarly examined the literature on antecedents and individual characteristics, while also incorporating 'moderators' such as leader traits, follower attributes, organisational characteristics, and the dynamics between leaders and followers, as well as environmental contexts, organisational cultures and workplace conditions.

Ko et al. (2018) further observed a propensity for employing survey instruments in ethical leadership research, particularly referencing Brown et al. (2006). The researcher acknowledges that most of their empirical research employed convenience samples, concentrating primarily on middle leadership as the unit of analysis. They also observed that their qualitative studies on ethical leadership were infrequent and predominantly conceptual, thereby constraining the understanding of the application and longitudinal evolution of ethical leadership in genuine, real-world contexts. The researcher additionally noted in their analysis that an integrative review of ethical, authentic and servant leadership revealed the associations of each leadership style with specific philosophical frameworks, asserting that their investigation into ethical leadership is rooted in deontological approaches and focuses on adherence to normative standards. The authors, in their research on ethical school leadership, argue that authentic leadership theory is derived from virtue ethics and emphasises the leader's self-awareness and self-concordance.

The authors contend that servant leadership is consequentialist and prioritises the service of multiple stakeholders. These authors from a positivistic standpoint that seeks to define certain leadership traits, actions and personality types have predominantly been examined, similar to ethical leadership, its antithesis, toxic or destructive leadership.

This observation and assertion in the literature review is supported by the study of Şevik (2024), Yengkopiong (2024) and Thoroughgood, Hong, and Sawyer (2024). The authors discussed an integrative review and typology of toxic leadership, asserting that such management behaviours result in adverse consequences stemming from unethical leadership practices for organisations, followers, stakeholders and society. The researcher asserts that, as per these researchers, the fundamental difference between studies on the dark and light facets of ethical leadership is the inclination of numerous authors to emphasise the beneficial impacts of moral leadership on the professional life and welfare of followers.

Thoroughgood, Hong and Sawyer (2024) corroborate this observation by the researcher, who assert that studies on the followers of toxic leaders investigate the motivations behind individuals' compulsion to follow them. The researcher contends that the predominant positivistic emphasis on relatively stable ethical characteristics and behavioural patterns in the literature on ethical and destructive leadership may explain the scarcity of studies examining the processes of change in ethical leadership practices within organisations. Huang, Yin and Li (2024) reiterate this claim by cautioning against the constraints of examining authentic, ethical, spiritual, and servant-based leadership models, as these frameworks may portray leadership in a manner detached from the realities of modern organisational experiences and behaviours. The authors, in their study and literature assessments, warn against the dominant trend of excessive positivism in ethical leadership studies, which they contend offers an overly simplistic representation of ethical leadership in the educational context. The claim that leaders displaying negative emotional characteristics like fear and anxiety are more susceptible to unethical actions has been challenged by both conventional and critical ethical leadership research. Modern discussions on ethical leadership often analyse its development by overcoming significant obstacles.

Another research was conducted by Cullen (2022) on the moral recovery of ethical leadership. Guo, Xue, He and Yasmin (2023) examined the correlation between ethical leadership and employee job satisfaction. Furthermore, Liu and Yin (2023) discussed the impact of ethical leadership on professional learning while Huang, et al., (2024) investigated the typology of school leaders.

In contrast, Neves (2025) examined the relationship between ethical leadership, teacher motivation and commitment in public schools, has delineated ethical leadership as a construct acquired through crucible experiences intense, often traumatic and invariably unplanned events that have transformed society and served as sources of distinctive leadership capabilities, as well as the social cognitive implications of a leader's artistic literacy on ethical leadership theory. Upon examining the literature reviews concerning ethical leadership, the foregoing cited studies deduce that conventional portrayals of the arduous learning experiences of school leaders are often framed as heroic narratives, in which these leaders overcome adversity by leveraging their inherent leadership capabilities, resolve or resilience to foster acceptable ethical leadership practices within their contexts.

The study conducted by Marquardt, Casper and Kuenzi (2021) and Liu et al., (2023) indicating that employees perceive their leaders as less ethical when they prioritise the avoidance of failure while minimising the significance of personal learning and development further corroborate this assertion. Consequently, school leadership must cultivate an ethical environment by encouraging both interpersonal and intrapersonal justiciable ethical interactions. Based on the review of literature concerning ethical leadership, the researcher aims to summarise the current state of research in this domain by aligning with the findings of Jia, Zhu, Zhang, et al. (2022), who elucidate the connections between ethical leadership, subordinate well-being and their ethical engagement in the workplace as essential factors that advance the study of ethical leadership. The researcher compared global literary expressions from Asia, Europe, and America as articulated by Jia et al. (2022), Liu et al. (2023), and Martin, Emich, McClean, and Woodruff (2021), and further elucidated by the continental studies of Msila (2023), Davids (2023), Ramasobana, et al (2023), along with Padayache, Maistry and Harris (2023). More importantly, the researcher adumbrates that within the African context, perspective and indigenous knowledge systems, ethical leadership has substantially cultivated ethical wisdom behaviour and emphasised the necessity of integrating Ubuntu philosophy into the ethical leadership practices of educational institutions.

The researcher concurs that the advancement of research in ethical school leadership practices in Africa has now become increasingly recognised as a rigorous and intellectually stimulating aspect of the predominant African culture of ethical leadership in evaluating ethical behaviour. Their work underscores ethical leadership that embodies the African idea of Ubuntu as a crucial notion in school management, emphasising the principle that prioritising one another's well-being cultivates an atmosphere of ethical mutual support. They claim in their literature that each person's humanity within the school value chain is best shown through their relationships with others, which are mutually recognised through acknowledgment of the individual's humanity.

2.3 SMTS' ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN MANAGING SCHOOLS

The ethical leadership practices of SMTs in South Africa encompass numerous critical components. These practices seek to foster honesty, respect, fairness, transparency, accountability, ethical decision-making, a healthy school culture, the safeguarding of student well-being, and professional growth in the management and administration of educational institutions. Romm and Nkambule (2022) present this claim in their study on South African viewpoints regarding knowledge management for the successful and ethical administration of public schools. SMTs in their ethical leadership practices typically exhibit integrity, where ethical leaders maintain elevated moral and professional standards, displaying honesty, integrity and consistency in their activities and decision-making processes. School leaders must treat all stakeholders, students, teachers, parents and staff with respect and fairness, fostering inclusivity, equity and non-discrimination in school policies and practices both within and beyond the school environment. In the research case study on ethical leadership in selected secondary schools Edwards (2022) asserts that transparency, open communication and ethical school leaders should cultivate a culture of transparency by delivering clear and accurate information to stakeholders, engaging in candid communication and involving them in decision-making processes concerning school affairs.

Concerning accountability as a crucial element that promotes ethical leadership practices, the researcher contends that SMTs must hold themselves and others accountable for their actions, ensuring that educational resources are utilised ethically, responsibly and efficiently, while achieving all established educational objectives. This encompasses establishing explicit performance and ethical conduct expectations, delivering feedback and resolving any misconduct or violations of ethical standards. Leaders should contemplate ethical implications throughout decision-making, assessing the potential effects on students, staff and the wider community surrounding the school. Moreover, they should prioritise the welfare of staff and the institution above personal or vested interests. The promotion of a positive school culture, as an intrinsic aspect of ethical practices, necessitates that school leadership cultivate an environment that encourages teamwork, collaboration, mutual respect and ongoing professional ethical conduct among staff members. The safeguarding of staff and student well-being is an essential element in fostering the necessary ethical leadership practices for effective school management.

The researcher's claims are corroborated by Demirbilek's (2024) study on parental expectations regarding the leadership of secondary school principals. The researcher asserts that prioritising the safety, well-being and comprehensive development of students and staff is essential, ensuring that policies, processes and practices are in place to safeguard them from harm, discrimination and exploitation. The effective and pertinent professional development of the SMT and their subordinates should be promoted to acquire the necessary skills and competencies for ethical conduct and leadership practices. This should be implemented for school personnel to be informed on educational trends, best ethical and leadership practices and legal obligations. These ethical leadership practices should strive to establish a supportive and inclusive educational environment, improve academic outcomes and cultivate a culture of honesty and quality in South African schools. We live in a tumultuous period. Fragility is an inherent trait and an inescapable element of daily existence. COVID-19 pandemic, economic problems, immigration surges and climate change have significantly strained all social systems, including schooling.

Educational leaders, especially school leadership, encounter several ethical challenges within their schools and communities. There are no established guidelines for leadership in a world that was already profoundly inequitable and has, since March 2020, experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and a collective protest against systemic racism, as posited by Ravich and Herzog (2023) in their research on cultivating a humanising educational leadership mindset for real-time adaptive change. Establishing a culture of trust through ethical leadership should serve as a foundational approach for critical leaders in education, considering the alarming state of a racialised world and the pervasive deficiency of moral and ethical public leadership. Amann, Tripathi and Gupta (2022) concur that ethical school leadership is founded on a set of ethical values or principles that elevate the overall quality of education. Sustained improvements in learners' academic performance necessitate leadership approaches from SMTs that demonstrate a significant correlation between their leadership styles and effectiveness, which is contingent upon contextual realities. According to contingency theory, effective ethical school leadership necessitates an assessment of the situation and context prior to selecting the most suitable leadership response that will significantly enhance pedagogy and improve student performance and ethical staff relations. Conventional leadership methods may hinder the ability of the SMT to comprehend and address the essential factors of the school environment necessary for maintaining enhanced ethical awareness and performance.

Both transactional and transformational leadership styles are critically significant in the ethical leadership practices of SMTs' dealings with the entire organisation. This encompasses various managerial principles, including planning, organising, leading, controlling, and decision-making concerning the interactions between SMTs and subordinates. Zheng, Epitropaki, Graham and Caveney (2022) define ethical leadership as a mode of expression that confronts and aims to alter the ethically unacceptable behaviours and practices of others in the study on ethical leadership and ethical voice. The researcher contends that SMT should consistently exemplify indisputable moral conduct regarded as without question. Arthur and Souza (2023) delineate ethical school leadership practices in schools as the capacity to morally motivate workers to attain collective learning objectives within the school setting.

The authors stress the necessity for SMTs to possess the requisite capacity to encourage personnel, highlighting the collaborative essence of ethical leadership in achieving joint actions and shared aims and objectives within school leadership. This remark indicates that the school leader is accountable for fostering the school culture. In their professional roles, school principals and their leadership teams confront several moral and ethical challenges primarily influenced by internal factors, such as self-perception. Often, the ethical principles of people clash with those of others inside an educational institution. A literature review on ethical school leadership research and reflections that examine International, African and South African perspectives to collaborative, transformative, distributive and directive ethical leadership practices in school management presents a variety of accounts outlined below:

2.3.1 International perspectives on Ethical School leadership

The ethical values evident in most school codes of conduct encompass honesty, truthfulness, transparency, accountability, justice, democratic governance, and the enhancement of both individuals and systems. In their research on the theoretical analysis of ethical leadership lapses, Pansiri, et al. (2021) compared the codes of conduct for teachers in various countries with analogous systems, such as Ireland regions of the United Kingdom like Scotland. They found that the codes of conduct in England place less emphasis on the internal ethical values of teachers and more on adherence to school rules and statutory regulations. Notwithstanding the meticulously formulated policy pronouncements in these developed nations, instances of unethical conduct have persistently escalated daily. Cheteni and Shindika (2017), in their research on ethical leadership in South Africa and Botswana, cited a 2018 study by the Ethics Resource Centre in the United States, which revealed that at least 57% of government employees observed violations of policies, laws or ethical standards in their workplace over a 12-month period, with one-third of these violations remaining unreported. The infractions included sexual harassment, inequitable treatment of employees, misrepresentation of work hours and breaches of privacy. Mincu, Colman, Day and Gu (2024), in their research on two decades of effective school leadership in England, using a humanistic perspective, posit that their methodologies for ethical school leadership are based on fundamental ethical principles.

The research by Mincu et al. (2024) demonstrated that, regardless of national contexts, cultures, policies and particular school conditions, the effectiveness of successful school leadership is fundamentally based on ethical leadership approaches that conceptualise schools as complex adaptive systems, motivated by educational goals that transcend mere functionality and are founded on principles of social justice and inclusion. Alongside the lack of a definitive framework for executing ethical school leadership policies noted by the researcher, additional shortcomings in ethical school leadership policies in sub-Saharan Africa encompass a deficiency in moral ownership, regulations lacking aspirational value statements and the development of policies that are not embedded within professional culture and issues that are less common in developed nations.

The researcher has recognised prevailing political and economic conditions in their educational context that bolster national competitiveness by emphasising graduate employability rather than the conventional objectives of cultivating informed citizens and promoting ethical standards and the overall welfare of individuals and society. According to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which emphasises the significance of education by ensuring inclusive, equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all, the education sector, as posited by the researcher, should play a pivotal role in national development.

The researcher asserts that since its implementation, additional challenges have emerged, and for this SDG to be fully achieved, ethical school leadership approaches that foster equality, accountability, honesty, fairness, justice, and overall moral conduct are essential for the success of SDG 4. The international community must continue deliberate on how education should address these issues. The researcher asserts that nations globally, both developed and developing, bear a moral obligation to support one another in achieving the necessary standards of moral and ethical school leadership practices to fulfil this objective. The researcher's claims are corroborated by a thorough bibliometric evaluation of the global research dynamics of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals conducted by Yumnam, Gyanendra and Singh (2024) and Reimers (2024).

The researchers emphasise that the SDGs are designed to be universal, inclusive and transformative, aiming to include all individuals and prevent marginalisation. The researcher asserts that SDG4 should guide ethical school leadership practices and prioritise the correction of disparities both domestically and internationally, including the improvement of access to quality education for all. Masood, Zhang, Singh, Meena and Perano (2024) assert in their research on exploring leaders' unethical behaviour and follower observations, posit that subordinates regard their leaders as less ethical when the leaders prioritise avoiding failure over personal learning and development. Consequently, it is essential for leaders to cultivate an ethical workplace by advocating for interpersonal and informational justice approaches. The authors assert that positive ethical involvement by leaders enhances staff engagement in public and service sector organisations.

Dağdeviren Ertuş and Özdemir (2024) articulated in their research that mediation of organisational commitment between collective teacher efficacy and ethical work engagement, as a leadership approach, is a positive, fulfilling, ethical work-related state of mind characterised by robustness, dedication and engagement. They assert that individuals employing this leadership strategy convert such leadership energy into innovation and ethical organisational commitment. The researcher suggests that these essential approaches of ethical leadership work engagement and ethical organisational commitment in the international contexts are primarily determined by elevated levels of cultural and moral socialisation among employees, shaped by their social community context.

The ethical leadership work engagement as a leadership approach has numerous determinants. Ethical leadership work engagement is a consequence of elevated moral resilience, job satisfaction and less moral distress. The factors contributing to ethical leadership work engagement encompass physical, mental, psychological and cultural involvement inside the organisation, while its outcomes include job satisfaction, innovation and leadership development. Ethical organisational commitment pertains to mental and emotional health, a pleasant disposition and job satisfaction inside an organisation. In the literature review on these approaches, the researcher in did not identify them as a unique apprehension; rather, it is regarded as a more extensive issue within current international

organisations, encompassing educational environments such as schools. Hassan, Amin and Ghoneim (2024) attested that these ethical leadership practices demonstrated in the international environment are based on authentic leadership, which promotes ethical workplace engagement, ethical organisational commitment and innovative work behaviour.

The literature evaluated from the research conducted by Abd El Qader and Benoliel (2024) indicated that ethical work engagement and ethical organisational commitment among leaders in an educational context can be fostered through genuine ethical leadership practices and the management of psychological capital. The researcher noted in the studies by Hassan et al. (2024), Dağdeviren Ertaş and Özdemir (2024), and Abd El Qader et al. (2024) that, despite a growing global emphasis on ethical school leadership research, particularly in the Global North, investigations into ethical work engagement and ethical organisational commitment as aspects of ethical leadership are infrequent.

Concurrently, the existing literature emphasises the significance of ethical school leadership, well-being, work engagement and innovative work behaviour. The study additionally noted that numerous scholars have concentrated on instances where these ethical leadership approaches are applied in developed nations, like Europe, the USA and Singapore. The researcher asserts that investigations into the correlation between ethical work engagement and ethical organisational commitment, as they pertain to ethical school leadership, remain in their emerging stages globally and have yet to provide substantial empirical findings. Only a limited number of recent research, including those by Jia, Zhu, T., Zhang, Rasool, Asghar, and Chin (2022), Islam, Zulfiqar, Aftab, Alkharabsheh, and Shahid (2024), and Sharma and Sharma (2024), have investigated the direct relationship and connections between ethical work engagement and ethical organisational commitment.

Nevertheless, the correlation between these approaches remains largely unexamined. The researcher, in the literature review, noted the documentation of ethical school leadership approaches, specifically work engagement and organisational commitment, and further observed the global prevalence and broad acceptance of transformational, managerial and instructional leadership approaches to ethical school leadership.

Litz and Scott's (2017) study in the United Arab Emirates found that the transformational leadership theory required adaptation for Islamic cultures. In contrast, Akkary (2014) observed a prevalence of managerial leadership over instructional leadership in Lebanese schools. The complexities arising from the literature review of these five ethical school leadership approaches examined by the researcher prompted the, 'so what' question on these leadership approaches noted in the international context. The researcher sought to distinguish among the five diverse leadership approaches discovered in the literature review of this study. The study found that school leaders utilise various strategies or adapt their approaches according on the ethical leadership orientation of the institution.

The researcher's review of international literature revealed that school leaders across different national contexts utilise diverse ethical leadership approaches, tailored to their personal leadership traits and contextual needs. These approaches include the ethical work engagement approach, the ethical organisational commitment approach, the managerial leadership approach, the instructional leadership approach, and a synthesis of transformational and instructional leadership approaches (Awan et al., 2025; Yan, Lin and Wang, 2025).

Each method emphasises ethical decision-making, yet their practical applications vary depending on cultural, institutional and individual leadership characteristics. The review highlighted that although these ethical leadership approaches are widely promoted internationally, their success is contingent upon their alignment with the leader's personal characteristics and ethical orientation. Research indicates that the effectiveness of any leadership style depends heavily on the congruence between the leader's values and the ethical demands of their environment (Nguyen, 2025; Azhar et al., 2025). Additionally, the cross-cultural dimensions of ethical leadership were a crucial focus. Educational institutions often function across cultural boundaries, necessitating leadership approaches that are adaptable, yet ethically grounded (Lu et al., 2025). For instance, Brazil's educational leadership practices incorporate instructional, transformational, managerial and distributed leadership approaches to better address the complex cultural and operational realities of their educational institutions (Yan et al., 2025).

Moreover, the interplay between work engagement, organisational commitment and ethical leadership underpins the broader understanding of effective leadership in education. Studies underscore that ethical leadership promotes organisational commitment and enhances work engagement by fostering trust, respect and ethical clarity among teachers and administrative staff (Yaseen et al., 2025; Ali, Chaudhary, and Islam, 2025).

These types of leadership approaches are common in South America. Macfarlane, Bolden, and Watermeyer (2024), who elaborate on the three leadership approaches, note that despite Brazil's educational policies promoting democratic school management and community involvement, these approaches are implemented extensively and effectively, corroborate the researcher's assertions. Arthur and Souza (2023) accentuate that these leadership techniques are culturally suitable within the Brazilian educational system owing to its cultural past. Their research on leadership methodologies in complementary schools demonstrates the intricacies of school leadership and the intersection among these three distinct methods. Litz and Blaik (2024) expressed that the literature evaluation from the Israeli perspective reveals a "high power" combination of organisational or distributive and instructional types of school leadership approaches.

They further characterise Israel as an ethnocentric nation, since its public spheres are divided into two distinct spaces: one for Jews and another for the indigenous Palestinian population, with its education system mirroring this state of segregation and dominance. The education system is categorised into the Jewish education system, which comprises secular, religious and settlers' education systems, each governed by a central Jewish administration. This ethos is evident in the curriculum, in contrast to the Arab education system, which is entirely managed by Jewish administration that endorses diverse approaches to ethical leadership practices within the educational framework. The literature reviewed by the researcher indicates that the instructional leadership approach has diminished in popularity within state schools in England as a model of ethical leadership practice, as the archetype of the heroic ethical leader is no longer deemed suitable for contemporary educational environments that emphasise democratic communities.

Gümüş, Liu, Bellibaş and Lee (2024), who examined a global typology of school principals' time allocation in leadership and analysed the impact of contextual and individual characteristics, present this claim. Nevertheless, there persists a notion that the principal is the sole individual in control, capable of wielding significant authority, even if they opt to reject a top-down instructional leadership model in favour of not distributing power among others within the educational environment. The researcher's literature review on international approaches to ethical school leadership further indicates a preference for instructional leadership models in Brazil, where the culture values collectivism over individualism. This was argued by Lucena Barbosa and Borges-Andrade (2024) in their study on the influence of national culture on informal learning behaviours in leadership. In other words, their argument posits that belonging to a coherent community supersedes individual accomplishment. This may indicate that ethical leadership work engagement and ethical leadership organisational commitment approaches might appeal to Brazilian school leaders. Literature review by Souza, Azevedo and Mendonça (2024) from Argentina emphasises that a collaborative approach among teachers is crucial for optimising the educational system and culture. This collaboration is vital for implementing innovations that enhance ethical work engagement, organisational commitment, and transformational leadership practices, ultimately predicting teacher leadership behaviour.

In the Arab context and certain Middle Eastern nations, comprehending how Arab educators and practitioners define ethical leadership is crucial owing to the substantial educational advancements occurring in the region and the scarcity of research on ethical school leadership to guide these developments. Hammad, Sawalhi, Salim Al-Harthi, Alamri and Morad (2023) supported this assertion in their study examining perceptions of teacher leadership in the Arab region, employing a comparative analysis of Qatar, Oman and Egypt. Furthermore, delineating a comprehensive overview of Education Development Leadership and Management (EDLM) knowledge generation in the Arab region necessitated an examination of literature published in Arabic, since most experiences and research endeavours continue to be undertaken in that language. This becomes increasingly evident to the researcher upon examining the volume of internationally published material relevant to Arab studies (EDLM).

A recent literature review on knowledge generation for EDLM in the Arab region revealed just 62 research articles were published in nine principal EDLM journals from 2000 to 2016. Hammad et al. (2023) corroborated this observation, wherein the researchers detected a limited quantity relative to the total of over 4,000 papers published in these journals during the same timeframe. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of literature review studies published internationally on Arabic language sources. This not only highlights the limited global awareness of EDLM in the Middle East but also underscores the necessity for international engagement and representation of local scholarship within Arab societies to achieve a more profound comprehension of EDLM practices and challenges in the region. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of worldwide approaches to ethical school leadership practices in the specified location is constrained. Arar and Saiti (2022) conducted a study in 2018 on ethical leadership, ethical problems and decision-making among school leadership in two distinct regions of Israel. This study sought to assess the influence of ethical leadership on the decision-making processes of educational leaders. This study employed an ethical leadership questionnaire. The findings indicated that the adoption of five ethical leadership approaches ethical work engagement, ethical organisational commitment, transformational leadership, managerial leadership, and instructional leadership by school leaders positively influenced the valuation of social values, the management of moral dilemmas and the enhancement of ethical decision-making within their institutions. These findings possessed practical consequences for leaders and managers within the education system.

It also offered pertinent and significant suggestions for school leadership and other educational institutions. The researcher additionally reports that studies across different continents promoted diverse leadership strategies to enhance student academic performance and necessitated ethical conduct among staff. European research endorsed an educational and transformative leadership approach. The American studies endorsed a comprehensive amalgamation of the five foregoing international ethical leadership approaches of work engagement, organisational commitment, transformational leadership, managerial leadership, and instructional leadership, to foster and motivate collaboration among school leaders and teachers, thereby enhancing student outcomes and ethical school performance. African studies advocated for a democratic and participatory leadership approach.

Some African school leaders endorsed an autocratic leadership style, but under circumstances that compelled teachers and students to conform. Asian studies promoted a leadership style that is both people-centred and transformational. Despite the comparable outcomes of all the studies aimed at enhancing academic achievement, the ethical leadership approaches varied. No identical or analogous leadership style was endorsed by any of the foregoing research since they indicated that situational and contextual factors must be considered for a leadership style to achieve success. The researcher contends that this would reinforce the argument that there is no singular 'best' ethical approach to school leadership for achieving persistent academic or managerial improvement. Cornelissen and Smith (2022) corroborated this claim by the researcher in their study on the leadership strategies of principals managing National Strategy Learner Attainment schools in South Africa. This evaluation of various worldwide literature aims to inspire other academics to conduct high-quality reviews of EDLM literature within Arab societies in the region. A weakness of this review is its dependence on a structural methodology for analysing Arabic EDLM literature.

The researcher asserts that scholars in the Arab region tend to employ an interpretive or critical perspective to gain a deeper understanding of this literature, rather than only noting its prominent characteristics. A further restriction is that the literature study focused on a certain selection of sources during a defined timeframe, although other additional EDLM research works in English, Arabic and French merit exposure to the global community of EDLM researchers and practitioners.

The study also overlooked additional contributions, including postgraduate students' dissertations, conference proceedings, and books. Uncovering this untapped material is expected to enhance our comprehension of EDLM practices and issues in this region of the Arab world, while also contributing to the collective objective of broadening the worldwide knowledge base in the subject. Ahmed (2025), in the present systematic evaluation of studies concerning principals' leadership styles and teachers' organisational citizenship behaviour, articulated this argument by the researcher.

The systematic literature review by Lumban (2023) examined ethical school leadership in Indonesia, highlighting preferences for ethical work engagement, ethical organisational commitment, transformational leadership, managerial leadership and instructional leadership approaches. The researcher suggests that increased collaborative research on school leadership with international scholars would enhance the volume of studies in this field.

Numerous prior studies supporting the perspective of Hariri, Money Penny and Prideaux (2014), Damanik and Aldridge (2017) and Sumintono, Hidayat, Patras, Sriyanto and Izzati (2024) highlighted the necessity to enhance the examination of school leadership within the Indonesian context, emphasising that collaborative relationships among colleagues are crucial for augmenting research capacity and establishing a knowledge base. Bryant and Walker (2018) aver that an effective coordination strategy for the region should integrate both official and informal approaches, be of intermediate scale, and be structured around a unified research agenda. To enhance the quality of school leadership within the Indonesian educational framework, international researchers must engage actively.

Prominent international researchers in educational leadership, such as Philip Hallinger (USA) and Tony Bush (UK), have significantly influenced the advancement and execution of effective school leadership in Asian and African nations. For example, an examination of the literature reviews conducted by the researcher reveals that several countries, including South Africa as articulated by Bush and Glover (2021), China as posited by Shengnan and Hallinger (2021), Malaysia as suggested by Vikaraman, Mansor, Nor, Alias and Gurusamy (2021), Vietnam as proposed by Le and Nguyen (2023), and Thailand as expressed by Kulophas and Hallinger (2024), have engaged in collaborative research with international scholars to enhance school leadership theories and practices within their respective educational contexts.

These collaborations have substantially augmented the volume of published studies in each nation. Bandur (2022) contended that the successful execution of school-based management policies and programmes in developing nations might require strategies from international donor agencies, in conjunction with pertinent academic experts, to assist government entities in enhancing the capacities of schools.

This collaboration should enhance understanding of effective school management team leadership and enable the practical application of this knowledge in fostering international ethical leadership concerning ethical work engagement, organisational commitment, transformational leadership, managerial leadership, and instructional leadership approaches for governance, administration and ethical decision-making in the global education sector.

2.3.2 African perspective on Ethical school leadership

Leadership in African communities has traditionally been a collective phenomenon rooted in communal cultural beliefs and practices, as articulated by Ashu, Lavngwa and Tchoumbou Ngantchop (2023) in their examination of African philosophies of educational leadership and their applicability to school leadership in Africa, serving as a guide for educational systems and school leaders. Chibaya (2024) delineates this methodology in the research concerning the navigation of ethical dilemmas, emphasising a comprehensive examination of ethical leadership practices as a humanistic value that promotes sharing and collective ownership. It also prioritises individuals and relationships, encourages participatory decision-making and leadership, and fosters patriotism and reconciliation amid turmoil and various deprivations in four Zimbabwean schools.

Msila (2014) previously presented these claims in the literature study about African leadership models in education and the management of institutions through Ubuntu. It was also asserted that these leaders ought to act ethically as stewards of Ubuntu philosophy and historically as leaders who must promote and uphold communal values and interests within the educational system through their leadership practices. Presently, the researcher posits that leadership practices in Africa persist in relying on Euro-Western liberal paradigms, which attribute responsibility solely to leaders' acts and thereby exonerate the entire community from accountability. Research on the African continent suggests that conflicting cultural practices, ethical beliefs and workplace expectations pose challenges, thereby fostering a paradoxical ethical leadership mindset and promoting transformative learning through contradictory leadership styles (Khan, Ullah, Sami, Kukreti and Shaukat, 2025).

This contextual view of the claim is previously articulated by Shoko (2023), emphasising its significance as it involves the reflective processes and values pertinent to ethical leadership styles and issues. The authors assert that this knowledge can be utilised to enhance practices, regulations and standards for school leadership training programmes, enabling leaders to navigate their challenges more effectively. An analysis of the literature reviews concerning the writers led the researcher to a relative conclusion regarding the ethical leadership dilemmas encountered by a sample of school leaders. It is proposed that when contextual differences are considered, Euro-Western liberal notions of ethics may not always be suitable. This challenge is presented by emphasising the ethical dilemmas faced by public secondary school leaders in certain regions of the African continent, while also providing a concise overview of ethical guidance in professional codes from various countries and introducing the concept of Ubuntu in school leadership. Kenya has adopted Euro-Western liberal professional ethics and standards in the 2015 Code of Ethics for the Teachers Service Commission, as articulated by Oduol (2020) in the analysis of the professional codes of ethics for teachers in New Zealand Kenya, which asserts that leadership must adhere to the principles of personal integrity, competence, objectivity, impartiality, accountability and selflessness.

The Kenyan standards fail to emphasise the significance of conversation or address how leaders should cultivate ethical sensitivity. There is a resurgence of interest in sub-Saharan nations about the increasingly significant concept of Ubuntu, notably associated with the Nguni proverb “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” “I am because we are’ (sometimes lightly translated as “a person is a person through other persons”). In Kenya, the Teachers’ Service Commission’s Professional Code of Ethics, Kenyan legislation, and the Teachers’ Code of Regulations delineate ethical leadership in secondary schools. All frameworks are based on Euro-Western ideals inherited from the British at the time of independence. The behaviour of Kenyan school leaders is evaluated with minimal consideration for culturally rooted ethical standards and local community expectations. Simultaneously, there is a rise in reports of ethical violations in Kenyan secondary schools. Abaya (2016) expresses these claims in the research on issues in school leadership along Kenya’s Borabu-Sotik border.

This context in the ethical leadership trajectory on the continent indicates potential tensions among school leaders' personal values, professional values and communal values. Nevertheless, the researcher argues that these incidents are often understood in a manner that presumes school leaders are unethical, without adequately considering the local context or the complexities of the moral dilemmas confronting these leaders. Until 2019, as highlighted by Pansiri, Maundeni and Ugwu (2021), Botswana, a sovereign nation in Southern Africa and a former British colony that achieved self-governance in 1966, has historically been seen as a premier exemplar of democracy in Africa. Pansiri and Majwabe (2020), who observed that the country's inability to decolonise its education system has resulted in its continued entrapment under cultural and historical hegemonies, previously articulated this claim. It became evident that local school communities are local in their structure, sociocultural makeup or educational methodologies. Based on the reviewed literature, the researcher contends that school leaders encounter the formidable problem of respecting or contesting local histories and ethical ideals while manoeuvring through legal, policy and curricular frameworks that may originate from different eras and contexts. Educational leaders are anticipated to collaborate with other schools and local community members, while teachers are urged to engage in a distributed ethical leadership model aimed at enhancing moral teaching and learning within the school context.

Pansiri, et al. (2021) highlight the existence of a significant reversal in ethical perceptions regarding socio-economic and political developments, which reflects on governance practices across all sectors of the nation's economy, including the ethical leadership challenge as a crucial element of governance in the advancement of ethical school leadership practices. Their claim and contemplation of this significant transformation, however, are confined to ethical leadership as observed in the school setting. Pansiri et al. (2021) maintain that decline in ethical school leadership is exacerbated by the rise of globalisation, neo-liberalism, and the market economy as a Eurocentric development model, which has undermined the Afrocentric social development philosophy of Ubuntu or Botho in Setswana. In 2008, Botswana launched "Botho" or "Ubuntu" as a paradigm of development aimed at fostering ethical leadership within public service and educational contexts.

The principle was adopted during a period marked by indications of flawed ethical leadership and moral deterioration within public service. The country implemented public work Management Directive No. 8 of 2014, which reviews the conditions of work for public employees to enhance ethical conduct.

Additional initiatives to foster ethical awareness were implemented via the School Management Manual, which advocates for school leadership to cultivate positive working relationships and to build high morale and acceptable ethical standards among the workforce within the educational setting. Pansiri et al. (2021) further assert that initiatives like the School Development Plan (SDP) were implemented with a focus on transparency, collegiality, partnership, shared decision-making, mutual trust, respect for differing opinions and a unified purpose. These characteristics are essential to ethical leadership. Notwithstanding the government's focus on ethical leadership, apprehensions regarding it in educational institutions increase persistently. Dipholo (2021) further laments that the increase in unethical behaviour, the leadership conflict in Botswana and the notable dismissal of 727 public service employees for unethical conduct over five years, indicate a systemic decline in leadership integrity in Botswana. This is exacerbated by numerous recent reports concerning the decline of ethical standards in schools, which necessitates immediate attention to establish codes of moral conduct for ethical leadership in educational institutions. Pheko (2018) previously cited these assumptions in the study of the obstacles encountered by new head teachers and their leadership teams in Botswana.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014), as referenced in Ololube (2018), articulated the policies, philosophies and objectives of Nigerian education, which encompass the cultivation of individuals into morally upright, patriotic and competent citizens, the comprehensive integration of individuals into their local communities, Nigerian society and the global context. Consequently, the responsibility rests with educational leaders, also known as school leaders, to adeptly manage their diverse duties, talents, and competencies to actualize the objectives of the Nigerian educational system. The author further elucidates the attributes of institutional leaders, asserting that effective leaders foster essential attitudes, characteristics, and qualities relevant to educational leadership and management.

Chimezie and Prince (2016) aver that the Federal Republic of Nigeria attributes the National Policy on Education, which articulates that the functioning of a school system should emerge from the lifestyles and social ethics (customs) of the communities it serves. The Nigerian secondary school system enforces educational regulations, professional ethics and codes of behaviour that must be followed by principals, instructors and students (Nabiebu and Enyia, 2019). Ethics delineates the obligations of employers and governments in promoting and enforcing ethical standards or codes of conduct.

Nonetheless, Udofia and Uduigwomen (2022) indicate that recent changes in the country reveal a significant need for enhanced professional and ethical standards among teachers. They additionally express concern that, for instance, teachers in Delta State exhibit apathy towards learning. A significant number of students are absent from school, while others arrive late and depart at their will. The professional ethics of this school leadership adversely influence learners and society. Ossai and Nwabuwe (2023) assert that professional misbehaviour among school leaders and teachers in Nigeria might result in inadequate discipline, subpar academic performance, diminished morale, failing grades, a negative school reputation and increased absenteeism. Students perceive school leadership and teachers as exemplars. If not addressed swiftly, this environment may cultivate immorality and lawlessness, ultimately compromising the integrity of the teaching profession. Consequently, school leadership are anticipated to conduct themselves ethically while interacting with teachers and learners in accordance with the Education Act, the Code of Ethics for Teachers and other pertinent legislation.

The enduring security challenges and ethical leadership dilemmas in Nigeria, which appear to lack a viable resolution, are indicative of a dysfunctional political system, as expressed by Ndukwe, Ukeje, Onele, et al. (2021). The authors further clarify that, although the educational sectors of several African countries have at times faced strain in fulfilling their moral value creation tasks, Nigeria is not exempt from this ethical dilemma. Nnaji, Igbokwe-Ibeto, Ukeje and Nwangbo (2022) assert that governance issues are crucial for communities and nations in their efforts to administer educational public institutions during times plagued by corruption and mismanagement of school resources.

Furthermore, Udofia et al. (2022) contend that for an organisation to attain effectiveness, it is essential to set rules and regulations that employees must adhere to. The authors further lament that a school's deficiency in rules and regulations engenders chaos, adversely affecting learners, staff and the institution itself. As vital environments for cultivating moral leadership, schools encounter numerous ethical and legal challenges that school leadership must not overlook. Nabiebu (2022), in discussing Africa and conflict law, asserts that beyond warfare and societal discord, educational law in Nigeria, along with meticulously formulated staff policies and ethical codes, underpins the functionality of the education system.

This implies that the conduct of school leadership must adhere to the established principles and standards of ethical behaviour as delineated by the Ministry of Education, the National Teachers Institute (NTI), the Union of Teachers of Nigeria (NUT), and the Nigerian Teachers Registration Council. The researcher asserts that postmodern ethical thought has complicated these paradigmatic approaches by recognising a diversity of perspectives and intersecting positions, necessitating a more thorough examination of omissions and the beneficiaries of unethical actions or behaviours. The researcher's perspectives have prompted various ethics professional organisations to emphasise participatory ethics, concentrating on the ethical reasoning of professionals within educational systems. This suggests that practitioners prioritise conditions conducive to dialogue and presents inquiries for practitioners to contemplate, thereby promoting ethical sensitivity awareness initiatives for school leaders and their subordinates. The researchers assert that this is a persistent challenge; nonetheless, revising ethical norms and guidelines to incorporate these diverse methods will be essential.

The challenges are exacerbated by the legacy of colonialism, as argued by Mathonsi and Sithole (2024), who observed that management and leadership practices in Africa are influenced by a complex, multi-faceted social, cultural and historical context. They further maintain that a comprehensive examination of leadership as a governance practice in post-colonial Africa is necessary, addressing its post-independence deficiencies, foundational theoretical shortcomings and the imperative for African wisdom in ethical school leadership practices.

The researcher notes that engaging with the concept of "decolonisation," after examining a plethora of literature by various authors, has prompted significant ethical leadership questions, compelling African scholars, writers and politicians to confront and address this notion, as exemplified by the Ubuntu Project, which can be characterised as ethical leadership morality within African contexts. Eze (2015) observes that the valiant African combatants who terminated the era of colonisation do not consistently transform into commendable politicians in the postcolonial context. Eze contends that many individuals are entangled in a dichotomous mindset that juxtaposes the vindictive oppressor with the courageous oppressed. The researcher posits that when binary thinking affects educational methods, it perpetuates a prescriptive ethical framework that presumes distinct and recognizable distinctions between right and evil. Nonetheless, a more profound ontological issue arises when Ubuntu is situated within its historical context.

The researcher acknowledges Eze's (2015) assertion that a fundamental ethical dilemma in decolonisation pertains to the African reaction to Euro-Western concepts of personhood. Eze (2015) and Mungwini (2015) both address a fundamental inherited dilemma that African philosophers must confront. The researcher's observation regarding the lack of an Africanised or indigenised code of ethics relatable to community members, educators and SMTs results in the disregard for professional conduct without consequence. The researchers assert that there is a necessity for more indigenised research and initiatives focused on the African continent, particularly in the Southern hemisphere, to develop an ethical leadership training policy that will direct the training of school leaders and guarantee that schools adhere to ethical and moral standards. To instil African leadership values in students, African school leaders must have access to diverse African educational models grounded in strong indigenous knowledge systems. This indicates that the African school leader must possess attributes that reflect a deep comprehension of the customs and traditions inherent in the indigenous practices that influence the knowledge and skills of African learners. Numerous literature studies within the African context include Adeyemi and Bolarinwa (2013), Obama, Eunice and Orodho (2015) and Ziduli et al. (2018). These researchers expressed concern regarding this assumption, noting that the ethical school leadership method on the continent received the lowest ratings among workers in educational settings.

The literature analysed from the works of the foregoing authors, writers and scholars revealed that negative leadership attributes were significantly underestimated. The researcher asserts, based on the presented literature analysis that the poor ethical leadership qualities stemmed from subordinates not observing these ethical leadership behaviours in their SMT leaders. Subordinates in educational environments preferred SMTs with a supportive leadership style. The authors argued in their studies conducted in Botswana, Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, respectively that the supportive ethical leadership approach is superior, as it facilitates teachers' inclusion in the team and their involvement in ethical decision-making processes. It fostered an environment of ethical cohesion in the pursuit of established objectives within the educational context.

2.3.3 South African perspective on Ethical school leadership

Kern (2025) identifies the decentralisation of authority within the South African education system as a significant concern, particularly in relation to the perceptions of inclusion among parent members of the SGB, of which principals are ex-officio members. The author also posits that prior to 1994 in South Africa, during the apartheid government, all power and authority in schools was solely vested in the principal, with negligible or absent teacher participation in decision-making and leadership roles in most schools. Conversely, the democratic government, following its establishment in 1994, inherited disparate educational institutions from the apartheid regime, marked by significant inequalities in resource distribution and allocation. Since that time, the democratic government has implemented numerous equality and equitable initiatives to reform the education system. A primary focus of educational reform has been the quality of leadership within schools.

Rais (2024) echoes the foregoing assertions, positing that during this undemocratic apartheid era, school leadership was predominantly authoritarian, hierarchical and centralised on the principal, leading to diminished student performance, since teachers did not use their full potential. The school leadership at that time exemplified apartheid government, characterised by a system that dictated while individuals within the schooling system submitted. The working conditions of teachers were not favourable to fostering leadership in areas where they possessed potential and aspiration.

They lacked the opportunity to display their capabilities, resulting in minimal professional advancement. In their research on school principalship and management, Pilo, Jaarsveld and Challens (2024) regard ethical school leadership as essential for transformation in schools, as it influences learners' performance. These authors posit that a competent leader, who fosters an ethical atmosphere, enabling all stakeholders to recognise their potential, aspirations and strengths while employing innovative distributive and transformative ethical leadership methodologies, guides an effective school.

Botha (2016), in the study on improving the efficacy of South African schools via distributed leadership, posits that this increasingly recognised approach is supported for its capacity to meet the expectations of ethical leaders, elevate classroom performance through collaborative decision-making and positively impact comprehensive school reform. Nkambule (2023) asserts that all professional sectors, including educational institutions, are diligently preparing for the onset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). These modifications will also affect educational systems in both developed and developing nations, including South Africa. The researcher asserts that the South African education system is under pressure to adapt to these changes within a relatively short timeframe. Central to these developments is the necessity for schools to cultivate a robust ethical leadership culture and methodology. Arimi, Gichohi and Bundi (2022) assert that an ethical leadership approach should actively and systematically embrace a credible appreciation for the wealth of leadership knowledge present within their environments by institutionalising a knowledge management framework focused on ethical school leadership to foster a conducive ethical climate. Ethical school leadership is crucial in influencing the future educational framework of South Africa.

The researcher asserts that a domestic approach to ethical school leadership must incorporate ideas and practices that foster integrity, accountability, equity, and social justice in educational institutions. The researcher discerned components during the literature study that sought to investigate current studies on ethical school leadership in South Africa, emphasising principal topics, problems, exemplary practices and management strategies intended to attain elevated ethical leadership standards.

These domestic approaches encompassed the moral exercise of power and control to enhance ethical and moral conduct within the school, the ethical application of personal leadership competencies and the elevated utilisation of interpersonal leadership skills by the SMT. The study posits that the misuse of these tactics, mainly power and control as a social force, can adversely influence the personal, professional, psychological, physical and ethical well-being of school leadership.

When the implementation of these ideas has bad outcomes, it may obstruct healthy relationships, effective teaching and learning, growth, productivity, and the overall ethical well-being of the school community. Botha and Fuller (2024), which articulates the perspectives of South African educators regarding the moral utilisation of personal ethical leadership competencies, the power and control exerted by school leadership, and the ethical implementation of interpersonal leadership skills by SMTs, illuminate the researcher's claims in the study. Room and Nkambule (2022), in their study on knowledge management for the effective and ethical administration of public schools, identified common themes in their literature review. They found that school leadership, in their approaches to domestic ethical leadership practices, consistently expressed that they intentionally employed Ubuntu to foster amicable, significant and mutually advantageous relationships. The authors, in their literature study, indicated that when school workers experienced offense in-group settings, methods for reconciling differences and progressing beyond past grievances were frequently identified, particularly when principles of ethical leadership were effectively implemented. The ethical conduct of staff within the school environment guaranteed that elements of mistrust, dissatisfaction, uncertainty and rivalry did not overshadow the welfare of staff relationships, organisational culture, information sharing, knowledge management and overall school effectiveness.

In their comparative evaluation of the leadership development needs of basic school leaders, Awodiji and Naicker (2024) assert that their primary objective was to delineate the contrasts between ineffective and effective knowledge management practices in the context of ethical school leadership. Two scenarios were presented, one of which had two schools utilised to exemplify an instance of an ineffective information-sharing culture and its overall influence on the efficacy of knowledge sharing and organisational learning.

Another scenario was exemplified by a school where excellent knowledge-sharing procedures had fostered a culture conducive to significant organisational learning. The literature research indicates that schools exhibit inefficient information sharing struggle with an anti-collaborative culture and a lack of leadership from the SMT at the grassroots level. Room previously articulated this assertion and Nkambule (2022), indicating that in schools that implemented effective ethical knowledge-sharing practices, a climate of collectivism and organisational learning prevailed.

In such environments, teachers and staff were encouraged by leadership to engage extensively and courteously with one another through dialogue in meetings and ethical leadership communities of practice organised by the school to cultivate best practices. The leadership of such schools prioritised bottom-up efforts and maintained an open-door policy for lower personnel to discuss ethical issues relevant to the school's success. Their study exemplifies how pragmatically coordinated ethical organisational learning is an inseparable process from a culture of effective knowledge sharing, participative ethical leadership and management, and overall school efficiency.

2.4 SMTS' MAINTENANCE OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

Ethics denotes a collection of rules, standards, principles, or codes that serve as a guiding framework for members of an organisation, enabling them to engage in morally appropriate behaviour and thwart actions that may jeopardize the welfare of others, regardless of potential personal gain. Jha and Singh (2023) articulated this assertion in their study on the taxonomy of employees' unethical conduct from the perspective of top management. They further believe that ethics relates to good and evil, right and wrong and concentrates on what we should or should not do. Individuals inside any organisation, such as a school, encounter numerous ethical difficulties, necessitating the establishment of rules or norms to assist in their resolution. Values and ethics are intrinsically linked, and values fluctuate according to differing environmental conditions. Consequently, workplace ethics can be interpreted as varying with changing settings. Employees must be cognizant of the prevalent standards of ethical conduct.

Behavioural norms may vary among organisations; what is deemed ethical in one may be regarded as unethical in another. Ethical standards delineate the parameters of behaviour by distinguishing acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, hence clarifying expectations for employees. Ethical behaviour entails compliance with the moral principles outlined in codes of conduct, whereas transgressions of these principles are deemed unethical. Jha et al. (2023) asserted that unethical behaviour pertains to actions or the severity of actions undertaken by employees that contravene widely accepted moral and ethical standards.

Such behaviours stem from a neglect of laws, policies, regulations and organisational norms, resulting in detrimental consequences for the institution and being deemed illegal or unethical by both society and the school community. The research, drawing from the literature review, posits that ethical leaders should serve as dependable role models for their followers, treating them with respect and decency. Numerous scholars characterise these leaders as honest, compassionate and impartial decision-makers who engage in ethical considerations that promote the ethical welfare of subordinates by administering rewards, recognition and penalties based on their unethical conduct and behaviour across various contexts beyond education, thereby underscoring the significance of these ethical principles.

The assertions were corroborated by Jha et al. (2023), Zeb, Akbar, Gul, et al. (2023) in their research on work–family conflict and emotional intelligence, as well as by Idrees, Hynek, Jin, Akbar, and Jabeen (2022) in their study on the effects of knowledge management.

This study examined the mediating role of ethical leadership practices on the ethical well-being of the SMT in their efforts to run their schools ethically. Silva and Machado (2025), in their research on ethical leadership and its correlation with social responsibility, assert that ethical leaders operate well owing to their clear expectations of employees. Moreover, they assert that the ethical leader's profile is defined by the ability to cultivate trust and positively influence employees through actions that reflect moral ideals and ethical commitments. In the research on school leadership, Best (2024) found that ethical leadership forecasts various outcomes, including the leader's effectiveness, job satisfaction, commitment to increased effort, and willingness to disclose ethical issues.

Comprehending its reciprocal advantages and engaging employees in the decision-making process to attain organisational goals influence the ethical welfare of employees. It fosters constructive work behaviour, since employees perceive their leader as reliable and equitably engaged in assisting them in attaining their ethical objectives. Li, Li, Xie and Lopez (2024), in their research on the impact of ethical leadership on creativity, asserted that ethical leadership favourably affects employee behaviour in the workplace. They also assert that ethical leadership cultivates ethical work behaviour by considering and prioritising the best interests of subordinates during ethical decision-making processes.

They assert that followers recognise that stringent disciplinary measures will be enforced if they engage in unethical behaviour and breach the organisation's ethical standards. The reviewed literature indicates that schools ought to advocate for ethical leadership training and appoint leaders with elevated moral standards to foster employees' creative thinking. Additionally, it revealed that a leader's positive demeanour significantly enhances employees' motivation, thereby improving their work efficiency and effectiveness while upholding ethical and moral conduct. The researcher, following a review of the literature on the SMT's preservation of ethical conduct, posits that several prior studies indicate that ethical school leadership is positively influenced by various dimensions of ethical leadership effectiveness, which enhance employees' commitment and work performance.

The claims regarding ethical school leadership behaviour were similarly expressed in the literature review by Kim, Choi and Son (2024), which explored the relationship between peer team leader ethical voice, role modelling and ethical leadership, as well as in the study by Awan, Zia, Khan and Khurshid (2025), which assessed the ethical leadership dimensions of high school principals. The literature examined by the researcher indicates that SMTs in South Africa are mandated to uphold elevated standards of ethical conduct, as they bear the responsibility for ensuring fair and equitable treatment of students, staff and stakeholders, while also maintaining principles of transparency, accountability, integrity, responsible resource management, conflict of interest mitigation, professionalism and compliance to pertinent educational laws and regulations.

Kim et al. (2024) proposed that the ethical behaviours of SMTs are crucial, therefore, emphasising the importance of an ethical voice and examining the relationship between school leadership's ethical voice, role modelling and ethical leadership practices. Awan et al. (2025) further elucidated these ethical leadership traits and dimensions in their evaluation of high school principals, emphasising the three components of ethical leadership: care, critique and justice, which are essential to all the research questions examined in this study, as well as to other participants crucial for establishing an acceptable moral compass within the school environment. The researcher determined from the literature review that the ethical leadership practices, roles and conduct of school principals are significant and encompass behaviours that influence transparency, accountability, integrity, responsible resource management, conflict of interest, professionalism and compliance to applicable laws and regulations.

2.4.1 Transparency

Upon reviewing the literature and evaluating the ethical leadership aspect of transparency, the researcher noted that the world is currently facing ethically demanding circumstances. The ongoing diverse limits resulting from a leadership and financial crises that commenced in late 2019 have disrupted millions of lives worldwide, and the world has remained morally and peacefully unsettled since that time. The escalation of conflicts and ethical dilemmas has engendered a period of turmoil for humanity. The degree of accountability and ethical ambiguity that characterised this period intensified this situation.

Nonetheless, humanity has demonstrated remarkable endurance in confronting morally demanding circumstances, tirelessly developing remedies, recovery strategies and mobilising resources to assist the most vulnerable members of society. Currently, the world requires exemplary ethical and accountable leaders more than ever. Educational institutions require leaders imbued with values, principles and ethics to effectively serve their constituencies; leaders who demonstrate concern for those under their authority, advocate for justice and equity, actively listen and ensure others feel acknowledged. Literature reviewed indicate that educational institutions require leaders who engage in reflection, embrace critiques as a decision-making tool, assist and encourage others, and has the capability and willingness to unify individuals. Leaders dedicated to ethical conduct are regarded as ethical leaders.

More importantly, students globally should be guided and supported by school leaders who assist learners in enriching their intellect and emotions. This is when ethical leadership is highlighted, as leaders adopt specific moral ideals and ethics, exemplified in this study by the ethics of care, justice and critique. Consequently, ethical leadership within these educational institutions necessitates transcending personal gain, authority or influence. The leadership model should incorporate suitable consequence management for ethical leadership within the educational context and its surroundings.

This study's literature review substantiated the concepts of ethical leadership, ethics of care, justice, critique and accountability, alongside the role of school leaders within ethical leadership, and highlights the most pertinent studies in the field. Literature has demonstrated that, to uphold ethical leadership transparency, moral leaders must consider the interests of both internal and external stakeholders.

Integrity, a vital leadership trait, compels leaders to communicate truthful information to stakeholders, thereby augmenting organisational value and employee conduct, (Ete, Epitropaki, Zhou and Graham, 2021). Their literature review revealed a significant correlation between leader and organisational behavioural integrity and its effects on follower behavioural outcomes. The study prominently identified the accountability aspect of ethical leadership, which enhances employees' awareness by conveying necessary moral behaviours and actions. Furthermore, the research emphasised that the traits of ethical leaders are fundamentally based on fairness, accountability, honesty and integrity. In the research on ethical leadership, Skiba (2024) asserted that moral ethics inherent in leadership fosters integrity, hence establishing an open and transparent communication system that directs individual moral conduct.

Ethical knowledge exchange is a crucial element in directing the leader's behavioural and moral actions. Considering the rapid globalisation discussed by Bhatti, Akram, Hasnat et al. (2020), in their examination of the impact of ethical leadership on knowledge sharing, the researcher contended that contemporary organisations operate within a milieu where ethical and moral imperatives are perpetually evolving, thereby amplifying the significance of ethical leadership practices within these organisations, in pursuit of adapting to rapid global

trends in ethical school leadership and management. The study further suggests that an institution, such as a school working in a highly ethically demanding environment, needs the adoption of ethical leadership transparency in response to its complicated context.

Supplementary literature on the assertions by Schnackenberg, Tomlinson and Coen (2021) regarding the dimensional structure of transparency as a construct suggested that ethical leadership influences organisational culture, thereby diminishing unethical practices and ethical ambiguity within the institution. The researcher asserts that SMTs must operate transparently, ensuring that decisions and procedures are evident and accessible to all stakeholders. The literature examined by the foregoing researcher provided insights into organisational policies, procedures and financial issues, delineating ethical school leadership practices as a process wherein SMTs are inspired by adherence to high principles and an ethical code, formulating and articulating a vision for the school and establishing a foundation of credibility.

The failure to cultivate a transparent culture within the school, or the avoidance thereof, is likely to lead to considerable moral deterioration within the school environment. It might be posited that ethical leadership is contingent upon a robust communication framework. Halbusi, Al, Ismail and Omar (2021) corroborated the researcher's claims, in their study on ethical leadership and employee ethical behaviour, suggesting that a transparent communication network facilitates leaders in establishing a two-way communication process, thereby improving the organisation's communication. Based on this assertion, the researcher agrees that ethical leaders actively influence the transparent communication environment.

The literature reviewed from the works of Ete et al. (2021) Schnackenberg et al., (2021), Halbusi et al., (2021) and Kim et al., (2024) corroborates the researcher's assertions that unethical conduct of the SMTs in managing the school ethical climate diminishes the impact of moral leadership, consequently adversely affecting organisational outcomes and staff attitudes and moral behaviour. Therefore, ethical school leadership undeniably play a crucial role in establishing the organisation's ethical climate by upholding ethical transparency.

2.4.2 Accountability

International research, including the International Successful School Principalship Project by Gunnulfsen, Jensen and Møller (2022) and subsequent findings by Ylimaki and Brunderman (2024) critically reviewed effective principal leadership and school development during challenging times. It indicates that school leaders must play a pivotal role in shaping their schools' ethical direction and learning environment.

Nevertheless, the researcher noted a deficiency in understanding regarding the development of ethical leadership layering across various accountability contexts, particularly in relation to how leaders engage with people inside their professional teaching and learning communities in educational institutions. The significance of comprehension in this context is emphasised when the researcher acknowledges that literature on ethical leadership indicates that school leaders are pivotal in cultivating and advancing a culture of ethical leadership and accountability, stemming from a well-defined ethical framework for teaching and learning.

A study by Jang and Lee (2025) regarding the equity ramifications of school principal evaluations on student achievement and perceptions of effective ethical school leadership and accountability revealed a strong correlation between the establishment of high ethical standards in schools and students' learning and advancement. This assertion is substantiated by the researcher following a meticulous review of literature regarding accountability as an essential component of ethical school leadership. The studies conducted by Gunnulfsen et al. (2022), Ylimaki et al. (2024) and Jang et al. (2025) elucidate the argument that when ethical leadership is characterised by democratic norms and robust distributed approaches, there is a greater understanding of how school leaders reconcile accountability with the demands of ethical leadership performance.

The prevailing school culture alone does not adequately account for how the moral imperatives of the educational governance system convey expectations for potential outcomes or influence leadership accountability and learning within schools. It is evident from the examined literature by these scholars that ethical school leaders in democratic societies face significant challenges in addressing the numerous complex, problematic and inevitable ethical decision-making responsibilities inherent to their role with confidence and

efficacy. Söderström and Seiser (2024) substantiated the researcher's claim in their study on ethical and moral viewpoints in school leadership, focusing on teacher ethics and teacher quality. The literature review supports the researcher's assertion that SMTs must guarantee equitable treatment of all students and staff, free from discrimination based on race, gender, religion or any other protected characteristic. They ought to advocate for inclusivity and diversity within the educational community. The existing literature on the responsibility of school leaders provides numerous significant theoretical contributions to this research topic. The literature research indicates that responsible ethical leadership is crucial for the development and implementation of an effective school ethical leadership plan.

This study significantly broadens the scope of research on responsible ethical school leadership for effective school management practices. Secondly, several prior research from the analysed literature on ethical school leadership have predominantly concentrated on direct supervisors, investigating the impact of their ethical leadership practices on both the school and organisational performance.

This assertion is demonstrated in the literature reviews and research conducted by Javed, Iqbal, Iqbal and Imran (2021), which centres on sustainable leadership and innovative behaviour. Cheng (2022) developed a mechanism for effective school-based management while Liao (2022) explored ethical leadership and future research prospects. Moreover, Huo, Safdar and Ahmed (2024) analysed the influence of responsible ethical leadership on sustainable performance and the subsequent work of Sultana and Javed (2024), which examined the effects of self-efficacy and ethical leadership on job performance in schools. The researcher concurs with the literature analysis concerning this aspect of accountability, noting that the authors and scholars highlighted the impact of ethical leadership accountability on organisational performance.

To address the gap between ethical school leadership and performance, it is imperative for school leadership to identify ethical dilemmas early, implement ethical leadership strategies, and utilise appropriate interventions to ensure effective management and a robust accountability framework for ethical conduct. The researcher asserts that these tactics, derived from the literature, if effectively managed and rooted in collaborative ethical

systemic leadership and management procedures, will enhance moral awareness and consciousness within the educational environment. Despite the interventions by the researcher, Abrahamsen and Aas (2024) contend, in their action research on assisting school leaders with school development, that tensions or dilemmas may arise within the SMT and among teachers. These tensions reflect ethical concepts such as fairness, equality, power and social justice (ethics of critique), the interests of others rather than self-interest (ethics of care), and student interests (ethics of profession) within the educational environment, necessitating effective management by a discerning ethical SMT.

2.4.3 Integrity

Integrity is frequently referenced in leadership and management literature to characterise a leader. Integrity, as articulated by Arif, Chaudhury and LaCross (2023) in their examination of leader integrity's impact on employees, encompasses various elements, including excellence, ethics, fairness, equity and reliability. These authors concur that integrity lacks a universally accepted definition yet emphasise that various studies have delineated integrity from diverse perspectives, including authenticity, ethical and moral conduct, steadfastness in adversity and coherence between words and actions.

Integrity is frequently employed to represent an individual's ethical or moral virtues, such as courage, honesty, trust, empathy, kindness, justice and equality. The researcher reiterates the claims regarding leader integrity made by Arif et al. (2023) and contends that this aspect has garnered significant attention in contemporary ethical leadership practices and research, from facilitating advantageous outcomes to averting moral crises in the workplace. The research indicates that leader integrity is a primary requirement for organisational effectiveness. According to the literature, integrity has been described in several research as the consistency of genuine, ethical, and moral conduct in the face of challenges, as well as the stability of words and actions.

The researcher has noted from the literature that the absence of leader integrity among both upper and lower levels of school leadership teams has been reported as unethical and disreputable conduct in the workplace. Consequently, organisational leaders establish norms for professional conduct and cultivate a culture that prioritises employee and organisational

effectiveness, inadvertently absolving junior and middle staff of this ethical leadership characteristic. The researcher concurs with Sibanda (2023) in asserting that fairness and equity constitute a locally rooted ethical leadership practice aimed at fostering a collaborative learning environment, reflected and supported by the sincere ethical endeavours of all participants in the school.

Sibanda (2023) concurs that integrity is an ethical process, fostered by a positive school culture, which employs strategies that engage the school in a collective responsibility for implementing equitable ethical practices and eradicating marginalising practices that sustain prejudice and segregation within the school environment. Qasim, Irshad, Majeed and Rizvi (2021) assert that leaders who exhibit integrity serve as dependable role models for their followers, treating them with respect and dignity. Researchers such as Qing, Asif, Hussain and Jameel (2020), Zeb, et al., (2023), and Idrees, Hynek, Jin, Akbar, and Jabeen (2022) assert that leaders possessing integrity are honest, benevolent and impartial decision-makers who promote the ethical welfare of their followers through the reinforcement, acknowledgment and sanctioning of behaviour. The researcher asserts, based on the foregoing researchers, that outstanding leader integrity in leadership practices demonstrates profound excellence, trustworthiness, sincerity and transparency.

For instance, Arif et al. (2023) indicated that leader integrity is predominantly comprehended within the framework of ethical leadership, when leaders' acts align with established ethical and moral norms. The activities of moral leaders closely align with the values they espouse and the moral and ethical principles upheld by themselves and their followers. The research conducted by Qasim et al. (2021) indicated that authentic leaders prioritise self-awareness, align their actions with their principles and demonstrate moral transparency. Against this background, the researcher concurs with this assertion and posits that while a leader's integrity encompasses various perceptions such as morality, ethics, authenticity and trustworthiness, the most effective method to evaluate that integrity is through the way these exemplary leaders exhibit these ethical integrity traits.

The literature examined from these writers in reference to this study reinforces the researcher's conviction analysis regarding the essential significance of leadership integrity, which encompasses the exemplary moral traits or attributes required of a leader.

The researcher further argues that the evaluation of virtuous ethical leadership pertains to leadership behaviours and practices that fit with prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice as proposed. Arif et al. (2022), reflecting the researcher's sentiments in the research work on examining leader integrity on staff, further delineated each virtue by defining prudence as a leader's capacity to discern appropriate actions, and fortitude, commonly referred to as courage, as the intrinsic disposition to resist immoral actions. These authors define temperance as the capacity to regulate emotions and make appropriate decisions. They ultimately defined justice virtue as a concept pertaining to adherence to laws and impartiality. This study significantly examined leader integrity from the standpoint of ethical leadership conduct, which is essential for ethical school leadership.

2.4.4 Responsible Resource Management

School-Based Management (SBM) is a leadership paradigm articulated by Cheng (2022) in the examination of school effectiveness, which grants SMTs the autonomy to formulate policies aimed at enhancing the quality, efficiency and equity of education, while also aligning with the preferences of the SMT and fostering collaboration among neighbouring schools, communities and governmental entities. In their research on leadership challenges and responses to complex township life, Zulu, Bhengu and Mkhize (2021) suggested that educational institutions within the South African system do not contribute to the nuances necessary for autonomy, as they are governed by a district and regional model. Consequently, they are constrained in their ability to establish ethical and moral managerial efficiency and equity. They are consequently limited to a defined array of duties for resource management and strategy development in accordance with their local circumstances. In the current era of globalisation and heightened competition across various leadership dimensions, every organisation must adapt to ongoing developments. The researcher asserts that schools should adopt a degree of autonomy to effectively implement virtuous ethical leadership practices in resource management.

The increasing requirement for ongoing development necessitates the creation of diverse new entrepreneurial management abilities inside educational institutions and across all facets of school leadership and resource administration. In their study exploring entrepreneurial behaviour and cognition among school leaders, Frentz, Brauckmann-Sajkiewicz, Bellibas, Pashiardis and Pietsch (2025) reflect the researchers' sentiments in the study. These authors advocate for the integration of leadership and creativity with accountability, offering significant insights into contemporary research on entrepreneurship and school leadership while identifying areas for future inquiry. The researcher contends that, as schools have become diverse environments for pedagogical action encompassing various ethical leadership responsibilities akin to business practices and ethical decision-making, the management of resources within the school context is increasingly vital. Entrepreneurship in school leadership is an emerging field, in contrast to its well-established role in business and start-ups. It is regarded as a dynamic process of creative destruction, encompassing the implementation of innovative visions, ideas and solutions for school leadership and management. The adaptability in resource management, including the engagement of the school community, will promote the ethical professionalism of the SMT. The claims made by the researchers are corroborated by multiple studies, including those by Omotosho and Yassim (2024) on cultivating business attributes in school leaders, and Ibrahim, Al-refaei, Alshuhumi, Al-Hidabi, and Ateeq (2024), which reviewed the influence of entrepreneurial leadership on employee creativity and outline a conceptual framework for its impact on innovation in education.

The researcher firmly argues that the autonomy granting this flexibility enables schools to enhance the ethical wellbeing of SMT, allowing them to focus more on establishing a more conducive resource management system for the institution. The researcher posits that, despite the statutory provision, the DBE, under the direction of the Head of Department, delegates its fiduciary responsibility for the proper and lawful utilisation of school resources, in accordance with all legal and procedural mandates, to the SMT, in a manner aligned with principles of social justice.

Their research on school leadership further elucidates essential elements of human resource management, indicating that when workers are respected, appreciated, acknowledged and recognised for their ethical behaviour and attitudes towards others, such an environment is likely to enhance ethical conduct.

Rivaldo and Nabella (2023), who commented that human resource management in schools, must be a primary priority for educational institutions to thrive in the era of globalisation, further corroborate this argument. Ethically competent human resource management is a crucial factor that facilitates the flourishing of ethical leadership, ensuring the successful execution of organisational activities and contributing significantly to the attainment of the school's objectives, while enhancing overall ethical and moral organisational performance. The literature reviewed by the researcher from the foregoing researchers advocates for the modern delegation, utilisation, or implementation of new entrepreneurial tactics to be employed by school leaders for the ethical management and consumption of school resources. The research conducted by Shabalala (2025) elucidated the challenges, opportunities and methods associated with distributive leadership, advocating for its implementation in resource management within South African secondary schools.

2.4.5 Conflict of Interest

According to Lima, da Silveira, Rasador and Nogueira (2025), a conflict of interest is characterised by a compromise of an individual's impartiality owing to a vested interest. SMTs must avoid conflicts of interest that may undermine their neutrality in rendering unbiased choices. The researcher asserts that ethical leaders must transparently disclose any potential conflicts and avoid participating in activities that may be regarded as partiality or personal gain in their relationships with others.

The researcher further posits, utilising the definition by Lima et al. (2025), that this act may occur both knowingly and unknowingly, as a conflict of interest is primarily defined by the erosion of an individual's objectivity owing to a vested interest in a specific process, procedure, or activity intended to fulfil a particular objective through the SMT's adherence to ethical standards. Rahm and Rahm-Skågeby (2023) articulated that this phenomenon occurs when an individual within an organisation or team is compelled to participate in two

or more ethically incompatible activities, resulting in a conflict between their desires and perceived obligations. This behaviour, if inadequately addressed, may impede the individual or leadership team's ability to make ethical and moral decisions, therefore, jeopardising the successful operation of the schools.

In their literature review on ethical dilemmas faced by mid-level school leaders through role-play simulations, Iftach and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2023) asserted that an ethical dilemma arises when two or more equally valued options are present, necessitating the selection of one at the detriment of the others. They further indicate that school leaders face numerous ethical dilemmas in the conflict-of-interest analytical process, including whether to allocate more resources to underperforming or gifted staff and students, which position to adopt in cases of majority versus minority opinions, and how to respond when staff, students, and their parents' dissent from the institutional ethical agenda. The researcher references assertions derived from the literature reviewed, specifically the works of Addi-Raccah and Grinshtain (2022) on teachers' professionalism and parent relations, and Chibaya (2024) regarding the navigation of ethical dilemmas and an analysis of ethical leadership practices. They asserted that these ethical dilemmas arise from the persistent tension between the ethical principle of caring for teachers, students and parents, and the necessity to adhere to formal regulations such as school policies and professional ethical standards, while maintaining a non-conflicted stance by school leadership.

Shapiro (2024) further elucidated the strategic applications and management of the conflict-of-interest concept in ethical school leadership through research on community-based school crisis response for school leaders, positing that these leaders consistently make ethical judgments both inside and outside the classroom, while considering the sociocultural contexts influencing their decisions.

Consequently, the same leaders may make divergent decisions and take varied actions in different contexts, and a potential conflict of interest is likely to arise.

In the research on the professional development of school principals and their comprehension of learning, Sahlin (2025) asserted that the essential learning process of facilitating appropriate instruction to avert conflicts of interest within the school environment is a

strategic priority for ethical leadership and management in education. A systematic literature review on conflicts of interest in ethical school leadership within the complex thinking framework by Ramirez-Montoya, Castillo-Martinez, Sanabria and Miranda (2022) asserted that the field of school leadership is facing ethical challenges characterised by uncertainty and vulnerability. Furthermore, training to cultivate the meta-competence of reasoning for complexity in recognising and avoiding conflicts is particularly arduous for school leaders.

Suryansyah, Kastolani and Somantri (2021) corroborated this literature review in their research on scientific thinking skills, where they delineated four sub-competencies: critical, systemic, scientific, and innovative thinking skills, which have the potential to improve conflict avoidance in leadership. Based on the literature analysis conducted by the researcher about the conflict of interest in the ethical conduct of the SMT, the researcher concurs with the arguments presented by the cited writers. The researcher defines critical thinking as the intellectually rigorous process of actively and adeptly conceptualising, applying, analysing, synthesising, and evaluating information obtained through observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, serving as a guide for belief and action to mitigate conflicts of interest in leadership. This assertion by the researcher is articulated in the systematic literature review conducted by Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023) about crisis management, school leadership during tumultuous periods and the recovery of schools in the post-COVID-19 context.

According to the researcher, systemic thinking is the foundational reasoning that ethical school leaders must cultivate to evaluate and comprehend complex global systems and phenomena that cause conflict. The researcher concurs with the author's characterisation of innovative thinking as the ability for creativity, which should be executed with a significant level of efficacy in conflict resolution. According to these writers, scientific thinking in conflict is characterised in the reviewed literature as a form of higher order thinking that assists school leaders in navigating the challenges of global competitiveness. This meticulous approach entails logical, analytical, systematic, inductive and deductive reasoning to resolve disagreement.

Referencing the studies of Suryansyah et al. (2021), Ramirez-Montoya et al. (2022), Shapiro (2024), and Sahlin (2025), the researcher postulates that the ability to mediate potential conflicts of interest in school management is crucial for maintaining ethical standards and promoting an ethically robust educational environment.

2.4.6 Professionalism

Since the early 1990s, several scholars, including Starratt (1991), Campbell (1997), Campbell, Gilroy and McNamara (2003), Ciulla (2014), Berkovich and Eyal (2020) and Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022), as referenced by Puyo (2022) in research on a cohesive perspective of ethical leadership in education, have underscored the necessity for school leaders to cultivate an ethical professional environment within their schools. They have highlighted the significance of grounding the schools' ethics in the paradigms of care, justice and critique. The researcher concurs that this remark bolsters the perception of school leaders as ethics practitioners. Garwood's (2023) subsequent research asserted that school leaders possess a moral vision and an ethical obligation to serve their communities and schools with professionalism. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) demonstrated a multiple ethical leadership paradigms approach in educational institutions, that articulated on ethics of justice, care, critique, including a fourth paradigm, the profession. Following an example of the use of the Multiple Ethical Paradigm approach to a real ethical leadership dilemma, at the conclusion of each scenario, many questions were posed to encourage contemplation of the paradigm, and their research showcased inconsistent multiple ethical leadership instances inside a school environment that illustrate the challenges confronted by school leaders.

Some inconsistencies in the literature emphasises the obligation to maintain elevated levels of professionalism and integrity in leadership engagements with students, staff and the wider community. Literature reviewed from the author's assertions on the professional paradigm, commented on the importance of school leadership to conduct themselves ethically, honestly and with regard for others, thereby functioning as exemplary role models. Forster and Maxwell (2023) commented on these assertions, articulating that this essential professional aspect of ethical leadership by SMT manifests as an expressive morality within the school environment, reflected in their attitudes, practices and values.

These values encompass respect in cultivating trusting relationships, valuing diversity, treating others with dignity, recognising the intrinsic worth and uniqueness of colleagues, and justice that promotes fairness, reasonableness and the respectful treatment of colleagues within the educational environment. This is similar to Garwood's (2023) framework of educational moral vision that includes ethical accountability.

The literature analysed by the researcher underscores the significance of teachers' behavioural management competence in enhancing both teacher and ethical well-being. Herman, Sebastian, Eddy and Reinke (2023) corroborated similar opinions expressed by the researcher in their study on school leadership, environment, behavioural, and ethical professional conduct as drivers of leadership competency and coping profiles among educators. Research by Herman et al. (2023) on the competence pathway and professional isolation posited that stress can compromise teachers' ethical behaviours, including their professional interactions with learners and colleagues. The authors additionally state that severe or inconsistent behavioural control procedures result in heightened staff disruptive behaviours, therefore increasing teacher stress and adversely affecting their moral conduct. Braun, Greenberg, Roeser, et al. (2024), in their study results from a cluster randomized trial on teacher stress and training, termed this stress cycle the “burnout cascade” hypothesis, positing that teacher stress leads to reactive behavioural management strategies that exacerbate student misbehaviour and school-related teacher stress.

The researcher, based on the reviewed literature, asserts that while part of their research addressed classroom management leadership skills, there is insufficient articulation regarding the ethical competence domain, which encompasses all skills sets essential for fostering positive moral conduct that improves professional conduct and practices in school leadership. Consequently, their research demonstrated that the reliability of implementing a successful professional ethical leadership training and model is within the realm of professional school behaviour. The researcher further posits that the previously presented Garwood model offers more nuanced predictions in this professionalism domain compared to analyses of the relationship between ethical classroom management and moral efficacy as precursors to effective ethical leadership by the SMT.

Research conducted by Faizuddin, Azizan, Othman and Ismail (2022) on contemporary professional development programmes for school principals in the 21st century yielded significant insights about lessons learnt from the school leadership practices of the SMT. Their research indicated a global shift in perceptions regarding the impact of ethical leadership and professionalism issues on schools, with the understanding that remedies are predominantly local. The researcher in the literature review noted that shifts in ethical values, emerging technologies and other societal changes have elevated expectations.

Concurrently, education policymakers recognise that issues and challenges arising at the school level must be addressed on-site, thereby necessitating a greater reliance on proficient and effective school-based management and leadership skills. The researcher recognises and concurs that the ethical leadership practices delineated in these studies are anticipated to produce or augment strategic ethical leadership actions, thereby facilitating the development of more effective contextually relevant solutions for the respective schools. New tools of ethical leadership and governance are required, distinguished by enhanced professionalism, autonomy and accountability. The researcher advocates for advanced literature and study, asserting that these ethical leadership instruments are essential for aiding policymakers and senior management teams in focusing on specific facets of school growth to function as mechanisms for ethical leadership quality assurance. Therefore, the researcher cannot affirm or ensure that the efficacy of ethical leadership depends on the selection and integration of these various leadership tools, together with the specific circumstances and context that inform those particular combinations.

The researcher's observations are elucidated in the literature study findings of Lopes, Folque, Marta and de Sousa (2024) on teacher professionalism in connection with ethical school leadership practices and ongoing change. Consequently, given that professional behaviour and ethical leadership are closely connected, professionalism within the educational environment is essential for fostering an ethical culture, which is vital for effective school leadership and management success.

2.4.7 Compliance with laws and regulations

Research conducted by Tintoré, Cunha, Cabral and Alves (2022), in their scoping reviews of the issues and challenges encountered by school leaders from 2003 to 2019, indicates that the role of a school leader has become increasingly intricate. This complexity is characterised by ambiguously defined ethical leadership responsibilities, a multitude of diverse tasks, substantial external pressures, challenging decision-making and prolonged working hours, all of which have significant repercussions. Awareness of job characteristics and ethical leadership expectations may assist the SMTs in enhancing their behaviour and self-management, aligning their moral perspectives on perceived issues, thereby facilitating the establishment of an appropriate ethical culture within the school.

Munby (2020) reinforces this argument in the research on enhancing school leadership practices for 21st-century schools, proposing ethical leadership coaching and guided critical reflection on compliance and networking among school leaders as potential solutions for improving adherence to relevant rules and regulations. Kaduma (2024) also articulated this assertion in the researcher's synthesis of qualitative study evidence about legislative compliance among school principals. The researcher concurs with the assertions of Munby (2020), Tintoré et al. (2022) and Kaduma (2024), positing that well-defined guidelines and transparent ethical leadership enhancement strategies will enable SMTs to concentrate more on teaching and learning rather than being preoccupied with legislative compliance and the ethical and moral behaviour of their subordinates. The researcher, after reviewing the literature, asserts that policymakers in the educational sector are not clearly articulating directives regarding ethical leadership rules, policies and regulations. Furthermore, they posit that ethical leadership coaching as an effective tool to support the SMT must reinforce this compliance process. The researcher's assertion is similarly supported by McGinnis' (2024) thesis, which advocated for the rapid implementation of ethical leadership coaching models for school leaders by district authorities. Moreover, in the research examining the influence of collaborative leadership on the effectiveness of school government in township secondary schools, Khantsi (2024) asserted that the intricacies of leadership coaching must be emphasised as part of the collective leadership process.

Collaboration among principals, or facilitated critical coaching and introspection, as argued by Beatty (2024) in the study on learning from the experiences of multilingual teachers, may serve as solutions for empowering school leadership to adhere to the requisite rules and regulations governing ethical leadership practices. The researcher concurs with these strategies and approaches that are likely to assist school leadership in establishing the essential ethical focus necessary for effective teaching and learning inside their institutions. Shalimova and Fomenko (2024) substantiated this remark by the researcher in their analysis of the deployment of an ethically suitable compliance management system. Moreover, the researcher asserts, following an in-depth examination of pertinent literature by these authors, that policymakers and relevant regulatory bodies engaged in the enforcement and compliance of these regulations contribute to the problem and should also be integral to the solution. This is not only because ethical leadership challenges are directly linked to specific policies that SMTs disapprove of but also owing to the significant statutory role that governmental educational departments play in the development of leadership support systems for all public SMTs. Increased support from authorities on ethical leadership policies is, therefore, essential for enhancing the ethical leadership practices of school leaders within their respective educational environments. Cheng (2024) discussed the evolving context and typology of school leadership and its implications for a paradigm shift, asserting that these leaders must be integral to the solution.

This necessity arises not only from the direct correlation between certain issues and specific policies that these leaders oppose but also from the significant role that governmental educational departments play in establishing support systems for all SMTs in public schools. Increased support from educational authorities and policies is essential to assist SMT and enhance education. Numerous scholars, researchers, writers and academics, including Giroux (1994), who re-evaluated the importance of democratic public culture in school leadership, have historically expressed this assertion.

Beck and Murphy (1997) discussed ethics in educational leadership, Begley (1999) explored values and educational leadership, whereas Shapiro and Gross (2013) examined ethical school leadership in challenging situations, all highlighting the critical necessity of compliance with laws and regulations.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2022) asserted in their research on the application of theoretical perspectives to intricate issues in ethical leadership and decision-making in education that a thorough analysis of the justice paradigm is essential for aligning rights, laws and regulations with the principles of justice and fairness. Furthermore, Sherchan, Baskota and Saud (2024) asserted that in the educational sphere, the ethic of critique necessitates vigilant school leadership, which serves to expose deficiencies in the fairness of laws, rules and regulations, as well as to identify discriminatory practices and ensure the protection of the constitutional rights of all staff and learners. The authors postulate that school leaders can enhance their capacity to address moral dilemmas by effectively interpreting these regulations. Puyo (2022) posited that enhancing ethical leadership in schools and society necessitates aiding school leaders in comprehending the significance of statutory compliance and governance.

In their systematic literature review on the impact of distributive leadership on public school leaders' job satisfaction, Zhang, Alias and Nordin (2025) postulated that the ethic of critique aims to assess the ethical leadership integrity of educational institutions to avert unfairness and injustice. The literature examined by the researcher indicates that when leaders exhibit non-compliance with rules and regulations, the ethic of critique regarding these ethical statutory provisions must aim to improve the ethical evaluation of these institutions to prevent the continuation of unfairness and injustice. Zrudlo (2025) accentuated that in the presence of unethical conditions, school leaders must cultivate a trust-based culture that encourages subordinates and staff to comfortably share their ethical leadership suggestions, thereby fostering dialogue in which subordinates feel acknowledged.

The researcher, synthesising the reviewed literature on legislative compliance, concurs with the assertions of the authors that SMTs should adhere to established legislative frameworks that facilitate compliance with all pertinent laws, regulations and policies governing education in South Africa.

This encompasses adherence to educational standards, health and safety laws, and legal obligations for staff employment and student ethical welfare. The reviewed literature corroborates the researcher's observation that SMTs must be empowered to formulate and implement a code of ethics that embodies these principles, as well as to offer continuous training and support to ensure that all staff members comprehend and adhere to these ethical standards.

This assertion is similarly reflected in the work of Watson, Volmink, Mdaka and Croucamp (2025) on values in education and the framework for care and support in teaching and learning. These authors emphasise respect for the rule of law as a fundamental pillar of compliance in daily school leadership culture. In doing so, they foster a supportive learning environment and enhance the general well-being of students and staff inside the educational institution. Mncube and Ngema (2023) validate the researcher's claims, asserting that compliance with rules, laws and regulations transpires when regulatees adhere to the stipulations set forth by the regulations for the improved management of the school and its resources. The researcher avers that to ensure effective adherence to these laws and regulations, the DBE and relevant statutory bodies must enhance internal oversight and implement robust accountability mechanisms to promote ethical conduct within the educational systems.

This will enable SMTs to comply with the laws and regulations delineated in various policies governing ethical school leadership with clarity and precision. The researcher conducted a supplementary literature review addressing diverse narratives and discourses regarding transparency, accountability, integrity, responsible resource management, conflict of interest, professionalism, and adherence to laws and regulations by SMTs. This literature examination that sought to explore ethical school leadership and management practices by SMT, revealed an effort to reconcile top-down ethical leadership practices with self-governance and the delegation of responsibilities to teachers.

The researcher's assertion indicates that the process of literature analysis was influenced by several contextual elements identified by the writers, academics and researchers discussed in this section of the study.

The researcher's deductions from the examined literature suggest that SMT, as democratic school leaders within the educational context, has the potential to enhance legislative and statutory compliance throughout the school environment. This entails a heightened commitment to a morally disadvantaged school population, increased dedication to the needs of learners and an intensified emphasis on ethical school leadership that promotes democratic engagement. The literature examined on this topical issue has significant consequences for the educational community and the professional growth of the SMT.

A further review of the research highlighted the necessity for policymakers to recognize the significance of establishing ethical school leadership communities that foster the cultivation of a democratic ethical citizenry. The literature review emphasises the necessity of providing support to school leaders to enhance their knowledge and comprehension of ethical decision-making, as this can facilitate the advancement of their leadership and management practices.

2.5 PROFESSIONAL GROWTH OF SMTS IN TERMS OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND MORAL CONDUCT IN SCHOOLS

The social learning theory was conceptualised by Bandura and Hall (2018) and elaborated upon by Gathenya (2022) in the literature review on social learning theory. The theory postulates the significance of ethical leadership and performance in community development. In addition, Lawrent (2024) recognised ethical leadership as a determinant of teacher efficacy in conjunction with Bandura and Hall's perspectives on how this theory expresses itself in the early years of social learning. It is, therefore, deduced that ethical leaders influence their subordinates through observational learning. Arguably, subordinates further acquire some knowledge indirectly by observing the behaviours and outcomes of leaders. Likewise, these literature evaluations assert that ethical leaders influence the psychological well-being of their subordinates through the social learning process. The literature examined by the researcher indicates that social learning, as described by these authors, pertains to the psychological condition of the recipient that determines which external ethical events are acknowledged, how they are processed, and the repercussions of inaction.

Bandura (1979) proposes this assertion in the initial research on social learning theory and its self-referent mechanisms. Brown et al. (2005) argued that an individual's capacity to observe, evaluate and respond to the actions of ethical leaders may be impeded by psychological conditions that induce cognitive dysfunction, potentially affecting their professional development. The study by Guarana and Avolio (2022) on ethical leadership and moral conduct examined the relationship between leadership and psychological ownership, indicating that leadership is the primary catalyst for psychological ownership, which influences an individual's overall development. Research on social learning theory by Bavik, Tang, Shao and Lam (2018) has largely overlooked the psychological states of subordinates, especially within the context of ethical school leadership.

The researcher examined the psychological ethical ownership of school leaders as articulated by these authors to gain insight into the psychological states that arise during the social learning process. Furthermore, the researcher adumbrates that this understanding is likely to strengthen the relationship between ethical leadership and psychological behaviour influencing professional conduct. The literature review of the study aimed to ascertain whether SMT professional development and commitment serve as a mediator between ethical leadership and knowledge sharing within the social learning process.

The researcher's additional literature review has revealed that school leadership teams significantly affect the interpersonal dynamics of knowledge exchange inside organisations in their professional practices. Nasir, Bhatti, Zubair, Sarfaraz and Miran (2025) examined the influence of school leadership in the 21st century, addressing its challenges and adaptations. Their analysis substantiates the researcher's literature review by emphasising the psychological and professional effects of ethical leadership, positing that ethical leadership behaviour is a significant predictor of ethical conduct and moral integrity within educational institutions. This predictor predominantly influences fairness, transparency and trustworthiness, which are crucial elements of effective professional ethical conduct required for a school culture.

The study by Er (2024) investigated the relationship between the professional behaviour of SMTs and their leadership practices, emphasising the mediating role of their viewpoints and professional development. The literature study revealed that ethical leaders can motivate followers to share their knowledge, serving as an initial step in promoting professional ethical behaviour.

This strategy seeks to alleviate physical obstacles that impede resource sharing among employees by instituting processes and controls that foster ethical behaviour, strengthen the code of ethics for school leaders, set standards for ethical decision-making, encourage open two-way communication and develop a just incentive system for exemplary moral conduct. These assertions constitute essential elements of an ethical workplace, as articulated in the literature review by Piala, Kilag, Abella, et al. (2024) in their research on enhancing professional capacity, amplifying impact and implementing a comprehensive ethical leadership strategy for the development of school leaders.

The researcher concurs with these sentiments and substantiates the arguments, asserting that when ethical school leaders embody the values and professional standards of their organisations by acting in accordance with these principles, they exemplify the values and norms that shape moral attributes such as trustworthiness, kindness and concern for others' needs, as referenced by Banks, Fischer, Gooty, and Stock (2021) in their study on the conceptual framework for ethical leadership and future research directions in leadership.

Arifin, Suryaningsih and Arifudin (2024) studied the relationship between classroom environment, teacher professional development and student academic performance in secondary schooling, while Hlongwane and Bhengu's (2025) qualitative case study focused on ethical leadership in educational institutions. These authors highlighted the critical significance of the professional growth of SMTs in relation to ethical leadership and moral behaviour within schools. Furthermore, it was indicated that the moral conduct of school leaders could inspire their subordinates to engage in professional social activities, such as knowledge sharing and assisting others in acquiring knowledge, while simultaneously mitigating deviant behaviour. Evans, Davis and Neely (2021) and Khan, Usman, Saeed, Ali and Nisar (2022) reiterated these claims in their postulation that leadership and ethical

behaviour is crucial to the professional development of SMTs. The researcher's literature review on the research subject, in agreement with these authors, clearly demonstrates the significance of their work. The significance indicates that competent and professional leadership behaviour among SMTs establishes the foundation for success.

Robust and professional ethical leadership inspires and motivates team members, cultivates collaboration and articulates a clear vision for the school's ethical culture and professional development. The behavioural features of school leaders, as analysed by the researcher in the literature, foster professional development opportunities, stimulate innovation and cultivate a pleasant work atmosphere that promotes team members' productivity and job satisfaction. Subsequent literature review revealed that the ethical behaviour and moral conduct of SMTs are crucial for fostering trust and honesty. When leaders demonstrate integrity, openness and equity in their decision-making, it fosters a culture of trust and respect among team members.

The literature review indicates that ethical behaviour include compliance with professional standards, the promotion of equity and inclusivity, and the prioritisation of the best interests of students and the school community. The professional development of school leadership and ethical behaviour immediately enhance the ethical and leadership culture inside the institution. Subsequent analysis, with which the researcher agrees, indicates that by exemplifying robust leadership qualities and demonstrating ethical conduct, school leaders motivate others to pursue excellence and ongoing professional development and progress.

The study asserts that school leaders should cultivate a culture of learning and professional growth, offering opportunities for team members to augment their skills, knowledge and leadership abilities. This expansion advantages both individual and the collective efficacy of the management team. Based on reviewed literature, the researcher asserts that effective leadership and ethical behaviour within SMTs foster an environment conducive to professional development. Moreover, effective ethical and moral leadership empowers team members, fosters ethical practices and enhances the success and well-being of the school community.

The researcher has identified consensus regarding attributes that promote the professional development of SMTs, specifically in relation to ethical leadership and moral conduct. This is evident in the works of Kim and Lee (2020), which discussed instructional leadership for teacher engagement in professional development. He, Guo and Abazie (2024) reviewed the role of school principals in teachers' ethical professional development while the literature review by Lafferty, Sheehan, Walsh, Rooney and Mannix McNamara (2024), which examined school leaders' perspectives on continuous professional growth and moral conduct. The researchers examined the influence of the team's leadership on information sharing from an ethical perspective. The researcher, following additional literature reviews of the claims made by Laferty et al. (2024), identified conflicting literature suggesting that other organisational contexts within their knowledge-based environments prioritise ethical leadership knowledge creation or production, while placing less emphasis on the professional training and development of SMTs regarding ethical leadership and moral conduct.

Research conducted by Kim et al. (2020) and He et al. (2024) asserted that, within the realm of higher education, responsible ethical leadership necessitates that principals, deputy principals, department heads, and other educators exemplify moral integrity for both staff and students, highlighting the profound influence of their professional and ethical judgment and behaviour. The research conducted by Singh, Rind and Sabur (2021) on the continual professional growth of schoolteachers and leaders corroborated the observations presented in the literature review by the researcher. The researcher's supplementary literature review on the professional development of SMTs concerning ethical leadership and moral conduct revealed further alignment with the published works of Sir Syed, utilising the foundational principles of Henri Fayol's management theory.

This alignment is also reflected in Jakhongir's (2025) literature review on the evolution of this theory as a framework for analysing ethical leadership practices among secondary school leaders. The investigation revealed that the application of ethical leadership concepts such as fairness, morality, trust, responsibility, equality, mutual respect and social justice varies based on the prior experience of the team leaders. The researchers assert that, in certain cases, experienced professionals may overlook important principles crucial for novices.

The researcher further avers, based on the literature reviewed from the study of Çevik and Doğan (2025), that the implementation of ethical leadership management principles varies among leaders by gender.

This statement is present in Çevik et al., (2025) in their inquiry in which they examine the significant correlation between the empowering ethical leadership behaviours of school principals and the psychological resilience of teachers, while considering the moderating effects of gender and tenure within the school leadership context. The researcher asserts that responsible ethical leadership practices are essential for cultivating a professional ethical workplace characterised by social moral norms of responsibility, which encourages school leaders to collaborate and support each other in attaining professional progress in school leadership. The supplementary literature review conducted by Saeed, Khan, Zada, et al. (2022) elucidated the rationale for investigating the impact of ethical school leadership on subordinates' ethical knowledge-sharing behaviour through a psychological lens, emphasising the study's aim to explore to explore the SMTs' experiences with ethical practices in managing schools.

2.6 DBE AND OTHER EDUCATIONAL REGULATORY BODIES POSTURE TOWARDS UNETHICAL LEADERSHIP CONDUCT AMONG SCHOOL LEADERS

The principal aim and objective of legislative rules and guidelines pertaining to codes of conduct or ethics, as articulated by Kriel, Livingstone and Kwenda (2023), is to guarantee that the behaviour of professionals in the educational domain always remains ethical. Siboli (2024) noted in the research on principals' experiences in administering the National Code of Professional Conduct in Secondary Schools that the terms "codes of ethics" and "codes of conduct" are frequently used interchangeably as if they are synonymous. Nevertheless, despite their similarities, they are not synonymous.

Zondo and Mncube (2024) affirmed this perspective in their literature review regarding the challenges teachers encounter in implementing a behavioural code for effective discipline in schools. They propose that there are two distinct types of codes, asserting that numerous institutions maintain separate codes of ethics and codes of conduct for the effective governance of behaviour and moral standards, a situation that applies equally to schools, as identified by the researcher in the analysis of reviewed literature. This researcher's discovery is similarly evident in the study of Odeh and Homer (2025), which investigated the definitions, applicability and efficacy of ethical codes and conduct guidelines in the public sector. They also assert that codes of ethics are discipline-specific and cater to particular demands grounded in shared principles such as honesty, integrity and respect. Their research elucidates the code of conduct as 'aspirational' and characterises it as the institution's basic principles, which pertains to the cultivation of an intrinsic moral compass among institutional staff.

The researcher concurs with these assertions and posits that professional codes of ethics offer advice when challenging ethical issues arise concerning ethical dilemmas in school leadership. These norms provide a reference point to guide personnel in acting ethically and appropriately, and to assess when an individual's behaviour does not uphold the professional ethical standards of the institution. Abuhassira, Razak and Hoque (2024) elucidated the researcher's perspectives on this research subject, following a comparative literature evaluation and analysis, in their study regarding the impact of transformational leadership on classroom dynamics in secondary schools.

The assertions are corroborated by the research of Botha and Fuller (2024) regarding South African teachers' perceptions of the authority wielded by their principals, and by Kapilima (2024) on the structural functionalist perspective of unethical leadership in the public sector, which influences the stance of educational regulatory bodies towards unethical conduct among school leaders. The stance of the DBE and other regulatory entities is reflected in the research conducted by Mthiyane and Mudadigwa (2021) regarding the investigation of ethical misconduct in four schools in Gauteng, South Africa, as well as in Edwards (2022) in a case study on ethical leadership and transparency in specific secondary schools.

Tsebe (2023) further elucidated the perceptions on the inadequate enforcement of ethical principles in the research concerning professional ethics in labour relations at the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), South Africa.

The DBE's inadequate enforcement of the regulatory framework on ethics, as noted by Tsebe (2023) in a study on the decline of ethical conduct within the GDE, is detrimental not only to the reputation of GDE districts and schools but also to the relationships between school leaders and staff, ultimately undermining their overall efficacy in ethical and moral conduct and exacerbating the prevalence of unethical behaviour among school leaders. The authors posit that the principal purpose of codes of ethics is not to serve as a disciplinary mechanism, but to enlighten teachers about guiding principles, values and anticipated conduct. Values should be incorporated into codes of ethics and conduct to facilitate ethical decision-making.

The literature examined from the research of Beard, Geertsema, le Roux, Graham, and Johnson (2023) revealed that the teaching profession is predominantly influenced by human behaviour. Therefore, ethical leadership within the sector should be pivotal in promoting good governance among various policy and regulatory stakeholders. The researchers contended that the assertion by Beard et al. (2023) should seek to furnish adequate assistance to school leadership in their examination of the behavioural elements of teaching and the factors that affect these behaviours. The DBE and these agencies need to comply with regulations designed to guarantee that their operations and governance are free from corruption and maladministration. According to Tsebe (2023), there is a conspicuous neglect by educational regulatory bodies regarding their stance on unethical leadership practices among school leaders.

Such unethical behaviour is perceived as a violation of constitutional provisions and a disregard for the public's expectation of moral and ethical conduct from the educational department's officials. The literature examined from Holloway Jr.'s (2024) research on the impact of diversity and ethical principles in secondary school educational leadership revealed systemic deficiencies in ethical leadership and governance, indicating inadequate levels of ethical leadership within these institutions.

The researcher observed a lack of urgency in the DBE and relevant statutory bodies to establish an ethical agenda, as outlined in the South African National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, articulated by the National Planning Commission in 2012, and other legislative frameworks.

This plan delineates the requisite actions for the state to bolster ethical leadership accountability, enhance coordination and mitigate corruption within the public service, with the objective of empowering the DBE and other educational regulatory entities to cultivate a principled stance against unethical leadership conduct among school leaders. Enaifoghe, Jili and Mthethwa (2023) support the researcher's observation in their study on the erosion of good governance resulting from deficiencies in ethical leadership within the South African public service. They discuss the potential benefits of ethical leadership in the public sector, including the DBE, and analyse the ethical leadership characteristics present in the public sector. The researcher postulates that analyses of the literature by Hollowar Jr (2024) and Enaifoghe et al. (2023) delineate various deficiencies.

Consequently, the DBE and its statutory bodies tasked with overseeing ethics and professional conduct in educational environments must intensify their initiatives aimed at fostering an ethical leadership culture throughout all governance levels in the education sector, which continues to be susceptible to unethical leadership practices. The position of the DBE and other educational regulatory entities concerning unethical leadership conduct among school leaders is outlined in the DBE (2016) report, which discusses unethical activities and corruption in teacher promotion procedures. It contends that such actions ought to be classified as criminal violations and reported to law enforcement and SACE, the regulatory body governing teacher ethical standards and professionalisation.

The study further advises that individuals identified as having exerted improper influence on the process should face internal departmental disciplinary actions. The researcher agrees with the reasoning outlined in the DBE study, emphasising that maintaining ethics in the profession and safeguarding the interests and welfare of all stakeholders in the educational setting is essential.

The researcher asserts that ethical conduct and the provision of quality education do not rely only on a proficient teacher functioning within a supportive environment but also on the DBE and other regulatory authorities. The studied literature corroborates the report's assertion that unethical leadership activities, including corruption and unprofessional conduct, generate detrimental conditions for school leadership and compromise the teaching-learning environment. A preliminary examination of the literature from Demirbilek's (2024) research on parental expectations regarding secondary school principals revealed a South African school leader burdened by certain ethical leadership complexities previously discussed. Furthermore, the literature reviewed by the researcher indicates that the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies in South Africa are pivotal in combating unethical conduct among school leadership. Literature examined confirms that these groups and the DBE are responsible for establishing norms and guidelines for educational institutions, monitoring compliance and taking necessary action in cases of unethical conduct. Based on the studied literature, the researcher asserts that the ongoing development, monitoring and assessment of policies and codes of conduct by the DBE and other agencies should explicitly delineate the anticipated ethical conduct for school leaders.

The literature research further posits that these policies should delineate explicit guidelines on professional conduct, integrity and accountability. The researcher asserts that regulatory agencies should consistently oversee schools and their leaders to ensure adherence to ethical norms for the control and monitoring of these statutory initiatives. Inspections, investigations and audits should be conducted to identify any unethical behaviour or wrongdoing. Literature review by Hlongoane and Enwereji (2024) examining the accountability methods of South African school governing bodies (SGBs) and Malatjie, Ngcaweni, and Magubane (2024) discussed the enhancement of governance in the public sector and the ability to teach ethics.

They further commented on the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies regarding their stance on unethical leadership among school leaders, advocating for prompt investigations and disciplinary measures in response to allegations of unethical conduct. They additionally posit that these regulatory agencies should rapidly commence inquiries to collect evidence and assess the veracity of the claims.

The researcher asserts that disciplinary measures must be implemented to address any verified misbehaviour. The rational outcome may encompass suspensions, reprimands or the revocation of leadership roles. The literature indicates that sufficient professional development and training in ethics is necessary to mitigate instances of unethical leadership behaviour. The researcher further assert that these educational agencies should provide ethical training and professional development programmes for school leaders, highlighting ethical leadership and decision-making.

The literature research highlighted collaboration and cooperation among many stakeholders, including educators, parents and community members, to advance ethical practices by the department and other agencies, thereby fostering a culture of integrity within schools. The literature analysis suggested that the enforcement of transparency and accountability by the DBE and its allies is essential for mitigating unethical activity in the education system. This will, therefore, promote accountability among school leaders and sustain public confidence in the education system. The literature indicates that by actively participating in these activities, the DBE and other regulatory bodies will establish a secure and ethical environment in South African schools, fostering the ethical welfare and development of SMTs while preserving the integrity of the education system overall.

In conjunction with initiatives like the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM) implemented by the Department of Education (DoE) and provincial governments, literature reviewed from Mzondi's (2024) study on governance and the moral quandary of the rainbow nation indicated that corrupt practices remain widespread. It advocated for a renewed perspective and approach to confront the moral challenges faced by all stakeholders in the education sector. The researcher contends that the implemented moral regeneration plan is unlikely to work, considering the already fractured moral fabric of the nation. Masengwe (2025), who discussed Clint Le Bryunn's Kairos theology in South Africa, supports the researcher's assertion. The author utilised his expertise in ecumenical discourse to empower grassroots movements, aiming to transcend denominational divisions while tackling the complexities of moral renewal and social transformation in the region.

The author further expressed dissenting views on the implementation and application of the moral regeneration movement, arguing that Kairos theology serves as both a historical artifact and a dynamic scholarly practice from an interdisciplinary perspective, while addressing the historical injustices of colonialism and apartheid. Nevertheless, literature indicated that the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies did not ignore their stance regarding the creation of an opportunity for a comparable moral regeneration narrative, aimed at addressing the unethical leadership conundrum encountered by school leaders. The literature reviewed revealed an initiative by the department regarding the Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship (2015), which was mandated by former Minister of Education, A.M. Motshekga.

This policy delineates the responsibilities of school principals and essential elements of professionalism and ethical leadership. It also elucidates the requisite leadership competencies comprehensively, while also functioning as a framework to address professional leadership and developmental requirements. Supplementary literature from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019) emphasises the attainment of universal school access and enhancements in educational quality, management proficiency and the expertise of teacher educators and curriculum developers, highlighting the necessity of ethical school leadership in educational institutions.

The document emphasised that in-service training for essential personnel should be initiated or enhanced where absent, focusing on administrative reforms and innovative management and supervisory techniques to elevate the management capabilities of principals and SMTs in schools. This UNESCO consultation paper also promotes the advancement of 21st-century educators and their impact on educational quality. The study concurs with UNESCO in highlighting their influence on learning outcomes by identifying five essential domains for teacher quality: professional development, learner performance, quality management systems, instructional methodologies and technological integration. The study concurs that SMT's ethical leadership impact on educational quality is evident through multiple moral perspectives.

The researcher further argues from reviewed literature that the school leadership quality management systems provided by UNESCO, despite critiques, function as a meter for evaluating the quality of ethical leadership in schools. Although the significance of ethical leadership is endorsed by statutory documents such as SACE Code of Professional Ethics and the Personnel Administrative Measures (PAM) document (2016), the researcher contend that these measures are insufficient owing to the fragmented nature of ongoing monitoring of these legislative frameworks.

Mthiyane (2018), who criticises the laxity or casual approach with which these statutory and regulatory frameworks are typically implemented and enforced, further supports this claim by the researcher. The studied literature, although limited, revealed genuine interventions and practices by the DBE and other educational regulatory authorities that foster unethical leadership among school leaders.

2.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The literature reviewed to address the primary research question, sub-questions and research objectives of this study employed a systematic approach, utilising various academic database sources including Scopus, WoS, ERIC, Google Scholar, and the Retrospective Reference Harvesting Procedure, among others. Research journal articles and pertinent publications from the current and preceding decade were studied and consulted. Principal search terms encompassed "ethical school leadership," "educational leadership in South Africa," "ethical practices," "SMTs" and "school leadership." A comprehensive total exceeding 200 peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed research journal articles, reports and books were chosen for analysis and synthesis. Key issues regarding ethical leadership ideals and principles were analysed, with various research highlighting the significance of ethical leadership attributes such as honesty, transparency, fairness and respect in educational leadership. These principles established the basis for ethical decision-making, promoting trust and cooperation among stakeholders. The literature review identified ethical leadership and decision-making as a focal point, highlighting that ethical school leaders in South Africa, Africa and internationally encounter intricate ethical leadership and decision-making scenarios involving moral

conduct, professional conduct, resource allocation, staff morale, student discipline and evaluations of teacher ethical leadership practices.

The reviewed literature emphasised the importance of ethical frameworks, professional standards and reflective ethical leadership practices in assisting leaders to make principled decisions that prioritise the welfare of staff, students and the wider school community. This chapter examined the literature about the establishment of an ethical school culture and climate, which is essential for effective school leadership and the cultivation of an ethical culture inside the institution. The literature examinations encompassed the promotion of shared ethical leadership ideals, the formation of clear moral expectations, the nurturing of open communication within the organisation, and the encouragement of ethical leadership behaviour among school leadership, staff and students.

The literature review was intended to explore SMTs' experiences with ethical leadership practices in managing schools, exploring the role of ethical leadership practices in shaping an ethical climate that supports teaching and learning, moral conduct and professional growth. Although ethical school leadership is not a new concept, its origins trace back to the 1980s. The stringent social aspect of its moral dimension is quite recent. Contemporary literature described schools as organisations that necessitate leaders that prioritise ethics and moral behaviour in their leadership agenda and promote these values among subordinates and colleagues in their daily interactions. It is now deemed imperative for SMTs to engage in ethical leadership within their educational and administrative functions. Ethical leadership is a moral obligation in all pursuits, particularly for school leaders in the current global moral atmosphere. The literature review confirms that educational ethical leadership constitutes a moral endeavour, since fostering the human, social and intellectual development of a leader inherently involves moral considerations.

Nevertheless, the ethical and unethical dimensions of each specific circumstance remain inadequately examined by both historical and contemporary literature. This argument is based on the notion that ethical leadership is intrinsically linked to an individual's beliefs and values. This is contingent upon the value system embraced by leaders, as they ascertain what is virtuous and just through an internal deliberation.

A minor vacuum in the literature exists, as the sense of morality is somewhat subjective, influenced in part by social settings on moral judgments. Various scholars, researchers and authors have recognised this gap. Therefore, most of these researchers advocate for formal ethical leadership training and preparation for school leaders concerning moral conduct, which would enable the execution of ethical leadership grounded in ethics, morality and values. Consequently, a limited number of higher education institutions globally provide a formal curriculum that encompasses ethical school leadership as a comprehensive formal qualification, instead presenting it as non-formal programmes or intermittent interventions. Therefore, the proposal advocates for a formal undergraduate qualification comprising a minimum of four mandatory foundational ethical modules: the ethical environment, the ethic of critique, the ethic of accountability and fairness, and the ethic of justice and caring.

These modules would serve as essential content pillars for the professional training of aspiring educators seeking to join the SMT. School leaders should cultivate ethical sensitivities and viewpoints, fostering an ethical conscience. The four anticipated qualification pillars from the researcher's perspective complement one another and function as a theoretical framework, which can be augmented by the five principal domains of responsibility: as a human being, as a citizen, as an educator, as an educational administrator and as an educational leader. A theoretical synthesis of these proposed pillars is shown in Starratt's (2005) work, which addressed ethical responsibility in educational leadership. The following chapter discusses the theoretical framework underpinning this research inquiry.

CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership is undoubtedly one of the most vital forms of leadership for individual stakeholders and society as a whole. This was evidenced by recent events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the social justice movement, wherein, ethical behaviours of leaders were found wanting in the way they led their organisations or their various settings. School and other industry leaders were expected to be at their very best ethical conduct amidst the uncertainty the pandemic was about to unleash. Various ethical leadership incidents underscored the necessity for moral leadership, including educational, corporate and political scandals, alongside the acknowledgment that businesses ought to advance the welfare of stakeholders beyond shareholder involvement. Ethical leadership is defined as the degree to which leaders exhibit normatively appropriate behaviour and foster the wellbeing of stakeholders (Kleshinski, Wilson, Stevenson-Street and Scott, 2021).

These authors propose an integrative framework emphasising the necessity for leaders to exhibit fairness, ethics and non-abusiveness. They assert that, despite substantial conceptual and empirical research on ethical leadership, significant gaps remain, presenting unique opportunities for the enhancement of theory and practice concerning the ethical leadership construct of principled leader behaviours. The cultivation of ethical leadership is a crucial element in improving school performance and achieving a competitive advantage. SMTs exert noteworthy influence, directing the path and achievements of their institutions by incorporating ethical concepts into their decision-making processes. In this regard, this study utilises a theoretical framework to examine the influence of ethical school leadership on the ethical leadership management and performance of secondary schools. The increasing focus on the need for ethical leadership in school setting has resulted in the implementation of a leadership style that prioritises behavioural values, integrity and judicious decision-making. School leaders who adhere to ethical principles not only improve their school's overall moral health but also cultivate a constructive workplace culture that promotes trust among stakeholders and employees.

Consequently, in the business world, as in the school setting, enterprises that emphasise ethical leadership often achieve increased profitability and improved capacity to succeed in the dynamic contemporary business environment. A theoretical framework for ethical leadership has been developed based on the 10-item "Ethical Leading Scale (ELS)."

This construct integrates characteristics of a morally accountable manager, such as facilitating discussions on ethical standards and applying appropriate rewards and penalties for ethical or unethical behaviour, along with traits of a morally principled individual, including empathy, integrity and moral discernment. This framework also encompasses essential components of other leadership elements, such as integrity and honesty. Ethical leadership is distinguished from other leadership theories by its focus on ethical considerations, owing to its relational character. Bauwens, Audenaert and Decramer (2024) concur with this comment and assert in their study on work behaviour and transformational leadership that leadership is perceived as a superior role, an individual trait and the relationship between leaders and followers within an organisation or society. Leadership resembles management; nonetheless, they fulfil distinct roles. Leading an educational institution is a highly demanding role, compounded by escalating pressures and duties in the swiftly evolving landscape of contemporary educational standards.

School leaders bear significant obligations, including the establishment of the school's ethical culture, acting as change agents and inspiring and motivating staff to engage in various school-related duties. Söderström and Seiser (2024) comment on this assumption in their research regarding ethical and moral attitudes in school leadership. They maintain that school leaders face persistent pressure as they navigate challenges to their ethical leadership, which is complicated by conflicting internal and external norms and institutions, including demands from subordinates within the school setting. Effective leadership development is crucial for establishing superior schools and equipping future generations to achieve the requirements of the 21st century. Bauwens et al. (2024) propose novel orientations, ideologies and aspirations for the teaching and learning processes. Ethically guiding others is notably tough yet crucial, owing to the intricate, ambiguous and unpredictable characteristics of moral challenges in contemporary organisations and the significant stakes at play.

Ciulla (1995) and Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005), in their initial investigations of leadership ethics and its effects, concur that social learning theory was primarily limited to philosophers who sought to define appropriate leader behaviour. Other social scientists, such as Burns (1978) and Jago (1982) in their early analyses of the evolution and perspectives of ethical leadership theory, noted that Bass and Avolio (1993) addressed the ethical components of leadership within the theoretical framework of notions like transformational leadership.

In reaction to the insufficient focus from the social sciences, Brown et al. (2005) introduced the notion of ethical leadership to promote a specialised examination of the ethical aspects of leadership from a social science viewpoint. These authors characterised it as the exhibition of normatively suitable behaviour via personal acts and interpersonal interactions, alongside the encouragement of such behaviour among followers through reciprocal communication, reinforcement and decision-making. Their research on the theoretical framework builds upon earlier exploratory qualitative studies by Treviño, Hartman, and Brown (2000), which indicated that ethical leaders are perceived as both moral individuals and moral managers. This implies that they not only possess moral characteristics but also actively shape the ethical conduct of others within their organisation. The moral management of others is a fundamental characteristic of ethical leadership that differentiates it from analogous leadership concepts that emphasise concern for others, ethical decision-making and leader integrity, as proposed by Brown et al. (2005). Since the initial articulation of the theory, subsequent studies have enhanced the understanding of the behaviours associated with ethical leadership.

According to Alabdullah and Al-Qallaf (2023), ethical leaders are perceived to act justly, distribute authority equitably, demonstrate concern for and assist their followers, exhibit integrity, articulate expectations clearly and encourage ethical behaviour in others. They assert that an opportunity exists to concentrate explicitly on ethical leadership characteristics for the success of the organisation. The domain of ethical leadership is significantly hindered by theoretical discourses that conflate leader activities with the subjective evaluations of followers. Follower conduct is assessed by supervisor evaluations or self-assessments about counterproductive work behaviours and organisational citizenship behaviours.

A recent examination of the previously mentioned claim by Banks, Ross, Toth, et al. (2023) regarding organisational behaviour literature revealed that merely 3% of the variables employed assess actual behaviours, while theoretical discussions frequently reference behaviours and only 19% of studies incorporated a single behavioural variable. This was corroborated by a meta-analytic evaluation of the ethical leadership literature conducted by Bauwens et al. (2024) who further illustrated these concerns, indicating that behaviours are theoretically conflated with subjective evaluations.

The ethical leadership literature is similarly influenced by the conflation of leader behaviours with follower evaluations, which are conceptually and empirically distinct (Bauwens et al., 2024). Although ethical behaviours of school leaders and subjective assessments of those behaviours are theoretically pertinent, they are not conceptually synonymous, as evidenced by the literature framework described by both previous and contemporary authors referenced in this chapter.

3.2 DEFINING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

Ethics is defined as morals derived from the Greek term “ethos,” as articulated by Vikaraman, Mansor and Hamzah (2018) from the earlier work of Burns (1978). Most scholars and researchers referenced by the researcher in the literature review contended that ethics encompasses an individual's perceptions and actions regarding right and wrong. This assertion was reiterated in their prior studies on ethical leadership, focusing on the essence of a moral life and methodologies for living morally. Ethics is manifested in an individual's behaviour through adherence to appropriate codes of conduct, facilitating sound reasoning and judgment in discerning right from wrong. Brown and Treviño (2005), as early scholars of ethical leadership, also articulated that ethical leadership entails a leader who upholds moral values, principles and conduct in their speech, behaviour, actions and decision-making. Consequently, such a leader can inspire their followers to pursue ethical endeavours in achieving their objectives.

The leader must also adhere to the ideas and rules of conduct established by the leader himself or herself. Trevino, et al. (2000), in their prior research on ethical leadership, posit that ethical leaders possess the ability to function as a "moral person," embodying commendable moral conduct, and as a "moral manager," guiding others through ethical practices to attain objectives and foster personal development in their followers. Kaduma (2024) further elucidates this literary articulation in articulating and aggregating the traits of ethical leadership, exemplifying attributes like integrity, honesty, trustworthiness, a people-oriented approach and the ability to empower and motivate others. Kalshoven, Hartog and De Hoogh (2011) significantly advanced the theoretical framework of ethical leadership by examining and re-establishing the dimensions of Ethical Leadership at Workplace (ELW), with a primary emphasis on people orientation, fairness, power sharing, sustainability concerns, ethical guidance, role clarification and integrity for both leaders and subordinates.

The seven dimensions of the ELW that guided the study in selecting research methodology have been modified for application within the educational context for principals and teachers as follows:

- The first dimension is people orientation, which underscores the relationship between the principal and teachers, highlighting the importance of effective communication skills, exceptional concern for teachers' welfare and equitable decision-making.
- The second principle is fairness, which requires principals to be impartial and objective while addressing matters related to teachers' obligations, errors, concerns, misunderstandings and well-being.
- The third aspect is power sharing, which delineates methods by which principals empower teachers to engage in crucial decision-making processes, actively solicit their guidance, equitably allocate hard responsibilities and afford all teachers the opportunity to formulate their objectives.
- The fourth concern is sustainability, emphasising the need for principals to prioritise a healthy and conducive work environment.
- The fifth aspect is ethical guidance, which prompts principals to elucidate the work ethics and codes of conduct anticipated within the school.

- The sixth aspect is role clarification, in which the leaders delineate the responsibilities and performance requirements for everyone within the school setting. The principal, through the SMT, articulates each teacher's responsibilities and the expectations for working groups with clarity.
- The seventh component is integrity, which requires individuals to uphold their commitments to foster trust. SMTs should be held accountable for their actions and statements, as they are trusted to fulfil their ethical leadership commitments.

Ethical leadership is a management style that emphasises the ethical aspects of leadership. It pertains to the leader's ideals, ethical characteristics and conduct inside organisational contexts, as well as their interactions with employees, organisations and society. An ethical leader is defined as one who may be evaluated based on widely accepted moral standards of conduct. This ethics pertains to a collection of concepts and moral guidelines that govern human interactions over what is considered ethically right and wrong. Ethical leadership encompasses influence processes within human relationships. Therefore, ethics in leadership manifests as the leader's ethical conduct, prompting followers to act responsibly towards one another by safeguarding human dignity and mutual rights and needs in daily interactions across various contexts.

Resnik (2020) also provides a contemporary and relevant definition of ethical leadership, which delineates a set of behaviours that differentiate acceptable from unacceptable conduct. He further asserts that individuals primarily acquire ethical standards through familial, educational, religious or other social environments. They maintain that while most individuals cultivate their sense of morality in childhood, ethical development persists throughout life, with humans progressing through many stages of moral evolution.

The theory of ethical leadership is founded on a perspective of practice directed by the responsibilities of leaders. In agreement with Resnik's (2020) perspective, the ethical leader must exercise authority in a manner that is critical, transformative, visionary, instructive, empowering, liberating, personally ethical, organisationally ethical, and accountable.

It is essential to differentiate between ethics as the examination of moral conduct and morality, which encompasses more than mere contemplation and ethical decision-making, particularly for effective ethical leadership in educational settings.

Conversely, significant contributions were expressed by numerous researchers who were acutely aware of the fundamentally human character of schools, their objectives and the ethical responsibilities of SMTs. The problems arising from non-compliance, diminished public trust and the ineffective ethical and moral conduct of SMTs in delivering ethical leadership, support this idea of distinguishing between ethics and the examination of ethical conduct and morality.

Asamoah (2023) concurs with this narrative and subsequently accentuates that in scrutinising the difference, ethics should serve as the framework for the practice of virtues such as justice, trustworthiness, honesty, regard for human dignity, sensitivity to the needs of others, empathy, kindness, transparency and selflessness. The author argues that untrustworthiness, as a facet of unethical leadership behaviours, is a significant contributor to leadership failure and conduct.

3.2.1 Conceptualising leadership

Leadership is a significant topic throughout many organisations, characterised by varying interpretations. It is perceived as interpersonal influence directed towards attaining specific objectives: a process of directing others to understand concur on necessary actions and facilitating both individual and collective endeavours to realise shared goals, or the mechanism by which one individual influence other group member towards the accomplishment of established organisational objectives (Lunenburg, 2011; Yukl, Mahsud, Hassan, and Prussia, 2013). Analysis of several definitions reveals four prevalent features in leadership: it is a process, involves influence, occurs within groups and entails goal achievement.

According to Mihelič and Lipičnik (2010), leadership may also be described as the skill of persuading followers to voluntarily participate in activities and tasks established by the leader as objectives. Consequently, the function of leaders is to guide individuals' actions towards intended goals.

Leadership styles differ according to personal attributes and personality features. Certain leaders, including charismatic and transformational types, wield personal power that enables them to engage staff, while others depend on positional or legitimate power, as noted by Eyal and Berkovich (2019). Leaders demonstrate a variety of values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, habits and practices frequently shaped by the school, corporate, professional or institutional culture. Leadership surpasses basic management; it encompasses inspiring endeavours that tackle the interpersonal dimensions of a manager's responsibilities, including transformation, motivation, inspiration and influence (Sinha, 2013). Proficient leadership abilities are crucial for the successful implementation of managerial functions throughout many organisations and tiers. Consequently, educational settings such as schools, akin to other social organisations, necessitate executives who transcend basic management to guarantee effective operation.

3.2.2 Conceptualising ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is a complex subject that has recently attracted considerable interest from scholars, researchers and leadership practitioners globally, resulting in diverse interpretations and viewpoints. Some prior studies concentrated on ethical leadership in specific areas, such as manufacturing, while others explored it across other social contexts, including school setting and associated environments. Consequently, ethical leadership is frequently considered a comprehensive concept that includes various perspectives rather than a distinct leadership paradigm. Ethical leadership fundamentally concerns the principles, beliefs and values of right and wrong, which underpin organisational behaviour and shape leaders' guidance of employees in attaining organisational objectives, as noted in the early scholastic literature on leadership theory and evolution by Campbell (1997). This viewpoint indicates a collective comprehension among organisational members concerning the organisation's ethical principles, promoting acceptable behaviours while deterring unethical conduct.

As research advanced, Ko, Ma, Bartnik, Haney and Kang (2018) succinctly define ethical leadership as the process of influencing employees through values, principles and beliefs that align with accepted norms in organisational behaviour. They also commented strongly about the theory in their integrative literature review and future research agenda on ethical

leadership. Likewise, Squires and Northouse (2016) assert that ethical leadership involves guiding in a manner that maintains ethical principles and ideals, while honouring the rights and dignity of others. This entails embracing principles such as trust, integrity, honesty, consideration, equitable treatment, charisma and fairness in leadership activities. This study, in the assertion of the researcher, positions and defines ethical leadership, as per Brown et.al (2005) and other various scholars, as the exhibition of normatively appropriate behaviour through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, coupled with the encouragement of such behaviour among followers via two-way communication, reinforcement and decision-making. This interpretation by the researcher posits that ethical leadership functions as a social learning process, wherein followers regard leaders demonstrating normatively suitable behaviours such as justice, honesty, trustworthiness, integrity and concern for others as exemplars for their own conduct.

Four elements of ethical leadership have been delineated based on this understanding by the researcher. The initial component entails exemplifying normatively acceptable behaviour via individual acts and social interactions (Brown et al., 2005:120). The authors contend that leaders regarded as ethical must demonstrate behaviours deemed normatively acceptable by their followers. Behaviours such as honesty, trustworthiness, fairness and consideration for others in decision-making and relationships augment a leader's legitimacy and credibility.

When principals demonstrate these behaviours in schools, teachers and other colleagues are inclined to perceive them as reliable and trustworthy role models, fostering emulation among teachers and other staff members. The second element of the term pertains to the encouragement of such behaviour among followers via reciprocal communication (Brown et al., 2005:120). This indicates that ethical leaders not only emphasise ethics and elevate their significance within the social milieu through explicit discussions with followers but also grant followers a voice, ensuring a procedurally or interpersonally just process that embodies charismatic ethical leadership and values (Howell and Avolio, 1992; Richmon, 2004).

In an educational context, this implies that SMTs should establish conducive channels for articulating ethical objectives to teachers while also permitting teachers to convey their aspirations and expectations concerning ethical conduct.

The third component, "reinforcement," suggests that ethical leaders set ethical standards, reward ethical behaviour and penalise those who do not comply with these standards, as posited by Kaduma (2024), therefore, facilitating vicarious learning. In a school environment, this indicates that SMTs are tasked with setting ethical standards, praising teachers and other subordinates who exhibit ethical behaviour and disciplining those who breach these norms. The concluding element of the definition relates to "decision-making." This signifies that ethical leaders contemplate the ethical ramifications of their choices and create principled and equitable decisions that may be observed and replicated by others. In the school setting, this underscores that leaders, such as SMTs, must judiciously evaluate and render equitable and transparent judgments to achieve improved outcomes.

In the initial stages of ethical leadership theory's evolution, researchers, as noted by Dinh, Lord, Gardner, et al. (2014), formulated various intricate concepts and theories to elucidate and forecast leadership efficacy and organisational performance, while also proposing new theories regarding leaders' attributes and effectiveness. Several prior studies, including Zhu (2008) and subsequently Walumbwa, Mayer, Wang, et al. (2011), contend that ethical leadership behaviours are crucial in correlating with organisational success. Research utilising social exchange theory indicates that followers reciprocate positively when treated favourably by their leaders, as articulated by Kalshoven et al. (2011), and further emphasised by Baker, Stites-Doe, Mathis and Rosenbach (2014) regarding the dynamic roles of followers and leaders in ethical leadership. Furthermore, Kark and Shamir (2002) assert that in transformational leadership, the leader fosters an environment in which followers cultivate a sense of identity with both the leader and the team being directed. The emotional attachment of leaders influences the ideals, goals and priorities of their followers (Yukl et al., 2013). Scholarly definitions of leadership predominantly emphasise the direction or influence of individual followers or subordinates towards achieving certain goals or completing designated tasks. It typically utilises non-coercive influence, namely, leveraging power such as expertise and referent power, without resorting to force or threats, to inspire, motivate and influence individuals towards the attainment of common objectives. Coercive power may also be employed to penalise individuals to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

The foregoing concept of leadership aligns with the prevailing agreement among scholars that leadership is co-created by both leaders and followers. Followers exert effort and demonstrate devotion to tasks in response to favourable treatment from their leaders. The leader's integrity and the group's trust in the leader unite them in the pursuit of objectives. Most experts, both past and present, unanimously concur that ethical leadership consists of two principal categories: the moral person category and the moral management category. The former denotes a manager endowed with inherent personal attributes such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, fairness, discipline and sensitivity to the needs of individuals including employees, whereas the latter characterises a manager who creatively endeavours to establish or implement ethical norms and standards, communicate clearly and influence followers. This research study is framed by previously known literature on value-based ethical leadership frameworks and human capital theory.

Recent research by Engelbrecht, Heine and Mahembe (2014) in South Africa, introduced a structural model illustrating the relationship between ethical leadership, trust and work engagement within the private corporate sector. The research demonstrated a favourable correlation between ethical leadership and trust, as well as work engagement, among managers and employees, based on the structural equation model that is also very relevant to the school setting. Bello (2012) also presented these critiques from multiple researchers about the notion of ethical leadership and its impact on job performance. Employee performance appears to improve when trust and confidence in leadership qualities are established. Unethical decision-making results in heightened distrust and diminished job dedication.

Employees develop faith in their leaders and enhance their performance in assigned tasks when those leaders consistently exhibit ethical characteristics. Recent studies on the correlation between distributed leadership and teacher welfare, conducted by Liu, Liu, Yang, Yao and Thien (2024), examined the practice of trust in educational leaders and the mediating effects of organisational trust. In their research, trust and commitment were emphasised to enhance the knowledge of ethical leadership and employee work performance. They argued that leaders' first obligation is to foster an atmosphere of reciprocal trust.

This onerous responsibility requires time, yet the emergence of a culture of trust inside an organisation signifies robust unity and dedication among its members. This aligns with the leader-member exchange idea, which underscores a reciprocal connection that advantages both the leader and the member in pursuit of a shared objective. Their findings indicated the necessity for a superior instrument to assess trust within the educational setting or a revision of the existing instrument to enhance its comprehensiveness and relevance. They further argued that organisational trust is regarded as a remedy for employees' lack of motivation and commitment to their task. They found that absence of trust might diminish teachers' enthusiasm and dedication, so hindering the school's growth and development. Based on the literature reviews concerning ethical leadership and its diverse definitions and references, these theoretical frameworks elucidate the influence of ethical leadership practices on fostering trust in leaders within the realms of school administration, management, instruction and teacher welfare.

This case study, drawing on past and present research, posits that the implementation of an ethical leadership style significantly fosters trust in leaders, which in turn may facilitate the cultivation of favourable working environments and behaviours, particularly within secondary schools. This research study drawing from the theoretical framework, further delineates the sub-constructs of ethical leadership practices that specifically foster the establishment of trust between teachers and principals. The researcher further opines that the literature reviewed and the framework of this case study expose a statistically significant and favourable correlation between ethical leadership and trust in leaders. This resonates with the subsequent findings of Asamoah (2023), who found that ethical leadership behaviours significantly fostered the building of trust. Ethical leadership fosters positive ideals that shape the cultivation of trust in leaders.

The exhibition of integrity, commitment and transparency are concurrent virtues in leaders that garner the trust of their followers. Integrity emerges as the most significant predictor of trust in leaders, followed by people orientation, sustainability concern, ethical advice, role definition and power sharing. Integrity requires the leader to be honest and to convey the truth regardless of its unpleasantness. Moreover, integrity is considered the foundation of a connection that fosters dependability between individuals.

A leader with integrity is seen as reliable and truthful in all circumstances, even when not visible. Their words align with their actions. What they exhibit is comprehensive, with nothing concealed to cause harm to others. In the context of being people-oriented, workplace trust emphasises the significance of prioritising relationships above competence, actions and the establishment of trust. People-oriented leaders instil a sense of self-worth in their team members and enhance their perception of the job they accomplish. They exert considerable effort in establishing a professional rapport that motivates employees to contribute to the organisation's objectives. The least effective predictor was fairness; it did not significantly contribute to fostering trust among leaders engaged in ethical leadership. These assertions contrast with research in which people orientation and role clarification emerged as the sub-constructs of ethical leadership that exerted the most significant influence on organisational commitment. The researcher is, therefore, predisposed to concur, based on these shared characteristics of ethical leadership, that acceptable ethical leadership behaviour is one where the leader's actions and the implementation of the leadership influence process align with ethical and moral principles. Comparable research and theoretical frameworks by Zacarias and Flores (2024) have demonstrated that a leader's humane relations, moderation orientation and sense of responsibility can influence performance, while an emphasis on fairness and justice positively moderates humane relations, moderation orientation and responsibility. This assumption is corroborated by multiple studies demonstrating that ethical leadership encompasses a constellation of values and good judgment employed by leaders in their interactions with followers, the organisation and society, as noted by Kalshoven et al. (2011). This assertion was previously elucidated by Brown et al. (2005), who characterised ethical leadership as “the exhibition of normatively appropriate behaviour through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the advocacy of such behaviour to followers via two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making.” Based on the recent research by Zacarias et.al., (2024), the researcher concurs with these historical scholars referenced in this study and opines that the influence of ethical leadership on the moral identity of subordinates in school settings closely mirrors the conduct of SMTs in their daily interactions with staff. Consequently, the researcher identifies material and substantial alignment with references related to ethical school leadership in this study.

3.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS UNDERPINNING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

In the field of education, teachers, influenced by diverse cultural value orientations, follow distinct behavioural standards, as stated by Ma, Tang, and Zhao (2022). This distinction is further emphasized by the possibility to create significant variations in the impact of certain circumstances on teachers' organisational citizenship behaviour inside the school setting. The researcher contends that this phenomenon is addressed in response to the assertion that transformational leadership, originally theorised and assessed within the individualistic framework of schools in South Africa, seems to be equally, if not more relevant, in the collectivist cultures of the rest of the Global North and South. This study includes collectivist culture as a moderating variable, as asserted by the researcher following a thorough investigation of the theoretical framework that supports this research. This is accomplished within the study framework to enhance the model put out by Cheng, Zhang, He and Yao (2024). The proposed integration aims to elucidate the boundary conditions relevant to the effects of group-focused transformational ethical leadership on teachers' organisational citizenship behaviour and the impact of ethical leadership on moral work engagement, thereby deepening the understanding of such behaviour within the South African educational system.

This approach is noteworthy, as collectivist groups typically prioritise collaboration and shared interests within the educational setting. Fang and Yu (2023) assert that in this situation, subordinates may exhibit a heightened propensity to respect their leaders, aligning with the collective ideals advocated by leadership, hence potentially enhancing the efficacy of transformational leadership. The principle of leader-follower value congruence posits that when subordinates' values align with the leadership style ideologically, they are more inclined to respond positively to that leadership.

Conversely, the impact of this leadership style diminishes when there is a misalignment in values. Group-oriented transformational leadership emphasises collective awareness and shared aims, fostering synergistic collaboration among members to achieve common goals.

Members of a group exhibiting a strong sense of collectivism, as a theoretical framework that underpins ethical leadership in schools, are inclined to conform to collective norms, prioritise group goals and engage actively in collaborative efforts. This alignment aligns with the principles of group-oriented transformational leadership. As a result, group members engaged in a high-level collectivist environment are more inclined to adopt the leadership's group values, resulting in the expression of organisational citizenship behaviour.

In contrast, members of a low-level collectivist group exhibit self-centred ideals, which are inconsistent with the principles of group-oriented transformational leadership. Consequently, for these employees, the influence of group-oriented transformational leadership on organisational citizenship behaviour may be comparatively diminished. Against this background, this study primarily examines the Virtual, Deontological, Democratic, Social Learning, and Authentic Leadership theories to explore their relationship with ethical leadership theory that underpins management in the secondary school setting.

3.3.1 Virtual Theory

This theory emphasises the type of individual one ought to be in their interactions with others in the school setting. Yuan, Chia and Gosling (2023) advocate that this theory emphasizes intrinsic virtue over the outcomes of activities or the mandates of behavioural norms. It motivates individuals to perpetually seek virtue and to embody morality in every facet of existence. This theory, in advocating for ethical school leadership, underscores the established traditions or cultures from which it originates, as well as the virtues that embody the values, traditions, memories and narratives of the cultures and communities involved. The researcher concurs with López González, Fernández Espinosa and Ortiz de Montellano (2024) that the virtual theory, as defined by the authors, supports ethical school leadership. However, it does not claim to enforce a strict, unconditional moral obligation within the school environment and is not an isolated trait, rather, it is contextual. Virtues empower school leadership to engage with subordinates, facilitating sound moral decisions and appropriate actions in specific and evolving circumstances within the school. This theory advocates for ethical school leadership, emphasising that leadership in school setting should aim for morally commendable outcomes.

It suggests that the act of guiding others is inherently moral, akin to other human actions that carry an implicit responsibility for beneficence in the interpersonal dynamics between school leaders and their subordinates. On the contrary, if leadership does not pursue a common good within the school or fails to do so morally effectively, it cannot be considered as ethical school leadership.

The researcher asserts that, despite acknowledging similarities between competences and virtues, it is important to highlight the distinctions between the two constructs, particularly with their differing focus on the intention behind human actions. In the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of education in virtues, delineated by López González et al., (2024) as a social phenomenon that serves a social purpose, that is intentional, influences people's attitudes, thoughts and actions, that is beyond management positions and is related to ethics and values which are not exclusively from leaders but are inclusive of the group. This virtual theory is, therefore, associated with the aim or purpose of the deed, which differs in significance from the notion of ethical leadership ability. Lawton and Páez (2015), were also influenced by Aristotle's concept of ethical leadership, referenced the theory in their work wherein this assertion was later elucidated by González, de Montellano and Cortés (2024), who assert that moral virtue necessitates an intentional desire and pursuit of good deeds by the individual. This deed or intention typically precedes action and facilitates the comprehension of that action. An ethical activity is deemed virtuous primarily when it is deliberately directed towards a genuinely desirable outcome. Consequently, the ethical aim is paramount, as it delineates the action rather than the execution itself.

Alzola (2024) contends that ethical virtues encompass not just behavioural tendencies but also desires, values, beliefs and emotions. Furthermore, these characteristics necessitate proper wants and ethical purposes for justifiable reasons. López González et al. (2024) contend that certain theorists in virtual theory assert that education in ethical leadership competency should acknowledge the significance of motives. However, the importance of intention is frequently neglected owing to a predominant focus on the efficient execution of specific tasks from a mechanistic perspective. The researcher concurs and asserts that this deficiency is absent among virtue education theorists such as Morgan, Gulliford and Kristjánsson (2017), who proposed a novel method for assessing moral virtues.

They contended that, typically, the intentional component from virtue theory serves as the principal catalyst for the actions individuals undertake, driven by profound motives and motivating intentions that guide the requisite actions. Miller (2020) notably overlooks the inadequate emphasis on ethical motivation within the character virtues and strengths of the virtual theory model as a conceptual necessity in the theoretical framework concerning ethical leadership motivation and the virtue of honesty.

Ethical leadership competencies differ from ethical leadership virtues. The latter, as posited by Brooks (2021), has the potential to cultivate a new generation of astute thinkers and principled ethical leaders, facilitating improved ethical decision-making in complex scenarios, particularly in interpersonal relationships that acknowledge the distinct identity and uniqueness of individuals within the school setting.

3.3.2 Deontological Theory

This theory postulates that morally good actions are those moral standards that can be rationally discerned, are universally applicable and are verifiable as true, necessitating adherence through obligation, irrespective of the consequences of following these moral principles. This claim is expressed and proposed by Poff (2023). The deontological model is a moral theory asserting that activities ought to be evaluated according to adherence to specific ethical standards or duties. Ethics or morals primarily pertains to duty, law or obligation. In this approach, leaders are required to follow a specific set of ethical standards and principles, irrespective of the outcomes of their activities. A leader that prioritises honesty would refrain from deceit, regardless of any short-term advantages for the organisation. Deontology is, therefore, focused on the intrinsic morality of actions, irrespective of their outcomes.

This paradigm posits that deontological ethical considerations and actions are assessed based on the underlying moral principles, rather than their resultant effects (Kwemarira, Ntamu, Nsereko and Balunywa, 2023). Deontologists assert that certain activities possess intrinsic moral value, being categorically right or wrong irrespective of their effects. Chilufya (2023) avers that the power of deontological models is in their promotion of objectivity, opposition to subjectivism and relativism and their ability to prohibit individuals from making personal exceptions, hence countering the common dangers of individualism in society.

It offers a definitive framework of ethical principles that can direct decision-making and conduct. Leaders who consistently adhere to ethical principles, even in challenging circumstances, particularly regarding ethical leadership as perceived by Generation Z, those who were born between 1997 and 2012 and are currently in education system, bear the responsibility to exemplify their dedication to moral values and their readiness to make difficult decisions in support of those values, as argued by Lim (2024) in the theoretical framework and literature review. This fosters trust and respect among followers, who are more inclined to regard the leader as a role model and emulate their behaviour. Nonetheless, deontological theory possesses intrinsic shortcomings, including the fact that law does not encompass all actions we undertake in our daily lives, as its directives do not always inform our decisions and behaviours. By prioritising compliance as the principal virtue, the legal model inadequately acknowledges the existence of the self as the moral subject and agent. The researcher contends that this approach significantly neglects the importance of virtues in ethical living and, by just delineating conduct restrictions, is insufficient in positively guiding our ethical behaviours. This paradigm fails to acknowledge the inherent reality that conflicts are inevitable among diverse entities. Determining which ethical standards should be prioritised in complex or confusing situations can be challenging. A deontological leader in a school setting, who prioritises truthfulness, may find it challenging to align this concept with the necessity of upholding secrecy or safeguarding sensitive information held by school leaders. This claim is endorsed by critics Suchy and Newman (2019), who argue that the deontological ethical model might be excessively rigid and inflexible, potentially neglecting the intricate and dynamic aspects of real-world decision-making. They further opine that a deontological leader who consistently promotes honesty may have difficulties in scenarios involving conflicting ethical concerns or the necessity to reconcile various values simultaneously. Consequently, while the deontological model serves as a significant framework for ethical leadership that can inform decision-making and conduct, it may not be suitable in every circumstance. It can, however, offer a significant foundation for educational leaders aiming to align their actions with their ethical convictions and foster a culture of integrity within the school setting.

3.3.3 Democratic theory

This theory is ascribed by scholars to a developmental perspective of democratic leadership in education, a crucial element of an empowered democratic community where school leadership facilitates subordinate involvement in decision-making processes. Recent empirical research by Larsen and Mathé (2023) has enhanced comprehension of this assumption by examining students' knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and activities, while also fostering the democratic attributes of school setting. These studies have shown that SMTs play a crucial role in fostering ethical leadership ideals and the moral growth of the school community.

A fundamental aspect of this idea, essential for effective ethical school leadership, is that a primary responsibility of democratic educational leaders is to advocate for democratic values inside both the school and the community. This theoretical framework is founded on a developmental understanding of democratic practice as articulated by James, Connolly and Hawkins (2020), encompassing four rationalities, each with a unique emphasis:

- decisional, pertaining to the right to participate.
- discursive, relating to the opportunities for open discourse;
- therapeutic, focused on fostering positive feelings of engagement and social cohesion; and
- ethical, concerning the pursuit of truth and the allocation of internal authority within the educational setting.

The four rationalities correspond to the definition of educational leadership proposed by James et al. (2020), who contend that this activity is a valid interaction inside an educational institution aimed at improving engagement with the institution's primary objective. They contended that a definition of educational leadership practice must delineate the legality of such behaviours, including, for instance, the ethical foundation of agency. López-Roca and Traver-Martí (2023) further contend that the emphasis of democratic leadership within the educational setting is to cultivate a dialogic approach to participation in decision-making processes involving the school environment. Consequently, the researcher asserts that this significantly highlights the inclination to improve the necessary moral and ethical attitudes and behaviours between school leadership and subordinates.

Hoque and Raya (2023) assert that democratic leaders prioritise collective interests by promoting social equality, reflecting a knowledge of emotional dynamics concerning their workforce. A democratic leadership style that prioritises teamwork, shared decision-making and a participatory approach positively influences teachers' emotional and psychological needs.

Research by these abovementioned authors indicates that teachers operating in settings characterised by democratic leadership tend to exhibit higher levels of job commitment and satisfaction, alongside reduced stress and burnout. Democratic leaders regularly provide teachers the opportunity to articulate their perspectives and frequently include their constituents in decision-making and goal formulation. This may empower teachers, foster inclusivity and affirm the worth of their efforts. They may also perceive that they are effecting change. Furthermore, democratic leadership can foster a productive and supportive work environment that answers specific ethical needs. The foregoing discussion indicates that the beliefs of school leadership significantly influence the emotional, pro-social and psychometric needs of teachers.

An effective and supportive work environment that addresses the emotional and pro-social needs of teachers can be established, for example, through a transformational leadership approach that emphasises inspiring and motivating teachers to pursue a shared vision. The authoritarian leadership style, characterised by stringent rules and expectations, may create a stressful and unsupportive work environment that fails to meet the emotional or pro-social needs of teachers. The extent of autonomy and professional development options available to teachers may be affected by the SMT leadership style, which could influence their psychometric needs.

3.3.4 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory postulates that individuals within a society seek to learn from and emulate the behaviours of those with elevated social status and higher ranks. This foundational description of the theory was conceptualised among others by Bandura (1969) and later expanded by Bandura and Walters (1977), focusing specifically on the identificatory process of the social learning theory. Employees' behaviour towards their supervisor and colleagues mirrors that behaviour, as they emulate and acquire it.

Ethical leaders enhance accountability by clearly communicating the organisation's objectives and expectations to their teams. Consequently, employees tend to emulate these leaders, acquiring knowledge and assisting one another in attaining the organisation's overarching goals (Kalshoven et.al., 2011). Ethical leadership comprises two fundamental and interconnected dimensions: the leader establishes ethical standards and thereafter administers rewards, accolades and sanctions to ensure adherence to these norms.

Secondly, these leaders demonstrate commendable traits including honesty, integrity, credibility, compassion and respect for colleagues, as posited by Yang and Wei (2017). Their claims were subsequently corroborated by Huo, Safdar and Ahmed (2023), and further on reflected in the research of Guo, et al. (2023) regarding the influence of responsible ethical leadership on employee task performance, which are essential attributes of ethical leadership. A leader monitors the behaviours of others and their resultant consequences to comprehend ethical standards, assimilates pertinent knowledge through evaluation and retains the processed information. Additionally, a formal code of conduct may be established as a regulated framework for fostering ethical behaviour in the workplace.

This theory can be further examined within the educational context by elucidating the correlation between staff self-confidence and job performance, as well as how situational factors typically influence employees' ethical behaviours and attitudes, ultimately influencing their ethical conduct. This theory, as articulated by Abdulla, Fenech, Kinsella et al. (2023), constitutes a prominent educational theory that prioritises the individual as an active learner who develops new insights and interpretations from pre-existing information and through social interactions with peers in a shared or analogous environment, thereby fostering a community of learning. The authors assert that this theory is elucidated by focusing on learning through active experience, both authentic and simulated, as well as reflection, reflexivity and problem-solving. They assert that social learning theory examines the interplay of leadership growth, teamwork, peer learning, and communication.

Hasnat Bhatti, Qiu, Akram, Bhatti and Akram (2023) assert that for this theory to be completely actualised within the educational setting and its management, ethical leadership must exert specific influences on employees' attitudes and behaviours.

The SMT must cultivate ethical conduct among both followers and their leader. Additionally, they should provide moral awareness programmes that equally emphasise the development of ethical behaviour among leaders and employees. When the manifestation of these moral behaviours is justifiably rewardable or punishable, both leaders and their subordinates will be compelled to comply.

SMT, in the affirmative implementation of this theory, must cultivate an ethical leadership style within their organisations and emphasise the significance of ethics, including, trustworthiness, equitable decision-making, integrity and honesty, as well as employees' self-esteem, while creating an environment conducive to the open exchange of theoretical opinions and knowledge without apprehension. Consequently, this idea ought to be implemented in the school as it fosters psychological empowerment, equitable benefit exchange and overall well-being, thereby encouraging ethical behaviour, such as the transparent sharing of work-related knowledge among colleagues.

3.3.5 Theory of Authentic Leadership

Definitions of authentic leadership have differed among prior literature reviews, theoretical frameworks and research investigations pertaining to this theory. Comprehensive descriptions by Begley (2001) and pertinent scholars such as Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, and Peterson (2008), as well as insightful researchers like Gardner, Coglisier, Davis, and Dickens (2011), Marinakou and Nikolic (2016), and Arcoudis, Papadopoulou, and Chalkiadaki (2021), along with emerging scholars Köse and Töre (2024), frequently characterise this theory as leadership grounded in knowledge, values and ethics, executed by the leader in a professional manner. They elaborated on authentic leadership theory from the standpoint of educational administration as the implementation of effective practices at a professional level, grounded in robust ethical principles, alongside the capacity for self-awareness to fulfil the components of educational management.

Walumbwa et al. (2008) further characterise authentic leadership as a behavioural pattern of leaders that depends on positive psychological traits and a constructive moral environment. They contended that these authentic leadership attributes are augmented by self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced information processing, and transparency exhibited by ethical leaders who collaborate with followers and foster self-development.

This theory represents a requisite form of affirmative leadership essential in the contemporary day to adapt to rapid transformations, fierce competition and ethical dilemmas. The birth of this theory suggests an increase in global moral decay and the necessity for the development of an ethical leadership styles.

The authentic leadership theory emphasises values and ethics to improve transparency among organisational leaders in their interactions with subordinates (Asim, Turi, Shahab and Rubab, 2023). Given that this theory is relatively new and was developed by researchers who acknowledged its significance at that time, the researchers concur that its relevance has now become paramount, particularly in the contemporary context. Consequently, it can be accurately designated as the contemporary real leadership theory. The researcher believes that it remains a subject of study and investigation, progressing towards maturation imminently. This claim is supported by recent study from Zhang, Long and Bowers (2024), which indicates that authentic leadership encompasses multiple key factors influencing school authentic leadership, teacher psychological empowerment and interactional fairness in the school setting.

The authentic leadership theory established a model comprising five fundamental elements:

- self-awareness, defined by Alshammari, Pasay-an, Gonzales and Torres (2020) as the leader's clarity and consensus regarding their core values, identity, emotions, motives, and objectives.
- transparency, which refers to the leader's clarity in self-expression towards subordinates and their engagement in behaviours that foster trust, such as openly sharing information and exchanging positive sentiments in interactions with subordinates resulting in transparency and integrity in leaders' relationships with subordinates, as expressed by Reichenberger and Raymond (2021).
- Authentic Internal Behaviour is defined as a leader's self-awareness and internal values, which establish a robust internal foundation for their actions, behaviours and decisions.

- Balanced Information Processing, as articulated by Fiskerstrand (2022), involves the objective analysis of data and comprehension of others' perspectives prior to decision-making, emphasising impartiality and the integration of opposing viewpoints.
- Positive Ethical Perspective, as described by Imam and Zaheer (2021), pertains to the standards, positive values and internal morals that direct leaders in their behaviours, actions, and decisions.

Leaders exhibit consistency, particularly under crises and external challenges, by making decisions and displaying behaviours that align with their intrinsic principles and ethics. The researcher subsequently integrated internal organisation and authentic behaviour within the internalised moral perspective to align with the preceding two elements of the concept, as both illustrate the congruence of the leader's behaviour with internal values and standards from the standpoint of the theory of free will and self-determination.

A leader's internalised moral perspective entails coherence between internal values and leadership practices and behaviours. Asim et.al. (2023) have uncovered significant literature supporting these ethical leadership ideas based on theoretical frameworks. Lipscombe, Tindall-Ford and Kidson (2024) aver that in formulating a personalised educational leadership theory amidst declining educational standards from secondary to higher education, it is imperative for school leaders and academic personnel to optimise their performance, thereby necessitating the advancement of ethical school leadership theories. These theories typically assign the locus of ethical responsibility to the person. Nevertheless, ethics ought to be a collective obligation among all stakeholders. SMTs often engage in ethical decision-making as part of their daily responsibilities. These educational leaders possess a social contract to fulfil the requirements of their constituents.

The researcher advocates for a gradual implementation of the school instructional leadership model, incorporating a revised framework and prospective ethical orientation for school leadership, as informed by the work of Özdemir, Gümüş, Kılınç and Bellibaş (2024). This concept is founded on three domains: individual, organisational and social. A school leader must acknowledge their ethical obligations and comprehend the necessity for their followers to operate within an ethical framework as well.

Authentic school leadership, when executed well, is likely to positively influence teachers' performance and ethical consciousness. Consequently, a genuine school leader is anticipated to possess a robust moral character, benevolence and altruism in guiding others. If properly utilised by the SMT, this narrative can facilitate the implementation of the four essential ethical school leadership qualities: self-awareness, an internalised moral perspective, balanced processing and relational transparency. The researcher and the prevailing advanced literature concur that unequivocal moral leadership significantly influences ethical leadership theory and fosters favourable attitudes, hence influencing subordinates' ethical learning and self-perception. The researcher concurs that literature from Al-Dhuwaihi and Almohaisin (2021) indicates that real leadership theory among certain public-school leaders must be comprehended and interpreted within certain cultural school contexts. Furthermore, the leadership approach of the SMT is contingent upon the context and cultural framework of the ongoing subjective and ethical dilemmas being addressed. It is understood that authentic leadership theory encompasses both transformational and transactional leadership styles, thereby yielding optimal outcomes in school management processes.

3.4 PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERPIN ETHICAL SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

A growing number of academics in educational leadership have acknowledged the substantial influence of cultural and societal ideas on the ethical leadership practices of school leaders or managers. Arar, Sawalhi, DeCuir and Amatullah (2023) elucidate this claim in their literature evaluations about the notion of ethical leadership within the educational setting. This acknowledgment by scholars has prompted researchers to examine these influences in other contexts. Their literature review findings suggest that cultural norms and values significantly influence a leader's attitudes and help to delineate their responsibilities and tasks in the efficient management of schools. Furthermore, a study into the factors that positively influence ethical leadership in schools has increased alongside the emergence of SMTs that uphold several ideals foundational to ethical school leadership.

The literature on ethics and leadership typically reflects a range of attributes universally regarded as ethical ideals, beliefs, behaviours and attitudes that might influence a school's success or failure. These universal ideals, however, must be contextualised within the school setting to have the necessary credibility.

Theoretical framework and literature review on ethical school leadership presented by Iftach and Shapira-Lishchinsky (2023), which examined ethical leadership dilemmas faced by school leaders through role-plays, delineated the ethical leadership ecosystem comprising layers influenced by individual, interpersonal organisational, community, and policy factors that constitute the foundation of ethical school leadership. The authors assert that these components exert a broad and generic impact on the success or failure of ethical leadership within the school setting. These layers at the individual level pertain to the personal attributes of school leaders, including gender, age and skill. At the interpersonal level, it pertains to the leader's immediate environment and the subordinates with whom the leader engages daily inside the school context.

At the organisational level, it delineates the leaders' contacts with members of the SMT in the quest for establishing a definitive ethical leadership agenda within the school. The layer including community engagement pertains to the social school community system in which leadership behaviours embody the appropriate ethical, cultural values and norms related to the school. The final layer of policy concerns pertains to the laws, rules, regulations and principles established by pertinent legislative and governance entities overseeing the national education system.

It is essential to identify and examine the ethical ideals that underpin ethical school leadership within school settings. The foregoing conclusions regarding ethical school leadership proposed by these scholars have led the researcher to concur that ethical school leadership theory should incorporate the fundamental principles of respect, service, justice, trust, honesty, transparency and integrity, to enhance the understanding and application of ethical school leadership practices.

3.4.1 Respect

The notion of respect in ethical school leadership centres on an internalised moral perspective that includes the moral individual, moral manager and their interconnected influences, which are founded on concern for others and the expected behaviours of oneself and others. Contemporary organisational methodologies emphasise the significance of leadership in fostering ethical conduct and moral integrity. Numerous leadership theories underscore the necessity for leaders to convey an inspiring vision. Nevertheless, the emphasis should be placed not on rhetoric but on the ethical conduct exhibited and the respect and compassion extended to others. Yazdanshenas and Mirzaei (2023) argue that the critical importance of organisational management and leadership style significantly influences employee empowerment and necessitates ethical conduct, making the presence and effective functioning of ethical school leaders a paramount concern for organisations. The authors characterise this leadership style from the social learning perspective as one grounded in normative rules and values, demonstrated through the leader's actions, decision-making (establishing ethical standards) and the application of rewards and punishments to promote ethical conduct within the corporate or school setting. Hasnat Bhatti et al. (2023) agree with this concept.

Most researchers perceive ethical leadership as the embodiment of normative behaviour and ethical standards, wherein leaders serve as ethical role models, exemplifying appropriate conduct through interpersonal relationships and communication with followers, while employing formal decision-making and authority to promote and enforce desired normative rules and ethical standards. An ethical leader is often polite towards others and perceives themselves as a servant to those they serve. This claim is valid and truthful, as stated by Arar, et al. (2023). The authors contend that a supportive environment fosters the development of subordinates' talents and confidence, while also training them to adhere to ethical norms. Furthermore, these educational leaders must exhibit ethical accountability and investigate the implementation of enforcement tools to foster ethical conduct. The increasing interest in ethical school leadership in recent years stems from prior research demonstrating its substantial impact on various positive organisational outcomes.

These outcomes include heightened job satisfaction, enhanced organisational commitment, a greater propensity to report issues to leaders and improved employee and organisational well-being (Asim, et al., 2023). Additionally, ethical leadership correlates with elevated employee satisfaction, ethical turnover, improved organisational justice, organisational support, and reduced job stress, burnout and overall enhancement of the ethical school leadership environment, thereby boosting employee efficiency and effectiveness in school management. Authors, such as the ones mentioned in the previous paragraphs, typically assert that ethical school leaders are primarily defined by their role as servants to others, the implementation of enforcement measures to foster ethical and values-driven conduct and the demonstration of respect, care and compassion towards others.

3.4.2 Service

Ethical service behaviour is characterised by individual acts directed towards the development, implementation and application of existing and innovative concepts to enhance the organisation. This claim is ascribed to Hoang, Luu, Du and Nguyen (2023), who further contended that, in the service innovation process, it is achievable when a colleague generates novel ideas pertaining to work-related challenges, solicits and obtains support for their implementation through idea advocacy, and seeks the endorsement of school leadership to ultimately integrate them into daily operations or broader activities within their group and the school setting.

This aspect of service behaviour pertains to employees' discretionary actions aimed at generating, promoting and implementing ethical, innovative and beneficial ideas concerning the services offered inside the school setting. Liu, Huang, Kim and Na (2023) emphasise the significance of the service value ethic as a crucial element in establishing the school's competitive edge and fostering sustainable ethical growth in employees' innovative work service behaviour. The authors, within their theoretical framework regarding service values, utilise social learning theory, social exchange theory, psychological safety and work engagement. They contend that these theories are critical mechanisms for the positive correlation between ethical leadership and employees' innovative work service behaviours, thereby addressing the existing research gap in ethical school leadership.

Organisations must cultivate innovations to address developing concerns and challenges arising from heightened global competitiveness, customer demands and a rapidly evolving business environment. Liu et al. (2023) assert that innovation can result in new products, services, business models and alterations to socioeconomic systems. They further assert that effectively managed schools remain innovative and creative, noting that subordinates within that school setting are pivotal in driving innovation and creativity, thereby positioning the school for a sustainable ethical competitive advantage. When employees demonstrate innovation and ethical maturity in their roles within the school setting, their organisations are more adept at addressing the evolving needs of students and communities, while their persistent innovative work behaviours yield enduring advantages for the school and its vicinity.

Conversely, López-Roca et.al. (2023) contend that ethical school leaders must perpetually develop their services to thrive and expand in the current highly competitive ethical and moral educational landscape. Nonetheless, while scholars and practitioners in developing nations have acknowledged the significance of service to the ethical and moral framework of school leadership, it has not garnered substantial research focus from academia. Consequently, effective and coordinated ethical innovation in school leadership has emerged as a significant concern to furnish a competitive advantage in a rapidly evolving and principled school setting. Consequently, in this setting, comprehending the determinants of individual ethical conduct and effectively fostering them within the service organisation is essential for ethical school leadership.

3.4.3 Justice

Justice can be defined as a process characterised by impartiality, acknowledgment of errors, equitable treatment of persons and refraining from exploiting the mistakes or deficiencies of others (Tufan, Namal, Arpat, Yesil, and Mert, 2023). Their analysis of institutional justice literature posits that a strong perception of ethical leadership justice significantly fosters positive attitudes and behaviours among employees.

There exists a divergence of views regarding the dimensions of institutional or organisational ethical leadership justice within school settings González-Cánovas et al., (2024); Poff (2023); Zulqarnain, Samdani and Rafeeq (2024). They assert that subordinates' subjective view of justice within an institution consists of four subdimensions that mediate the effects of ethical leadership on justice.

The dimensions include distributive justice, procedural justice, interactional justice and informational justice, each comprising two subdimensions of informational justice and interpersonal justice. Groenewald, Groenewald, Uy, et al. (2024) contend that these dimensions significantly affect the ethical leadership behaviour of SMTs. Peng, Chen, Yang and Xie (2024) assert that distributive justice pertains to employees' opinions of the equitable distribution of their earnings and its significance in the workplace. Procedural justice pertains to the decision-making processes of the SMT or the rules employed to execute certain operational decisions.

The interactional justice reflects the value, civility and respect demonstrated by the SMT towards employees in the formulation of justice-oriented interventions and the execution of everyday transactions in the management of the school. Informational justice entails providing pertinent and necessary information regarding the execution of duties by subordinates. Ethical school leaders enhance the perception of justice inside their organisations by their principled behaviour. Moreover, while ethical leaders exhibit fairness, they also endeavour to prevent and rectify unethical conduct within the school environment. Therefore, fairness is regarded as a fundamental characteristic of ethical school leadership, as ethical leaders explicitly possess values such as fairness, trustworthiness and honesty into their leadership practices. Consequently, in an equitable atmosphere, employees will possess confidence in the implementation of justice and will behave ethically to eradicate doubts in their relationships with employers. Tufan et al. (2023) assert that when employees observe unfairness, they endeavour to rectify it by establishing equilibrium. Such behaviours encompass diminishing effort and exhibiting decreased motivation through the cultivation of unfavourable sentiments towards the organisation, potentially leading to actions that undermine it, characterised by distrust in both the organisation and its leadership.

The authors contend that ethical leaders enhance the perception of justice within their businesses owing to their moral characteristics. They assert that while ethical leaders are equitable, they are also expected to prevent and rectify unethical behaviour inside the organisation to ensure that the notion of justice effectively contributes to the discourse on ethical school leadership. Asamoah (2023) asserts that acceptable leadership is characterised by the alignment of the leader's actions and the implementation of the leadership influence process with ethical and moral standards. Research conducted by the author indicates that an ethical leader's humane relations, moderation orientation and sense of responsibility can enhance performance, while a justice orientation, particularly demonstrated by school leadership, positively moderates humane relations, moderation orientation, and responsibility within the educational context.

3.4.4 Trust

A significant body of recent research on educational management and leadership, as noted by Çoban, Özdemir and Bellibaş (2023), has focused on delineating successful school leadership roles and practices and assessing their impact on school processes, structures and outcomes. The authors underscore the importance of trust as an ethical foundation for school leaders to engage effectively in instructional issues. Secondly, they assume that the school leadership's emphasis on teaching would enhance both teachers' teamwork and their perceptions of self-efficacy, ultimately improving their ethical conduct and behaviour towards others. The authors designate this vital value as personal esteem, competence in essential obligations, personal integrity and the individual's psychological condition, which includes the willingness to embrace vulnerability based on optimistic expectations of others' intents or behaviours. These authors assert that trust is fundamental to fostering ethical and moral behaviour inside the school setting. Effective and ethical school leadership is contingent upon elevated levels of trust within the school setting.

The researcher asserts that the ethical value of trust is essential owing to the SMT's authority over the institution, as they bear the duty for significantly shaping the school's physical and ethical psychological work environment. Trust is fundamental in influencing ethical behaviours and regulations within the school setting, particularly concerning moral dilemmas related to punishment in the school environment.

Golann and Jones (2024) substantiate this claim in their academic addition to this theoretical framework, elucidate how principals as school leaders navigate the complexities of ethical leadership, caring and control in school discipline.

3.4.5 Honesty

Honest and ethical leaders must be responsible and principled (Modise; 2023; Mthethwa, Ngqwala and Mpungose, (2024). These authors strongly buttress that, for any organisation's success, leaders' honesty is likely to establish a critical foundation for an ethical culture rooted in this leadership trait. The authors assert that ethical leaders who are consistently prepared to accept blame for their actions, acknowledge their mistakes and possess a keen awareness of the repercussions of unethical behaviour, are most likely to foster a culture of care and honesty. Honesty-based leadership is essential for the success of school leadership and governance given its inherent character. It cultivates a culture of trust and respect, essential for collaboration and teamwork within the school setting.

This principle sets a high standard for ethical behaviour, which can help to prevent scandals and other unethical difficulties within the school setting. This assertion is further substantiated in the theoretical framework and literature review by Cooper, Cohen, Huppert, Levine and Fleeson (2023), who, in their systematic review of this essential ethical leadership principle, argue that honesty encompasses not only truth-telling but also a multitude of other dimensions of honesty antecedents, such as intellectual honesty, honest content, honest disclosure and honest delivery, which emerged from their research. Their research on these honesty encounters underscored significant hurdles or costs related to trustworthiness. Their research elucidated that engaging in honest behaviour impacts both communicators and recipients of communication actions, at individual and organisational levels.

The effects can be beneficial, yet, if not managed meticulously, they may adversely influence the overall ethical conduct and behaviour of the entire workforce. Lleo, Ruiz-Palomino, Guillen and Marrades-Pastor (2023) assert that school setting should be grounded on robust ethical leadership, hence fostering environments centred on honesty.

The authors assert that ethical leadership in schools necessitates that school leaders primarily focus on unifying shared interests and fostering relationships with both internal and external stakeholders, including employees, to facilitate success for the school and its stakeholders. Moreover, the authors adumbrate that this theory postulates that school leadership must implement principles that are internally consistent and representative of the organisation's mission and purpose. Their assertions have led the researcher to reference ethical leadership theory, which posits that in the educational context, honesty constitutes a relationship-oriented work environment, separate from a task-oriented setting. Lleo et al. (2023) posit that, based on the principles of honesty in school leadership, the primary objective of schools as organisations is not profit maximisation, but rather the enhancement of social welfare and the creation of value for students, families and society. Therefore, the school leadership places significant emphasis on honesty as a facilitator of ethical conduct, specifically, among the SMT, teachers, students, families, and the wider community. So, ethics is crucial for the development of these relationships.

Teaching and learning rooted on ethical leadership necessitates significant focus on moral intangibles, such as a compassionate tone towards students and an honest, respectful assessment of their learning. Based on the literature review regarding ethical leadership and the principle of honesty, the researcher argues that in a semi-autonomous profession, school leadership cannot compel honesty and commitment from teachers; instead, it necessitates the implementation of relational strategies to foster overall honesty and dedication to the school's mission and objectives.

3.4.6 Transparency

Education serves as a fundamental basis for societal advancement, with school leaders being central to the success of school setting. Kilag, Tokong, Enriquez, et al. (2023) assert that school leaders must embody visionary leadership, as they are instrumental in fostering positive change, improving teacher effectiveness and ensuring overall school excellence and ethical governance. Granting school leaders management autonomy and decision-making authority is recognised as an essential leadership approach that fosters the success and efficacy of subordinates within the school setting (Mbua, 2023).

This research sought to investigate the degree of management empowerment and transparency among school leaders and its possible influence on teacher and school effectiveness in managing the school. Over the years, educational policies and administrative practices have significantly transformed the position of school leaders from ordinary administrators to instructional leaders tasked with cultivating conducive learning environments. An essential factor in their leadership efficacy is the extent of empowerment granted to them for decision-making about curriculum creation, resource allocation, teacher professional development, student discipline and school improvement initiatives. The influence of managerial empowerment on teacher efficacy is significant. Empowered school leaders may offer prompt support and resources, resulting in enhanced teacher motivation and work satisfaction.

Through the efficient allocation of resources and the promotion of collaboration among teachers, empowered leaders establish professional learning communities that facilitate ongoing improvement and refined teaching methodologies, ultimately enhancing student-learning results. Furthermore, management empowerment affects the overall efficacy of the institution. Empowered leaders synchronise school objectives with overarching educational aims and execute extensive enhancement strategies. They foster a constructive school culture that promotes responsibility, openness and ongoing development, leading to enhanced parental and community involvement, elevated student attendance rates and diminished disciplinary occurrences. A supportive environment attracts and retains skilled teachers and driven students, enhancing the school's overall performance and reputation.

Transparency in the SMT ethical leadership is a fundamental element that could foster change and innovation in the attainment of all the set aims and objectives. According to Chatzipanagiotou and Katsarou (2023), transparency is essential during crises, offering ethical leadership, certainty, hope, guidance, resource efficiency, and fostering open and trustworthy communication within the school community. Effective, meaningful and comprehensive communication significantly influences a school's organisational culture and the development of trust among its members, aiding school leaders in navigating the rapid changes associated with potential crises in the school setting.

Transparency has become an essential instrument for school management in preserving the cohesive virtual and physical ethical identity of the institution. This technique facilitates ongoing communication between school leaders, teachers, parents and the external community, enabling continual support for the most vulnerable and listening to those in need. The study asserts that effective ethical school leaders utilise all accessible communication channels, such as social media, websites, newsletters, emails, phone calls, text messaging, and other multimedia platforms, to convey information regarding school governance and everyday activities in a transparent and ethical manner. Transparent communication can facilitate continuous dialogue among personnel to assist them in delivering educational services sustainably and ethically.

3.4.7 Integrity

The primary ethical practice is integrity, characterised by honesty and robust moral values. It includes attributes like fidelity to commitments, adherence to personal views or ideals and the exhibition of loyalty, sincerity and trustworthiness. In the school setting, principals through their leadership teams are anticipated to maintain integrity in spiritual affairs, financial administration and decision-making processes (Vikaraman, Mansor, Hamzah, et al., 2020). They manage finances ethically, comply with regulations and distribute funds equally to areas of greatest need within their schools. SMT uphold decisions taken in meetings, exemplifying their devotion to their statements. Teachers, as mechanic observation trait, will always emulate acts of integrity exhibited by their school leaders unwittingly without notice (Göçen, 2021). These include the avoidance of unethical behaviour under pressure, the alignment of words with actions and the adherence to norms and regulations.

Effective school leaders must exhibit a blend of essential personal qualities and talents. Kilag, Pasigui, Malbas, et al. (2024) assert that integrity, along with empathy, communication and problem solving, are essential traits and competencies. These scholars have highlighted integrity as central through numerous investigations and research endeavours, deeming it a crucial aspect in the success of educational leaders. Moreover, Kilag et al. (2024) contend that by cultivating and selecting individuals with these attributes, educational systems might guarantee the presence of effective leaders who can morally enhance student learning and optimise the entire operation of the school.

Integrity is frequently identified as a vital character attribute of desirable educational leaders. Successful school leaders are associated with honesty and robust moral convictions, which are deemed crucial for establishing trust and credibility with stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents and the community. A study by Sasan and Baritua (2022) reports that integrity is a vital determinant of educational leaders' performance, as it empowers them to exemplify ethical behaviour and foster a positive organisational culture. Yazdanshenas et al. (2023), in their literature review of this trait, contend that integrity is associated with critical values such as ethics, character and sincerity, and is presumed to inherently encompass ethical components such as benevolence, justice and honesty. The authors further reported in their research that this is particularly crucial for ethical school leaders who must establish credibility and legitimacy among their subordinates in the school setting.

According to the researcher, integrity is a crucial element in enabling ethical school leaders to foster trusting relationships with teachers, students, school governing bodies and the broader school community, thereby enhancing overall positive behaviours and perspectives within the school. Integrity, as defined by Kilag et al. (2024) and further examined by the researcher, is a multifaceted concept that significantly influences ethical school leadership. Should the school leadership receive a high rating for integrity, they will likely demonstrate both personal and collective consistency in their behaviours and attitudes grounded in moral ideals. This trait of integrity will consequently serve as a crucial impetus for school leadership to adopt ethical leadership, thereby impacting subordinates' attitudes and behaviours.

This assertion is corroborated by Yue, Men and Ci (2022), who contend that integrity, as a component of moral value assessment and a foundation of ethical leadership, substantiates the hypothesis that school leaders who exhibit behavioural integrity foster acceptable moral conduct among subordinates within the school setting. Based on the authors' articulations and their literature review, the researcher concurs that the principle of integrity, as derived from the theoretical framework and research findings, significantly influences subordinates' perceptions of their work success in ethical school leadership, particularly through school leadership's behavioural integrity and other value-centric approaches.

This assertion is further substantiated by the conclusion reached by Yazdanshenas et al. (2023), which indicates that the motivational impact of ethical behavioural integrity extends beyond the current performance of subordinates and influences their potential for future success in school settings. Consequently, based on the analysed contributions from the authors, the researcher concurs that ethical integrity can enhance the SMT's perception of the overall leadership ethics, which, in turn, can bolster the current and future success of subordinates and the ethical framework of the school.

Researchers have, throughout the years, formulated various intricate concepts and theories to elucidate and forecast leadership efficacy and organisational performance, while also proposing new theories regarding leaders' qualities and effectiveness (Yazdanshenas et al. 2023). Various worldwide research, including those by Arar et al. (2023) and Kilag et al. (2024), assert that suitable ethical leadership behaviours are essential for an organisation's performance.

Research utilising social exchange theory indicates that followers reciprocate positively when treated favourably by their leaders. In transformational leadership, the ethical leader fosters an environment in which followers cultivate a sense of identity with both the leader and the team being guided. The emotional attachment of ethical school leaders influences the values, goals and priorities of their followers in the school setting. Additionally, other studies conducted by Cooper, et al. (2023) have explored the impact of ethical leadership on effectiveness, followers and goal achievement. The authors contend that justice, integrity, transparency, attentiveness to subordinates and participatory decision-making significantly influence the success of ethical school leadership.

Ethical principles, including respect, service, justice, trust, honesty, openness and integrity, align with previous research and are essential for achieving the goals of ethical leadership within the school environment. The literature from several authors referenced herein has substantiated this assumption made by the researcher. The theoretical framework of ethical school leadership practices posits that unsuccessful leaders often contradict these ideals and believe that subordinates should solely serve the leadership.

Ethical school leadership should, however, not be viewed to exploit subordinates or to attain personal status or benefit at the expense of those being led. In the knowledge society, exemplary ethical school leaders are anticipated to embody values that promote ethical leadership practices, possess a clear vision and effective communication skills, demonstrate genuine concern for their subordinates' success, prioritise employee empowerment and satisfaction, foster teamwork and embrace the responsibility of stewardship. Moreover, they need to uphold the paramount values of respect, service, justice, trust, honesty, transparency and integrity, as evidenced by numerous studies. Ironically, a system that ostensibly ensures enhanced transparency, accountability and responsiveness in school performance may render such assurances futile if the SMT lacks requisite ethical leadership and managerial direction.

The articulated principle, along with the accountability and responsibility demanded of the SMT, is essential owing to the complexity of schools as institutions. School leadership must navigate ethical dilemmas and choose the most appropriate representation from a diverse array of options. In forming these judgments, it is essential to analyse the political and social context in which the school operates, along with the opportunities afforded by that environment. Their ethical leadership judgments must be guided by the rational priorities, ethical limitations and context established by the educational policy environment in which the school operates.

These statements, for the school's success, pertain to both its internal and exterior operations. As previously commented by the researcher, accountability encompasses the notion of responsibility, implicitly or explicitly; hence, it is closely linked to issues of power, control and authority. Formal accountability systems prevalent in many contemporary schools emphasise not only the instrumental reflections of actions by the SMT but also the issues related to the entire school system.

The exigencies of a performance culture that disregards ethical leadership behaviours have resulted in the commercialisation, marginalisation and ultimate deterioration of the educational system's social, ethical and moral dimensions. The examined literature in this study underscores the importance of management empowerment among school leaders and its potential influence on teacher and school efficacy.

Empowered school leaders may make contextually relevant decisions, facilitate teacher development and foster positive school ethical cultures, resulting in enhanced teacher motivation, job satisfaction and overall performance. Furthermore, management empowerment improves the overall efficacy of the school as an institution by aligning objectives and including stakeholders in decision-making processes. Nonetheless, obstacles to management empowerment persist, requiring additional study and policy deliberations to enhance effective ethical leadership practices. Therefore, ethical leadership functions as a pertinent theoretical framework that emphasises the necessity of empowering school leaders to inspire and motivate teachers towards their ongoing ethical and moral enhancement.

3.5 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

Kim (2023) contends that the emergent theory of ethical leadership resides at the nexus of ethics and leadership in the authors' examination of this significant topic. The emergence of ethical leadership as a distinct domain, rather than merely a facet of another leadership theory, is primarily influenced by various scandals in the educational, business, political and religious sectors during the early 2000s. This development is evident in the foundational works of Treviño, et al. (2000) as well as Brown, Treviño and Harrison (2005). The foregoing developmental research of the theory was subsequently corroborated by the studies of Banks, et al. (2023), Guo, et al. (2023) and Kim (2023). The evident ethical violations have intensified the focus on precisely delineating the ethical aspects of leadership. Research indicates that leaders can influence their followers; therefore, it is plausible to conclude that leaders can also sway individuals to act in either an ethical or immoral manner. Within the framework of ethical leadership theory, the foregoing authors have variously described ethical leadership as a leader-follower relationship wherein both parties concur that decisions are equitable, mutually gratifying and uphold integrity while promoting autonomy.

The emerging concept of ethical leadership as an independent theory is founded on both qualitative and quantitative research focused on comprehending ethical leadership, its perception by followers and its correlation with employee happiness.

The foundations of ethical leadership theory are primarily rooted in two principal concepts: the reliance of employees on external sources for ethical direction and the principles of social learning theory.

Drawing from these frameworks, ethical leaders enhance followers' awareness by rendering an ethical message sufficiently prominent within the organisational context, thereby enabling the leader to distinguish themselves from an ethically neutral backdrop. The authors concur that directing followers' attention to ethical standards by emphasising their importance is a vital component of ethical leadership as a social construct and theory. Social learning theory, initially conceptualised by Bandura (1969) and later revisited by Bandura and Walters (1977), underpins the concept of ethical leadership, postulating that individuals within a society seek to learn from and emulate the behaviours of those possessing greater social status and authority. Employees' conduct towards their leader and colleagues mirrors that behaviour, as they emulate and assimilate it. Ethical school leaders enhance accountability by clearly communicating the organisation's objectives and expectations to their teams.

The SMT has an intrinsic obligation to ensure that subordinates emulate, acquire knowledge and assist others in attaining the organisation's overarching objectives. Ethical leadership theory comprises two fundamental and interconnected dimensions: the leader initially establishes ethical standards and subsequently administers rewards, recognition and sanctions to ensure adherence to these norms. Secondly, these leaders demonstrate commendable attributes including honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, compassion and respect for their colleagues, as delineated by Huo et al. (2022). Leaders monitor the activities of others and the resultant outcomes to learn ethical norms, obtain pertinent knowledge through information evaluation and keep the processed data. Social learning theory has, therefore, achieved significant prominence in both academic literature and practical applications. Notwithstanding the theoretical and empirical focus on ethical leadership, fundamental difficulties persist that require resolution. These issues involve elucidating the theoretical mechanisms underlying ethical leadership phenomena, the conceptual distinction between behaviours and evaluations and methodological concerns, including endogeneity bias and the necessity to utilise recent technological advancements such as deep learning.

Ethical school leaders cultivate a constructive and high-calibre relationship with their followers by honouring, nurturing and appreciating their views, while making decisions that prioritise their wellness, so promoting ethical conduct in the workplace.

Prior studies have shown that ethical leaders foster positive feelings and a sense of belonging among their followers, leading to the formation of a robust connection with the leader's views, goals and objectives, which are recognised as a fundamental principle of ethical leadership theory. When ethical school leaders engage in two-way communication with subordinates, demonstrating their inclusion in the school operations, colleagues become driven to participate and fulfil the organisation's overarching goals, and are more inclined to behave ethically in their daily interaction with the leadership of the school.

Cognition, within the framework of ethical leadership theory, is crucial for learning when employees observe their leaders' activities. Social learning theory illustrates that employees acquire knowledge by observation, imitation and modelling, particularly by seeing the attitudes, behaviours and outcomes of others, especially their superiors. Consequently, employees progressively emulate the conduct of their role models.

Research conducted by Kalshoven et al. (2011) and subsequently by Kilag et al. (2024) demonstrate that ethical leaders operate effectively owing to their unambiguous expectations of employees. Moreover, they assert that an ethical leader engages in transparent and equitable communication, hence fostering a constructive relationship with employee conduct. They additionally proposed that ethical leadership theory is likely to forecast certain outcomes, including the leader's effectiveness, work satisfaction, commitment to exert greater effort and willingness to disclose ethical issues. Enhancing comprehension of its reciprocal advantages and engaging employees in the decision-making process to attain corporate goals influence the ethical and moral framework of colleagues. For ethical leadership to thrive, the SMT must effectively subscribe to the theory and subordinates must perceive their leaders as trustworthy and genuinely engaged in assisting them in achieving the outlined objectives.

Ethical leaders function as role models, fostering integrity, dignity, credibility and trust within the organisation. The subordinates are likely to respond to ethical behaviour with a robust ethical institutional culture. When an ethical leader articulates moral beliefs and institutional ethics to their subordinates and exemplifies appropriate conduct, the followers emulate the characteristics of their leaders. School leaders familiar with this notion of ethical leadership has a significant potential to accurately discern the behaviours that promote ethical conduct within the school setting. Subsequently, they will endeavour to adjust their behaviours to ensure equitable and impartial treatment of their subordinates, thereby fostering a positive environment.

Sasan et al. (2022) found that the proficient use of ethical leadership theory positively impacts employee behaviour regarding work and ethics. They also stated that ethical leadership cultivates ethical work behaviour by considering and prioritising the best interests of subordinates throughout decision-making. The subordinates recognize that stringent disciplinary measures will be enforced if they engage in unethical behaviour and contravene the school's ethical norms. A leader's affirmative gesture augments employees' drive to perform their tasks with more efficiency and effectiveness. Moreover, numerous prior research studies have demonstrated that ethical leadership theory is positively affected by multiple facets of leadership effectiveness, contributing to workers' development, commitment and work performance (Koay and Lim, 2022).

Researchers such as Akhtar, Abbas, Varikkodan, and Pinitod (2022), along with Javed, Iqbal, Iqbal and Imran (2021), posit that employees with a positive rapport for ethical leaders are more inclined to cultivate inspirational goals and propel their organisations toward significant success. Additionally, prior studies corroborate the notion that ethical leadership enhances employees' confidence in achieving organisational objectives, as they demonstrate commitment, sincerity and adherence to the directives of their leaders, traits that are characteristic of the theory. According to the research and theoretical examination by Gou, et al. (2023), which discusses the literature on ethical leadership and workplace behaviour in the education sector, social learning theory significantly contributes to ethical leadership, benefiting individuals, organisations and society as a whole. Significant theoretical research has been conducted on this concept.

The researcher contends that theoretical specificity is constrained in ethical leadership theory, as ethical school leaders tend to diminish information asymmetry in their interactions with followers when ethical behaviour is at stake. The existing study by the researcher aimed to enhance ethical leadership theory through the creation of a taxonomy of ethical school leadership. The ethical leadership theory, as delineated in the literature study by the researcher, was experimentally transcended to illustrate its impact on significant ethical leadership assessments and behaviours. The theoretical progress in ethical school leadership theory presents significant opportunities for future research.

3.6 CRITICISM OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP THEORY

The literature on ethical leadership theory, similar to other leadership theories, is affected by endogeneity bias, which arises when the influence of morality on behaviour is ambiguous owing to the exclusion of relevant ethical factors that influence ethical school leadership. Endogeneity bias may arise from numerous factors, as noted by Dua, Farooq and Rai (2023), including the omission of ethical leadership variables, ethical behavioural traits, simultaneity, common-method variance and errors in measuring ethical leadership. This bias can result in unintended correlations, rendering regression analyses of ethical leadership ambiguous and difficult for subordinates to comprehend and assimilate. The ethical leadership theory's failure to establish causal inferences regarding ethical conduct may hinder the progression of understanding the antecedents of ethical leader behaviour and the degree to which such behaviour influences attitudinal and behavioural outcomes among school leaders. Previous data suggests that this form of bias, as proposed by Banks et al. (2023), afflicts most research on ethical leadership. The literature on ethical leadership theory is similarly influenced by the combination of leader behaviours with follower evaluations, which are conceptually and empirically distinct.

Despite the critique of the theory, both ethical leadership behaviours and subjective assessments of those behaviours are theoretically pertinent. However, they are not conceptually interchangeable, as illustrated in the research by Amory, Wille, Wiernik and Dupré (2024). Consequently, the theory seeks to enhance the literature on ethical school leadership by concentrating specifically on the ethical behaviours demonstrated by school leaders.

Ethical leadership theory has garnered significant attention in both academic research and practical applications. Kim, Choi and Son (2024) contend that, despite the theoretical and empirical focus on ethical leadership theory, fundamental challenges that require resolution persist. These concerns involve elucidating the theoretical mechanism by which phenomena associated with ethical leadership theory manifest; yet the conceptual distinction between behaviours and attitudes remains essential. Ethical leadership holds significant value for individuals, companies and society as a whole. Extensive literature reviews and theoretical frameworks have been conducted on this concept by numerous scholars, including Burns (1978), Ciulla (1995), Trevino, et al. (2000), Kalshoven et al. (2011), Vikaraman et al. (2018), Audenaert, Decramer and George (2021) and Kilag et al. (2024).

However, the researcher contends that the specificity of theoretical and ethical leadership applications is constrained by the context in which school leaders mitigate information asymmetries in their relationships with followers. Notwithstanding the rich insights from the foregoing studies by the cited researchers, this ongoing study in ethical leadership theory has regarded ethical leadership knowledge as a singular concept, neglecting the multidimensionality of ethical knowledge-hiding behaviour.

The researcher asserts that scholars such as Rudolph, Murphy and Zacher (2020), McCauley and Palus (2021), Dugan (2024) and Mifsud (2024), in their critique of the ethical leadership theory and other leadership theories, argue that the theory facilitates leaders and employees in comprehending each other's perspectives and constraints during ethical leadership decision-making. It is, therefore, essential for the theory to facilitate a balance among the moral interests of diverse stakeholders within the school setting.

The researcher further contends that ethical perspective-taking may serve as a fundamental mechanism by which ethical school leadership influences employee ethical knowledge-hiding behaviours.

The theory posits that the impact of social environment on individual outcomes varies among persons and organisations, being dependent upon diverse ethical individual-related and contextual aspects linked to the theory of ethical leadership, therefore, referencing the theories and claims presented by Kilag et al. (2024).

The researcher asserts that SMTs should incorporate tactics for ethical leadership and justice orientation, contingent upon the degree to which persons in the school setting internalise justice as a moral virtue and remain cognizant of fairness issues in their surroundings. This claim is corroborated by Usman, Ali, Soetan, Ayoko and Berber (2024) in their study on the influence of servant leadership and the effect of moral virtue on subordinates' knowledge-hiding behaviours.

3.7 SUCCESS FACTORS OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP THEORY IN SCHOOLS

The school is an institution requiring collaboration among various stakeholders to establish an ethical and morally sustainable work environment of high quality. Teachers and the SMT are obligated to uphold high moral and ethical standards to ensure that students acquire the knowledge, competencies and skills necessary for success in the workforce and all facets of life. At the school level, the leadership, comprising the principal as the leader and the SMT, exerts the most considerable influence on students' teaching and learning. Ethical school leadership is essential for the success of the academic initiatives and for fostering community cohesiveness within the school's environment. The role of the SMT as a leader confers authority over the school's organisation and exerts significant effect on its ethical, physical and psychological work environment. The anticipated ethical and moral conduct of SMT should not be undervalued, and its success is defined by the following actions: managerial behaviour, behavioural integrity, communication and the capacity to enhance delegating, sharing and control.

3.7.1 Managerial behaviour

Leadership is described as the capacity to guide a group towards a common objective that would remain unattainable without the leader's presence. Hoque et al. (2023) define this managerial leadership behavioural feature as the way a leader interacts with their subordinates to achieve collective goals. In educational contexts, research indicates that principals and teachers perceive school leaders employing diverse leadership styles, such as autocratic, bureaucratic, democratic, instructional, transformational, transactional, moral, and laissez-faire, to fulfil educational or organisational goals. Principals, as educational leaders, typically adhere to instructional, democratic, transformative, laissez-faire leadership styles or a combination thereof. The appropriateness of the style is contingent upon the overall ethical conduct of the workforce.

A competent leader, whether a principal or another member of the SMT, must employ an appropriate ethical leadership style to attain organisational objectives. According to Halim, Hassan, Basri, Yusof and Ahrari (2021), managerial behaviour in ethical leadership is a social influence process in which a leader endeavours to obtain the voluntary behavioural engagement of subordinates to achieve organisational objectives.

Scott (2024) asserts that instructional ethical leaders in school settings formulate, guide and oversee the curriculum and instructional practices, and their managerial behavioural traits should not be found wanting for an effective ethical culture. The leadership approach and managerial conduct of the SMT set elevated expectations for both teachers and students. It suggests that school leaders recognise teachers' pro-social and psychometric cognitive competencies, including the curriculum and instructional behaviours necessary for an ethical teacher to effectively manage the classroom. An instructional leadership style that emphasises content, instruction and evaluation positively impact teachers' emotional and psychological needs.

Research by Hoque et al. (2023) indicates that teachers and other school staff receiving enough managerial behavioural leadership assistance are more inclined to demonstrate elevated job satisfaction, motivation and commitment, alongside reduced stress and burnout, while also exhibiting high ethical and moral standards.

Ethical school leaders aiming to cultivate robust ethical managing acumen should secure subordinate buy-in regarding management techniques. Democratic leaders in school settings should prioritise collective interests by fostering social equality, demonstrating an awareness of emotional dynamics among staff. This notion is supported by Atasoy (2020), who underscores the significance of the relationship between the school principal, as the leader of the SMT, the leadership style, school culture and the ethical organisational trajectory. Effective management conduct by school leadership prioritises collaboration and collective decision-making, alongside a participative methodology that is likely to positively influence teachers' emotional and psychological needs, serving as a foundation for ethical leadership. Chen, Ning and Bos (2022) assert that school leaders operating in democratic leadership contexts are more inclined to exhibit enhanced ethical behaviour, job commitment and contentment, with reduced instances of unethical behaviour, stress and employee burnout. The managerial behaviour of school leaders tends to afford subordinates the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and ideas, often involving them in decision-making and goal-setting processes.

School personnel, including the teaching staff, are likely to feel empowered, included and valued owing to this managerial behaviour exhibited by the school leadership. Furthermore, democratic managerial leadership fosters a constructive and supportive work environment that tackles specific ethical leadership shortcomings that may arise within the school context or setting. Mirsultan and Marimuthu (2021) contend that transformational school leaders provide vision and purpose to emotionally inspire personnel to exceed expectations. School managers employing a transformational leadership style focus on enhancing the value system of employees, their inspirational capacity and ethical standards, alongside their competencies. Laissez-faire school leaders who lack essential managerial behaviours permit personnel to make immoral actions, revealing an understanding of the workforce's deficiency in ethical consciousness. The preceding discourse indicates that SMT leadership ideology can significantly influence the ethical, emotional, pro-social and psychometric needs of teachers and other general staff within the school setting.

3.7.2 Behavioural integrity

Leader behavioural integrity reflects the perceived consistency between a leader's declarations and their behaviours. The construct comprises two elements: the perceived alignment between affirmed and enacted ideals and the perceived fulfilment of promises (Ete, Epitropaki, Zhou and Graham, 2022). In an educational setting, SMT behavioural integrity refers to subordinates' view of leaders' authenticity regarding their values, beliefs, priorities, ethics, and expectations; in other words, whether they embody their principles. Furthermore, the behavioural integrity dimension of the SMT, which pertains to promise-keeping, encompasses the perception of adherence to emotional, ethical and moral obligations, as well as the maintenance of strategic commitments within the school setting.

Miao and Zhou (2020) contend that the psychological construct of leader behavioural integrity enhances the trustworthiness and credibility of a leader's positive impact on ethical and moral connections with followers, as well as on leadership effectiveness. This claim by the author is likely to promote ethical behaviour inside the school environment. Based on empirical evidence demonstrating that leader behavioural integrity significantly influences the leader-follower relationship, the researcher contends that organisational behavioural integrity may also play a substantial ethical leadership role in employee relationships within the school environment.

Ete et al. (2022) differentiated the behavioural integrity of various leadership entities within the school and contended that subordinates may form disparate perceptions of leader behavioural integrity for these entities, which can significantly influence their ethical leadership behaviours in the workplace. Furthermore, the researcher contends that the current literature analysing the relationship between school ethical leadership and employees has inadequately addressed the intricate dynamics of this interaction, since it does not fully encompass the broader social context inside an organisation. This argument was also expressed by Palanski, Cullen, Gentry and Nichols (2015) and subsequently asserted by Kilag et al. (2024), who recognised that employees could cultivate several relationships with different leadership tiers inside the organisation. Previous research has adequately demonstrated how these leaders independently affect employees' attitudes and ethical behaviours around social exchange, identification and civic behaviours.

School leaders are essential organisational representatives in fostering the necessary behavioural integrity and their demonstration of integrity can positively influence employees' perceptions of the ethical leadership integrity of the school and its collective environment.

3.7.3 Communication

Communication serves as a pivotal strategic leadership instrument within school settings, crucial for orchestrating ethical actions (Lessy, Pary and Adamek, 2023). These authors assert in their theoretical framework that extensive research on strategic, inclusive and effective communication has yielded numerous insights. Nonetheless, this significant assertion in the researcher's opinion is frequently dispersed across various fields and topics, complicating the ability of researchers and practitioners to synthesise this knowledge and delineate the essential strategic considerations for the school environment within the parameters of ethical leadership. For school leadership to effectively utilise this essential managerial component, they must engage in an ethical, open and transparent dialogue regarding their interactions with one another. Chatzipanagiotou et al., (2023) assert that, in addition to being essential for fostering change and innovation in school the setting, ethical school leaders must ensure communication certainty and clarity during crises. This assertion is substantiated in the theoretical literature by Dumulescu and Muşiu (2021) in their study on academic leadership during COVID-19, emphasising that providing hope, guidance, resource efficiency, and fostering ethical, open, and trustworthy communication within the school community is essential for ethical leadership in school settings.

Inadequate and ineffective communication can compel the school and its community into a state of emergency, driven by the limitations imposed by a lack of openness in the communication processes and procedures within the school setting. In the previously unstable and uncertain context of the COVID-19 era, school leaders were tasked with the responsibility of managing a notably stressful situation, fulfilling various roles, implementing reforms and adapting to constantly changing policies within their organisations, all while contending with structural constraints and limited resources, and simultaneously expected to demonstrate a high standard of ethical and moral leadership. Given the unanticipated obstacles posed by the epidemic, school leaders were necessitated to deliver clear and ethical communication that is both sensitive and purposeful, as well as flexible and adaptable.

They were summoned to employ their ethical, trustworthy and credible voices for the advantage of their school community, to act promptly and with foresight, making rapid vital ethical decisions on intricate situations with life-saving consequences for both learners, staff and the surrounding community. These educational leaders were, therefore, required to convey empathy and compassion while also addressing the worry, irritation and fury of others during the crisis. This study comments on a comprehensive theoretical framework that underscores the significance and advantages of ethical strategic communication. The overall influence of driving or restraining forces of ethical communication in the school setting can be comprehended as the result of its leadership scope, clarity, impact and sustainability. Research studies report on the percentage of subordinates within the designated school population who are subjected to the relevant ethical communication as an influencing or inhibiting factor.

The effect refers the magnitude of the ethical communication influence exerted on all school staff members who are exposed to that force. Durability denotes the duration and resilience of the ethical communication impact against opposing influences within the educational setting. The researcher supporting this framework demonstrated how ethical communication by SMTs could be utilised to distil, connect and interpret extensive existing research and theory relevant to this study, and how it may assist school leaders in identifying to this study, and how it may assist school leaders in identifying ongoing unethical communication challenges.

3.7.4 Delegation Sharing and Control

The process involves creating an environment that empowers employees by highlighting the importance of their roles, providing autonomy in decision-making, demonstrating confidence in their abilities and allowing them to act according to the prevailing circumstances, as posited by Munawar, Haider, and Suleman (2023). The authors maintained that an ethical leader's empowering behaviour constitutes a power-sharing and supportive process wherein subordinates perceive their leaders as enabling them to practice self-regulation, self-management, self-control, self-administration and self-leadership.

Empowering ethical leadership occurs when leaders enhance trust-based relationships with their followers, articulate a definitive vision to their subordinates, encourage participatory decision-making, and guide their followers towards greater self-sufficiency in the delegation, sharing, and control processes within the school setting. Empowering school leaders consistently delegate authority and grant autonomy to their staff by recognising the value of their contributions, demonstrating trust in their abilities, providing necessary resources, facilitating communication, and fostering opportunities for independent problem-solving and decision-making.

Bharadwaja and Tripathi (2021) assert that elements of empowering leadership behaviour encompass power delegation, information sharing, skill enhancement, accountability, self-directed decision-making and coaching to promote the creative performance of subordinates, thereby ensuring effective management and ethical conduct within the organisation. Research conducted by Lee (2024) reveals that employees may experience increased flexibility in the workplace when granted greater delegation authority, empowerment and autonomy by their leaders. The author further maintains that ethical leadership and empowering actions positively influence employees' empowerment, turnover intentions, well-being, attitudes, and ethical performance.

Research conducted by Suleman, Syed, Shehzad, et al. (2021) indicates that subordinates under empowering leadership perceive encouragement and assistance from their leaders through positive persuasion, emotional support and inspirational statements, enhance their sense of efficacy and resilience in their profession. Their study additionally revealed that leader delegation, sharing and control practices enhanced performance by fostering participative decision-making, granting autonomy, improving ethical conduct, and demonstrating self-assurance in high efficiency, thereby establishing delegation, sharing, and control as essential elements of ethical leadership.

Amber, Qazi, Javaid, Khan and Ahmad (2022) contend that the delegation of authority and oversight in ethical leadership within public organisations, such as schools, serves as a facilitating mechanism that enhances subordinates' self-efficacy, thereby positively affecting their ethical awareness and practices, as well as augmenting their intrinsic motivation.

The researcher asserts that a substantial body of literature regarding delegation sharing and control reveals a significant neglect of gender empowerment in leadership. Knezovic and Musrati (2018), who lament the complete absence of efforts to empower women in this crucial aspect of delegation sharing and control within organisational contexts, particularly on gender portrayal, on echo this claim. This success factor of ethical leadership theory is essential for school success and moral integrity, as it positively promotes ethical behaviours, including the delegation of authority, sharing of counsel, accountability, autonomous decision-making, skill development, and mentorship for ethical innovation within the school setting. Numerous research literature has significantly advanced the understanding of ethical school leadership in relation to managerial conduct, behavioural integrity, communication, delegation and control. The researcher's theoretical literature framework analysed behavioural integrity from three distinct perspectives of a leader, organisation and follower.

The present research significantly contributes by offering initial empirical support for the theoretical assertions made by Ete et al. (2022) and subsequently by Kilag et al. (2024). these authors contend that the construct of behavioural integrity is not limited to leaders but is applicable to other organisational entities, including organisations and followers.

Previous empirical investigations by Palanski et al. (2015) solely identified leader behavioural integrity as a primary predictor of favourable results for followers. This research study expands the existing knowledge by investigating the distinct impacts of leader behavioural integrity and organisational behavioural integrity on followers' attitudes and behaviours that are crucial for the school setting. The researcher's study elucidates the significance of two conceptions of behavioural integrity: the perceived alignment between affirmed and performed values and the perceived promise-keeping construct, establishing their importance in influencing follower outcomes. The researchers' conclusive analysis from the advanced literature reveals that when leaders and schools fulfil ethical commitments and undertake actions consistent with articulated aims, staff exhibit a stronger identification with both the leaders and the organisation.

It is unequivocal that the integrity of leadership and organisational behaviour significantly influences employees' conduct regarding the demonstration of ethical behaviours and participation in pro-social actions advantageous to the organisation. The researcher identifies robust support for ethical leadership theory as a fundamental theoretical framework for behavioural integrity research, elucidating how followers replicate the ethical conduct of leaders and the congruence between organisational actions and rhetoric, thereby aligning their discretionary behaviours with the values espoused by leaders and organisations. The theoretical framework of this research indicates that various aspects of behavioural integrity affect follower outcomes through distinct mechanisms, as the researcher asserts the mediating roles of organisational ethical leadership identification and leader ethical identification.

3.8 SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY ON ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION

In contemporary times, the ethical transgressions of school leadership have been overshadowed by scandals in industry, government, sports, social organisations and religious institutions. These issues prompted investigations regarding the organisation's ethical leadership (Ahmed, 2023). A school leader plays a pivotal role in fostering ethical conduct among employees within the school setting and its impact on ethical decision-making (Shiundu, 2024). Consequently, the government and professional educational organisations ought to establish explicit ethical standards and regulations for school leaders and employees within corporate and professional entities.

According to Yazdanshenas et al. (2023), these policies, regulations and laws must incorporate stakeholder trust, as ethical leadership serves as a foundation for organisational longevity, competitive advantage and, crucially, the restoration of public trust. Ethical leadership in education pertains to the practice of influencing others to comprehend and concur, while also promoting ethical behaviours to attain both personal and organisational managerial accomplishment.

When leaders adhere to ethical standards, employees have a sense of safety and increased trust in the workplace, hence promoting reciprocity, knowledge sharing and ethical behaviour. Junaidi (2024) discusses this assumption in the research of the influence of ethical leadership on employee work engagement and its relation to social learning theory.

According to Guo et al. (2023), social learning theory positively influences ethical leadership education. The authors accentuates that this theory underlies daily social and ethical interactions among individuals within the same organisational environment. In both private and public contexts, the notion yields a beneficial net impact on organisations and shared places. Effective ethical leadership in the workplace is crucial for aligning employee actions with the organisation's objectives and ethical standards, while social learning theory is inherently connected to the various ethical conduct practices commonly observed in school settings. The research by Koay et al. (2022) on social learning theory and the impact of ethical leadership education indicates that ethical leadership serves as a filter within government and is instrumental in attaining organisational objectives, as well as fostering employee trust and work engagement. Ramlawati, Serlin, Arminas, Junaidi, and Ready (2023) say that the impact of social learning theory on educational leadership in school settings has progressed slowly in developing nations in West Africa, Southern Africa and Asia.

Chenini (2024) supports this assumption by stating that it aligns with findings from other African nations, including the Gambia, Malawi and Sierra Leone, as well as Nepal in South Asia. Moreover, Junaidi (2024) contends that Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, Ethiopia and Equatorial Guinea perform better in ethical leadership education, despite experiencing political instability and diminished social capital. Ethical school leadership education, informed by social learning theory, represents an innovative method for improving ethical employee involvement in the workplace and mitigating unethical behaviour.

Owing to the plethora of ethical scandals across various private, public, religious and social organisations, there exists a deficiency in ethical leadership. Ramlawati et al. (2023) contend that it diminishes the trustworthiness of individuals. From a normative or philosophical perspective, the researcher posits that numerous scholars and academics have addressed ethics and leadership, offering recommendations for the conduct of ethical school leaders.

Nonetheless, the researcher contends, based on the literature analysis and theoretical frameworks that inspired this investigation, that a more comprehensive and cohesive social scientific approach on ethical school leadership remains deficient. Zhang, Zhao and Yin (2023), along with Zahoor, Qadeer, Sheeraz and Hameed (2024), echo this perspective, expressing concern about the insufficient study regarding the impact of social learning theory on educational leadership education.

They persistently posed essential inquiries regarding the nature of ethical leadership in education and the emergence of these problems considering ethical leadership scandals inside the school setting. They persist in interrogating how trust among employees, information exchange and job satisfaction vary under ethical leadership, as well as how ethical leadership affects employee work engagement in relation to trust, knowledge sharing and job satisfaction. Consequently, the researcher asserts that this study effectively developed a comprehensive theoretical framework for ethical school leadership and connected it to the ethical social capital dimensions of subordinates, aiming to elucidate the prevailing circumstances in both public and private school environments. This assumption by the researcher is reiterated in the research conducted by Daniëls, Hondeghem and Heystek (2023). The subsequent antecedents related to social learning theory and the hypothesis formulation about ethical leadership, trust, knowledge sharing, work engagement, and job satisfaction are delineated next.

3.8.1 Social learning theory and ethical leadership on trust

Le and Nguyen (2023) adumbrate that social learning theory and ethical leadership regarding trust indicate that ethical leaders shape the moral conduct of society and individuals, with trust being vital for effective leadership. The conduct of organisation members evolves via individual experiences and the observation of other leaders' actions. To foster ethical conduct within the school setting, the process is crucial, as role modelling significantly influences the workforce's understanding of expectations, organisational advantages and the repercussions of members' behaviour. Organisational leaders convey the significance of normatively proper behaviour to employees via moral leaders who elucidate the processes of acquiring and regulating observational learning.

More importantly, organisational leaders and employees must serve as exemplary and dependable role models. Ethical leadership influences followers by offering guidance that they cognitively internalise, leading to critical self-reflections and subsequent behaviours. Leaders possess an ethical obligation to establish the behavioural standards for their followers. Edwards (2023) contends that ethical leaders cultivate a sense of belonging among team members by addressing prevalent organisational challenges, sharing their perspectives and engaging in the decision-making process. Engaging in discussions, exchanging ideas and sharing expertise may affect job satisfaction, the author further argues.

Yazdanshenas et al. (2023) assert that the primary significance of trust and the ethical dimension of social learning theory effectively elucidate the impact of ethical leadership on employee behaviour, job satisfaction and work engagement.

3.8.2 Social learning theory on knowledge sharing

Ethical leadership pertains to certain behaviours of individuals within the workplace and their interpersonal engagements with organisational leaders and peers. Yazdanshenas et al. (2023) maintain that it pertains to personal attributes including sincerity, dependability, altruistic drive, moral obligation and employee competency. Ethical scandals inside school setting are significantly linked to ethical leadership, as the organisation's code of conduct is pivotal in influencing and directing employee behaviour (Junaidi, 2024). Subsequently, Kmiecik (2024) notes that ethical leadership positively and significantly influences employees' trust in their leader and the organisation's viability. In certain organisational contexts, such as school setting, ethical leadership positively influences employees' attitudes, behaviours and knowledge sharing (Al Halbusi, Al-Sulaiti, AlAbri and Al-Sulaiti, 2023; Junaidi, 2024). Social learning theory, regarding trust, knowledge sharing and job satisfaction, postulates that the effective management dimensions of ethical leadership within an organisation are founded on trustworthiness and a commitment to respectful dialogue and interaction among employees. Ethical leadership arises from reciprocal communication and reliability, aimed at diminishing essential obstacles and fostering ethical consciousness and trust inside the organisation, which in turn affects employee job satisfaction.

3.8.3 Social learning theory on work engagement

Goswami and Agrawal (2023) describe work engagement as the positive fulfilment and commitment towards constructive characterisation. Employees are committed to their roles and the organisation they serve. In this scenario, employees exhibit heightened motivation to produce additional work resources and perform repetitive tasks that need extended time and greater ability. Ethical organisational leaders who possess a sense of belonging and are actively engaged in their work positively influence employee motivation, enhancing performance and fostering innovative ideas.

Preliminary research conducted by Islam, Khatoon, Cheema and Ashraf (2024) concludes that work engagement is significantly correlated with employees' job satisfaction and organisational commitment. In a team environment, trust is essential for fostering ethical behaviour among employees within an organisational context. This premise has emerged as a strategic ethical leadership asset and value to achieve the organisation's goals and ethical sustainability (Ramlawati et al., 2023). Recently, the study of ethical leadership in knowledge management has gained traction among researchers owing to the unethical conduct of organisational leaders and swift changes in the work environment, continuing to influence social learning theory regarding employee trust, knowledge sharing and engagement in the workplace. Establishing trust necessitates proficient leadership, particularly through genuine and transparent leadership methodologies. Kmiecik (2021) contends with this assertion and notes that, trust among colleagues enhances employees' ethical consciousness and moral awareness value shifts.

Trust and information sharing within team environments significantly contribute to the improvement of employee relationships in educational contexts. It indicates that employees' work engagement may subsequently influence their levels of trust and knowledge-sharing behaviour (Singh and Ramdeo, 2023). It demonstrates that ethical leadership principles and elements like trust significantly influence employee engagement in the workplace. Furthermore, knowledge exchange can be efficiently facilitated through trust, as noted by Islam et al. (2024) in their research on the impact of ethical leadership on employee work engagement and the significance of trust in leadership and harmonious work passion.

The existence of a profound correlation among ethical leadership, trust, information sharing and employee engagement inside the workplace remains paramount for effective ethical school leadership practices.

3.8.4 Social learning theory on job satisfaction

Trust and employee job satisfaction significantly contribute to organisational success, whereas knowledge sharing positively influences employees' work engagement. The increasing prevalence of educational institutions, particularly schools, has initiated opportunities for ethical knowledge sharing, job satisfaction and work engagement, which directly influence work outcomes and ethical behaviour within the educational environment (Junaidi et al., 2024).

Employees' job satisfaction in the educational context significantly influences the ethical work environment. This illustrates the importance of cultivating a positive workplace culture to enhance trust, motivation and engagement. Moreover, a high degree of employee involvement signifies a substantial amount of energy and organisational performance stemming from the ethical leadership within the organisation.

A growing array of global challenges is enhancing understanding of job satisfaction, employee engagement and ethical social capital, which are essential components for academic success. Moreover, Serang, et al. (2024) contend that this claim enhances employee creativity. They further assert that this social capital of job satisfaction enables employees to exchange their abilities to improve their contributions to ethical innovative work and to disseminate vital information, knowledge, ideas, and expertise. Social learning theory on knowledge sharing, job satisfaction and work engagement positively influences successful work engagement, fostering creativity and innovation among employees. The impact of employee knowledge sharing on job satisfaction and work engagement varies owing to regional, cultural and educational inequalities within South African school settings. It also facilitates the sharing of work-related knowledge across SMTs and enhances their commitment to innovative and ethical collaboration. The researcher asserts that some scholars are striving to establish a connection between ethical involvement and the exchange of ethical knowledge.

Chen, Yang, Xia, et al. (2023) discovered in their research on the correlation between gratitude and job satisfaction that social learning theory about knowledge sharing, job satisfaction and work engagement positively influence employee engagement and motivation. However, scholars conspicuously overlook the essential role of knowledge sharing in enhancing job satisfaction among organisational leaders and employees, both within and across organisations.

Chen et al. (2023) concur that social learning theory explicitly supports this assertion regarding job satisfaction, including significant mediating roles of social support and ethical behavioural endorsement. Serang et al. (2024) aver that social learning theory about knowledge sharing, job satisfaction, and work engagement is positively influenced by ethical behaviours. This assertion is further corroborated by Singh et al. (2023), who demonstrate that knowledge sharing in ethical school leadership significantly influences employee job engagement and ethical participation. Leaders in both public and private sector organisations, as well as in business and management, can employ ethical leadership as a strategic instrument. The rapid progression of information technology has rendered the dissemination of information and expertise attainable. Moreover, the significance of trust, information sharing and job satisfaction is essential for fostering employee engagement.

The theoretical framework of social learning theory on ethical leadership in education provides essential insights to motivate school leaders and staff to adopt the social, emotional and economic dimensions of the workplace through ethical innovation and collaboration. Employees' commitment and diligence towards the organisation are validated by their emotions stemming from transparent ethical conduct and the implementation of reward and punishment mechanisms. To engage personnel in the process, leaders must cultivate ethical conduct and address ethical dilemmas during decision-making. The SMT must consequently adhere to moral ideals, ethical standards, legislative norms and religious values where necessary to promote ethical behaviour in the workplace. The correlation between ethical leadership and employee engagement in the workplace, mediated by trust and ethical knowledge satisfaction, is garnering increased interest in the domain of ethical school leadership.

This study illustrates the significance of moral leadership in enhancing employee engagement in the context of social learning theory. This study's primary hypothesis underscores the necessity of individual ethical contributions from SMT in the workplace.

Recent research has established the correlation between leaders and employees' organisational attitudes within organisational contexts. The diversity of organisational culture and social learning theory regarding ethical leadership in education necessitates an understanding of employee ethical awareness, attitudes, and willingness to engage in school ethical conduct initiatives, thereby supporting ethical behaviour and employee commitment to the organisation. Efficient error management is essential for organisational success.

However, error sharing will not transpire without the recognition and acceptance of one's own fallibility. This is a modest yet essential acknowledgment. School leaders who acknowledge their significant impact on observers might serve as role models within the school setting by transparently disclosing their self-inflicted ethical mistakes.

3.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

This study was guided by its critical primary research question in the examination of the theoretical framework. What are the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province? The theoretical framework supporting the theory of ethical leadership is evident throughout the chapter. Literature and scholarly evidence sought to establish the theoretical framework's critical significance is, therefore, clearly demonstrated. The involvement of the SMT in ethical leadership is essential and crucial for the successful management and leadership of the school. The theoretical framework substantiated the claim that school leaders concur on the significance of recognising ethical leadership, which pertains to enhancing their appreciation and acknowledgment of their moral and ethical roles and obligations. This supports the researchers' claim that ethical school leadership is essential for cultivating an effective professional ethical school environment.

The theoretical framework and literature evaluations presented by many writers in this study underscore the significance of ethical interconnectedness and the capacity of the SMT to facilitate ongoing ethical professional development within the school setting.

Prominent scientists and authors in their theoretical framework on ethical leadership theory have argued regarding varying levels of ethical and moral knowledge and consciousness. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the definitions of theory as proposed by many authors and scholars, with these definitions corresponding to distinct features of the framework. These definitions elaborated on the framework by defining leadership as a general term and sought to align it with the practical understanding of ethical school leadership as a construct. This chapter elaborated on the theoretical frameworks pertaining to virtual theory, deontological theory, democratic theory, social learning theory and authentic leadership theory, primarily analysing various transactional ethical leadership constructs derived from strategic ethical governance imperatives that influence ethics and morality in school management. The theoretical foundation supporting the foregoing requirement is further stated through the concepts of respect, service, fairness, trust, and honesty, which underpin ethical leadership in schools. The theoretical framework elaborated on the criticisms and success elements of the theory about management behaviour, behavioural integrity, communication and the delegation and control of ethical leadership practices within the school setting.

The social learning theory further elucidates its implications on ethical leadership concerning trust, knowledge sharing, and job satisfaction, as well as its effects on employee trust, knowledge sharing, work engagement, and on the principles of job satisfaction and employee work engagement. The subsequent chapter describes the research design and methods utilised in this study.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a summary of the principal findings from empirical studies, utilising a systematic literature review to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research topic of school management and ethical leadership. It further describes the process of research design in the collection of all pertinent facts that adhered to a specific set of criteria that addressed the research design and methodology issues using systematic and exact methodologies that classified, selected and critically analysed various research studies or papers. Systematic research, as a scientific methodology, offers distinct advantages over traditional literature reviews by enhancing consistency, replicability, reliability and validity. This chapter elucidates the researcher's assertions of rigour in the report, thereby identifying gaps and outlining directions for future studies. The collected data have undergone a thematic analysis. Themes derived from the examined literature have been classified and analysed to discern prevailing patterns, trends and deficiencies in the current knowledge base.

The synthesis sought to deliver a thorough and nuanced comprehension of the interconnections among school ethical leadership, instructional efficacy and professional development. The results from the systematic research and design process have been analysed in relation to the research questions, available literature and theoretical frameworks. The synthesis emphasised critical ideas, pinpointed areas of agreement and confronted existing gaps or discrepancies in the examined literature. This study's research design and methodology aimed to investigate the ethical leadership practices of SMTs within the Tshwane West District 15 of Gauteng Province. This research has been conducted in the Tshwane West District of Gauteng Province. The six schools are located on the periphery of Tshwane, the capital city of South Africa and the seat of government. Their position is situated among semi-urban communal settlements, exhibiting unique geographical and social attributes.

The location of the schools is defined by marshland urban terrain, presenting distinct contemporary environmental concerns and growth potential. Factors included differing infrastructural circumstances, closeness to the city's economic industrial hub and prospective community attitudes contribute to the increased interest among parents in enrolling their children in these schools.

This situation, among others, has been regarded as a factor affecting the school's initial reputation for ethical leadership and management. Over time, these schools, once notorious for their dilapidation and parental involvement apathy, have undergone a remarkable change. What were formerly schools situated on the outskirts of the city have now transformed into highly sought-after institutions for parents to enrol their children. The appearance of these schools has evolved owing to ongoing developmental initiatives by provincial and national governments, as well as the private sector. New facilities, contemporary classrooms fitted with cutting-edge technology, and an enhanced curriculum have invigorated the educational atmosphere. Consequently, certain schools today exemplify how tenacity and strategic investments may effect significant positive transformation in education. This developmental continuum is likely to present unforeseen ethical leadership issues that have been examined in this study.

4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a qualitative case research design to reveal the SMT's perspectives on conventional ethical leadership traits that define the SMT. Werang and Leba (2022) assert that the qualitative research approach is inherently exploratory, characterised by "an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world." Denzin and Lincoln (2018) previously endorse this stance. Creswell (2017) earlier argued that researchers should examine phenomena within their natural contexts to comprehend and interpret them based on the interpretations attributed by participants, rather than those imposed by researchers. The qualitative research methodology is closely associated with case studies.

Werang and Leba (2022) maintain those certain researchers regard case studies as a fundamental component of the qualitative research methodology. Yin (2018) defines a case study as an empirical research endeavour that investigates a specific contemporary occurrence or action within a limited context, utilising adaptable empirical data gathered through diverse methods. For this study, the researcher utilised a qualitative case study to meticulously analyse the data within a specific context. A qualitative case study examined a real phenomenon within its natural setting. Employing a qualitative case study enables academics or researchers to investigate a phenomenon across multiple specific situations utilising diverse data sources and perspectives. This study utilised a qualitative research strategy to comprehend not just participants' thoughts but also the rationale behind them inside their natural environments.

The researcher employed a qualitative research approach, as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of data collection and seeks extensive qualitative information without constraints on the questions asked or the responses given by participants. This research design explored unusual thinking and activities that may result in revolutionary changes within the educational ethical leadership environment. This study aimed to examine the rationale behind the SMT's unconventional leadership approach, which deviates from typical organisational norms, potentially indicating a deviation from ethical leadership practices. Although certain SMTs use a valid ethical leadership framework, a qualitative case study investigation interrogates the prevailing norms by exploring their perspectives, attitudes and behaviours about ethical school leadership. This study adopted a descriptive research design, as proposed by Dubey and Kothari (2022), wherein the authors highlight that this approach involves the collecting of data for a defined goal and predetermined outcome.

4.2.1 Research Paradigm

The constructivist research paradigm was utilised in this study as it elucidates the participants' perspectives on their environment and their unique interpretations of the world in which they exist. Kamal (2019) posits that this paradigm serves as a lens through which to view the world, shaping a research topic and influencing beliefs regarding the nature of problems, as well as the methodologies employed to investigate and explore these research

questions. The issue of subjectivity became further complex when considering the audience of the research report. When interpretivist researchers articulate their comprehension of the educational phenomena and the study participants, the audience must re-evaluate the research findings. The interpretation of the research report may vary depending on the reader's personal experiences. Recognising the various layers of subjectivity present in social interactions between research participants, the researcher and the audience, the researcher in this study provided intricate descriptions of the situation to convey their interpretations. Moreover, since the researcher frequently serves as the instrument of interpretation, he offers the reader self-reflections on the research process and presents evidence of any actual or perceived biases that may have influenced the interpretation process.

Analogous to anthropological researchers, science education researchers operating within the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm endeavour to scrutinise the way individuals, whether principals, deputy principals, teachers, students, school managers, or parents, cultivate an understanding of their experiences and activities. Consequently, the researcher invested considerable time with the participants, from whom extensive qualitative data was gathered through observations, interviews and descriptive narratives. Interpretivist studies exhibit considerable variability in terms of organisation, duration and the degree of researcher contact with participants. The researcher utilised several prevalent characteristics of this paradigm, as elucidated by Treagust and Won (2023), wherein common research topics, research design, researcher roles, quality standards and reporting styles, were thoroughly examined in the study.

Research issues within the interpretivist paradigm concentrates on cultures, language utilisation and participants' decisions on their ethical leadership knowledge, context and lived experiences. A conventional research design model was employed as a sensemaking process for the researcher, which evolved throughout the study process, as suggested by Lucero, Delgado and Green (2020). This prevalent research theory served as a natural framework for interpretivist research, as it typically employs qualitative research designs, including case studies, ethnography, narrative and phenomenological models, which were utilised in the study. This facilitated the documentation of the daily events, behaviours and attitudes of the research participants as they occur in their natural environments.

The researcher's position concerning participants in this paradigm did not assert objectivity; rather, ensured that meanings were not predetermined but were collaboratively constructed through hermeneutic dialogues with participants. The use of common quality standards in the study relied on the researcher's talents, sensitivity and honesty, as this theoretical research approach constituted a sensemaking process. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) characterise the qualitative research process as a systematic approach involving extended, significant engagement with participants, meticulous and repetitive examination of collected data, reflective analysis of the information obtained, and comprehensive reporting of the findings from the study. This study utilised the conventional research-reporting format, which is characteristic of the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm. This design meticulously details the participants' real experiences and skilfully integrated them into the researcher's interpretations and expressions.

4.2.2 Research Approach

The research study aimed to explore the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province. To achieve this objective, a qualitative research approach was employed, incorporating a phenomenological design that included narrative analysis. Kilag, et al. (2024) describe this approach as the process that seeks to understand the behaviours, attitudes, perceptions and lived experiences of the SMTs and teachers within the said educational settings. Qualitative research focuses on understanding how individuals interpret their social reality, recognising that researchers' own experiences and perspectives shape the meaning-making process (Grossoehme, 2014). This recognition includes factors such as one's positioning, gender, sex, race, ethnicity, and class, to name a few, regardless of the chosen analytical approach. While some scholars view the presence of the researcher as a challenge, such a presence is a valuable contribution to research, as qualitative inquiry aims to analyse and interpret individuals' experiences and understanding of their social world (Flick 2022). Qualitative research is rooted in the lived experiences of individuals as articulated by Grossoehme (2014) and therefore, should adopt an interpretive stance.

It involves observing the dynamic and context-dependent meanings, knowledge, notions of reality and social world. Rather than assuming a fixed and predetermined social reality, qualitative research acknowledges the complexity of social life, including networks of meaning, language, symbols and culture (Flick, 2022). Throughout the research process, the researcher engaged with this complexity, considering and interpreting the socio-culturally constructed meaning of individuals' experiences. This process of consideration and interpretation was further influenced by the inherent uncertainty, mystery, astonishment and deconstruction involved in understanding social phenomena, as postulated by Kilag et.al (2024). Qualitative research on this study generated knowledge through individual reflection rather than relying on numerical data, measurement and causal analysis. It emphasised capturing the richness and depth of participants' experiences and perspectives, offering insights that quantitative approaches may overlook.

Silverman (2020) opines while the researcher engages in the interpretive role during the research process, it is inevitable that the researcher will navigate various tensions and perspectives related to ontology, epistemology and methodology. The choice of qualitative data analysis was influenced by factors such as the social production and collection of data, as well as the context, purpose, rationale and contributions of the research.

The qualitative research design chosen for this study went beyond basic descriptions and normative assumptions, serving a valuable purpose regardless of its design and analysis. One common approach employed by the researcher was to guide how knowledge is constructed in social constructionism, which explores established knowledge and subjective processes. However, this perspective may not have fully addressed the power dynamics, success and legitimacy of existing ways of being and doing in the school setting, nor may likely not fully have considered how these can be deconstructed, and alternative voices within the school setting promoted. By adopting a critical qualitative approach, power dynamics were considered, allowing previously silenced teachers and other leaders within the school setting to be seen as legitimate sources of information in the research process.

Kilag et al (2024) argue that this style will enrich data by recognising alternative ways of being and doing as legitimate, understanding power dynamics as complex, circulating through various relations, sources and modes of existence within the school. Incorporating these qualitative approaches in the study, the authors further postulate that it will enable the researchers to observe specificity, highlighting what is different and lacking, rather than assuming universal, similar and normative contexts. Consequently, this qualitative research process embraced these processes and practices, deconstructed social legitimacy and fostered a critical analysis of social conditions, practices and knowledge within the school setting and possibly its immediate community. In this study to explore SMT's ethical leadership practices in managing the school, the historical origins and epistemological developments of social constructionism and interpretivism methodologies were explored, providing a comprehensive overview. The drivers, assumptions, processes and outcomes of research study conducted within this theoretical framework of ethical school leadership offered a detailed account of the concepts utilised in these approaches outlined, which served as a guide for qualitative analysis.

4.2.3 Research Strategy

This study employed phenomenology as a research strategy to elucidate the significance of participants' lived experiences, rendering it suitable for educational ethical school leadership research, as such experiences compel educators to interrogate established norms and procedures. Phenomenology is the examination of a phenomena by investigating its appearances (Larsen and Adu, 2021). Hermeneutic phenomenology was further utilised as a qualitative research method aimed at comprehending the significance of human experiences from the participants' viewpoints. This method allowed the researcher to fully grasp the perspectives and worldviews of the participants, rendering it appropriate for investigating complex and subjective experiences such as their attitudes, belief systems, behaviours and conceptions within this qualitative research framework. Phenomenology illustrates the profound relationship between foundational beliefs and research methodologies. Authors such as Freeman (2021) describes this strategy as both a method and a philosophy extensively employed as a research approach.

Phenomenology served as a crucial approach within the context of qualitative research theories and methodologies for this investigation. It embodied a significant intellectual legacy that continues to captivate researchers across many disciplines and applied fields. Freeman (2021) asserts that this research strategy could be fundamentally utilised since it places the original qualities of life outside the scope of natural sciences and objectivity itself. The researcher employed this technique as it pertains to the lifeworld and the lived human experience of the participants. The research technique concentrated on comprehending how individuals construct and influence meaning and existentialism inside their educational environments. By comprehending their positioning within their environment, in relation to their diverse interactions, obligations and ethical awareness, they are likely to grasp how they will exist and contribute to their surroundings. Gill (2014) contends that the hermeneutic phenomenology research paradigm involves examining lived experiences within the educational environment and its community, alongside interpersonal dialogic discourse and personal reflection, through which meaning is constructed.

4.3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study is qualitative in nature and employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, targeting 24 purposively selected participants from six schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. The participants included six principals, six deputy principals, six departmental heads, and six teachers all of whom were actively engaged in their respective school environments. Individual interviews were conducted with participants to explore their perspectives, beliefs, attitudes and expressions concerning ethical leadership practices and their impact on school management and administration.

In these interactions with participants, all documented ethical leadership practices and relevant school documentation were analysed to provide additional understanding of the role of ethical school leadership. Purposive sampling was utilised to choose all participants relevant to the study subjects.

Participants were informed of the study's objectives and their inherent participating rights as participants. Moreover, the researcher informed them that their participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study without repercussions.

All gathered data were kept secret and anonymous to protect participants' privacy. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data gathered from interviews and document examination. The data have also undergone transcription, coding and analysis to discern emergent themes and patterns relevant to the research questions. The research adhered to ethical guidelines, encompassing informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity. Considering the researcher's knowledge of the schools' daily functions, steps were instituted to protect the participants' rights, privacy and the integrity of other school activities. The criteria for selecting interview participants are described in the next sub-section.

4.3.1 Selection of Participants/Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct experience and insight into ethical leadership practices within school management. This method is appropriate in qualitative research where the goal is to gather rich, detailed data from individuals who are more knowledgeable about the topic under investigation (Hossain, Alam and Ali, 2024). This study analysed participants' articulations to derive statements, manifestations and inferences concerning their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, attitudes and conjectures about ethical leadership practices in school management.

The qualitative case study concentrated only on 24 participants from six schools, comprising six principals, six deputy principals, six departmental heads, and six teachers, all of whom were currently engaged and active at these schools. Creswell (2020) asserts that the sufficiency of sample size in a qualitative investigation is fundamentally dictated by the principle of data saturation.

These participants possessed extensive experience and understanding regarding the school system, and their experience ranged from five to 15 years. Consequently, the researcher anticipated that they would provide extensive information on ethical school leadership and management practices inside the school setting and environment, along with their resultant ethical school leadership implications.

The selection of participants was done through an email sent to principals of various schools within the selected district, following the receipt of necessary approvals from the GDE, which was subsequently communicated to the participants within the schools. The schools were selected using snowball sampling. The GDE's relevant contacts or liaison officials of the designated schools from the circuit office, who are authorised to collaborating with school leaders, were requested to provide an information letter to them either via email or in person.

This enhanced privacy and mitigated any sentiments of coercion that participants may experience. This method ensured that the researcher remained unaware of the identities of both participants and non-participants, so significantly enhancing anonymity and privacy in the study. Upon contacting the participants with an agreement to partake, staff participants were assembled via a consent letter detailing the study's objectives and methodology. The researcher indicated in the letter that a semi-structured interview would be conducted to collect essential information for the study. The permission letter was accompanied with a participant information sheet detailing the study's objectives, the methodology for data collection, the study's benefits, associated risks, the voluntary nature of participation and data storage procedures.

Participants received an ethical consent form, which necessitated a signature of intent for their involvement in this study, should they opt to participate. This ethical permission formalised the nature of the respondents' involvement in this investigation. The data collection methods utilised in this research, particularly within the qualitative framework, has significantly impacted the response rates, data integrity and resource allocation.

The selection of data collection strategies for this study has been meticulously justified, as it has established a reconciliatory link with the research questions posed in this investigation. This assumption is clarified by Rahman (2023), who posits a comparison between telephonic and face-to-face interviews for data gathering within the qualitative research paradigm. The study has involved meticulously defined methods of data collection, interviews and document analysis.

4.4 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

4.4.1 Data Collection

This study employed semi-structured interviews at a location and online mode MS Teams and Zoom as selected participants preferred the methods, targeting 24 purposively selected participants from six schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. The participants included six principals, six deputy principals, six departmental heads and six teachers all of whom were actively engaged in their respective school environments.

To enhance engagement and inclusivity, the research considered the potential use of elicitation techniques, as discussed by Kahlke et al. (2025), including online prompts. These tools can assist participants in articulating tacit knowledge or emotionally sensitive perspectives that are crucial in discussions of ethics and leadership. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved when no new insights emerged from additional interviews. Achieving saturation helps to ensure comprehensiveness and robustness of qualitative findings (Hossain et al., 2024). Participants were selected based on diverse roles within the school system to capture a variety of perspectives, which also supports saturation in heterogeneous data sets.

Accordingly, Yin's (2018) proposition regarding data collection is that the researcher will formulate a set of interview questions to serve as the protocol for guiding data collection in the study. The researcher has utilised topical inquiry and casual interviews following a standard directed interview protocol. The researcher requested participants to articulate and exchange their opinions, experiences and beliefs regarding the characteristics of ethical leadership that define the school principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, and teachers of the six selected secondary schools in Tshwane West, Gauteng.

These educational settings may influence ethical school management and efficacy, as well as the personal teaching and learning experiences inside the school environment. The researcher further employed a dual approach to semi-structured interviews, incorporating both broad and particular questions to gather data efficiently and transparently. During the general interviews, the researcher concentrated on the participants' demographic data, including age, qualifications, years of experience and overall understanding of the concept of ethical school

leadership. In the designated interview segment, the researcher emphasised the participants' perspectives, attitudes, behaviours, beliefs, extensive knowledge, and competencies related to the ethical leadership and management attributes that define their leadership or otherwise within the school environment and its community. The interview questions concentrated on participants' lived experiences and perceptions about ethical leadership and school management practices.

The interview questions during data collection were given to establish a comfortable and familiar setting, facilitating correct responses from participants. This data gathering technique is clearly stated by Creswell (2017), further elucidated by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), and subsequently affirmed by Rahman (2023). These authors emphasised that for data collection process to attain the necessary respect and authority, the interview environment must be transparently equitable, conducive, acceptable and comfortable for the participant to yield the desired credibility, confirmability, transferability and dependability outcomes. The researcher employed strategies to mitigate inherent subjectivity by implementing a multi-stage and multi-step process to identify potential scammers, during which the researcher continuously engaged participants to recognise the inherent judgment and subjectivity involved in their participation. This approach enabled the researcher to utilise scaffolding throughout the qualitative research process.

4.4.2 Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured allowing for a balance between consistency and flexibility. As Shoozan and Mohamad (2024) emphasise, semi-structured interviews facilitate deep inquiry while providing the interviewer the latitude to probe emerging themes. The study adhered to the Interview Protocol Refinement (IPR) Framework (Castillo-Montoya, 2016), which includes aligning interview questions with research aims, constructing inquiry-based conversations, gathering peer feedback and piloting the protocol. This process improved the precision and relevance of the questions, enhancing the overall trustworthiness of the data (Shoozan and Mohamad, 2024). Qualitative research encompasses several interview forms, positioned along a continuum, including unstructured, semi-structured and structured interviews.

Viewpoints from Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) and Seidman, (2019) opine that semi-structured interviews are best utilised or employed to investigate the participants' lived experiences, insight and perspectives. The researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews, which lasted roughly one hour apiece or longer where it was necessary. The interview guide encompassed inquiries regarding the participants' insights, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and experiences related to ethical leadership practices within their school environments. The potential advantages and obstacles of ethical leadership practices and efficient school management, along with recommendations for other ethical leadership practices in the management of their individual schools and educational environments were explored. All interviews and telephonic follow-ups were audio-recorded and transcribed precisely. Semi-structured interviewing offers a level of standardisation in interview questions while allowing for a degree of flexibility in the interviewer's responses (Seidman, 2019).

The author asserts that this interview style resembles unstructured interviews more closely, produces qualitative data, possesses a freedom characteristic akin to semi-structured interviews, and necessitates identical abilities. Nevertheless, the researcher exerted a greater impact in directing the interview towards issues pertinent to the study. Compared to other interviewing methods, the semi-structured approach selected for this study enhanced the researcher's visibility as a knowledge-producing participant. A principal characteristic of a semi-structured interview, as posited by Brinkmann and Kvale (2018), is the utilisation of an interview guide, which comprises several primary, open-ended questions and subjects pertinent to the study's emphasis. Robinson (2023) concurs on the probing process in qualitative research interviews, asserting that this interview method enables researchers to conduct interviews based on a pre-established catalogue of concerns. Simultaneously, an interview guide provides essential flexibility for spontaneous and comprehensive responses, enabling the opportunity to pose supplementary questions for elaboration, deliberation, clarification, or digression (Robinson, 2023). Consequently, while a well-defined agenda ensures credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability, a semi-structured interview guide also facilitates the investigation of unforeseen topics that arise during the interview process.

Semi-structured interviewing generally affords interviewers greater autonomy in exploring topics, making this technique particularly appropriate for the specific research areas and themes of this study. Bhattarai (2023) contends that semi-structured interviews represent the most prevalent and varied qualitative research method, and are the sole format meticulously delineated in qualitative research textbooks. Bhattarai (2023) further maintains that the increasing prevalence of qualitative interviews is attributable to the acknowledgment of their necessity and the significance of insights derived from discussions with decision-makers across several policy domains, including education, welfare and health.

The primary benefit of qualitative semi-structured interviews for this study is that they allowed the researcher to investigate the ethical dimensions of daily school life, the significance of interviewees' experiences and the functioning of social processes and educational institutions in relation to ethical school leadership practices. Consequently, the researchers employed interviews to extract descriptions of the participant's life world and experiences. Nonetheless, these interviews did not focus on verifying the authenticity of the participants' narratives, as it frequently occurs in survey interviews and questionnaires. Like other qualitative methods, employing semi-structured interviews for this study necessitated meticulous and theoretical preparation.

This encompassed a well-defined conceptual framework and the creation of an interview guide tailored for this study. Furthermore, the researcher's behaviour was essential for the success of the entire procedure. The researcher's interpersonal skills were utilised throughout the interview process, as they are of equal significance. The process covered active and attentive listening, empathy, spontaneity, judicious application of clarifying techniques, follow-up inquiries, probing for clarification and the capacity to pose questions and understand participants' responses. The researcher developed a social rapport, created a safe setting and attended to the interviewee's wellness, which are prerequisites for capturing the detailed, intimate and nuanced opinions of participants. However, Bhattarai (2023) emphasises that participants' narratives should not be accepted at face value, as they require careful analysis.

Chailleux and Zittoun (2024) concur that, despite their adaptability and capacity to provide valuable insights, semi-structured interviews present numerous issues that must be considered carefully. The researcher ensured that some methodological issues inherent to qualitative research, particularly those related to semi-structured interviews, were mitigated. The concerns articulated by Chailleux and Zittoun (2024), pertaining to the researcher's positionality, the inadequacy of precise qualitative scientific methodologies for examining the research question, the arbitrary selection of interview subjects, the questionable reliability of information sources, the lack of objective criteria for data selection, categorisation, and interpretation were adequately addressed by the researcher. Diminished internal validity and reliability of the data, the reduced external validity and confirmability of the findings, and the restricted applicability of the findings to social science, were also sufficiently attended to and remained uncompromised by the researcher. The researcher ensured that all limitations associated with the inherent subjectivity in the qualitative research process of this study, stemming from the absence of universal, systematic decision-making models, were meticulously addressed.

Nonetheless, in the lack of standardised processes, the researcher has, during the interviews, ascertained those guidelines on credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability epitomised the methodological rigor of the qualitative research interviews in this study. To fulfil these standards, the researcher assured rigor by employing extensive descriptions, triangulating data, and maintaining methodological transparency in recording data collection and analytic procedures. The researcher remained cognizant of social desirability response bias that may affect the study's outcomes during the interviews. This is particularly significant when the interview addresses sensitive topics pertaining to the ethics and morality expected of leaders. Moreover, the qualitative case study of this research provided profound insights into the specific contexts of the participants during the interviews; however, it was essential to situate the findings within historical, societal, ideological, and structural frameworks to enhance their explanatory capacity concerning ethical school leadership practices. The predominantly subjective aspect of the semi-structured interviews utilized in this study can be regarded as both beneficial and detrimental.

Despite the foregoing limitations encountered during interactions with participants, semi-structured interviewing served as a distinctive method for uncovering concealed facets of social life and capturing the perceptions and interpretations of ethical leadership practices held by principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, and teachers.

4.4.3 Document Analysis

Kutsyuruba (2023) elucidates the historical origins of document analysis, tracing it back to work of Goode and Hatt (1952), who characterised this concept as a social science research method. They assert that it involves researchers and scholars screening, counting, coding documents and subsequently employing them as pertinent evidence for their research. Data and evidence concerning the ethical leadership practices of SMTs was thereafter extracted into a data analysis template for enhanced visualisation, comparison and synthesis. To investigate the SMTs' experiences with ethical practices in school management, the following documents were examined and analysed over a six-month period: Case studies on ethical school leadership in the Tshwane district, analyses of ethical conduct, SACE reports on unethical leadership behaviour by SMTs, SACE code of ethics, school self-assessments about ethical leadership and conduct, and school ethics policies. The researcher employed many approaches to authenticate these documents and instruments in the document analysis process, including construct validity, discriminant validity, convergent validity and content validity.

In exploring the information gathered and extracted from these various documents, the researcher complied with the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI) Act 4 of 2013, which seeks to safeguard personal information handled by public and private entities, in this case, the researcher. Kutsyuruba (2023) subsequently delineates the document analysis approach as a qualitative analytical method that involves a systematic process for studying and assessing documents by identifying, selecting, appraising and synthesising the data they contain. Consequently, documents were examined not solely based on their manifest content or physically present elements, but also on their latent content, which necessitated an interpretive analysis of the symbolism inherent in the physical data acquired. An essential preliminary assumption in the researcher's analysis of the document's material culture is that behaviour, belief, attitude, ideas and intents are pivotal to action and practice.

Kutsyuruba (2023) further contends that the flexibility of this method enables documents to be analysed independently or in conjunction with other qualitative methods, serving as complementary and contextual approaches for data triangulation and enhancing trustworthiness metrics.

The document analysis processes yielded data regarding the context of this study, serving as evidence of historical occurrences related to ethical school leadership practices, while also offering further background information and insights into moral and ethical conduct issues within the school and educational environment. This method delineated potential questions to be posed and scenarios that require observation as components of the study. Document analysis additionally furnished extra research on ethical leadership challenges within the school context and enhance the study's knowledge base.

This document analysis process functioned as a means of monitoring ethical leadership problems, changes and trends within the school and its community. This exercise was utilised to validate results or substantiate evidence of potential ethical leadership practices by the SMT from alternative sources. It additionally aided in uncovering significance, enhancing understanding and revealing findings pertinent to the primary research topic of this investigation. The gathering and interpretation of qualitative data were coordinated through an iterative process, as proposed by Lester, Cho and Lochmiller (2020). Upon the commencement of data collecting for the case study, the gathered data were then analysed.

Thematic analysis is employed to examine the data, enabling the researcher to validate, present and assess data, points to identify patterns that fulfil all data requirements (Rawat, 2021). Thematic analysis was utilised as it offers an effective method for examining the perceptions of diverse research participants, emphasising the similarities and variations among those perceptions while distilling the most significant attributes of a substantial data set from relevant documents. The gathered data were analysed immediately after the initial interview, utilising a qualitative data analysis methodology, comprising three concurrent phases: data reduction, data display and conclusion drafting and verification.

In the initial step, the researcher commenced data analysis by data reduction employing the coding technique, as it enabled the researcher to connect the data from the collated documents to the research questions.

The researcher then categorised the data utilising initials and pattern coding. Saldaña (2021) posits that in the initial coding process, the researcher must find participants' statements that reference the characteristics of ethical leadership practices exhibited by the participants. In the pattern coding process, the researcher organises all previously coded data from various documents and transcripts into relevant themes and subthemes according to the study questions. The researcher conducted this exercise by manually highlighting salient commonalities on collated documents and printed transcripts.

In the second phase, the researcher categorised and thematically organised the data coded in the first phase relevant to the study questions, subsequently focusing on data displays. In the third phase, relevant conclusions were drawn and verified, and the concepts developed in the previous phase were then examined and renamed. To guarantee the comprehensibility of the final theme names, the researcher evaluated all themes formulated in the second phase and then articulate the definitive names of each theme with precision.

The researcher then employed a topographical analysis, defined by Hallinger (2017) as an examination aimed at elucidating the characteristics of topics and research methodologies, concentrating on uncovering patterns of knowledge production, summarising conceptual and methodological trends, and establishing a basis for future research. This data and document review analysis was intended to critically evaluate the research evidence, propose significant implications for educational officials, practitioners and policymakers, and recommend future research directions. The researcher involved a systematic narrative synthesis approach, primarily utilising words and text to summarize and elucidate the synthesis findings.

4.5 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Trust is fundamental for interpersonal relationships and communication. Trust enables individuals to collaborate and attain objectives that would be unattainable independently. Moreover, this claim is elucidated by Pozzi and Mazzearella (2024), who assert that it facilitates the sharing and acquisition of information that would otherwise be challenging or

unattainable. The authors further propose that, owing to the dangers of betrayal and misinformation, humans have developed a range of cognitive systems to evaluate the trustworthiness of others, facilitate companion selection and promote cooperation.

To benefit from communication while mitigating the risks of misinformation, humans possess the capacity for epistemic vigilance. Enworo (2023) asserts that this process of assessing trustworthiness allows colleagues in the same environment to calibrate their trust accordingly. Peels and Bouter (2023) posit that data trustworthiness has four essential components: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability. Among these, trustworthiness is regarded as the paramount component. Triangulation and member checks are two techniques employed to guarantee trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability and transferability. This study employed the member-checking method to authenticate the research's trustworthiness. This method was implemented by supplying the interview guide to the participants and soliciting their comments during the procedure. By allowing participants to rectify inaccuracies and contest perceived errors, the researcher aimed to validate the reliability and authenticity of the collected data.

This procedure enabled participants to provide feedback, indicating that the transcripts accurately represent their opinions, by so doing, establishing the study's legitimacy. Peels and Bouter (2023) highlight that trustworthiness serve as normative dimensions in the replication of a study, suggesting that such research is appropriate, reasonable, or rational, hence enhancing the credibility of the findings. The authors contend that the conclusions of a study are credible if there is a rational basis to believe they are dependable or at least approximating the truth, and that they are founded on suitable, high-quality evidence.

The trustworthiness of this study mostly depended on its credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and comparability. The following assumptions: the likelihood of the findings prior to the study's execution, the study's size, and its methodological quality concerning its validity and precision.

The five critical normative dimensions of trustworthiness are articulated as follows:

4.5.1 Credibility

The credibility of the study pertains to the veracity of the data or the perspectives of the participants, as well as the researcher's interpretation and depiction of these elements. In the same vein, Rowlands (2021) concurs that credibility in reviewing the interview guide to enhance data quality is improved by the researcher's articulation of their experiences and the validation of research findings with participants.

The author also asserts that a qualitative study is deemed trustworthy if those who have undergone similar experiences readily acknowledge the depictions of human experiences. To enhance credibility in reporting a qualitative study, the researcher exhibited engagement, observational methodologies and audit trails. The credibility of this study evaluated the trustworthiness of the researcher's findings and conclusions, as well as the degree to which they offer thorough and rational interpretations of the data. The objective is to instil confidence that the participants perceive the results as authentic, credible, plausible and achievable through sustained engagement, continuous observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, referential adequacy, and member checks to enhance the study's credibility.

4.5.2 Transferability

Transferability pertains to the applicability of findings to alternative contexts or surroundings. Creswell and Báez (2021) articulating this notion, assert it as a fundamental ability for qualitative research. In contrast, Ahmed (2024) posits this pillar as the extent to which research findings can be generalized to different contexts or scenarios. The researcher strived to provide detailed and complex descriptions of the study's context, participants and methodologies to improve transferability potential. By offering clear and complete explanations, researchers enable readers to assess the applicability of the findings to analogous situations, hence enhancing the study's transferability. Humphreys, Lewis, Sender and Won (2021) further refine this methodology in their examination of incorporating transferability as a fundamental notion across diverse qualitative methodologies.

A qualitative study fulfils this requirement if its findings resonate with those not participating in the research, allowing readers to relate the results to their own experiences and readily apply them to their respective contexts. The researcher furnished adequate information regarding the participants and the research context to allow the reader to evaluate the transferability of the findings. Moreover, the criterion of transferability depended on the objective of this qualitative study and only be pertinent if the research aimed to generalise about the subject or phenomena. The researcher ensured that readers comprehend and recognise that all conclusions and insights from the study are applicable to similar circumstances.

Qualitative research, as indicated in the methodology of this study, entails offering adequate details and evidence for readers to assess the transferability of the findings to different situations. The primary aim of transferability is to enhance the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be generalised or applied to different contexts, as stated by Cristancho, Watling, and Lingard (2021), who identified transferability as a fundamental principle for achieving effective qualitative outcomes.

4.5.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions. Bingham and Witkowsky (2022) articulate this description of the concept in their literature and theoretical framework on the deductive and inductive approaches to qualitative data analysis. Ahmed (2024) equally concurs that dependability pertains to the enduring and unwavering nature of the research findings across time. To ensure dependability, the researcher rigorously documented this approach, techniques for data gathering and procedures for analysis in this inquiry.

The researcher created and preserved an audit trail, which consisted of a comprehensive log documenting the decisions made throughout the research process, which then allow other researchers to reproduce the study, therefore guaranteeing the dependability of the results. Adler (2022) supports this assertion by the researcher wherein the author underscores the importance of dependability in the researcher's work on trustworthiness in qualitative research studies.

Dependability in this study was further achieved when another researcher concurs with the decision trails at each stage of this research process. Through the researcher's process and descriptions, a study would be deemed dependable if the study findings will be replicated with similar participants in similar conditions. Dependability is basically the qualitative term for reliability in quantitative research. In quantitative research, reliability applies to the consistency of the data collection instruments. It also refers to providing adequate details for the study's replicability. In qualitative research, dependability of this study will refer to the researcher's responsibility to document the procedures for generating and analysing the results. In a sense, it will be the same as the second meaning of reliability, which is, providing adequate and detailed documentation and explanations of coding and data analysis. This way, the readers will be able to reach the same inferences as those of the researcher.

Dependability in this inquiry, hinges in the ability, to the extent that all conditions are equal, to obtain the same results if the study were to be replicated. As such, the research process in this study was logical and transparent such that the process and procedures were auditable and traced, therefore, ensuring coherence across the methods and findings. Dependability in this study was attained through credibility, triangulation, splitting data and duplicating the analysis and use of audit trail.

This assertion is further supported by Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2020) wherein they describe dependability as one critical qualitative data analysis method that can be employed to assure that the study or research inquiry has a high propensity of dependability when compared or associated with other studies in the same or similar contexts.

4.5.4 Confirmability

Confirmability denotes the researcher's capacity to substantiate that the data accurately reflect the participants' responses rather than the researcher's prejudices or perspectives. The researcher can provide confirmability by elucidating the processes via which conclusions and interpretations were formulated, so illustrating that the findings were directly derived from the data (Haq, Rasheed, Rashid and Akhter, 2023). Qualitative research was presented through the inclusion of substantial excerpts from participants that illustrate and confirm each emerging theme. Confirmability denotes the degree to which the researcher presents the

findings impartially. Researchers can attain confirmability by employing reflexivity tactics that allow them to reveal and scrutinise their beliefs, judgments and behaviours in their capacity as researchers, and how they may have influenced the study process and outcomes (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio and Kahlke, 2023).

Ahmed (2024), who refers to confirmability as the pursuit of impartiality and objectivity in research findings, ensuring they remain untainted by any biases or preferences of the researchers, further emphasises this pillar. Researchers may employ various methodologies to enhance the confirmability of the findings, including peer debriefing, member verification and reflexive journaling. Peer debriefing involves soliciting feedback from colleagues or experts in ethical school leadership practices to validate interpretations and reduce potential researcher bias. Member checking, a procedure wherein participants meticulously assess and verify the precision of the findings, augments the degree of confirmability. Haq, et al. (2023) equally affirm the procedures in their study on the criteria for evaluating and assuring trustworthiness in qualitative research. This investigation demonstrates that the findings and their interpretations are grounded in the data rather than the researchers' imagination. The objective was to enhance the assurance that the findings of this study are validated or substantiated by additional researchers.

4.5.5 Comparability

When an assertion is usually made that comparative transitivity is valid, it is meant that its occurrences always express necessary truths, so long as any ambiguity or context-sensitivity they harbour is resolved uniformly (Dorr, Nebel and Zuehl 2023).

These authors support a case for comparability in a research inquiry. Given the importance of comparability to analyse data that has been harvested, the comparability of sustainability information is increasingly gaining the interest of researchers. Breijer and Orij (2022) confirm this research trend in their study on the comparability of non-financial information and the exploration of its impact on research data comparison. Their study further emphasises different aspects of comparability. Accordingly, the researcher in this study attempted to distinguish several levels of comparability when focusing on the ethical leadership practices of SMT and the teachers.

The researcher concomitantly used comparability with an earlier period, with other participants in the same settings, with other educational settings in the same inquiry.

In the context of this study, the researcher in analysis comparability during data collection, three critical comparability concepts of materiality and comparability, benchmarking and comparability as well as operationalisation and comparability as articulated by Korca, Costa and Bouten (2023) played a pivotal role. During this critical data analysis stage, materiality and comparability formed the basis for protected institutional disclosure on ethical leadership practices issues material to the school setting. Jørgensen, Mjøs and Pedersen (2022) articulate this step in their research inquiry on sustainability of research reporting and its approaches to comparability in the materiality of amassed information, tensions and possible resolutions on the collated data. Benchmarking and comparability allow the researcher to monitor collated data across the schools chosen in the study in two methods, one being intra-school and the other focusing on inter-school. The latter comparability analysis focused on data valuation purposes that allowed monitoring information explored from the schools and participants that disclosed information that enabled the researcher to easily compare sustainability information among the different schools that were part of the study. Conversely, intra-school comparability focuses on the stewardship of the collated data within the schools that are part of the study.

This allowed the researcher to use the data and compare it for different purposes within the research inquiry and benchmarked the ethical leadership practices where necessary within the school settings and outside of the educational environment.

Operationalisation and comparability of trustworthiness of data in this study compared, analysed and examined the extent to which the collated information foster the comparability of the sustainability information in the study. Its dependability concluded that the systematic comparison of the information disclosed in the study, relevant to different disclosures are comparable and such comparability is sustainably consistent. The researcher assured that the process is strictly followed the same guidelines throughout the process of analysis. The researcher further assured that other technical aspects such as restatements by the participants and differences in the analysis method leading to differences in perceptions and

interpretations are carefully compared. In the same vein, Venturelli, Pizzi, Caputo and Principale (2020) concur with the process that was chosen by the researcher in the examination on how the researcher should employ a critical lens on the comparability principle.

4.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conducting this research inquiry, the researcher adhered to the highest ethical standards by minimising any interruption to the participants' everyday lives and work-life balance. The researcher prioritised the participants' comfort and their readiness to provide candid and transparent information during the interviews. To protect their rights, all research participants provided their voluntary agreement to engage in the study. The researcher guaranteed that the consent form is articulated clearly and comprehensibly and presented in the language with which the participants are most familiar. The researcher then obtained informed permission from participants to ensure their confidence, privacy and security during the research inquiry. To safeguard the participants' rights, the researcher preserved their anonymity by employing pseudonyms to conceal their names. More importantly, participants were further assured of a comprehensive awareness of the research objectives, the potential advantages and disadvantages of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, a commitment was established to guarantee the confidentiality of all data by maintaining its privacy and security. During the research and after its conclusion, the researcher was the sole individual with access to the data, thereby ensuring its protection.

Acknowledgment was made to the participants that the research adhered to all pertinent legal and regulatory requirements, which included submissions of the ethical research clearance applications to the Unisa College of Education Ethics Review Committee and subsequently to Gauteng Department of Education Research and Knowledge Management for approval. Upon securing all necessary ethical clearances, the researcher adhered to all relevant rules in this study. Against this background, the researcher recognised the importance of unbiased data and addressed any potential biases that may affect the findings by executing the research with professionalism and according to rigorous standards, ethical guidelines and protocols.

4.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Data collection is an essential component of the research process. Researchers will select beneficial methodologies that enhance precision and reduce study errors during the document analysis process. While telephone, online, face-to-face interviews, observations and document analysis are all legitimate methods for collecting research data, researchers must understand the data reporting consistencies of each method to make an informed decision, as direct comparisons among them are limited. According to a consensus derived from the article review process, face-to-face, telephone, document analysis or online interviews are expected to yield more accurate reports on ethical practices. However, interviewees in face-to-face settings and documents analysis are less likely to disclose all challenges related to their ethical practices compared to those participating in telephonic or online interviews. The literature evaluation of this study indicates that all used strategies are equally successful for qualitative research involving humans. Nevertheless, upon examining costs, advantages and downsides, as well as data reporting consistencies, various approaches began to reveal distinct benefits. Telephone and online semi-structured interviews were the most economical option. Upon examining the merits of the methods, no definitive victor was identified; however, online interview process for this research inquiry possessed several additional advantages. The predominant theme is that document analysis and online interviews tend to be less tedious, shorter, and frequently underreport, but face-to-face interviews necessitate more time, training, and often overreport on identical themes when addressing ethical leadership practices in educational environments. In these instances, the entire sample had adequate access to telephones or online connectivity, doing face-to-face interviews may have warranted the additional expense to foster rapport and enhance the study's validity. Since online interviews demonstrate adequate accuracy within permissible error margins, this methodology was employed for this research study.

The interview method offered advantages in terms of cost and convenience; nevertheless, three follow up face-to-face interviews yielded further benefits to the research that surpass the extra expenses. Although both online and face-to-face interviews include various advantages and disadvantages, the researcher chose the online option that minimises bias and yields precise results.

To analyse the data collection instruments, the researcher utilised the theory given by Miles et al. (2014) employing the flow analysis technique. Initially, the data obtained from direct observation, encompassing online-generated notes, in-depth interviews and document analysis, were condensed and categorised according to the research focus, specifically the ethical school leadership practices of the senior management team and the participating teachers. The presented results were correlated with the established theories of ethical leadership. The following chapter will outline the presentation, analysis, and discussion of the study's data. It also focuses on the conclusions that comprise the expressions, articulations, remarks, and perspectives gathered throughout the semi-structured online interviews about the themes specified in the research inquiry. The next chapter focuses on the study's findings, analysis and discussions.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter described the research design and methodology of this study. The main aim of this research inquiry intended to explore the SMTs' experiences with ethical practices in managing schools. This chapter provides an exposition of the presentation, analysis and the discussion of the findings. The researcher recorded the interviews with the permission of principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, and teachers, similarly referred herein as participants. This assisted the researcher to transcribe each of the participants' responses. The presentation, analysis and the discussion of data was based on the research questions of the study. The views, expressions and experiences of the participants were presented verbatim to enhance trustworthiness of the study. In addition, the participants' responses were investigated, examined and assessed by the researcher. Furthermore, the findings of this study were presented in relation to evaluated literature in Chapter 2 and the theory underpinning this study, namely ethical leadership. Owing to the Covid-19 outbreak which was later on contained and the current health risks and the enforcement of the protocols by the DBE, the interviews with participants as prescribed by the ethical clearance were conducted using different virtual platforms such as the telephone, Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and where feasible, were also conducted face-to-face. This study explored the following main and sub-research questions:

5.1.1 Main research question

- What are the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province?

5.1.2 Sub-Questions

The following critical sub-questions will underpin this study:

5.1.2.1 How do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

5.1.2.2 What are the teachers' experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools?

5.1.2.3 How do teachers view the DBE and other educational regulating agencies in counteracting unethical behaviour of school leaders?

5.1.3 Objectives

This research inquiry further pursued the following critical research objectives:

5.1.3.1 To explore how SMTs maintain ethical conduct.

5.1.3.2 To explore the teachers' experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools.

5.1.3.3 To explore teacher's views on the DBE and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders.

The data from the semi-structured interviews were elicited from 24 participants from six secondary schools, located in two separate Gauteng district circuits. Two teachers, two departmental heads, two principals, and two deputy principals from the three secondary schools made up the participation groups from both the Tshwane East and West regions. Themes that emerged from the investigation of participants' responses were examined, synthesised and linked to existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the theory, which underpinned this study. An intensive and concerted effort was made to show connections between the findings to existing literature on the research questions under discussion. The researcher demonstrated participants' intimate involvement, views and experiences in a consistent, consolidated and systematic manner. To maintain continuous anonymity and confidentiality in the study and drawing from the coding manual for qualitative researchers in the work of Saldana (2021) the six schools involved in the study were coded as school "A, B, C, D, E and F. Code "P1-6" is used for the six principals. Codes "DP1-6" and DH1-6" were used to represent the six deputy principals and departmental heads respectively. In contrast, "T1-6" was utilised to depict the teachers from the six separate secondary schools.

This segment of the representative subset of the teachers were not necessarily part of the SMT, but their involvement in the study was critical to get balanced views, insights and perspectives of teachers on ethical leadership practices by SMTs within their domains. The participants' responses are recorded and narrated verbatim in the following sections.

5.2 THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Initially, the researcher planned to use six weeks to virtually and where necessary physically interview the 24 participants, namely, and in order of sequence, six teachers, six departmental heads, six deputy principals and, lastly, the six principals.

The process was characterised by some frustrations regarding availability, particularly with some principals and departmental heads in the sample. Letters informing participants in the sample were sent in advance to their various destinations, namely, schools and district offices where necessary. Attached to these invitation letters, were ethical clearance research permission letters from both the district and head offices of the GDE. Appointment dates for conducting interviews were arranged with the participants. Participants were also informed in the letters that recorded virtual or where necessary physical interviews would be used. This was not a problem with any of the participants. Where participants raised questions why the virtual recording of the interviews was used, the researcher, during virtual interviews, was able to supplement the explanation before the interview commenced.

The selected SMTs and the teachers respected the dates and times agreed upon to conduct the interviews. During the interviews, all the sampled participants gave their responses in English. With some principals and departmental heads, it was very difficult and challenging to secure appointments right away. Dates and times agreed upon were changed intermittently as the agreed schedules were affected by some changing school operational requirements prior to our schedules. The interviews with them were ultimately conducted thereafter. As indicated earlier, interviews were based on the interview protocol prepared. During the interview process, the researcher explored and prompted to get to the bottom of issues. During the research interviews and further probing of the participants, the objectives of the investigation and the courteous and respectful interview protocols were constantly kept in mind.

5.3 THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The participants were sampled from the six secondary schools located within the Gauteng Tshwane East and West districts contacted by the researcher. School principals, departmental heads and ordinary teachers participated in these interviews. These participants were chosen because the researcher had intended to obtain data-rich opinions, insights, experiences and their perceptions in exploring the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in the leadership of their respective schools.

5.4 THE PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The information in the next tables indicates the attributes of the participants who participated in individual virtual and physical interviews in the sampled educational settings and in other instances in their own privately agreed spaces. These characteristics are shown in Table 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6. A total number of participants that participated in the research was 24. The participants in the study were characterised by gender mix, with more females than males.

Table 5.1: The Profile of Participants of School A

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Experience
P1	56	Female	Principal	30
DP1	51	Female	Deputy Principal	20
DH1	52	Male	Head of Department	18
T1	39	Male	Teacher	12

Table 5.2: The Profile of Participants of School B

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Experience
P2	56	Male	Principal	30
DP2	53	Male	Deputy Principal	20
DH2	50	Female	Head of Department	19
T2	32	Female	Teacher	12

Table 5.3: The Profile of Participants of School C

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Experience
P3	58	Female	Principal	27
DP3	55	Male	Deputy Principal	20
DH3	50	Male	Head of Department	18
T3	31	Female	Teacher	11

Table 5.4: The Profile of Participants of School D

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Experience
P4	59	Female	Principal	29
DP4	57	Male	Deputy Principal	18
DH4	42	Female	Head of Department	14
T4	36	Male	Teacher	13

Table 5.5: The Profile of Participants of School E

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Experience
P5	57	Male	Principal	33
DP5	50	Female	Deputy Principal	21
DH5	44	Female	Head of Department	18
T5	35	Female	Teacher	12

Table 5.6: The Profile of Participants of School F

Participants	Age	Gender	Occupation Status	Experience
P6	59	Female	Principal	34
DP6	53	Male	Deputy Principal	18
DH6	52	Female	Head of Department	15
T6	30	Male	Teacher	11

5.5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The interview data were transcribed from the virtual platforms and manual recording after listening and studying the recordings several times. The following data is presented under topics that were developed from the examination and study of the interview transcripts. The presentation and discussion of the findings of this inquiry were guided through the initial fundamental work of Braun and Clarke (2006) earlier on supported by King (2004) who argues that thematic analysis is a useful method for examining the experiences and perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights. In the scholarly book on the utilisation of qualitative methodologies to address research questions, Oliver (2021) examines the application of qualitative methods to address research questions, positioning these questions at the core of the selected research methodology to determine the most suitable and robust qualitative approach for optimising study success. Data presentation and discussion in this study was characterised by QDA based on an interpretative philosophy that was aimed at examining the meaningful and symbolic content of qualitative data (Maree, 2016). Qualitative data presented was analysed to make meaning from the perceptions of the participants. Critically, the three main questions of this research qualitative data interview analysis methodology were distinguished through the process of open and axial coding, data management of actionable findings and analysis of the five-phase process of qualitative data analysis as posited by Bingham (2023).

The three themes that express the research questions are briefly examined as follows:

- Theme 1 addressed ethical conduct as a critical leadership component within the educational setting. Further exploring perception and understanding of ethics and ethical leadership and the emphasis on what constitutes good ethical school leadership and its meaning, both real and perceived. The theme further accentuated on the clear understanding of ethical leadership and its attributes.
- The second focused on the experiences and expectations about the level of required professional growth in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school. The theme

further probed on relationship with colleagues, subordinates, relations and application of discipline within the school setting.

- Theme 3 articulated how the DBE and other educational regulating agencies are viewed and how they should create a countenance on unethical behaviour within and outside of the confines on the school setting.

Figure 7.1 summarises themes that emerged from the investigation. An in-depth-analytical discussion of these themes then follows the graphical presentation.

- How do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?
- What are the teachers' experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools?
- How do teachers view the DBE and other educational regulating agencies in counteracting unethical behaviour of school leaders?

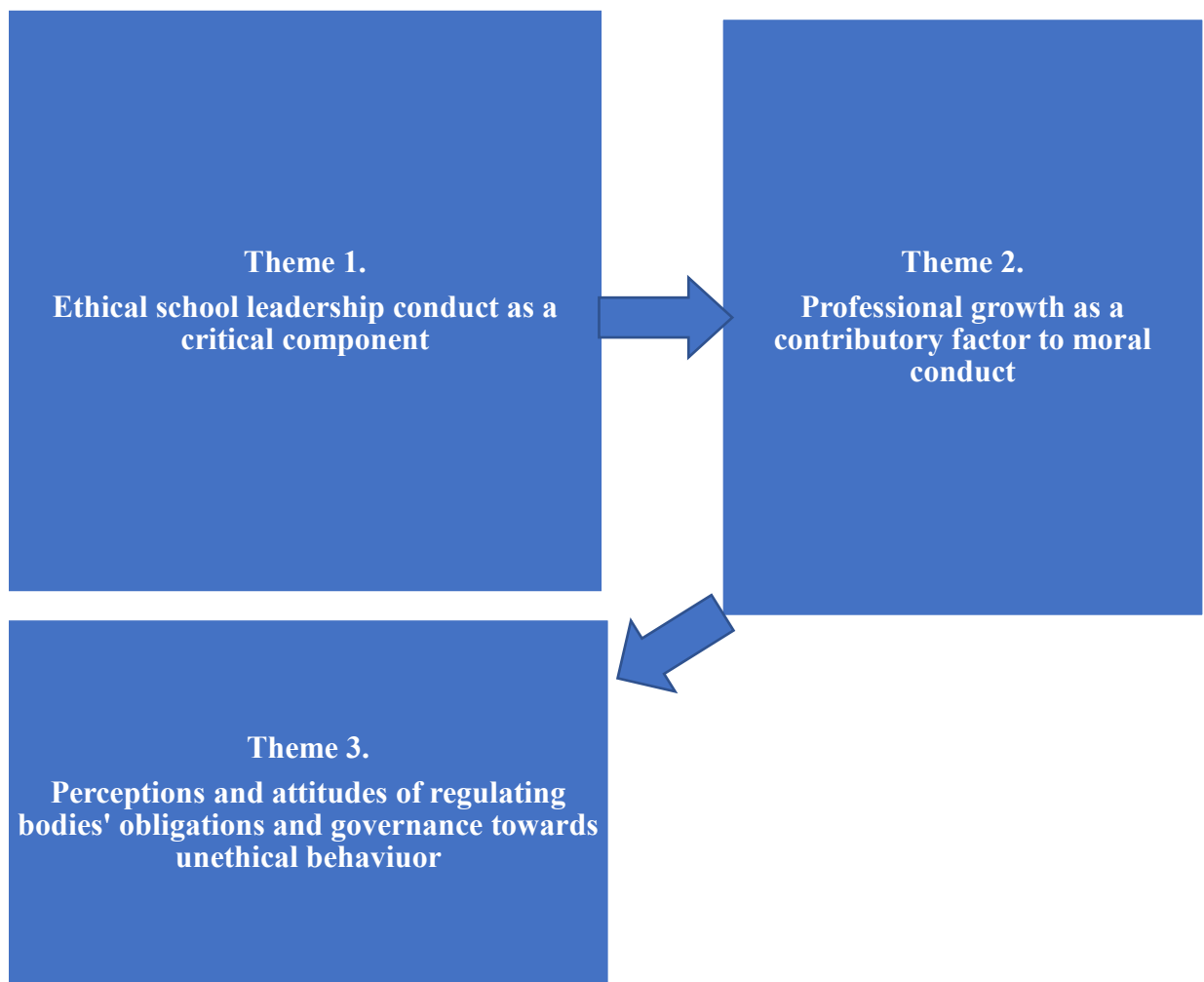


Figure 5.1: Diagrammatic representation of emergent themes

5.5.1 How do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

Regarding this research inquiry, P1-P6 and DP1-DP6 were largely in agreement and typically expressed that:

“Ethical school leadership is a system of morals, values and principles that guide our decisions and behaviours not only within the confines of our schools but also refers to the extent to which our external attitudes and behaviours are measured, particularly within the communities in and around the school”

P2 particularly elucidated that:

"As I see ethical school leadership today, I see it as a kind of leadership that ought to be maintained by being open, inclusive and forward-thinking. In addition to us modelling ethical behaviours, leaders in schools should actively encourage these behaviours. This is known to me as ethical school leadership..."

P4 illuminated that:

"Ethical leadership components or traits are morally acceptable behaviours and principles that are expected of our officials in schools without fail. This is something that I personally cannot compromise on, and I think we maintain these by having monthly audits of our ethical behaviours."

P6 particularly elucidated that:

"A conduct that will dictate your behaviour is what I perceive to be ethics... In order to practice ethical leadership, you must apply these same moral principles to the way you run your school and deal with your subordinates or even other staff members within the school, this will assist us in maintaining ethical leadership."

Further, DP1 effectively conveyed the concept by asserting it as:

"A system of moral accountability-based ideas that help distinguish between good and wrong will greatly assist to maintain ethical and moral conduct. Another responsibility of ethical school leadership is to deliver a well-rounded education in a structured setting that upholds morality and integrity."

DP2 expressed that:

"According to what I understand, ethically upright behaviour that befits a leader in the school without compromising is the foundation of ethical leadership, and that need to be maintained by continuously checking our moral conduct in our activities and having ethical leadership monthly forums."

DP3 particularly explained that:

"I consider this as a sense of ethical responsibility for the choices we make in relation to the individuals we guide, and our conduct should be beyond doubt, and one should not be found lacking when it comes to their behaviour in the school, this is how we should maintain it."

DP5 particularly elucidated that:

"My understanding of this concept is that ethical school leadership behaviours are acts that we do on behalf of the people we lead in the school. It is important that such behaviours are not lacking when it comes to our behaviours in the school, and that should be maintained by making sure that our own behaviours are exemplary and we have clear rules and guidelines."

The departmental heads, located at the six schools, expressed a common belief that ethical school leadership entails maintaining high standards of moral behaviour, which is expected from school leaders. They emphasised the importance of creating a high benchmark for such conduct. When asked about this research question, most participants in DH1-P6 agreed and expressed that:

DH2 particularly elucidated that:

"For me, ethical school leadership entails demonstrating integrity, taking responsibility, setting a positive example, and being accountable for one's actions, particularly in a school context and us as HOD's are fighting hard to maintain the required ethical and moral conduct by making sure that we have weekly forums to address any of these challenges..."

DH3 specifically clarified his view as follows:

“My personal understanding of ethical school leadership is that it involves adhering to a set of principles that guide one's behaviour. It is crucial to treat others with honesty, integrity and professionalism in order to be respected. Ultimately, ethical leadership is primarily demonstrated through one's overall behaviour in the school setting. In my perspective, it further extends beyond the confines of the educational environment and we try our best to maintain it by having regular meetings and feedback sessions regarding ethical conduct and leadership in our school. I know sometimes this is not enough...”

DH4 particularly expounded that:

"This is a set of criteria that pertains to the ethical responsibility we have for our words and actions in the school environment. It is closely related to our behaviour and conduct in the presence of others and we strongly have to act professionally in all material aspects of our leadership in order to highly maintain levels of ethical conduct."

DH6 explicitly said that:

“I consider ethical school leadership to be a crucial aspect of how we, as departmental heads, engage with our colleagues and the staff who report to us for teaching and learning, as well as all other ethical aspects within the school. It is our duty to demonstrate ethical behaviour in these areas.”

The teachers collectively articulated as follows:

T1 said that:

"Ethical school leadership refers to the manner in which a school is expected to be governed based on its values and moral principles... In my perspective, ethical school leadership entails comprehending and acknowledging the perspectives of all those involved. To maintain it the school needs to ensure that all individuals in the school

are informed about the current moral challenges and situation and taking into account the needs and perspectives of everyone in this process.”

T2 elucidated as follows:

"In my interpretation, when discussing ethics and ethical school leadership, it is crucial to establish a stringent benchmark of honesty, ethics, morals, and values for us teachers, the school leaders and learners. This ensures the absolute absence of conflicts and favouritism within the school, and by doing so, this can be easily managed...."

T3 stated that:

"The reason our school leaders are so unapproachable is that they set a poor ethical example by acting in ways that are inconsistent with their expected behaviour and the moral principles that shape their integrity, honesty, and accountability, this is how I model ethical school leadership and it will be very difficult to main it in my view..."

T4 proclaimed that.

"Because of the way the school management team treats some of us, I am not personally aware of any ethical leadership qualities at the school and these are maintained. The absence of compassion and empathy compels me to respond in this way, demonstrating the deficiency of ethical leadership in our school as a component that is lacking."

T5 asserted in her expressions that:

"The proper and morally acceptable behaviour of people in positions of authority, along with the consistency with which those behaviours are displayed, constitute ethical school leadership, in my opinion and this should be maintained by setting simple and exemplary ethical examples every day in the school without fail."

T6 announced that:

“This component, in my opinion, is the principal and her team's constant capacity to behave in a way that upholds the morally just behaviour that we can all readily accept and be proud of, and if their can maintain their moral behaviour and conduct by being truthful, inclusive, empathetic and demonstrate kindness towards staff, I think it will be helpful for the school.”

According to data gathered and presented from semi-structured interviews, most study participants understood what the terms “ethics” and “ethical school leadership” in detail meant. Ethical school leadership was generally defined by the participants as a system of morals, values and principles that guide a person's decisions and behaviours not only within the confines of the school, but also refers to their external attitudes and behaviours, particularly within the communities in and around the school. This expressed view by participants is enunciated in work of Arar et al. (2022) where they define ethical leadership as a concept that promotes the demonstration of ethically acceptable behaviours among organisational stakeholders via reciprocal communication, reinforcement and decision-making processes. The participants competently explained ethical school leadership as a type of leadership that shares the same moral principles and values. In one way or another, several participants shared their personal interpretations, perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the theme, some were more detailed than others were. The SMTs in charge of the six schools had similar views about what constitutes ethical school leadership.

They all agreed, but not entirely in the same disposition, that principles like accountability, transparency and honesty are part of ethical school leadership, and they further defined this concept as a type of leadership that is guided by these moral convictions. The participants articulated on some of the critical factors that appeared to be ethical school leadership challenges that they have experienced in their various roles, relationships and responsibilities, and these assertions were saliently common among the SMT. As previously said, the following component of the participants included six teachers who are not necessarily part of the school leadership team. However, they are senior teachers with extensive experience, making them a crucial component of the study.

They also held the belief that ethics and ethical school leadership encompass morals and values, which should guide ethical school leadership according to the same moral principles required from the SMT. They openly expressed their divergent and perhaps contentious perspectives. Regarding this research question, T1-P6 have shown a high level of agreement and generally diverged from the rest of the SMT. The teachers were more critical on the absence of consistent application of discipline and decision-making processes and instances that had the preponderance to affect the ethos ethical school leadership among colleagues.

Their responses and articulations on possible strategies that could be developed to enhance ethical school leadership was more common among all the participants, but albeit differently enunciated given their perceptions, attitudes and experiences. Their general perception of ethical school leadership as a critical component for the effective management of the school and its environment, and for the enhancement of acceptable moral leadership practices, permeated very strongly from their varied responses.

The principals and deputy principals in all six schools were in complete agreement with the importance of ethical school leadership and the rules of moral behaviour required from individuals in leadership positions. They unanimously voiced the view that such conduct should be beyond criticism. Additionally, they emphasised that this anticipated ethical behaviour should be applied to all individuals inside the educational environment. This view is expressed in the work of Day, Sammons and Gorgen (2020) who assert that management behaviour pertains to the expected conduct of school leadership that is beyond criticism, which is increasingly recognised as the attitudes, actions and practices necessary for fostering ethical conduct within the educational environment.

In examining the views, perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and expressions from all the 24 participants regarding the foregoing theme, it appears that all the participants possess a good grasp and appreciation of the description of ethical school leadership. The participants were able to share their experiences of what is expected of good ethics and acceptable ethical school leadership. Participants in general agreed on their real and perceived understanding of good morals, values and principles that individual leaders should espouse and possess.

They also understood that these principles governed the conduct of individuals and enabled them to determine right from wrong. The participants further argued that the values of good ethical school leadership had the propensity to enhance good governance in schools. The participants also had an in-depth understanding of ethical school leadership. Participants interpreted ethical school leadership as a type of leadership that is based on the socially acceptable ideals. They also acknowledged that this leadership trait involved not only the demonstration of ethical behaviours by leaders, but also the promotion of this behaviour by leaders in their schools.

The participants' understanding of ethical school leadership in their responses was reinforced by the early works of Perry, de Graaf, Zeger, van der Wal and van Montfort (2014) in their research on "Returning to our roots: Good government evolves to good governance." They posit that ethical leadership is underpinned by principles that promote honesty, morality and trust. The authors further articulated that discussions around the globe on ethical leadership issues would continue even as researchers debate these unresolved conceptual ethical school leadership dichotomies.

This was further supported by early literature on ethical training for effective anti-corruption systems in the public service by Manyaka and Sebola (2013), who defined ethics as involving a framework of socially acceptable norms, morals and values that control an individual's actions. These authors extend this definition to public servants and leaders, who have an ethical framework comprising a moral code that directs their professional and personal conduct. The participants also labelled the term ethics as a set of moral principles and values that determine an individual's behaviour. This assertion was then to be later further elucidated and supported by Vivekananda and Meenakshi (2024), articulating on the critical role played by honesty and trust in maintaining social cohesion, interpersonal relationships and integrity. The school, as a social construct, can therefore not be excluded from this truism and assertion.

Findings emerging from the responses in this theme were further illuminated in their expressions, which are further voiced in the work of Vivekananda and Meenakshi (2024). These researchers concur that honesty, integrity, fosters genuine connections, enabling individuals to express their thoughts, emotions and vulnerabilities openly where ethical school leadership is a key component of good governance and has significant potential to affect public trust. Furthermore, the actions of the SMT, as schools' leaders are important in promoting good conduct and fostering an ethical school culture. The definitions of ethics from the literature are, therefore, supported by the views of participants. The researcher believes that the participants had a clear understanding of what ethics and ethical leadership are. In summarising the descriptions from the participants' standpoint, ethical leadership encompasses accountability, transparency, fairness, justice, integrity, honesty, authenticity, compassion, courage and mutual respect. The next theme examines the SMTs' professional growth as a contributing factor to moral conduct and reflections on ethical leadership in their practices.

5.5.2 What are the teachers' experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

T1-T6 in their narratives reported adverse experiences and sentiments regarding the foregoing theme as perceived by the participants and indicated that:

T1 expressed his view this way:

“Certain members of the SMT, particularly principals, occasionally exhibit deficiencies in their professional growth, development and ethical awareness, as well as in their demonstration of appropriate conduct regarding ethical leadership... I anticipate that they will consistently demonstrate appropriate moral and professional leadership; but my interactions and the responses, I have reviewed indicate that some are regrettably inexperienced, exhibiting various unprofessional habits about ethical leadership.”

In a further pronouncement of the matter, T2 said that:

“I have considerable unhappiness with the school leadership due to unprofessional conduct, inconsistent rule enforcement, interpersonal conflicts, and preferential treatment of personnel. I consistently endeavour to remedy these issues, which I think are brought about by the lack of professional growth and training in ethical leadership.”

T3 was scathing in her articulation that:

“These colleagues assigned to lead the schools can enhance their ethical leadership capabilities through professional development and training. I occasionally observe instances of power abuse by senior management team members among certain teachers, colleagues and some trade union representatives.”

The three teachers T4, T5 and T6 were generally in concert that:

“Occasionally, we believe that with appropriate professional training and supervised development, these individuals can enhance our awareness of ethical leadership practices. Our senior management teams must consistently uphold ethical leadership, as they bear the responsibility for the inadequate leadership practices observed in our schools.”

P1 said:

“Based on the frequency of ethical leadership cases I encounter monthly, I can confidently assert that ethical leadership in schools presents a significant challenge. However, the majority of SMTs (SMTs) in my institution are adequately and professionally trained and fulfil their responsibilities. Nevertheless, we also contribute to this endeavour through our supportive frameworks.”

The same sentiment was shared by P2. He maintained that:

“In general, it seems like ethical leadership is always pushed to the back of the line, and colleagues aren't made aware of this or helped with their professional growth.”

After probing P2, he expressed that:

“Some people on our team don't see this task of ethical school leadership as important, and it takes a lot of my time to settle disagreements that come up because they are at times practicing unethical leadership techniques that they know they shouldn't be using based on their training.”

P3 was resolute in what she expressed that:

“When it comes to how I treat my coworkers and the whole staff, I don't remember ever being found wanting professionally in terms of ethical leadership.”

P4 commented that:

“I treat all of my subordinates and other colleagues the same and listen to their concerns without judging them, whether they are right or wrong. That's how we were trained as professionals, and I think that has enhanced by my growth.”

In further probing on the theme, P5 further cemented the narrative that:

“For at least a long time, the district has never looked into any acts or conduct of bad leadership at our school.”

P6 Lamented that:

“My entire management team has grown professionally as they have learned all of these expectations and what they need to do to act in an honest way for the success of my school.”

DP1 was similarly resolute. His views were expressed as follows:

“From where I'm sitting, it looks like everything is going great at our school. My colleagues have grown significantly in this area. If there were problems with unethical leadership, I would have been happy to tell you about them. Of course, there is still room for improvement.”

DP2 lamented that:

"As leaders in the school, we have always shown the good and proper ethical behaviour that is expected of us, everyone in leadership has grown professionally at my school."

DP3 commented that:

"We've always erred on the side of caution when it comes to ethical leadership because different people on our staff have very different ideas about it, but in general, our actions have not been found wanting."

The deputy principal DP4 said:

"The way I have dealt with complaints and allegations of favouritism, ill-discipline and other bad practices, by and against our staff, consistency has been key for me, I have never been biased towards or against anyone."

DP5 was very vocal about this, stating that:

"There are some rotten apples when it comes to ethical conduct in the school, but generally, we are able to handle those issues as a team, because of our own awareness and growth."

DP6 (the deputy principal) had a slightly different opinion on this matter after being further probed, saying:

"I should also state that, we are all humans and all of us are prone to err from time to time, when it comes to unacceptable behaviour, but we should learn from that, accept our mistakes and move on; this happens even if we received the best training and have grown professionally in this regard."

DH1, in his articulation, was very upfront and expressed that:

"There is no doubt that our school has a big problem with ethical leadership, even after training... It's not always clear who is in charge. Yes, I am aware that I am part of the school's leadership and that we can improve how we handle ethical leadership issues and I think we are growth as we should in this area."

When probed further, DH1 said:

"At times, we weren't consistent in how we dealt with very similar ethical leadership problems and conflicts, and that's a big mistake on our part as school leaders."

DH2 lamented the fact that:

"Some of us fall short in how we act as ethical leaders at this school because we are sometimes blinded by favouritism, buddy friendships, and other things like that... We've dropped the ball in this area because our ethical leadership across the school divide has not been up to par in terms of how we've behaved and handled ourselves. I agree with this statement that we do not show the level of professional growth that is expected of us."

DH3 concluded by saying:

"All things considered, there is always room for improvement in how we treat others in a morally sound way, but we all want to get there, and we are slowly growing as professionals."

By probing further on how they are growing on this area, DH3, responded that:

"We are getting ourselves into the relevant ethics forums and statutory bodies to understand better this whole concept, by not waiting for the Department."

DH4 indicated that:

"This issue of ethical leadership in our school is more complicated than it seems. Some of our colleagues still don't seem to understand what it's all about and what they need to do every day, even after all the awareness and sensitivity training we had."

On further probing and follow-up, she said:

"I agree that our management style doesn't always reflect ethics and good behaviour and that has affected our professional growth in this area in the way we lead others. There are clear signs of favouritism and buddy-buddy relationships here, but we always try to show a consistent pattern of applying ethical rules for all colleagues in this school, especially when the violations are similar, but professionally we are found wanting."

DH5 agreed in her expressions and lamented that:

"Some teachers are not professionally trained to act in an ethical way, but we treat them all the same here when it comes to how work is assigned, how discipline is expected, and how our SMT interact with everyone."

DH6 further commented that:

"The people in charge of this school do care about ethical leadership issues. We also care about making sure that everyone is treated fairly. We also value our colleagues' opinions and experiences when they express any unethical behaviour by school leaders. This is how we were trained, and our professional development has helped us a lot in this area."

The interviews indicated that various forms of unethical conduct by SMT and other senior school officials during their normal leadership activities in the six schools were concerning. Many participants indicated that unethical acts among SMT members occurred frequently and were on the rise, primarily owing to deficiencies in their professional conduct, development, growth and attitude. The principals and deputy principals overseeing the six schools in the study unanimously articulated the professional improvement exhibited by the members of the SMT at their respective institutions. The participants appeared to concur with the alignment of the SMTs with ethical leadership principles. A cohesive perspective appeared to arise from their thoughts, expressions and attitudes toward this issue, with only a few divergent opinions.

Departmental heads assigned to supervise managerial and leadership tasks throughout the six schools articulated very similar perspectives regarding the issue. Their perspectives on professional growth and development appear more progressive and emphasise the realities of the ethical leadership challenges encountered by the schools.

The comments from DH4, DH5, and DH6 were consistent, as they collectively expressed their perspectives and experiences about the manifestation of ethical leadership behaviour and professional growth and development in their leadership practices within their respective school environments.

The participants appeared sincere and enthusiastic in articulating their perceptions of their interactions, treatment, attentiveness, assistance, and perspectives towards their subordinates and colleagues in relation to addressing complaints and issues.

The researchers' analysis indicates a notable unanimity on how the SMTs exhibited ethical leadership behaviour in their leadership practices and professional development within their specific school contexts. The participants' comments suggested that unethical conduct by the SMT was not widespread in schools. The resemblance in the replies elucidated the shared perceptions among participants on the manifestation of ethical leadership within their educational environments, indicating their professional development and readiness to confront ethical leadership problems. The data obtained from the interviews indicated acts that did not reflect a deficiency in professional development or awareness, nor did they raise any concerns regarding ethical and moral conduct.

Participants considered the importance of ethical conduct, emphasising the consistent enforcement of rules and regulations, the prompt resolution of interpersonal conflicts and the equitable treatment of staff, all of which are likely to foster high ethical standards in the school environment. Groenewald, Groenewald, Cruz, et al. (2024), in their systematic review on educational leadership, challenges, styles, and impacts, corroborated this observation by noting instances of rule-bending and unprofessional conduct associated with school norms characterised by inadequate ethical leadership. They additionally hypothesised about obstacles, including the absence of defined qualifications and professional advancement for

school leaders, which presented considerable impediments to leadership development, growth and equity. Their study underscores the necessity for policymakers and stakeholders to prioritise the development of effective leadership pipelines, qualifications, ethics awareness initiatives and ethical leadership support systems to tackle the problems of ethical school leadership. Their analysis additionally suggested measures to foster practical ethical leadership roles for all genders within the educational setting, including ethical leadership grants, scholarships and fellowships.

The findings highlight the essential importance of ethical school leadership in influencing the future of education and advocate for cooperative efforts to develop ethical, inclusive, effective and visionary leadership practices that promote educational excellence and equity. Bıyık and Şahin (2024), in their examination of teacher collaboration relative to the instructional and ethical leadership behaviours of principals, concur with my analysis. Indeed, the professional growth and development of school leadership prioritises exemplary traits such as authenticity, responsibility, openness, honesty, integrity, sound ethical practices, and a commitment to exemplary conduct, and these foster an environment conducive to ethical practices within the school.

This assumption corresponds with participants' comments concerning the acceptable ethical conduct of SMTs that exemplifies professional growth, development and transformational leadership towards subordinates and their interpersonal relations, which positively influences teachers' ethical behaviours. The participants' perceptions indicate that SMTs exhibit the necessary level of professional growth regarding leadership and ethical behaviour inside the school. The researcher believes that principals often presented themselves favourably, making it essential to gather further perspectives, experiences and expressions from other participants regarding the ethical school leadership practices of SMT members under the principals' guidance. This assertion is positively exhibited in the research work of Yilmaz and Tore (2025) who discovered that school principals demonstrating transformational leadership characteristics positively affect teachers' innovative work behaviours via the mediating role of self-efficacy, emphasising that robust moral leadership fosters teacher empowerment and professional development.

5.5.3 What are the teacher's views on the DBE and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

On responding to the challenges SMT's face, P1, in his introductory remarks, suggested that:

"This remains a huge task that we are faced with every day, and we are still working hard to make it happen. This is why the support of the department and other regulatory bodies is so important."

P2 on the same matter further lamented that:

"My schools still have a lot of work to do because of problems like misusing funds and resources, students not showing up for class, general disobedience and leaders not acting in the way we expect them to. We need strong leadership to solve these problems."

Engaging further with the issue, the principal from the third school (P3) stated:

"We are hard at work to address these ethical leadership challenges in our schools, the heightened levels of ethical behaviour awareness interventions from the Department and SACE must become our mantra for us as leaders to advance all expertise and advice from the department and SACE."

P4 expressed unreservedly that:

"Problems with ethical school leadership caused by substance abuse, especially alcohol, by those who are meant to be in charge continue to slow down our progress in how our school leadership should act...We keep getting unsettling reports of bad school leadership and management, including inappropriate sexual reports involving teachers and students. The school leadership isn't doing anything about it, and this is where the Department of [Basic] Education and other groups need to step in and teach SMT and others about ethical leadership the most."

P5 intimated that:

"Also, ethical leadership issues caused by problems of bad peer pressure and because of a lack of guidance and support from the authorities on how to deal with ethical misconduct seem to be very common. We as the SMT seem to be singing from the same hymn sheet because we can confront each other on the ethical leadership issues brought up against any of us, and we seem to be making progress."

P6 stated that:

"I agree that the department has tried to make us more aware of different issues related to ethical school leadership, and that SACE has also visited us to talk about these issues. I can't say for sure if these efforts are working or not."

The deputy principal, DP1 said:

"We now have huge disciplinary cases of mismanagement of funds and resources that need to be resolved. Some cases started out as small acts of unethical behaviour that could have been quickly dealt with by the principal as a leader, but others have grown much bigger than the school. The lack of leadership from the Department of [Basic] Education is making this situation much worse."

DP2 expressed that:

"One problem started when the SMT was told about an educator who was thought to be having a sexual relationship with a student in his class. We had to handle the situation without any help or direction from the authorities, but we didn't give up hope." If the department had done what we thought they would, this problem could have been fixed quickly."

DP3 voiced similar manifestations from his list of challenges faced by the school management by alluding that:

"I have seen a pattern of a huge lack of mentorship and guidance from the government and relevant regulatory bodies on how to stop unethical leadership."

When probed for further response, DP3 said:

"I have records of formal complaints that were filed, in which we asked the Department of [Basic] Education and other regulatory bodies to step in and help solve these problems with unethical leadership, but they were not present. When we asked for help, we talked about similar examples of unethical behaviour by some of our school leaders, such as misusing funds and resources. We felt that our requests for help were not properly addressed and were sometimes completely ignored by the department and other regulatory bodies."

DP4 stated that:

"To be honest, we are still looking for a "blueprint" that shows us how to fix the problems with unethical leadership that are hurting our schools, and how these can be reduced as there is nothing much from the department and SACE."

DP5 commented that:

"Our school's ability and processes to deal with acts of misconduct is weak, and we continue to get very little advice and direction on how to handle these important issues from the department and SACE."

DP6 referred on these as follows:

"It would be better if the Department of [Basic] Education and all other regulatory bodies, like SACE, worked with school leaders on this important issue, but the opposite is happening."

The departmental head, DH1 commented that:

"The departmental heads (DH) involved in the six-school expressed diverse opinions, insights and perspectives regarding the Department of [Basic] Education and other educational regulatory bodies on addressing the unethical conduct of school leaders."

DH 1 indicated that:

"As a leader at this school, I often have to deal with colleagues who act in ways that are not appropriate for a colleague of their level. They set a terrible example for new teachers, and we also don't have a real ethical school leadership manual that advise us how to deal with them."

After probing on his response, he further lamented that:

"Some of my colleagues who I lead are the ones who keep acting badly at school. Their natural habit is to get together in small groups and unwittingly get each other to break the law and moral rules. These actions present a major ethical and moral leadership challenge for the school. For the past two years, these bad actions have harmed the school's performance and morale, and we haven't been able to get any help from the department or SACE to stop them or at least reprimand them."

DH2 of School B shared very similar experiences on the attitudes of the colleagues in his school. The participant articulated that:

"I'm really upset about the shady leadership at my school that comes from people I trust a lot. The problems have been around for a while, and the people in charge of the area are well aware of them. Someone on the senior management team is now being charged with serious misconduct for sexual misconduct with a student. This is a very serious issue. Do you think that's being moral and good?"

DH3 stated that:

"One thing I think is a huge challenge for our leadership is lying about others without consequences. I am also very worried about people's rights being violated. I think it is unethical to spread rumours around school because it causes problems and is a big

problem. Colleagues need to be made aware of these kinds of behaviours, and I think the department can help with that."

DH4 went on to enunciate that:

"Due to people not showing up for school, there is a serious problem with their behaviour that affects everyone's morale. This is because other people have to keep covering for them, and their coworkers think that this is not an issue that the school leadership should be dealing with. The Department of [Basic] Education and other authorities need to help us with intervention strategies in this matter."

DH5 in school E commented that:

"We are faced with ethical leadership challenges of colleagues coming to work reeking of alcohol and totally misbehaving in front of their colleagues, with others forever absent without leave for extended periods of time. They are forever absent to provide leadership when it is needed, it's a real shame, but we hope the district will assist us with how to deal with them, we can only report them, and what can we do?" [Shrugging her shoulders].

DH6 expressed very similar frustrations when probed on the same theme:

"Ethical school leadership is a real problem that we face in large numbers, and our colleagues continue to treat it with little importance. There is a serious loss of morals happening here, and we need strict rules and procedures from the Department of [Basic] Education right away to deal with it."

When further pressed for a further response, DH6 said:

"Others' rights are not respected here, and I think that the bad behaviour and lack of discipline by some leaders is unethical. If you complain in public, you are purged, which is why we need clear rules from the Department."

T1 stated that:

"At my school, the management team has to deal with a huge ethical leadership challenge. They have to deal with divisions that they've caused by being unfair to staff members. This is because I think they tend to take sides when there is a disagreement, and the authorities don't seem to be saying anything about this."

On further examining the response, he said:

"Other colleagues are not punished as harshly when they're constantly absent without a reason. The principal and her team are very selective in how they discipline and enforce school rules and procedures. I think this is unethical, and the department needs to step in more often."

T2 articulated similarly that:

"Our leadership sides with those who disagree with us, but they don't listen when we talk about unethical behaviour or misusing of funds and resources, and I believe that is unfair and wrong. People in the school have split up into different groups in our leadership, and it's hard for us to figure out where to go for leadership and advice. I believe this is one of the biggest problems that the Department of [Basic] Education needs to solve by offering guidance and support."

T3 stated that:

"I believe it is high time for the Department of [Basic] Education and all other regulatory groups, and trade unions, to start taking these concerns about moral school leadership seriously."

T4 Lamented that:

"Authorities should now start making rules and regulations official about how to handle ethical leadership issues and give clear instructions on how to do things."

T5 response to the engagement was:

"My advice to the Department of [Basic] Education and other educational regulatory agencies on how to stop school leaders from acting unethically is simple. We need a clear, written path for how to report these problems and then deal with them without fear or favour."

When pressed for further elaboration, T5 lamented that:

"I mean we need a simplistic approach to a path and process for dispute resolution on issues that have to do in acts of unethical leadership traits, and such process should not have eyes as to who the offender and the offended are."

T6 alluded to the question that:

"The department must be forthright and have rules and regulations that address ethical leadership issues that are likely to cause divisions and chaos within the school."

The collation of data regarding this theme exhibited commonality among the participants during the interviews, with some few minor exceptions. During the interviews and data analysis, it became apparent that there was a huge ethical school leadership challenge faced by those tasked to provide leadership in the schools. The views, experiences and sentiments expressed were strikingly similar and weighed heavily on the SMTs and the inability or lack of support from the DBE and all other relevant statutory bodies or organisations, tasked to support school on issues relating to ethical school leadership.

The participants unanimously expressed the view that if all stakeholders did not properly manage unethical school leadership challenges, they could negatively influence the school and adversely affect its performance on all fronts, such as learner results, teacher motivation

and staff morale. This assertion is expressed along these similar lines in the work of Hashemi et al. (2021) where they assert that the DBE must implement policies to reduce hierarchical power distances in schools, as unchecked ethical leadership disparities could foster unethical behaviour, diminish school performance, and result in low teacher motivation and overall staff morale. Ethical leadership challenges that arise out of the abuse of drugs and alcohol by the teachers and some members of the SMT, absenteeism, disrespect for subordinates' rights, peer influence among teachers to defy lawful instructions, sexual relations across the spectrum and the mismanagement of funds and resources emerged significantly from data in the above theme. SMTs are strategically positioned at the core of upholding the required standards of ethical conduct for the management teams of the schools within their districts. The remarks of principals and their deputies throughout the six schools were unanimously complimentary on the foregoing theme.

Participants interviewed in the schools expressed similar sentiments regarding the ethical leadership problems encountered by the SMTs in their various schools, as well as the potential support and intervention from the department. Participants were acutely cognizant of the responsibilities assigned to SMT within their environments, and the majority suggested that accountability rested with both the school leadership and the DBE for their sufficient and rigorous oversight. Most of the participants' responses suggested that the number of ethical leadership challenges facing SMTs was increasing, and government must start taking a lead on how this issue needs to be resolved. Some of the unethical behaviours that SMTs exhibited were that they did not adequately involve all stakeholders on ethical leadership decisions within the school context as well as on decisions that are likely to affect other external stakeholders. Inconsistency and unfairness in the enforcement of the rules and regulations within the school setting seemed to be an ethical leadership challenge emerging from the responses.

SMTs displaying acts of being dictatorial and abusing their position of power by ill-treating colleagues, poor management of funds and resources, absenteeism, leaving the school early, and alcohol abuse featured prominently as challenges that the participants wanted the DBE to take on strongly. The findings that emerged from the theme further exposed inappropriate relationships within the leadership themselves, wherein, all seem to be waiting for further

guidance and support from authorities, and not keen on coming up with initiatives. Elements of peer pressure among colleagues disregarded the rights of others to be heard by the SMT when they raised their concerns regarding ethical leadership challenges within the school setting, and this is done, in the absence of proper rules and procedures governing ethical leadership conduct from the relevant authorities and statutory agencies. Webb (2023), in support of these expressions made by participants, accentuates that mismanagement of resources and lack of clear guidance and support caused lack of morale, fractured ethical conduct, discontent and dissatisfaction in the organisation and contributed to poor ethical leadership.

This assertion was earlier supported by Mostafa and Bottomley (2020), in their research on self-sacrificial leadership and employee behaviour, who postulated that unethical conduct of school leadership that manifested itself in embezzlement of funds, fraud, extortion, abuse of power, nepotism, conflicts of interest, abuse of privileged information and favouritism, among many other ills, have the potential to fracture the required moral and ethical fibre of the school. Participants remarked on some features as having a high net effect on behaviours and attitudes that inhibited moral practice in the school setting and agreed that government has a moral duty to intervene and provide SMTs with required guidance and support on how to handle issues of ethical leadership. These remarks resonate with those of Obiekwe, Ifeanyi and Mbonu (2021) who assert that ethical leadership practices in public secondary schools are defined by the behaviours and attitudes demonstrated by principled leaders in fulfilling their leadership responsibilities. In contrast, Obiekwe and Ezeugbor (2019), in their study on teachers' perspectives regarding the extent of ethical leadership behaviours in secondary schools, previously asserted that unethical conduct is likely to negatively influence the achievement of long-term organisational goals and performance if educational authorities do not provide relevant guidance, support and interventions.

The responses of the participants regarding this theme seemed to indicate varied serious concerns about unethical behavioural practices in schools, which remain largely unaddressed by expected governmental guidance and intervention. The participants expressed varied remarks when responding that interventions from the DBE and other regulating agencies are clearly needed for prompt resolution of these issues of ethical leadership conduct and school

leadership practices. Accountability by those that have the inherent responsibility to lead, guide and support others in the education sector seemed to be very low and a real concern.

From the various perspectives of the study participants, members of SMTs do not consistently display acceptable levels of responsibility among themselves or towards their subordinates. In addition, the findings from the interviews with the participants exposed varied unethical practices of gross ill-discipline associated with ethical leadership that included absenteeism, reduced employee well-being, performance and decreased accountability from SMTs.

The participants in the study repeatedly expressed their varied views on high levels of anxiety and increased discomfort in the school caused by mistrust among them as colleagues. These views were corroborated by Holst (2023) who suggested that there was a positive connection between ethical leadership and affective trust in finding a moral compass when dealing with issues of ethical school leadership. The author in support of these expressions made by most of the participants asserts that, making ethical decisions showed to be the most significant factor in creating a moral compass. The expressions made by the participants further suggests the development of an ethical leadership decision-making conceptual framework using transformational leadership dimensions and the three main ethical approaches to normative ethics in attempting to resolve these issues speedily. This framework can be used for ethical school leadership development training, awareness and sensitivity for SMTs as directed by the DBE and relevant regulatory agencies. These interventions as echoed by Bingham, (2023), who postulates that in data management to actionable findings on a five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis, these expressions from the participants can then be used as a guide in developing the school and departmental training framework when determining how to cultivate and lead with a reliable ethical leadership and moral compass. In the main, the responses by participants in the researcher's analysis, further suggest that critical strategies to enhance ethical leadership in schools are urgently needed for SMT members to achieve the desired levels of acceptable conduct.

5.6 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher elucidated, examined and interpreted the participants' responses. The findings indicated that the management of unethical activity among SMTs is escalating at an alarming rate, and there is a lack of adequate mentoring, advice and assistance from authorities in addressing these ethical issues. The investigation found that the causes of these immoral behaviours were diverse and stemmed from multiple variables. This chapter's themes and interview data reveal that the conduct of certain SMT members lacks the concepts of ethics and ethical leadership that foster behaviours such as honesty, dignity, benevolence, and fairness.

The perceptions, expressions and attitudes of various participants led the researcher to conclude that the management value chain of ethical leadership in schools has been significantly eroded, with minimal support from the DBE and relevant regulatory agencies. The participants exhibited a pronounced consensus on the significance of ethical school leadership as an essential element for school success.

The participant's responses indicate that the ethical leadership deficit in schools stems from persistent neglect in the realm of ethical leadership, which is exclusively entrusted to school leadership that is often incompetent, unprepared and lacking the requisite professional development and training to manage such a significant responsibility. The participants emphasised that the government and its allies must assume an active and important role for the success of ethical leadership practices in schools. The subsequent chapter will delineate the study's conclusions, encompassing the resolution of the primary research questions, implications, recommendations, and additional hypotheses for future inquiry. The following chapter discusses the findings, recommendations and conclusions.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, data were analysed and interpreted to allow the researcher to draw conclusions and formulate recommendations based on the final findings. This study aimed to explore the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather information from the SMTs and teachers in six secondary schools within the Tshwane West District. This section and chapter examine the responses of interviewed principals, deputy principals, departmental heads, and teachers by employing the wording "Participants" interchangeably with the phrase "Teachers" in this study. The research problem in this study was examined in Chapter Two through literature review, bolstered by an analysis of domestic, continental and global literature that substantiates the phenomenon of ethical leadership. Chapter Three provided additional support through a discussion of the theoretical framework that underpinned this study, while chapter four detailed the selected research techniques and design, primarily focusing on the implementation of semi-structured interviews. This chapter aims to present an overview of the information obtained from the collected data in this investigation. This chapter will provide a summary of the findings, recommendations for future research and conclusions concerning the ethical leadership practices of SMTs in the Tshwane West District of Gauteng Province. Furthermore, this study aimed to contribute to the field of qualitative phenomenology research design. This final chapter contains the researcher's compelling arguments, assertions, findings, persuasive evidence, decisive results and conclusion. These are obtained from the data analysis conducted in chapters one, two, three, four, and the conclusions drawn from the data acquired in Chapter Five. This chapter delineates the study summary and contributions over six segments: research purpose, contributions to participants, contributions to the research, contributions to the theory, a discussion on the main research question, and the three research sub-themes. The chapter also examined research implications, applications, limitations and study recommendations, recommendations for future research, the researcher's reflections, and the study's conclusions.

6.2 SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

This study comprises six chapters, and this section aims to summarize each of the five chapters. The key points of the five chapters are concisely summarised next:

Chapter One provided a comprehensive overview of the study's contextual background. The discourse encompassed the articulation of the main research question, the three sub-research questions, the study's purpose and the delineation of the research methodology employed to gather data. The comprehensive research study focused largely on the main research question, supported by three sub-research questions. Ultimately, the conclusion was reached by elucidating the concepts pertinent to the research topic and delineating the chapter divisions.

Chapter Two analysed domestic, continental and global literature that substantiates the phenomenon of ethical leadership. Chapter Three discussed a theoretical framework that supported this study. Chapter Four outlined the research methodologies and design selected for this research inquiry. The chapter also examined the research framework, considering ontological assumptions, epistemological beliefs, rhetorical options, and methodological contexts. The research design, methods, and sample were discussed. This chapter elaborates on the case study design, along with the techniques of data production and analysis, which included both consulted documents and conducted interviews. Ethical concerns pertinent to the research and components of trustworthiness were thoroughly examined.

Chapter Five addressed the presentation of findings and the insightful analysis of the conceptualisations, behaviours and experiences of SMTs about ethical leadership in schools. The researcher integrated the data's implications on the examined phenomena of ethical leadership practices into the analysis, correlating and contrasting the findings as required. This chapter concludes the study by presenting its findings, addressing the main research question, sub-themes, and objectives, as well as discussing implications, recommendations, potential hypotheses for future research, and the study's intended contributions, along with the researcher's overall reflections.

6.3 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

6.3.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of the research study was to explore the ethical leadership strategies employed by SMTs in the governance of schools within Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province. At this juncture, SMT ethical leadership and decision-making were predominantly characterised as a reflective process and deliberate endeavour grounded in two articulated criteria, “truthful and immoral,” alongside an established standard of principles including trust, integrity, fairness, honesty and respect, while conforming to the code of ethics delineated in various memoranda from the department and other regulatory entities. The theoretical framework for this study, primarily the five-model ethical leadership paradigms of virtual, deontological, democratic, social learning, and authentic leadership was pertinent to the main research question posed. This research study's findings demonstrate the significance of ethical leadership principles for SMTs in enhancing ethical decision-making and mitigating unethical behaviours within the school setting.

6.3.2 Contribution of Participants

The research heightened participants' awareness of the significance of ethical leadership practices inside the school during the interviews and observation phase. Participants posed numerous relevant, direct and clarity-seeking inquiries that enhanced their understanding of their ethical leadership duties and responsibilities. Participants' contributions to the research study are likely to enhance their ethical leadership and management resolve, benefiting their schools and the sector overall, considering the critical condition of the ethical and moral compass in the field of education, leadership and management. The SMTs and participating teachers gained insights by critically examining their perceptions of leadership in relation to broader governance and management standards. This study aimed to attain a comprehensive understanding of the ethical leadership practices exhibited by school leaders. The researcher aimed to achieve a thorough understanding of the diverse aspects of ethical leadership practices demonstrated by SMTs, as perceived by participating teachers, which is likely to enhance the SMTs' everyday interactions with teachers in the educational environment.

Likewise, the perspectives and expressions articulated by all participants will likely foster an accepted culture of ethical leadership within the school setting. The findings underscore the undeniable contributions to the ethical conscience and awareness of all participants.

6.3.3 Research Contribution

The reviewed literature and other material can inform additional studies examining the leadership roles of SMTs or school leadership teams (SLT) as called in various countries. While the objective of employing a case study in qualitative research is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of a specific scenario, the methodologies applied can be replicated in several contexts with analogous characteristics. This study examined SMT's ethical leadership practices in managing diverse school environments and the execution of their ethical leadership positions in school governance. The findings underscore the participants' favourable inclination to engage in activities that transcend their official employment responsibilities and educational environments. The consensus among participants regarding anticipated ethical leadership practices in the school setting indicates their motivation to contribute meaningfully to the school's overall effectiveness, ethical integrity and development.

The exhibited dedication and involvement in constructive ethical leadership practices profoundly influence the school's overall efficacy and success. This study significantly contributes by demonstrating that ethical behaviours, including inclusive decision-making by SMTs, active participation in ethical leadership initiatives and offering emotional ethical awareness support to subordinates, can foster a positive work environment, enhance collaboration and improve the ethical culture within schools. The findings imply a continual positive organisational environment, suggesting that fostering and promoting effective ethical leadership practices is essential for a robust ethical culture. School leadership is essential in fostering a supportive and inclusive ethical culture by acknowledging and rewarding commendable moral conduct, as well as facilitating opportunities for professional growth and development within the school environment. These findings significantly influence and contribute to this research, offering a robust foundation for subsequent inquiry.

The findings on the participants' ethical leadership consciousness, awareness and exposure in this study are significant and indicate favourable tendencies.

The widespread recognition and consensus among participants, especially on the ethical leadership practices of SMTs, demonstrated a robust commitment to positively contributing to the research study. The study participants exhibited a dedication to beyond their standard duties in fostering a positive ethical culture inside the school setting.

6.3.4 Contribution to Ethical Leadership Theory

The study contributes to the theory by asserting that no singular leadership theory is applicable to school management; rather, varying conditions necessitate diverse leadership approaches. The theories presented in Chapter Two postulate that effective leadership necessitates a synthesis of various ideologies contingent upon the circumstances. The researcher believes that participatory leadership approach is most appropriate for schools considering that SMTs predominantly engage with an educated populace in a highly politicised context. To effectively implement this ethical leadership theory, which encompasses virtual, deontological, democratic, social learning and authentic leadership paradigms, school leadership must prioritise the interests of their staff and align their objectives with the ethical leadership goals of the school.

This will provide them with colleagues in the school who are prepared to demonstrate exemplary moral and ethical actions. Although the implementation of a participatory leadership model, which embodies the attributes, poses challenges within the South African education system owing to its historical authoritarian leadership styles, the attitudes, responses and expressions from participants indicate a positive outlook with a high likelihood of contributing constructively to the research. Moreover, while the South African society endeavours to embrace democratic principles, concerns of hierarchy continue to exert significant influence inside the school environment. Consequently, characteristics of contributory leadership issues regarding ethical school leadership practices persist in most rural and township schools. This study predominantly presents a Global North perspective, as existing current literature on ethical school leadership is largely influenced by Anglophone histories, developments, systems and paradigms.

This assertion is supported by Tan's (2023a) and (2023b) in the research work on mindful leadership for schools and further on the comprehension of mindful leadership. As a result, inadequate focus has been given to the cultural and spiritual ethical leadership practices and traditions from non-Western viewpoints. Consequently, it appeared essential for the researchers to formulate an African leadership model and framework, characterised by its participatory nature and encapsulating the principle of “I am because we are,” aimed at addressing African ethical school leadership challenges. Based on the findings and observations delineated from the main research question and the sub-questions of this study, the following proposal is made:

6.3.4.1 Affective Ubuntu Leadership Model

The proposed Affective Ubuntu Leadership Model (AULM) presents a transformative framework that integrates the emotional dimensions of leadership within an Ubuntu philosophical paradigm. It recognises that school environments much like other organisational contexts are not only cognitive or functional spaces but emotionally charged ecosystems where feelings, relationships and communal values deeply influence behaviour, decision-making and leadership effectiveness.

Ubuntu, derived from the Nguni Bantu term often translated as “I am because we are”, emphasises interconnectedness, empathy, respect and community orientation (Chetty and Price, 2024). It is not merely a cultural ethic but a guiding principle for how leadership is practised in African contexts. Within Ubuntu leadership, relationality and emotional awareness are foundational to achieving trust, collaboration and ethical behaviour. The affective dimension of leadership has gained recognition as an essential element in educational and organisational leadership, particularly in response to crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Research shows that emotional states among teachers and principals significantly affect school dynamics, staff morale and ultimately learner outcomes (van Jaarsveld et al., 2024). Emotions such as anxiety, frustration, hope and care are omnipresent in school environments and should not be excluded from leadership considerations.

Eyong et al. (2025) argue for an Afrocentric understanding of leadership as inherently sentiment-driven, challenging the dominant Western rationalistic models. In African communities, leadership is not merely a technical or strategic role but one deeply infused with sentiment, spirituality and collective responsibility. These aspects are crucial in understanding how leaders influence attitudes and behaviours through emotionally intelligent engagement.

Similarly, Sowcik and Johnson (2024) emphasise humility and peacebuilding as emotional competencies that are foundational to leadership in relational cultures. Their model suggests that self-awareness, interpersonal sensitivity and humility are not optional but essential for ethical and effective leadership. These elements align closely with Ubuntu's principles of human dignity, empathy and collective well-being. The AULM applies these cultural and emotional principles in practical ways within school settings. It postulates that emotions guide leadership behaviour, affecting how principals, deputies, heads of departments and teachers engage with challenges. Leadership actions that recognise the emotional needs of others contribute to healthier, more cohesive school climates. Ubuntu-informed leadership behaviours, such as active listening, inclusive decision-making, and emotionally supportive communication, foster a sense of belonging and purpose among staff and students.

Chetty and Price (2024) found that Ubuntu leadership is positively correlated with employee engagement, particularly when leaders foster empathetic relationships and a sense of shared identity. These dynamics are equally relevant in schools, where engagement and motivation hinge on both rational policy implementation and affective leadership practices.

The proposed AULM recognises that school environments, as workplaces, are filled with occurrences that elicit emotional responses from individuals, subsequently influencing attitudes and behaviours. Nkambule (2023), who explores Ubuntu-inspired leadership styles of principals, particularly highlighting their potential to manage knowledge ethically amidst unequal power dynamics, affirms this premise. Ethical leadership is crucial for the successful operationalisation of the AULM, emphasising that leaders must model morally significant behaviours that evoke emotional and moral sentiments, thereby enhancing the model's usability, comprehension and adoption.

Ethical leadership, as emphasised, is not merely perceptual but must be anchored in conduct that directs ethical practices within institutions. Msila (2014) reinforces this view through his exploration of African leadership paradigms, particularly Ubuntu, arguing that authentic leadership must prioritise communal ethics, values and the collective well-being of the school community. Effective leaders are expected to inculcate moral standards that govern follower behaviour, steering the organisational focus towards collective ethics and values. Similarly, Sasere and Mathashu (2024) underscore the relevance of leadership as governance practice in post-colonial Africa, analysing the micro political dynamics in school distributed leadership. Although emotions are acknowledged within the domain of ethical leadership, limited research focuses specifically on the function of dignity. Addressing this gap, the AULM integrates the appraisal theory of emotion, emphasising that the subjective appraisal of events shapes emotional experiences rather than the events themselves (Pérezts, Russon and Painter, 2020). The model asserts that ethical leadership necessitates leaders' recognition of their obligation to act rightly, not just to avoid guilt or shame but also to foster self-esteem and moral dignity. Ethical leadership behaviours such as caregiving, altruism, social justice and responsiveness strongly correlate with moral dignity, thereby enriching the AULM. Moreover, demonstrating empathic listening and ethical conduct enhances interpersonal relationships, fostering positive emotions reciprocated through emotional contagion within the organisation.

The model postulates that moral dignity surfaces when leaders acknowledge the significance of their ethical actions and perceive positive emotional feedback from their colleagues and subordinates. Fundamentally, the AULM is built upon core ethical leadership principles such as respect, justice, community building and honesty. These principles are bolstered by values like fairness, morality, trust, accountability, equality and mutual respect, as detailed in Chapter Two of this study and supported by participant responses. Against this background, the proposed AULM can be used to fill a vital gap in leadership theory by synthesising emotion and cultural philosophy into a practical model for educational leadership. It highlights how the affective domain, often neglected in leadership theory, can be a powerful lever for ethical, inclusive and transformational change within school management structures, particularly in culturally rich contexts like South Africa.

The transformation of ethical leadership behaviours and moral pride

The literature review included in Chapter Two and interviews with principals and their deputies indicate that school leaders derive advantages from exhibiting ethical leadership behaviours when they have moral pride. The proposed emotional events theory posits that the good impact of moral pride stemming from ethical leadership practices is unlikely to be uniform among all leaders. Ethical school leadership behaviours represent an objectively positive occurrence; however, the extent to which the school management team experiences pride is contingent upon their interpretation of these behaviours, which is crucial for the Affective Ubuntu leadership model. Maliha (2024) posits that personal attributes may influence the correlation between workplace occurrences and the emotions experienced, hence facilitating the development of these leaders as transformative agents. The researcher characterizes this transformation component in the suggested model as a higher-order construct consisting of six evaluative attributes: morality, trust, accountability, equality, mutual respect, and social justice fairness, as detailed in Chapter Two of this study.

The transformation of ethical leadership behaviours and moral pride among school leaders in favour of this model should function as a fundamental self-assessment of their ability to manage their lives both within and beyond the school environment. These leaders should thereafter assess their ethical leadership behaviours and subsequently experience the sensation of moral pride because of the mandated ethical conduct outcomes of the school. This claim is supported by the research conducted by Saeed Pervaiz and O'Brien (2024) regarding the facilitation of change in education, emphasising how participants instigate and oversee change, alongside with self-assessments and reflections on their development during the transformation process. This significant element in the model should motivate school leaders to value a broadly positive ethical emotional response, such as pride, and should enhance their motivation to experience pride through the ethical leadership behaviours anticipated of them. In this context, while ethical school leadership should exemplify socially desirable and appreciated behaviours, school leaders must cultivate more self-awareness and motivation to feel pride following such actions. This component of the model should promote the positive influence of ethical school leadership behaviours in fostering moral pride among leaders within the educational environment.

This will ascertain the degree to which their ethical leadership actions may cultivate a sense of moral pride among their subordinates inside the school and its surrounding community. The assertions supporting this component in the proposed model are reinforced by the research of Sherchan, Baskota and Saud (2024), which discusses ethics as a transformative force in education from an ethical leadership viewpoint.

The cultivation of ethical leadership behaviours

The AULM improves the evaluation process by positing that the emotional responses of individual leaders to ethical leadership events, rather than the events themselves, dictate the emotions experienced. Daniel-Ozah (2024) elucidates this claim in research concerning morality in educational leadership as a factor influencing institutional management. This aspect of the model indicates that SMTs behave ethically not alone to evade feelings of shame and guilt, but also to augment their sense of achievement and self-esteem through the practice and promotion of ethical leadership behaviours within the educational environment.

This ethical practice in the paradigm is likely to arise from cognitive assessments by subordinates, perceiving their leaders as socially valued ethical figures or recognising a socially desired ethical outcome, including moral achievement. When leaders intentionally nurture the perception that their ethical leadership activities are socially esteemed, this self-assessment elicits the affirmative self-directed emotion of pride. This assertion is echoed in the research conducted by Jeong et al. (2025) which underscores the affective processes of ethical leadership and the significance of moral emotions, particularly ethical leadership behaviours such as trust, humanity, morality, accountability, social justice and the capacity of leaders to address the needs and emotions of others. This component of the model aims to cultivate essential ethical leadership behaviours, emphasising that school leaders must exemplify concepts of justice, honesty, respect, accountability, kindness and self-control as fundamental elements for the model's success. Ethical leadership practices and indiscipline are interconnected issues that undermine the delivery of quality educational leadership and management in institutions globally. The overarching objectives of ethical school leadership and management practices in educational settings, particularly schools, cannot be realised by all stakeholders without rigorous adherence to a culture of ethics and acceptable moral conduct within the educational environment.

Consequently, the development of suitable ethical leadership behaviours outlined in this model is essential for the success of the school and its governance.

Compliance with ethical standards in school management practices by leadership is crucial for the overall well-being of the institution and the school. Consequently, this model, in fostering appropriate ethical behaviours, focuses on enhancing morals, behaviours, and perceptions and conduct vital for rectifying erroneous distinctions between right and wrong, influenced by tradition, culture, religion, and the profession, amongst other ethical misconceptions.

The aspiration of positive moral outcomes

This component of the model is characterised by a noticeable self-worth and heightened self-satisfaction among people in leadership positions within the school and associated organisations. This element acknowledges that positive emotions in ethical leaders, such as ethical aspiration, can expand their temporary thought-action repertoires and augment their lasting personal ethical leadership resources, which include physical, intellectual, social and psychological assets.

This claim supporting the proposed model element is reinforced by the earlier works of Fredrickson's (2001) articulation of the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, which posits that the ability to experience positive ethical moral outcomes is an essential human strength vital to the examination of human flourishing. Arshad, Hassan and Azam (2024) later echoed this assertion in their research on the assessment and impact of observed organisational integrity on employees' ethical behaviour in seeking for positive moral outcomes.

The pursuit of favourable moral outcomes tends to enhance the advancement and growth of ethical school leaders. The concept in the model acknowledges that ethical leaders who experience favourable moral outcomes, particularly those with attitudes indicative of self-referential assessments of competence or value, are more likely to excel in their school leadership and management activities. In this context, witnessing favourable moral outcomes following ethical leadership actions should foster attitudes indicative of a belief in one's competence regarding ethical morality or conduct.

Given that favourable moral outcomes are correlated with self-determination and enhanced self-efficacy in influencing the ethical climate of a school, this model component is likely to significantly impact leaders' performance within the institution or any organisation.

This model component further instils confidence in leaders, reinforcing their belief in their ability to excel in management and leadership roles, enhances their self-ethical perspective and promotes innovative behaviours within their leadership contexts. The articulations and propositions for the model are illuminated in the research conducted by Xu and Ju (2024), which posit that ethical leadership behaviours function as intrinsic rewards for leaders and adopts a moderated mediation model of moral outcomes. Their study examined the advantages of ethical leadership behaviours for ethical leaders, as well as the underlying mechanisms and potential aspirations for positive moral results. Furthermore, the researcher advocates for the proposed model and substantiates the assertions of the authors, positing that when leaders excel in these ethical pursuits, they will attain the necessary moral outcomes, which can enhance and expand their subordinates' enduring and constructive ethical and moral behavioural responses. This enhanced the goal for favourable moral outcomes in the model aids leaders in addressing anticipated problems associated with ethical leadership behaviours, hence improving their in-role ethical leadership and management performance and practices.

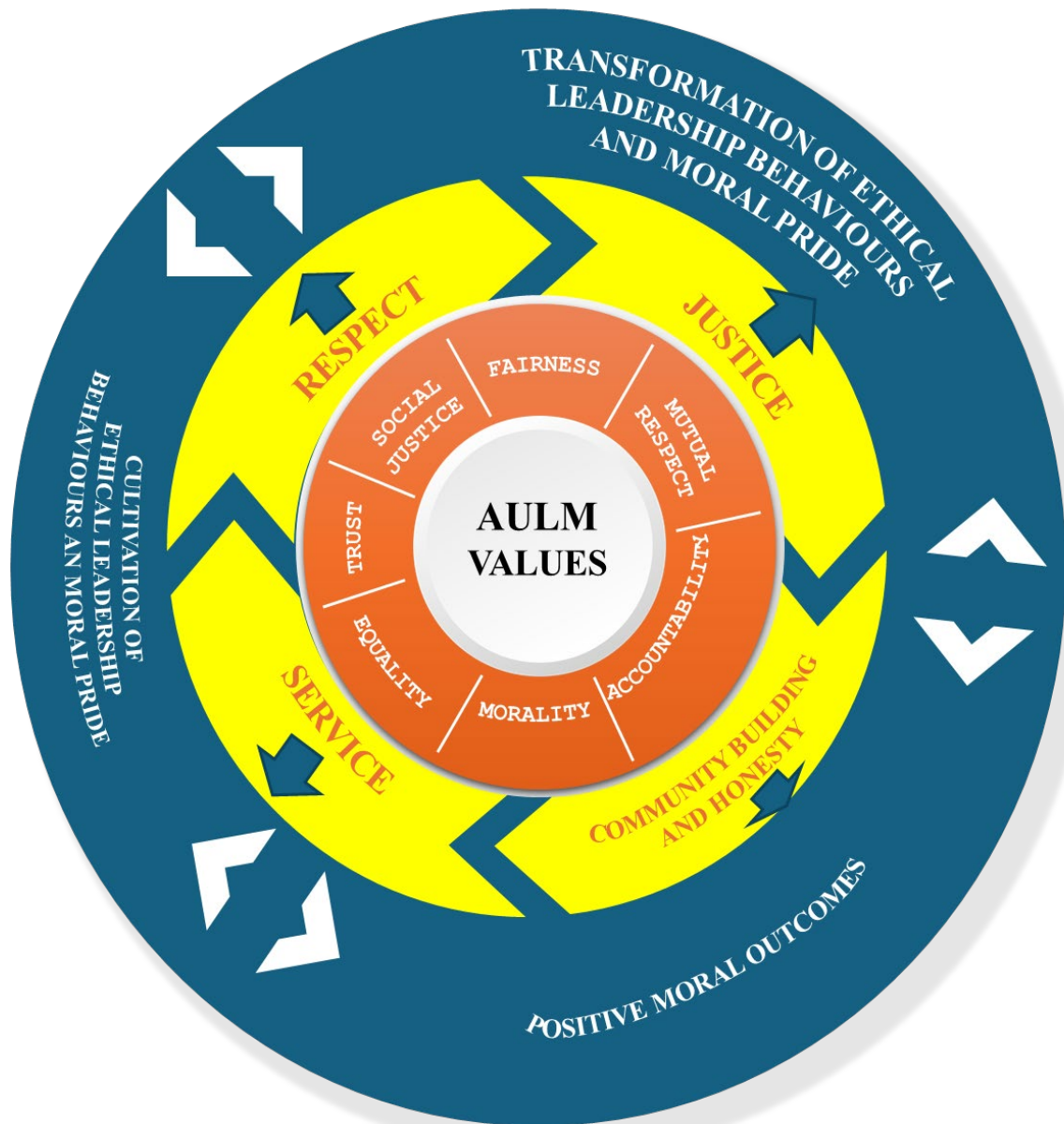


Figure 6.1: Proposed Affective Ubuntu Leadership Model (AULM)

Source: Own source

The AULM integrates African values of respect, justice, service, community building and honesty into a culturally grounded leadership framework. Rooted in Ubuntu philosophy, which stresses shared humanity and interconnectedness, it emphasises ethical, communal leadership.

- **Respect** honours human dignity through attentive listening and deference to elders.
- **Justice** centres on restoration and reconciliation over punishment.
- **Service** calls leaders to humility and prioritising community needs.
- **Community building** fosters collaboration and collective success.
- **Honesty**, through integrity and transparency, strengthens trust.

Together, these values create a model that aligns leadership with African cultural ethics, promoting harmony, accountability and the well-being of the whole community.

Recent developments in communication technologies highlight transformative shifts toward Near-Field Communications (NFC) and Integrated Sensing and Communication (ISAC), signalling significant technological advances that will influence future connectivity and intelligent systems. The study by Liu et al. (2025) contrasts near-field and far-field communications, emphasising the evolution of wireless technologies like XR, digital twins and holographic video, which demand high data rates, low latency and superior reliability—requirements achievable through NFC innovations (Liu et al., 2025).

The survey by Zhang et al. (2025) provides a comprehensive examination of ISAC systems that integrate radar and communication functionalities. Traditional ISAC models struggle with complexities and inefficiencies. However, the infusion of artificial intelligence (AI) methodologies such as machine learning, deep learning and federated learning into ISAC designs promises superior adaptability and efficiency (Zhang et al., 2025). This integration supports advancements in various sectors, including the internet of things (IoT), autonomous vehicles and next-generation wireless systems. These transitions are not solely technical. Educational and leadership models must also evolve to support this innovation-driven era. As observed by Siriphatcharachot et al. (2025), fostering creativity, innovation and teamwork (CIT) skills among SMTs is pivotal.

Teachers' perspectives show that encouraging CIT skills enhances students' ability to adapt to rapid technological changes, bridging the gap between academic knowledge and real-world applications (Siriphatcharachot et al., 2025).

Similarly, Li et al. (2025) emphasise the critical role of computational thinking in STEM education for rural students, highlighting that equipping students with problem-solving and coding skills directly prepares them for participation in a technology-centric workforce. Their "Learning by Making" (LbM) curriculum emphasises real-world applications and empowers students to tackle practical challenges through STEM education (Li et al., 2025). Organisational changes in the public sector also parallel these educational and technological transformations. Alamaa, Hall and Löfgren (2025) argue that the rise of "organisational professionals" in public administration correlates with increasing demands for accountability. Their findings demonstrate how bureaucratic expansion, driven by political and administrative pressures, reflects broader societal shifts toward professionalism and transparency (Alamaa et al., 2025).

Adeoye, Baharun and Munawwaroh (2025) discuss transformational leadership in education, advocating for balancing innovation with accountability and global citizenship. Their work argues that educational leaders must redefine traditional accountability models to foster innovation and prepare students for global engagement. This leadership model emphasises professional development, flexible assessments and community engagement as pillars for sustaining educational excellence in a rapidly changing world (Adeoye et al., 2025). Collectively, these insights emphasise that technology, education and leadership must co-evolve to meet the demands of a dynamic and interconnected global society. Strategic integration of innovative communication technologies, adaptive educational models and ethically grounded leadership practices will be crucial in shaping resilient and future-ready institutions.

6.3.5 Research Questions

The research questions significantly shaped the conclusions, implications and applications of this study. The theoretical literature review, theoretical framework and empirical findings provided the foundation for deriving the research conclusions, implications and applications.

The researcher's observations and insights derived from the analysis of the main research question and the three research sub-questions that guided the study are summarised in this section. The data analysis incorporated the participant's transcripts, examined documentation, interviews, observations, interactive discussions and audio recordings of participants' comments and emergent themes. Research findings were utilised to motivate further research studies and to build suitable training programmes for professional ethics growth and educational policies about ethical guidelines.

6.3.5.1 Main Research Question (MRQ)

- What are the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 in Gauteng Province?

The image produced by the primary research question reveals that, in general, the SMTs and educators perceive the adoption of the ethical leadership paradigm as a beneficial advancement for ethical leadership in schools, despite receiving minimal support from educational authorities in the effective implementation of these ethical standards.

The image further illustrates that, despite certain adverse perceptions concerning ethical leadership issues and the execution of ethical leadership practices in educational institutions, the SMTs and educators recognise the existing gap in educators' ethical training for addressing these challenges.

6.3.5.2 Research Sub question One (RQ1)

- How do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

This question included details regarding the factors affecting ethical leadership decision-making efficacy of the SMT and the interrelations among ethics, honesty, values, integrity, and their individual and collective character.

The research findings revealed that certain essential characteristics of ethical school leadership are associated with the way SMTs make ethical decisions. The emerging themes provided substantial corroboration for each participant's remarks and the diverse elements that influence their ethical leadership decision-making and their profound comprehension of the term "ethics."

The findings also revealed that the participants believe that making appropriate ethical decisions in school leadership and ensuring justice are fundamental to honesty and ethical integrity. Most participants recognised that justice, honesty and integrity are essential for the coherence of ethical decision-making methods. Most participants further argued that without trustworthiness in the process, it would fail to produce the requisite ethical value. The study analysis revealed that most participants involved in ethical decision-making, expressed a greater propensity to trust honest leaders over those with a history of dishonesty. The capacity of SMTs to exhibit commendable characteristics is essential for making ethical decisions.

Participants often asserted that justice, trustworthiness, honesty and integrity are fundamental elements of the values that drive the vehicle to make ethical actions. Moreover, participants identified "integrity" as a fundamental component of ethical leadership criteria essential for implementing ethical behaviours and decisions in school leadership. The participant's belief that the absence of fairness, honesty and integrity, among other ethical attributes, implies that ethical principles that lack a foundation will ultimately vanish, is corroborated by the analysis of the related literature review in the study. This research sub-question revealed unequivocal responses affirming that these ethical traits are vital attributes for the moral conduct of school leadership, as they frequently face decisions involving ethical issues.

In their responses to this sub-question, participants also emphasised the paramount importance of adhering to ethical leadership principles and standards without compromise. The findings suggested that participants' acknowledgment of their organisation's ethical standards was contingent upon their commitment to a set of ethical principles, which they defined as ethical guidelines, encompassing their personal moral values.

While the participants predominantly offered a distinctive viewpoint to the discourse, there was a unanimous agreement that successful ethical decision-making parallels exemplary school leadership performance. The analysis of the data revealed that these articulated principles of ethical leadership of fairness, trust, equality, morality, accountability, social justice, and mutual respect, significantly influenced the participants' ethical leadership behaviour in decision-making.

According to the data analysis findings and emerging themes, the researcher was unable to discern any correlation or disjunction between the ethical school leadership practices of the management team and the decision-making processes. Their overall perception of ethical school leadership, concerning this sub-question, emerged as a vital component for effective ethical leadership and management practices and the promotion of suitable moral leadership practices, as clearly reflected in their varied responses.

6.3.5.3 Research Sub Question Two (RQ2)

- What are the teachers' experiences about the level of professional growth of SMTs in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools?

The findings elicited from this sub-question elucidated the ethical leadership principles and professional development criteria that school leaders must follow to make informed judgments for their institutions. The reoccurring themes indicated that the participants were acutely cognizant of the increase in unethical behaviour, characterised by a pronounced deficiency in ethical awareness and professional development about the issue in extremely restricted contexts. The data derived from this research question revealed deficits in the professional growth, development and ethical awareness of the participants, which appeared to amplify their inclination to advocate for their moral perspectives. All participants unanimously concurred that leading by example exemplifies the highest standard of ethical leadership.

Several participants concurred that it is vital to assess all alternatives prior to choosing the optimal course of action, including identifying the most effective way for addressing an ethical dilemma, the ethical issue at hand and exploring feasible ethical remedies.

The additional consensus replies from participants indicated that unethical activity by the SMT was not grossly prevalent in schools owing to the levels of professional growth, training and development. Data analysis indicated that a key element affecting participants' ethical leadership practices is their belief that the necessary professional training and development policies are essential for improving best practices. Some participants emphasised that examining SMT's prior ethical leadership behaviour before taking their roles could influence their ethical decision-making by providing appropriate professional ethics training where deficiencies exist. All participants unanimously agreed that the factors influencing the SMT's moral judgment and professional competence would likely dictate their leadership style. The participants' judgments regarding this research sub-question indicated that SMT exhibited a somewhat satisfactory level of professional development in leadership and ethical behaviour within their institutions, albeit further room for development and training. The researcher asserts that other SMT participants often depicted themselves favourably in answering this research question, hence requiring the gathering of the teacher's perspectives, experiences and insights regarding the ethical leadership practices of SMT members under the principals' oversight in their respective school settings.

6.3.5.4 Research Sub-question Three (RQ3)

- What is the perspective of teachers on how the DBE and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders?

The primary objective of this research question was to attain a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and assertions regarding the relevant authorities' stance on their inherent responsibilities and the approaches employed by these authorities in addressing unethical behaviours of SMTs. The viewpoints, experiences and emotions expressed by participants were notably similar and adversely affected the SMTs, underscoring the lack of support from the DBE and other relevant statutory bodies or organisations tasked with aiding schools in ethical leadership matters. The answers to this sub-research question illuminated the potential disjuncture between the SMT's ethical leadership practices and their ethical decision-making processes, emphasising the existing gap in the strategic ethical school leadership policy and guidelines within the educational system.

Their unanimous assertion is that SMTs are responsible for clearly and unmistakably adhering to and communicating the ethical leadership management and practices agenda of the school and the department. The transcript analysis indicated that participants held varied perspectives on the expectations from authorities for this sub-research question. The responses revealed that participants approached this subject from a forward-looking developmental perspective, emphasising their views on growth enhancement measures. The predominant theme that emerged from the responses to this research sub-question was that most participants concurred that the DBE and the pertinent statutory regulatory authorities should assume leadership in formulating a framework for the implementation and governance of this ethical leadership response. Respondents primarily said that inconsistency and disparity in the implementation of rules and regulations within the school environment represent an ethical leadership issue that the DBE is unable to address with guidelines. Some participants indicated that their personal growth and progress in ethical leadership are evident in their ethical decision-making frameworks, which adhere to the school's laws, despite limited direction from the necessary authorities. Primarily, based on participant replies and the researcher's analysis, it indicates that key methods to improve ethical leadership rules and standards in schools are urgently required.

6.4 IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study hold considerable significance for the educational community, institutions, and SMTs. The study underscores the significance of ethical leadership practices in influencing the conduct and involvement of SMTs and teachers. School leaders must prioritise and exemplify ethical leadership practices, encompassing trust, justice, respect, mutual respect, accountability, morality, and equality, among other values that yield both direct and indirect consequences. The findings revealed that these principles can foster a healthy work environment and encourage essential ethical leadership practices and preferred engagement in discretionary ethical behaviours.

The study emphasises opportunities for enhancement in both individual and collective leadership, specifically with ethical leadership behaviours, mentoring and the clarity of leadership roles. SMTs who prioritise improving communication regarding ethics, offer clear elucidations of ethical guidelines and actively endorse and promote ethical behaviour are likely to display better outcomes, as evidenced by the data. Furthermore, based on the findings and their consequences, it is essential to delineate responsibilities, expectations and ethical leadership practices to guarantee that SMTs possess a comprehensive awareness of their roles within the institution and its environment. It further indicated that school leaders perpetuate this environment by cultivating a supportive, ethical and inclusive culture, acknowledging and rewarding ethical behaviour, and offering chances for professional advancement and ethical leadership development.

The study directly implies that fostering an ethical atmosphere that promotes and supports discretionary ethical behaviours might result in elevated moral conduct, improved relationships and student outcomes, and overall school performance. The considerable positive link between ethical school leadership practices and moral conduct highlights the critical role of ethical leadership in shaping SMT's adherence to accepted ethical behaviours. The findings also revealed that school leadership is likely to acknowledge the influence of their ethical conduct on subordinate behaviour and actively endeavour to promote and exemplify ethical behaviour. A significant conclusion is that, by doing so, they might inspire and motivate subordinates to go beyond their official work requirements, in so doing contributing to the overall ethical success of the school.

Considering the results of the data analysis, the main research question, sub-questions, observations, arguments and conclusions that have been derived, this study's findings clearly reveal a diverse range of both adverse and beneficial consequences for SMT's ethical leadership practices within the educational setting. Qualitative research often depends on participants' narratives, behaviours, attitudes and experiences for its data. So, the findings of a singular qualitative study may not consistently yield a definitive basis for drawing accurate conclusions.

The implications are that personal perspectives frequently serve as the foundation for data acquired in qualitative research. The researcher's analysis of the data concerning the study's practical implications yielded limited insights; yet critical.

The findings suggested that SMTs demonstrating loyalty, trustworthiness, integrity, honesty, respect, effective listening and communication, discipline and fairness were inclined to make decisions consistent with their ethical leadership principles and guidelines. SMTs exhibiting sufficient ethical leadership training and knowledge are likely to effectively comply with these ethical principles and recommendations. The study's additional implications indicated that SMT could enhance their ethical standards by confronting unethical behaviour inside their institutions. The success and sustainability of any school rely on its SMT leadership, upholding a high level of professionalism and being well prepared. The study's conclusions may be derived solely from the data analysis, as metrics of responsibility; justice, honesty, and respect have become increasingly prevalent in the educational community.

Participants underscored the significance of mutual accountability, ethical leadership and personal responsibility. The participants determined that school leaders must exhibit transparency and accountability in their decision-making to foster trust and confidence among their subordinates on their capacity for ethical judgment. Furthermore, participants indicated that accountability and ethical responsibility could enhance trust and confidence in leaders. The study revealed that Ubuntu leadership principles were essential to the participants' ethical leadership practices and ethical decisions making. The research highlighted that obstacles in ethical leadership could directly influence participants' Ubuntu leadership ideals and their ethical awareness. A significant finding from the findings obtained from the interviews was that all participants unanimously concurred that an SMT's integrity, character, fairness, respect and trustworthiness must be reflected in their consistent ethical leadership behaviours and practices. The study's implications enhanced the existing knowledge of the SMT's ethical leadership practices and decision-making within the educational setting and environment.

This investigation, based on other previous studies, substantiates the theory that the ethical awareness and leadership roles of SMT are more inclined to demonstrate optimistic ethical attitudes and elevated levels of ethical motivation in their leadership and practices.

6.5 APPLICATION

The contributions of participants in this study provided diverse findings that corroborate prior research claims. The results of the data collection and the emerging themes from the analysis of participants' transcripts indicated that these opportunities for the practical application of ethical school leadership might be implemented in their set domain. The DBE, in collaboration with its pertinent partners, must deliver training as a component of their programmes to enhance ethical education within the schooling system. Participants recommend that the department and its associated partners and regulatory bodies incorporate ethical school leadership training and ethics into the education curriculum for SMTs and prospective graduates, ensuring that ethical considerations are integrated into their training and awareness. More importantly, the DBE should foster and implement an environment conducive to competent ethical leadership and fruitful collaboration among colleagues and subordinates within the educational setting.

This will enable SMT to instil honesty and fairness to attain superior ethical outcomes in the decision-making process. The participants recommended school leaders to effectively instil honesty and integrity as foundational principles for ethical decision-making. The findings revealed that these fundamental rules demonstrate that ethical leadership influences the value of the SMT's ethical decision-making. SMTs ought to instil leadership characterised by trust, integrity, respect, fairness and honesty in their decision-making processes about ethical and unethical conduct. Participants advised that school leaders exemplify the traits of trust, integrity, respect, fairness and honesty in their leadership practices. SMTs should regularly assess their organisation's ethics to ensure adherence to ethical standards that guide decision-making.

Participants further emphasised that school leaders must cultivate an environment of transparency and integrity inside their organisations and in their personal contacts with subordinates and colleagues. The findings indicated that departmental policies are essential in influencing school leaders' ethical decision-making and leadership performance requirements. This will enable school leadership to consistently evaluate their past actions, their impacts and the responses of school staff to facilitate improved ethical decision-making. Participants advised that senior management should exemplify ethical behaviour for their subordinates and motivate them to engage in ongoing self-reflection over their actions. The transcripts indicated that SMT ought to promote and support staff in making ethical decisions by cultivating a culture that embraces the positive effects of all ethical decision-making processes. The implementation of these guidelines and findings is expected to enable school leadership to effectively exhibit loyalty, trustworthiness, integrity, honesty, respect, active listening, communication, discipline, and justice in ethical leadership practices and decision-making. Subsequent data analysis revealed that these fundamental ethical leadership principles are associated with the influence of the SMT ethical decision-making value.

6.6 RESEARCH LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

This qualitative investigation encountered several limitations and delimitations, as a quantitative approach would not have effectively fostered a suitable environment for this research. This viewpoint is supported by Takoma (2024) in their work on research design, encompassing qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method approaches. The research limitations in educational research, as described by Sjölund and Lindvall (2024), delineated the elements of the researcher's study that could potentially constrain or undermine its validity, generalisability or reliability. The delimitations are the boundaries that the researcher intentionally established to define the scope of this study. This claim is supported by Kumar, Eaton, Mindzak and Morrison (2024) in their study on research and academic integrity. The study's limitation was to explore the SMTs' experiences and ethical leadership practices in managing schools.

Limitation was for 24 participants across multiple secondary schools in the Tshwane West District and an analysis of relevant ethical school leadership documents that were not in violation the statutes governing the provision of personal information. These set boundaries were successfully navigated by the researcher. Face-to-face interviews with study participants were impractical owing to physical distance and the COVID-19 regulations, which had not yet been fully relaxed in the school setting, and as suggested and advised throughout the ethical clearance approval procedure and certificates. The limits of the research design influenced the researcher's prior knowledge and delineated the parameters of the study inquiry, therefore, influencing the internal and external validity of the research. The primary limitation of the study was its time-consuming nature, characteristic of all thorough qualitative research.

The data gathering process was laborious, as it relied on scheduled appointments with individual participants and adhered to the stringent standards of the DBE, which prohibited disruptions to teaching and learning time in schools. The entire process spanned over 12 weeks owing to the participants' limited availability. Furthermore, the many viewpoints were documented and analysed according to the researcher's constrained comprehension. Furthermore, when qualitative research explores personal interactions for data collection, discussions frequently diverge from the primary focus, with participants expressing their unique grievances and unhappiness regarding their environments. A second potential issue with qualitative research is that a specific problem may remain undetected, therefore, constraining the researcher's interpretations. Personal institutional experiences and knowledge of the participants further shaped the observations and conclusions pertaining to the research problem.

Owing to the open-ended nature of qualitative research, participants exerted greater control over the data collected. In certain situations, the researcher was unable to objectively validate the results against the participants' responses. This qualitative investigation necessitated a labour-intensive analytical process, including categorisation and recoding. Likewise, qualitative research requires a seasoned researchers' high interview and probing skills to acquire and decipher the desired data from the selected cohort of respondents.

The researcher was required to transcribe data from individual interviews with participants from the six involved schools, in addition to documents provided for examination. Despite potential data loss during transcription, the researcher meticulously reviewed the recordings. The volume of data acquired from empirical investigations was substantial, yet enlightening and captivating. Coding the data to identify occurrence patterns that would explain the study's conclusions proved challenging yet surmountable. Several participants seemed less dedicated to the research interviews in the beginning, which proved problematic at times due to their varied prior experiences with research participation. An initial deficiency in commitment that occasionally impeded the study in the beginning, but gradually improved.

Another issue with the study was the sincere disturbance, as the researcher unintentionally had to enter the participants' personal space during the interactions. This was quickly resolved by establishing a rapport among the principals, deputy principals, departmental heads and teachers involved in the study. Notwithstanding these constraints, the study provided the researcher with valuable insights and successfully met its goals and purpose. The delimitations of this study were deliberate since the researcher confined the research questions to three to maintain the study's original aim and avoid ambiguity and incompleteness in the findings. This delimitation of not pursuing too many research questions on this study enabled the researcher to identify only the three essential research questions, concentrating specifically on the issue of ethical school leadership and management, that was narrowed down to three themes. Geographical delimitation was employed as the study concentrated solely on a specific education district, rather than attempting to generalise findings to the broader Tshwane District or region. The intended delimitations included a cap of 24 participants and six schools. The decision to utilise a qualitative research methodology, while deliberately omitting mixed methods or quantitative approaches, was dictated by the research questions. The decision to limit the study to a single theoretical framework while excluding other perspectives was deliberately made to illustrate the study's recognition of its constraints and its dedication to concentrating on ethical school leadership and management practices.

6.7 STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents several recommendations derived from the findings related to the main and sub-research questions detailed in Chapter 1, as well as the conclusions drawn from the literature research in Chapter 2. Primarily, these recommendations will be articulated within the framework described in Chapter 5 of this study. In the main, the researcher proposes recommendations for the SMTs as a vital cohort of this research inquiry. The researcher further presents some recommendations for teachers, general school staff, parents and the district office that are distinctly connected to the main research question and its sub-questions, as several participants provided thought-provoking statements and articulations regarding these other integral school associates, making it essential for the researcher to articulate these insights.

6.7.1 Recommendations for SMTs

Given that the SMTs led by the principal as the primary accounting officer responsible for the daily operations of schools, the researcher, following the presentation of the data in this study, recommends the subsequent measures regarding the ethical leadership and management of the school. SMTs should take a proactive role in promoting ethical conduct by formulating ethical rules specific to their schools, ensuring alignment with the broader guidelines established by the DBE. To mitigate or eradicate unethical behaviour, it is essential that these ethical frameworks be integrated into the daily operational culture of the school. In addition to rule-setting, SMTs must train, educate and implement ethics awareness initiatives targeted at addressing unethical conduct among staff, students and parents. To encourage transparency and accountability, schools should introduce a confidential suggestion box accessible to staff, parents and learners for reporting any experienced or suspected unethical behaviour. Furthermore, SMTs should actively implement actions and activities in accordance with District directives, focusing on enhancing professional ethics awareness and development within their institutions. This may include utilising tools such as an ethical awareness grid designed specifically for staff engagement.

Finally, adopting a comprehensive school ethics operational model would provide a structured, systemic approach to embedding ethical principles across all levels of school governance and daily practices.

6.7.2 Recommendations to teachers

This study sought to examine the literature on adherence to ethical school leadership practices as perceived by teachers, highlighting both ethical and unethical activities. The ethical leadership behaviours observed among these participants encompass integrity, compassion for others, equity and justice, promoting ethically acceptable conduct within the school, transparency, exemplifying behaviour, and the SMT assuming ownership and accountable for their activities.

The researcher, after meticulously analysing their responses, offers the following recommendations:

SMTs should actively coordinate and lead ethical activities and initiatives aimed at mitigating unethical conduct among teachers. By taking a leadership role, SMTs can model ethical behaviour and reinforce a culture of accountability within the school. A key strategy for achieving this objective is the establishment of professional development programmes specifically focused on ethics awareness for teachers, ensuring that ethical principles are consistently reinforced throughout teachers' professional journeys. Additionally, schools should implement a district-sanctioned "Ethics Week" programme, organised and conducted by teachers on a quarterly basis and championed by the SMT. This initiative would serve as an ongoing platform to discuss ethical challenges, celebrate attained ethical practices and further embed ethical values into the daily operations and culture of the school.

6.7.3 Recommendations for general school staff

Conversely, owing to the failure to adhere to ethical school leadership standards, numerous unethical behaviours were consistently noted by most participants in the examined literature and interviews referring to the general school staff. This encompassed a lack of respect for others' dignity, manifestations of favouritism, the prioritisation of personal interests, irresponsibility, and indiscreet dissemination of information among the school.

These unethical activities adversely affect the work habits and ethical standards of the entire school community; therefore, the researcher recommends the following:

SMTs must champion effective communication about ethics, sanctioned by the District, to ensure that all school staff receive comprehensive elucidations of ethical regulations and expectations. By promoting clear and consistent messaging, SMTs can endorse and acknowledge ethical behaviour across the entire school community, reinforcing a shared commitment to integrity. In addition to communication efforts, SMTs should develop and implement ethical education training programmes designed to foster honest communication, establish clear ethical norms and policies and support ongoing activities that encourage ethical self-reflection. These initiatives are critical for embedding a sustainable ethical culture within the school environment, guiding both individual and collective conduct.

6.7.4 Recommendation for Parents

While ethical school leadership is a global phenomenon, as discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of this study, parental involvement in the control and management of student ethical behaviour has been identified as a crucial factor contributing to acceptable social ethical conduct both within and outside the school environment. Considering the significant emergence of this essential component, the researcher subsequently recommends as follows:

The SMT needs to implement parental development programmes that emphasise the promotion of ethical mentorship and the establishment of peer support groups to foster a collaborative approach to ethical education within the school community. In addition, the creation of a learner ethics reporting system would provide a structured and accessible platform for students to report unethical behaviour, thereby assisting the SMT in maintaining a transparent and accountable school environment. Furthermore, the SMT should encourage non-formal parental involvement programmes, enabling parents to actively participate in the regulation and oversight of student ethical behaviours. These initiatives collectively aim to strengthen the partnership between the school and families, ensuring that ethical values are consistently reinforced both within the school setting and at home.

6.7.5 Recommendations for the Education District Office

Despite the implementation of awareness and regulations programmes preventing ethical conduct by the government and the DBE to regulate and monitor school leadership behaviour, the researcher, following the presentation of the findings, proposes that:

The District office should take a proactive role in strengthening ethical leadership by conducting mandatory ethics awareness seminars for SMTs biannually. These seminars would aim to enhance SMTs' vigilance regarding ethical practices and improve their ability to implement and sustain ethical leadership within their schools. Regular engagement with such training would not only reinforce existing knowledge but also update SMT members on emerging ethical challenges and best practices.

Policies and programmes focused on ethics and moral conduct should be systematically provided to SMTs to support the subsequent training and upskilling of their personnel. This structured approach ensures that ethical expectations are consistently communicated and understood across all school levels. Regular district-led visits to schools should also be conducted to monitor, guide and assist in the practical application of ethical leadership practices in school management, reinforcing accountability and offering support where needed.

To ensure that ethical leadership is embedded from the outset, it is advisable to mandate "ethics training and awareness" as a legal prerequisite prior to the appointment of individuals to SMTs. Beyond initial selection, the integration of formal ethical leadership training programmes into postgraduate education in educational management and leadership should be made compulsory. This would ensure that prospective SMT members are equipped not only with managerial competencies but also with a deep understanding of moral leadership principles. Finally, it is recommended that the District establish a community of practice dedicated to ethical school leadership. This initiative would create an ongoing professional network where SMT members can collaboratively share strategies, discuss ethical dilemmas and support one another in fostering a strong culture of ethical leadership within their respective schools.

6.8 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study's results created a framework for investigating further research and understanding how SMTs implement ethical leadership practices and decision-making experiences in school management. The study's findings and recommendations for further research on the ethical school leadership and management practices provide a more profound insights for more focused quantitative research, which should include learners and the SGB's perceptions of ethical school leadership. The analysis of data concerning trust, honesty, trustworthiness, respect, integrity, fairness, social justice, equality and reinforced by moral principles such as repentance, humility, active listening, and discipline may also warrant additional research to enhance understanding of the factors influencing SMT ethical leadership practices and their impact on managerial performance.

Subsequent study may investigate how SMTs foster, educate and guide their team members, as well as the influence of these aspects on their organisations, incorporating real primary ethical incidents and personal moral actions is an additional approach that might be employed to identify factors influencing ethical decision-making among school leaders in a comparable geographic area. The influences of organisational hierarchy, individual and familial values, and ethical principles seem to change participants' moral judgments regarding what they deem "right or wrong" in ethics, warranting research that is more comprehensive. Examining the challenges encountered by SMT decision-making processes that are amenable to the beneficial impact of ethical school leadership practices constitutes another pertinent area of research. Given the significant deficiency in the literature concerning the lived experiences of ethical school leadership practices among SMTs, a comprehensive analysis may be warranted to juxtapose the findings of prior research with those of the ongoing study. This study has successfully fulfilled its aims and objectives by exploring the SMTs' ethical leadership practices in managing schools in selected South Africa's Gauteng secondary schools.

Several connected matters by other parties connected to the school necessitate further investigation, specifically, it is essential to validate the correctness of the results across various schools within and outside different circuits. Considering the findings of this study, the researcher recommends the following for further research:

The research was limited to six secondary schools within the Tshwane West Circuit, which presents a limitation in terms of the generalisability of the findings. It is, therefore, recommended that future studies expand to include a broader sample of secondary schools within the Tshwane West Circuit as well as schools from other provincial circuits. This broader scope would provide deeper insights into the ethical leadership practices across various districts and provincial contexts. Additionally, in-depth research incorporating parents and learners as primary participants is necessary to gain a comprehensive understanding of their attitudes, acceptance, expectations and the nuanced perceptions of ethics and morality within the school environment. Furthermore, a comparative analysis of the ethical leadership roles played by SMTs and SGBs in selected South African secondary schools within the same circuits would offer valuable perspectives on the alignment, challenges, and opportunities in fostering ethical leadership across different school governance structures.

6.9 REFLECTIONS OF THE RESEARCHER

The existing research in ethical school leadership, however, lacking in some respects on empirical evidence consistently indicates a favourable correlation between ethical school leadership and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB). Ughulu (2024) articulated this claim in the study on ethical leadership within contemporary organisations, especially referencing the prior work of Brown and Treviño (2006), who similarly emphasised this correlation. Furthermore, several investigations have corroborated this concept. Lim (2024) identified a positive correlation between ethical leadership and group-level OCB in the context of Generation Z's perception of ethical leadership.

While further empirical investigation is necessary to solidify this relationship, these studies, along with the current research, collectively enhance the existing evidence supporting the favourable link between ethical school leadership and organisational citizenship behaviour, particularly in various organisational contexts emphasising ethics. The researchers' assertions and contributions on ethical school leadership and the role of the SMT are likely to have included previously unconsidered subtleties. The literature review and theoretical framework analyses enabled the researcher to cultivate perspectives that influenced the organisation of the study and guided the data framing process. This study employed a qualitative design for the investigation.

This study design yielded comprehensive information. The utilisation of observations, interviews, and document analysis as data collection instruments enhanced the researcher's competencies. The study validated the researchers' prior reservations regarding the complexities of engaging participants in a case study, necessitating the establishment of a professional relationship founded on trust. This research study enhanced the researcher's comprehension of the challenges faced by the SMT in fulfilling their ethical roles and responsibilities. These reflections are echoed in the work of Zacarias and Flores (2024), wherein they explored school leaders' ethical leadership and teachers' organisational citizenship behaviours.

6.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY

The objective of this qualitative study was to deliver comprehensive responses to a primary research question and three subsidiary questions that guided the investigation and analysis of the literature review and theoretical framework concerning ethical school leadership and the complexities encountered by SMTs in making ethical decisions within the school environment and, at times, within the surrounding communities. The relevance of Kitchener's five-model ethical leadership paradigm, the main theoretical framework guiding this study, was assessed for its applicability. The study revealed that participants

predominantly concurred that a top-down approach was the most effective method for communication and the regulation of ethical behaviour. The study serves as a guide for future research on ethical school leadership practices in decision-making. The study contributed to the current literature on ethical school leadership in decision-making and established a model and framework for future research examining ethical leadership principles in the educational context. In today's intricate ethical landscape, there is a necessity to cultivate ethical leaders that can inspire and encourage their followers towards optimal moral performance and practices.

This study indicates that several academics have concentrated only on instances of ethical school leadership practices in industrialised nations, like Europe, the USA and Singapore. Nonetheless, investigations into the interdependent relationship among ethical school leadership, organisational ethics and moral conduct in leadership remain nascent within the African diaspora and the Global South, yielding limited academic advancement and outcomes. Limited research has investigated the direct correlation between ethical school leadership and ethical practices. Nonetheless, the interplay of ethical school leadership, well-being, ethical leadership practices and ethical work behaviour remains unexamined. Further investigation is required into ethical school leadership as an intervening construct and ethical practices as a moderating variable, given the prospective research impetus. Consequently, it is posited that a systematic evaluation centred on ethical school leadership is necessary to evaluate its impact on employees' learning and ethical conduct in their everyday tasks.

The objective of this study was not to conduct a systematic review and critique of research on ethical school leadership practices in school management, but rather to identify gaps in ethical school leadership practices, propose mitigating solutions and contribute to the emerging body of knowledge for the effective and ethical management of schools by those in leadership roles. Based on these literary contributions and theoretical frameworks, ethical school leadership will continue to serve as a mediating factor between emotional moral ownership of knowledge and the ethical concealment of knowledge by those responsible for providing ethical leadership within the school.

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APPENDIX A: UNISA ETHICAL CLEARANCE



UNISA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

Date: 12 August 2024

Ref: **2024/08/12/000000130/03/RB**

Name: **Mr. Freddy Abílio Mlambo**

Student No.: **7706189**

Decision: Ethics Approval form

Dear **Mr. Freddy Abílio Mlambo**

Researcher(s): Name: **Mr. Freddy Abílio Mlambo**

E-mail address: 7706189@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **012 481 2813**

Supervisor (s): Name: **Prof VP Mahlangu**

E-mail address: mahlavp@unisa.ac.za

Telephone: **012 429 8550**

Title of research: Exploring School Management Teams' Ethical Leadership Practices in Managing Schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province.

Qualification: PhD

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee for the above-mentioned research. Ethics approval is granted for the period **2024/08/12 to 2029/08/12**.

*The **write risk level** application was reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee on **12 August 2024** in compliance with the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.*

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to the relevant guidelines set out in the Unisa Covid-19 position statement on research ethics attached.
2. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.



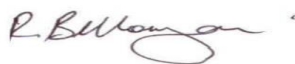
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3. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the UNISA College of Education Ethics Review Committee.
4. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
5. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing.
6. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
7. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
8. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date **2029/08/12**. Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

*The reference number **2024/08/12/00000130/03/RB** should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.*

Kind regards,



Prof RB Monyai
Acting Head: CEDU Research
monyarb@unisa.ac.za



Prof Mpine Makoe
Executive Dean: CEDU
gakisme@unisa.ac.za



Approved - decision template – updated 16 Feb 2017

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APPENDIX B: GDE ETHICAL CLEARANCE



GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	20 January 2025
Validity of Research Approval:	08 February 2025– 30 September 2025 2025/518
Name of Researcher:	Mlambo FA
Address of Researcher:	1544 Mount Anderson Street Kirkney Village
Telephone Number:	082 939 398 3
Email address:	mlambfa@unisa.ac.za
Research Topic:	Exploring school Management Teams' Ethical Leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15 Gauteng Province
Name of University:	UNISA
Type of qualification	PhD
Number and type of schools:	6 Secondary Schools
District/s/HO	Tshwane West

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management

7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001

Tel: (011) 355 0488

Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za

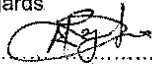
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Open Rubric

1. Letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
2. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.
3. Because of the relaxation of COVID 19 regulations researchers can collect data online, telephonically, physically access schools or may make arrangements for Zoom with the school Principal. Requests for such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.
4. The Researchers are advised to wear a mask at all times, Social distance at all times, Provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and Sanitise frequently.
5. A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.
6. A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.
7. The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.
8. Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.
9. Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.
10. Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.
11. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.
12. The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.
13. The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.
14. On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.
15. The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.
16. Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards



Mr. David Bapela

CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 20/01/2025

2

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Tel: (011) 355 0488

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Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

APPENDIX C: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT THE STUDY



Eng: P Moloi
Sub-Directorate: ISSP
Tel: 012 725 3568
Ref no: 8/4/4/1/2

TO: THE PRINCIPALS
HOËRSKOOL HERCULES, HOËRSKOOL AKASIA,
HOËRSKOOL LANGENHOVEN,
RUABOHLALE, TIYELELANI AND SOSHANGUVE
SOUTH SECONDARY SCHOOLS

CC: CIRCUIT MANAGERS

FROM: MS YVONNE MOOKE
DISTRICT DIRECTOR
TSHWANE WEST DISTRICT

DATE: 19 MARCH 2025

REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH: MR MLAMBO FA

The purpose of this letter serves to indicate that approval has been granted to Mr Mlambo FA to conduct research at your school in respect of the study indicated below.

Research Topic: "Exploring School Management Teams' Ethical Leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province".

Because of the relaxation of COVID-19 regulations, researchers can collect data online, telephonically or physically access the schools, or may make arrangements for Zoom/virtual meeting with the school Principal. Such arrangements should be submitted to the GDE Education Research and Knowledge Management directorate.

The researchers are advised to always wear a mask, social distance at all times, provide a vaccination certificate or negative COVID-19 test, not older than 72 hours, and sanitise frequently.

A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB). Teaching and learning should not be compromised.

Yours sincerely

Ms Yvonne Mook
District Director
Date: 20 March 2025

"Unlocking Potential, one learner at a time!"

Office of the Director – Tshwane West District

(Mabopane, Winterveldt, Ga-Rankuwa, Soshanguve, Kameeldrift, Rosslyn, Akasia, Pretoria North, Mountain View, Roseville, Capital Park, Hercules, Pretoria West, Lotus Garden)

Private Bag X38, ROSSLYN 0200. Tel (012)725 1300

Yvonne.Mooke@gauteng.gov.za; Web: www.education.gpg.gov.za

Open Rubric

APPENDIX D: PERMISSION LETTER TO THE PRINCIPALS

RE: request for permission to conduct research at your school.

The Principal

F A Mlambo
P O ox 29657
Sunnyside
0002

Dear Sir/ Madam

RE: Request for participation to conduct research at your school.

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I, FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO conducting a study as part of my research as a doctoral student entitled “**Exploring School Management Teams’ ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province**” at the University of South Africa. The Ethics Committee of the College of Education, UNISA, has given permission for the study. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your seniority as principal with valuable experience and expertise related to my research topic. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail should you agree to take part. The importance of ethical school leadership in education is substantial and well documented. In this interview, I would like to have your views and opinions on this topic. This information can be used to improve the critical importance of ethical school leadership.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately thirty minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location at a time convenient to you. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. With your kind permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of accurate information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information you provide will be considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained on a password-protected computer for 5 years in my locked office. The benefits of this study are to provide valuable information to the Gauteng DBE, as well as other stakeholders in education. You will not be reimbursed or receive any incentives for your participation in the research. If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO on +27 82 939 3983 or email mlambof61@gmail.com.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at +27 82 939 3983 or by e-mail at mlambof61@gmail.com. I look forward to speaking to you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign the consent form.

Yours Sincerely
Freddy Abilio Mlambo

Researcher’s name
UNISA Student
7706189

Researcher’s signature:

Date

APPENDIX E: PERMISSION LETTER TO DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

RE: request for permission to conduct research at your school.

The Deputy Principal

F A Mlambo
P O Box 29657
Sunnyside
0002

Dear Sir/ Madam

RE: Request for participation to conduct research

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I, FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO conducting a study as part of my research as a doctoral student entitled “**Exploring School Management Teams’ ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province**” at the University of South Africa. The Ethics Committee of the College of Education, UNISA, has given permission for the study. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your seniority as deputy principal with valuable experience and expertise related to my research topic. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail should you agree to take part. The importance of ethical school leadership in education is substantial and well documented. In this interview, I would like to have your views and opinions on this topic. This information can be used to improve the critical importance of ethical school leadership. Your participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately thirty minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location at a time convenient to you. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences.

With your kind permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of accurate information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information you provide will be considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained on a password-protected computer for 5 years in my locked office. The benefits of this study are to provide valuable information to the Gauteng DBE, as well as other stakeholders in education. You will not be reimbursed or receive any incentives for your participation in the research. If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO on +27 82 939 3983 or email mlambof61@gmail.com. If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at +27 82 939 3983 or by e-mail at mlambof61@gmail.com. I look forward to speaking to you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign the consent form.

Yours Sincerely

Freddy Abilio Mlambo
Researcher’s name
UNISA Student 7706189

Researcher’s signature:

Date

APPENDIX F: PERMISSION LETTER TO DEPARTMENTAL HEADS (HOD)

RE: request for permission to conduct research at your school.

The Head of Department

F A Mlambo
P.O. Box 29657
Sunnyside
0002

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a research study I, FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO conducting a study as part of my research as a doctoral student entitled “**Exploring School Management Teams’ ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province**” at the University of South Africa. The Ethics Committee of the College of Education, UNISA, has given permission for the study. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because as head of department in your school and for your valuable experience and expertise related to my research topic. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail should you agree to take part. The importance of ethical school leadership in education is substantial and well documented. In this interview, I would like to have your views and opinions on this topic. This information can be used to improve the critical importance of ethical school leadership.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately thirty minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location at a time convenient to you. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. With your kind permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of accurate information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained on a password-protected computer for 5 years in my locked office. The benefits of this study are to provide valuable information to the Gauteng DBE, as well as other stakeholders in education. You will not be reimbursed or receive any incentives for your participation in the research. If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO on +27 82 939 3983 or email mlambof61@gmail.com.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at +27 82 939 3983 or by e-mail at mlambof61@gmail.com. I look forward to speaking to you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project.

If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign the consent form.

Yours sincerely

Freddy Abilio Mlambo
Researcher’s name
UNISA Student 7706189

Researcher’s signature:

Date:

APPENDIX G: PERMISSION LETTER TO TEACHERS

RE: Request for permission to conduct research at your school.

The Teacher

F A Mlambo
P.O. Box 29657
Sunnyside
0002

Dear Sir/Madam

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I, Freddy Abilio Mlambo conducting a study as part of my research as a doctoral student entitled “**Exploring School Management Teams’ ethical leadership practices in managing schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province**” at the University of South Africa. The Ethics Committee of the College of Education, UNISA, has given permission for the study. I have purposefully identified you as a possible participant because of your valuable experience and expertise related to my research topic. I would like to provide you with more information about this project and what your involvement would entail should you agree to take part. The importance of ethical school leadership in education is substantial and well documented. In this interview, I would like to have your views and opinions on this topic. This information can be used to improve the critical importance of ethical school leadership.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately thirty minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location at a time convenient to you. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you so wish. Furthermore, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time without any negative consequences. With your kind permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of accurate information and later transcribed for analysis. Shortly after the transcription has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or to clarify any points. All information you provide is considered completely confidential. Your name will not appear in any publication resulting from this study and any identifying information will be omitted from the report. However, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used. Data collected during this study will be retained on a password-protected computer for 5 years in my locked office. The benefits of this study are to provide valuable information to the Gauteng DBE, as well as other stakeholders in education. You will not be reimbursed or receive any incentives for your participation in the research. If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact FREEDY ABILIO MLAMBO on +27 82 939 3983 or email mlambof61@gmail.com.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at +27 82 939 3983 or by e-mail at mlambof61@gmail.com. I look forward to speaking to you and thank you in advance for your assistance in this project. If you accept my invitation to participate, I will request you to sign the consent form.

Yours sincerely
Freddy Abilio Mlambo
Researcher’s name
UNISA Student 7706189

Researcher’s signature:

Date:

APPENDIX H: INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPANTS



Informed Consent

I have read the information presented in the information letter about the study in Education. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and add any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses. I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous. I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher. With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

I, the participants in this study, have been informed on the subsequent critical subjects:

- I shall be given a copy of this informed consent from to keep.
- Participation in this exercise is voluntary.
- I am free to decline to participate in this research project, or I can withdraw my participation at any time without any prejudice.
- The information collected from this research will be stored as confidential as credible. Participants' real names will not be used in the outcome and all documents, transcripts and data will be kept in secure cabinet in the researcher's place, and no individual except the researcher will have access to them. Participants' names will not be utilized and any identifying personal information will be circumvented.
- Participant's signature below means that an individual agrees to participate in this research exercise.

Participants' Name (Print Name) : _____

Participant Signature : _____ Date : _____

Researcher Name: Freddy Abilio Mlambo

Researchers signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX I: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO PRINCIPALS

Title of the interviewee: _____

Current position of the interviewee: _____

Gender of the interviewee: _____

1. What is your level of education and experience?

Diploma	
Diploma, Degree and above	

2. How many teachers are you responsible for?

21 to 40	
41 and above	

3. How many learners are in your school?

Below 300	
301 to 350	
351 and above	

Q 4: Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

Q 5: For how long have you been a principal in your school?

Q 6: Can you describe your current roles and responsibilities as principal?

Q 7: Do you implement all the roles and responsibilities as principal to your satisfaction?

If yes, describe how these roles and responsibilities are carried out?

If no, which roles and responsibilities don't you carry out to your satisfaction and why?

Q 8: Did you receive any training or attended any workshops on ethical school leadership practices?

Q 9: Do you feel the training or workshops were good enough?

If yes or no, why?

Q10: In your opinions, how do you describe what constitute ethical leadership in the school on how SMT maintain ethical conduct? In addition, in your experience are these elements observed?

If yes, describe good ethical leadership examples?

If no, describe bad or unethical leadership examples?

Q 11: How do you think the Department of Education and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders?

Q 12: In your view, do you as the principal reflect ethical leadership behaviours in your leadership practices?

If yes, what are those practices?

If not, why not?

Q 13: In your opinion, what are the ethical leadership management factors that affect your working relationship with staff or within the school in general?

Q14: What is your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management teams in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools

Q 15: In your view, what strategies could be developed to enhance ethical leadership in schools?

APPENDIX J: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

Title of the interviewee: _____

Current position of the interviewee: _____

Gender of the interviewee: _____

Q1: What is your level of education and experience?

Diploma	
Diploma, Degree and above	

Q2: How many teachers and non-teaching staff are you responsible for?

21 to 40	
41 and above	

Q3: How many learners are in your school?

Below 300	
301 to 350	
351 and above	

Q 4: Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

Q 5: For how long have you been a deputy principal in your school?

Q 6: Can you describe your current roles and responsibilities as deputy principal?

Q 7: Do you implement all the roles and responsibilities as deputy principal to your satisfaction?

If yes, describe how these roles and responsibilities are carried out?

If no, which roles and responsibilities don't you carry out to your satisfaction and why?

Q 8: Did you receive any training or attended any workshops on ethical school leadership practices?

Q 9: Do you feel the training or workshops were good enough?

If yes or no, why?

Q10: In your opinions, how do you describe what constitute ethical leadership in the school and how SMT maintain ethical conduct? In addition, in your experience are these elements observed?

If yes, describe good ethical leadership examples?

If no, describe bad ethical leadership examples?

Q 11: How do you think the Department of Education and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders?

Q 12: In your view, do you as deputy principal reflect ethical leadership behaviours in your leadership practices?

If yes, what are those practices?

If not, why not?

Q 13: In your opinion, what are the ethical management leadership factors that affect your working relationship with staff or within the school in general?

Q14: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management teams in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools

Q 15: In your view, what strategies could be developed to enhance ethical leadership in schools?

APPENDIX K: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

Title of the interviewee: _____

Current position of the interviewee: _____

Gender of the interviewee: _____

1. What is your level of education and experience?

Diploma	
Diploma, Degree and above	

2. How many teachers are you responsible for?

Below 5	
6 to 10	
11 to 15	
15 and above	

Q3: Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

Q4: For how long have you been an HOD or departmental head in your school?

Q5: Can you describe your current roles and responsibilities as departmental head?

Q6: Do you implement all the roles and responsibilities as departmental head to your satisfaction?

If yes, describe how these roles and responsibilities are carried out?

If no, which roles and responsibilities don't you carry out to your satisfaction and why?

Q7: Did you receive any training or attended any workshops on ethical school leadership practices?

Q8: Do you feel the training or workshops were good enough?

If yes or no, why?

Q9: In your opinions, how do you describe what constitute ethical leadership in the school and how SMT maintain ethical conduct? In addition, in your experience are these elements observed?

If yes, describe good ethical leadership examples?

If no, describe bad ethical leadership examples?

Q10: In your opinion and coupled with experiences, are there any ethical school leadership challenges facing your school?

If there are, what are some of the challenges?

If there are not, why do you think there are no challenges?

Q11: How do you think the Department of Basic Education and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders?

Q12: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management teams in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools?

Q13: What appears to be the ethical management leadership challenges that you have as departmental head in your interaction with staff in general?

Q14: In your view, what strategies could be developed to enhance ethical leadership in secondary schools?

APPENDIX L: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO TEACHERS

Title of the interviewee: _____

Current position of the _____

interviewee: Gender of _____

the interviewee:

Q1: What is your level of education and experience?

Diploma	
Diploma, Degree and above	

Q2: How many classes are you responsible for?

Below 5	
6 to 10	

Q3: How many learners are you responsible for?

Below 100	
101 to 150	

Q4: Do I have your permission to audio record this interview?

Q5: For how long have you been a teacher in your school?

Q6: Can you describe your current roles and responsibilities as a teacher?

Q7: Do you implement all the roles and responsibilities as a teacher to your satisfaction? If yes, describe how these roles and responsibilities are carried out?

If no, which roles and responsibilities don't you carry out to your satisfaction and why?

Q8: Did you receive any training or attended any workshops on ethical school practices?

Q9: Do you feel the training or workshops were good enough?

If yes or no, why?

Q10: In your opinions, how do you describe what constitute ethical leadership in the school and how

SMT maintain ethical conduct. In addition, in your experience are these elements observed?

If yes, describe good ethical or moral examples? If no, describe bad ethical or moral examples?

Q11: How do you think the Department of Basic Education and other educational regulatory bodies should address unethical leadership conduct among school leaders?

Q12: In your view, does your school management team (SMT) reflect ethical or moral leadership behaviours in their leadership practices?

If yes, what are those practices? If no, why not?

Q13: In your opinion, what are the ethical or moral leadership factors that affect your working relationship with the

SMT or within the school in general?

Q14: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management teams in terms of leadership and moral conduct in schools?

Q15: In your view, what strategies could be developed to enhance ethical or moral leadership in your school?

INTERVIEWS TRANSCRIPTION

APPENDICES M-P: RESEARCH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

APPENDICES N1–N6: RESEARCH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Interviewees: Twenty-Four Participants involved in the study.

(P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6) (DP1, DP2, DP3, DP4, DP5, DP6)

(DH1, DH2, DH3, DH4, DH5, DH6) (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6)

Interviewer: Freddy Abilio Mlambo

Periods of Interviews: February – May 2025

Transcribed by: Freddy Abilio Mlambo

Edited by: Not edited

Total Audio and Video Track Time: 32h: 49:18

Background:

The researcher planned and conducted virtual interviews during the period February - May 2025 with twenty-four participants, namely six principals (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6). Six deputy principals (DP1, DP2, DP3, DP4, DP5, and DP6) Six Departmental heads (DH1, DH2, DH3, DH4, DH5, and DH6), and six teachers (T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6), based on the three key research questions and themes emerging from the below topic:

EXPLORING SMTSM' ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN MANAGING SCHOOLS IN TSHWANE WEST DISCTRIC 15, GAUTENG PROVINCE.

The research was conducted in the context of the ethical school leadership difficulties confronting SMTs within the contemporary educational system. Given that several ethical leadership roles are vital for societal service at all levels, the requisite obligations in ethical school leadership are inherently extensive, diverse, and demanding. In recent decades, extensive research has focused on many aspects of ethical school leadership practices, responsibilities, and processes. This research aimed to explore SMTs' ethical leadership practices in the context of ethical school leadership and management frameworks.

Setting: The interviews were conducted on MS Teams and Zoom, and a few follow ups through Cell phone from the researcher's home.

Key Codes:

Q stands for Question

A stands for Answer

P stands for Probing

—: speech cuts off, abrupt stop

.... speech trails off, pause

Italics: direct emphasis made by participants

APPENDIX M1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

APPENDICES I1–I6: RESEARCH INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS FOR PRINCIPALS

APPENDIX M1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER ONE (P1)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do school management teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“SMT’s should always maintain ethical conduct by being approachable, be real examples of good morality here in the school by treating everyone the same, and not favour others.”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“Based on the frequency of ethical leadership cases I encounter monthly, I can confidently assert that ethical leadership in schools presents a significant challenge. However, the majority of SMTs (SMTs) in my institution are adequately and professionally trained and fulfil their responsibilities. Nevertheless, we also contribute to this endeavour through our supportive frameworks.”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"This remains a huge task that we are faced with every day, and we are still working hard to make it happen. This is why the support of the department and other regulatory bodies is so important."*

APPENDIX M2: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER TWO (P2)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"As I see ethical school leadership today, I see it as a kind of leadership that ought to be maintained by being open, inclusive, and forward-thinking. In addition to us modelling ethical behaviours, leaders in schools should actively encourage these behaviours. This is known to me as ethical school leadership..."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"In general, it seems like ethical leadership is always pushed to the back of the line, and colleagues aren't made aware of this or helped with their professional growth."*

P: Why do you think this issue of professional growth is not taken seriously?

"Some people on our team don't see this task of ethical school leadership as important, and it takes a lot of my time to settle disagreements that come up because they are at times practicing unethical leadership techniques that they know they shouldn't be using based on their training."

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"My schools still have a lot of work to do because of problems like misusing funds and resources, students not showing up for class, general disobedience, and leaders not acting in the way we expect them to. We need strong leadership to solve these problems. The department must assist us by proving appropriate monitoring and evaluation tools to reduce these bad morals."*

APPENDIX M3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER THREE (P3)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“Being part of the leadership team, I think we should communicate more often, even in instances when colleagues are being good or bad moral examples to others, by so doing, we will be maintaining the good behaviours we want of our staff and ourselves.”*

P: Can you give example of how that can be maintained?

A: *“I think we should have by weekly ethical awareness dialogues and reflections, to keep up the spirit and maybe have an external person to facilitate these sessions.”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“I am unsure of the actual level of growth of my colleagues, all I know is that our professional growth has been more academically, rather than a lot on our leadership and moral conduct.”*

P: Are you able to give a rough percentage estimate of your professional growth regarding this question?

A: *“I think my leadership and ethical conduct professional growth has been very minimum in the last five years”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"We are hard at work to address these ethical leadership challenges in our schools, the heightened levels of ethical behaviour awareness interventions from the Department and SACE must become our mantra for us as leaders to advance all expertise and advise from the department and SACE."*

APPENDIX M4: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stands for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FOUR (P4)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"Ethical leadership components, or traits, are morally acceptable behaviours and principles that are expected of our officials in schools without fail. This is something that I personally cannot compromise on, and I think we maintain these by having monthly audits of our ethical behaviours."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"I treat all of my subordinates and other colleagues the same and listen to their concerns without judging them, whether they are right or wrong. That's how we were trained as professionals, and I think that has enhanced by my growth."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"Problems with ethical school leadership caused by substance abuse, especially alcohol, by those who are meant to be in charge continue to slow down our progress in how our school leadership should act...We keep getting unsettling reports of bad school leadership and management, including inappropriate sexual reports involving teachers and students. The school leadership isn't doing anything about it, and this is where the DBE and other groups need to step in and teach SMT and others about ethical leadership the most."*

APPENDIX M5: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stands for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FIVE (P5)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“SMT’s has a duty to maintain ethical conduct by encouraging colleagues to sign ethical leadership registers on a monthly basis, wherein we constantly check on each other’s conduct.”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“Our team has grown professionally regarding issues of leadership and ethics, but I can confess that, there is still a lot to grown on regarding this issue.”*

P: Can you maybe share with me, what areas do you think, you still need growth on?

A: *“I think our level of ethical and moral consciousness is still low, our consequence management and accountability measures are still very lacking”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"Also, ethical leadership issues caused by problems of bad peer pressure and because of a lack of guidance and support from the authorities on how to deal with ethical misconduct seem to be very common. We as the SMT seem to be singing from the same hymn sheet because we can confront each other on the ethical leadership issues brought up against any of us, and we seem to be making progress."*

APPENDIX M6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER SIX (P6)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"A conduct that will dictate your behaviour is what I perceive to be ethics... In order to practice ethical leadership, you must apply these same moral principles to the way you run your school and deal with your subordinates or even other staff members within the school, this will assist us in maintaining ethical leadership"*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"My entire management team has grown professionally as they have learned all of these expectations and what they need to do to act in an honest way for the success of my school."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"I agree that the department has tried to make us more aware of different issues related to ethical school leadership, and that SACE has also visited us to talk about these issues. I can't say for sure if these efforts are working or not."*

!! END OF TRANSCRIPT!!

APPENDICES N1–N6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

APPENDIX N1

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER ONE (DP1)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"A system of moral accountability-based ideas that help distinguish between good and wrong, will greatly assist to maintain ethical and moral conduct. Another responsibility of ethical school leadership is to deliver a well-rounded education in a structured setting that upholds morality and integrity."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"From where I'm sitting, it looks like everything is going great at our school. My colleagues have grown significantly in this area. If there were problems with unethical leadership, I would have been happy to tell you about them." ... off course the is still room for improvement".*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour.

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"We now have huge disciplinary cases of mismanagement of funds and resources that need to be resolved. Some cases started out as small acts of unethical behaviour that could have been quickly dealt with by the principal as a leader, but others have grown much bigger than the school. The lack of leadership from the DBE is making this situation much worse."*

APPENDIX N2: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER TWO (DP2)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"According to what I understand, ethically upright behaviour that befits a leader in the school without compromising is the foundation of ethical leadership, and that need to be maintained by continuously checking our moral conduct in our activities and having ethical leadership monthly forums"*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"As leaders in the school, we have always shown the good and proper ethical behaviour that is expected of us, everyone in leadership has grown professionally at my school."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"One problem started when the SMT was told about an educator who was thought to be having a sexual relationship with a student in his class. We had to handle the situation without any help or direction from the authorities, but we didn't give up hope." If the department had done what we thought they would, this problem could have been fixed quickly."*

APPENDIX N3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER THREE (DP3)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"I consider this as a sense of ethical responsibility for the choices we make in relation to the individuals we guide, and our conduct should be beyond doubt, and one should not be found lacking when it comes to their behaviour in the school, this is how we should maintain it."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"We've always erred on the side of caution when it comes to ethical leadership because different people on our staff have very different ideas about it, but in general, our actions have not been found wanting."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"I have seen a pattern of a huge lack of mentorship and guidance from the government and relevant regulatory bodies on how to stop unethical leadership."*

APPENDIX N4: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FOUR (DP4)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“We maintain it by having these issues of ethical conduct as a standing item on our weekly staff and management meetings and written reports are presented.”*

P: May I ask what then happens to those reports if there any on a given week?

A: *“The principal and myself will follow them and take necessary action where necessary, including reporting to the necessary authorities where required”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“The way I have dealt with complaints and allegations of favouritism, ill-discipline and other bad practices, by and against our staff, consistency has been key for me, I have never been biased towards or against anyone.”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *“To be honest, we are still looking for a "blueprint" that shows us how to fix the problems with unethical leadership that are hurting our schools, and how these can be reduced as there is nothing much from the department and SACE.”*

APPENDIX N5: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FIVE (DP5)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"My understanding of this concept is that ethical school leadership behaviours are acts that we do on behalf of the people we lead in the school. It is important that such behaviours are not lacking when it comes to our behaviours in the school, and that should be maintained by making sure that our own behaviours are exemplary and we have clear rules and guidelines."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"There are some rotten apples when it comes to ethical conduct in the school, but generally, we are able to handle those issues as a team, because of our own awareness and growth."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"Our school's ability and processes to deal with acts of misconduct is weak, and we continue to get very little advice and direction on how to handle these important issues from the department abs SACE."*

APPENDIX N6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPUTY PRINCIPALS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER SIX (DP6)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"Weekly monitoring of our special designed ethical and moral template that is completed by all staff is very helpful in maintaining our school ethical leadership barometer"*

P: What do you then do with this template?

A: *"It really helps us to keep track on issues to be followed up and escalated for external reporting if necessary, and a record is kept should there any disciplinary required."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"I should also state that, we are all humans and all of us are prone to err from time to time, when it comes to unacceptable behaviour, but we should learn from that, accept our mistakes and move on, this happens even if we received the best training and have grown professionally in this regard."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"It would be better if the DBE and all other regulatory bodies, like SACE, worked with school leaders on this important issue, but the opposite is happening."*

!! END OF TRANSCRIPT!!

APPENDIX O

APPENDICES O1–O6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

APPENDIX O1 INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER ONE (DH1)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"I always expect of my team a weekly report of all ethical and moral challenges that they have experienced, from their learners as well as from colleagues and a report of how they dealt with those issues if any, I think this method works for me and my group to maintain ethical leadership conduct amongst us and towards others"*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"There is no doubt that our school has a big problem with ethical leadership, even after training... It's not always clear who is in charge. Yes, I am aware that I am part of the school's leadership and that we can improve how we handle ethical leadership issues and I think we are growth as we should in this area."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *“As a leader in this school, I am regularly faced with colleagues that continue to act in a manner very unbecoming of a colleague, and they set a very bad example to the upcoming teachers, and we have no real tangible ethical leadership manual of how to deal with them.”*

"As a leader at this school, I often have to deal with colleagues who act in ways that are not appropriate for a colleague of their level. They set a terrible example for new teachers, and we also don't have a real ethical school leadership manual that advise us how to deal with them."

P: Are you finding the department or any regulatory bodies helpful?

A: *"Some of my colleagues who I lead are the ones who keep acting badly at school," Their natural habit is to get together in small groups and unwittingly get each other to break the law and moral rules. These actions present a major ethical and moral leadership challenge for the school.*

“For the past two years, these bad actions have harmed the school's performance and morale, and we haven't been able to get any help from the department or SACE to stop them or at least reprimand them.”

APPENDIX O2: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stands for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER TWO (DH2)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do SMTs maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“For me, ethical school leadership entails demonstrating integrity, taking responsibility, setting a positive example, and being accountable for one's actions, particularly in a school context and us as HOD's are fighting hard to maintain the required ethical and moral conduct by making sure that we have weekly forums to address any of these challenges....”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“Some of us fall short in how we act as ethical leaders at this school because we are sometimes blinded by favouritism, buddy friendships, and other things like that...”* “We've dropped the ball in this area because our ethical leadership across the school divide has not been up to par in terms of how we've behaved and handled ourselves. I agree with this statement that we do not show the level of professional growth that is expected of us.”

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"I'm really upset about the shady leadership at my school that comes from people I trust a lot. The problems have been around for a while, and the people in charge of the area are well aware of them. Someone on the senior management team is now being charged with serious misconduct for sexual misconduct with a student. This is a very serious issue. Do you think that's being moral and good?"*

APPENDIX O3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER THREE (DH3)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“My personal understanding of ethical school leadership is that it involves adhering to a set of principles that guide one's behaviour. It is crucial to treat others with honesty, integrity, and professionalism in order to be respected. Ultimately, ethical leadership is primarily demonstrated through one's overall behaviour in the school setting. In my perspective, it further extends beyond the confines of the educational environment and we try our best to maintain it by having regular meetings and feedback sessions regarding ethical conduct and leadership in our school, I know sometimes this is not enough.”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“All things considered, there is always room for improvement in how we treat others in a morally sound way, but we all want to get there, and we are slowly growing as professionals.”*

P: Can you maybe share with as to how you are growing in this area?

A: *“We are getting ourselves into the relevant ethics forums and statutory bodies to understand better this whole concept, by not waiting for the Department.”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"One thing I think is a huge challenge for our leadership is lying about others without consequences. I'm also very worried about people's rights being violated. I think it's unethical to spread rumours around school because it causes problems and is a big problem. Colleagues need to be made aware of these kinds of behaviours, and I think the department can help with that."*

APPENDIX 04: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FOUR (DH4)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"This is a set of criteria that pertains to the ethical responsibility we have for our words and actions in the school environment. It is closely related to our behaviour and conduct in the presence of others and we strongly have to act professionally in all material aspects of our leadership in order to highly maintain levels of ethical conduct."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"This issue of ethical leadership in our school is more complicated than it seems. Some of our colleagues still don't seem to understand what it's all about and what they need to do every day, even after all the awareness and sensitivity training we had."*

P: How does this then affect your overall growth in this area?

A: *"I agree that our management style doesn't always reflect ethics and good behaviour and that has affected our professional growth in this area in the way we lead others. There are clear signs of favouritism and buddy-buddy relationships here, but we always try to show a consistent pattern of applying ethical rules for all colleagues in this school, especially when the violations are similar, but professionally we are found wanting."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *“Due to people not showing up for school, there is a serious problem with their behaviour that affects everyone's morale. This is because other people have to keep covering for them, and their coworkers think that this is not an issue that the school leadership should be dealing with. The DBE and other authorities need to help us with intervention strategies in this matter.”*

APPENDIX 05: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FIVE (DH5)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"The maintenance of ethical conduct in our school is very difficult to assess as most colleagues complain about not having clear set of rules and guidelines, but we individually try and maintain our conduct with others and our learners in the most collegial way best possible"*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"Some teachers are not professionally trained to act in an ethical way, but we treat them all the same here when it comes to how work is assigned, how discipline is expected, and how our SMT interact with everyone."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"We are faced with ethical leadership challenges of colleagues coming to work reeking of alcohol and totally misbehaving in front of their colleagues, with others forever absent without leave for extended periods of time, they are forever absent to provide leadership*

when it is needed, it's a real shame, but we hope the district will assist us with how to deal with them, we can only report them, and what can we do?" [shrugging her shoulders].

"We have ethical school leadership problems because some coworkers come to work smelling of alcohol and acting unethical in front of their colleagues, and others are always absent without leave for long periods of time. They are never there to lead when it's needed, which is a shame, but we hope the district will help us figure out how to deal with them. What can we do?" She shrugged her shoulders."

APPENDIX 06: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR DEPARTMENTAL HEADS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER SIX (DH6)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"We maintain it by having reference groups dealing with various ethical conduct matters separately and reporting on them and the actions taken weekly, but there is lack of general enthusiasm on this matter."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"Our level of professional growth on ethical leadership and moral conduct in general, leaves much to be desired, we are direction less and its sometime very frustrating"*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"Ethical school leadership is a real problem that we face in large numbers, and our colleagues continue to treat it with little importance. There is a serious loss of morals happening here, and we need strict rules and procedures from the DBE right away to deal with it."*

P: What do you think is the root cause of this loss of morals?

A *“Others' rights are not respected here, and I think that the bad behaviour and lack of discipline by some leaders is unethical. If you complain in public, you are purged, which is why we need clear rules from the Department.”*

!! END OF TRANSCRIPT!!

APPENDIX P

APPENDICES P1–P6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS FOR TEACHERS

APPENDIX P1: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR TEACHERS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER ONE (T1)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"Ethical school leadership refers to the manner in which a school is expected to be governed based on its values and moral principles..." In my perspective, ethical school leadership entails comprehending and acknowledging the perspectives of all those involved. To maintain it the school needs to ensuring that all individuals in the school are informed about the current moral challenges and situation and taking into account the needs and perspectives of everyone in this process."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"Certain members of the SMT, particularly principals, occasionally exhibit deficiencies in their professional growth, development and ethical awareness, as well as in their demonstration of appropriate conduct regarding ethical leadership..." I anticipate that they will consistently demonstrate appropriate moral and professional leadership; but my interactions and the responses, I have reviewed indicate that some are regrettably inexperienced, exhibiting various unprofessional habits about ethical leadership.*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Basic Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"At my school, the management team has to deal with a huge ethical leadership challenge as they have to deal with divisions that they've caused by being unfair to staff members. This is because I think they tend to take sides when there is a disagreement, and the authorities don't seem to be saying anything about this."*

P: What do you think is the attitude of the Department and other authorities on this matter?

A: *"Other colleagues are not punished as harshly when they're constantly absent without a reason. The principal and her team are very selective in how they discipline and enforce school rules and procedures. I think this is unethical, and the department needs to step in more often."*

APPENDIX P2: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR TEACHERS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER TWO (T2)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"In my interpretation, when discussing ethics and ethical school leadership, it is crucial to establish a stringent benchmark of honesty, ethics, morals, and values for us teachers, the school leaders and learners. This ensures the absolute absence of conflicts and favouritism within the school, and by doing so, this can be easily managed...."*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of school management team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"I have considerable unhappiness with the school leadership due to unprofessional conduct, inconsistent rule enforcement, interpersonal conflicts, and preferential treatment of personnel. I consistently endeavour to remedy these issues, which I think are brought about by the lack of professional growth and training in ethical leadership."*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"Our leadership sides with those who disagree with us, but they don't listen when we talk about unethical behaviour or misusing of funds and resources, and I believe that is unfair and wrong. People in the school have split up into different groups in our leadership, and it's hard for us to figure out where to go for leadership and advice. I believe this is one of the biggest problems that the DBE needs to solve by offering guidance and support."*

APPENDIX P3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR TEACHERS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER THREE (T3)

(2) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“The reason our school leaders are so unapproachable is that they set a poor ethical example by acting in ways that are inconsistent with their expected behaviour and the moral principles that shape their integrity, honesty, and accountability, this is how I model ethical school leadership and it will be very difficult to main it in my view...”*

(3) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“These colleagues assigned to lead the schools can enhance their ethical leadership capabilities through professional development and training. I occasionally observe instances of power abuse by senior management team members among certain teachers, colleagues and some trade union representatives.”*

(4) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies’ obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Basic Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *“I believe it is high time for the DBE and all other regulatory groups, and trade unions, to start taking these concerns about moral school leadership seriously.”*

APPENDIX P4: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR TEACHERS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FOUR (T4)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“Because of the way the school management team treats some of us, I am not personally aware of any ethical leadership qualities at the school and these are maintained. The absence of compassion and empathy compels me to respond in this way, demonstrating the deficiency of ethical leadership in our school as a component that is lacking.”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“Occasionally, we believe that with appropriate professional training and supervised development, these individuals can enhance our awareness of ethical leadership practices. Our senior management teams must consistently uphold ethical leadership, as they bear the responsibility for the inadequate leadership practices observed in our schools.”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"Authorities should now start making rules and regulations official about how to handle ethical leadership issues and give clear instructions on how to do things."*

APPENDIX P5: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR TEACHERS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER FIVE (T5)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *"The proper and morally acceptable behaviour of people in positions of authority, along with the consistency with which those behaviours are displayed, constitute ethical school leadership, in my opinion and this should be maintained by setting simple and exemplary ethical examples every day in the school without fail "....*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *"Sometimes, we think that these leaders can help us learn more about ethical leadership practices if they get the right professional training and are closely supervised as they grow." Because they are responsible for the bad leadership seen in our schools, our senior management teams must always support ethical leadership".*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Basic Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *"My advice to the Department of Education and other educational regulatory agencies on how to stop school leaders from acting unethically is simple: we need a clear, written path for how to report these problems and then deal with them without fear or favour."*

P: Are you able to elaborate more on what you mean?

A: *"I mean we need a simplistic approach to a path and process for dispute resolution on issues that have to do in acts of unethical leadership traits, and such process should not have eyes as to who the offender and the offended are".*

APPENDIX P6: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION FOR TEACHERS

In this transcription, abbreviation letters used are explained.

Q stands for Question

A stand for Answer

P stands for Probing

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER SIX (T6)

(1) Ethical school leadership conduct as a critical component

Q: In your opinion, how do School Management Teams maintain ethical conduct?

A: *“This component, in my opinion, is the Principal and her team's constant capacity to behave in a way that upholds the morally just behaviour that we can all readily accept and be proud of, and if their can maintain their moral behaviour and conduct by being truthful, inclusive, empathetic and demonstrate kindness towards staff, I think it will be helpful for the school....”*

(2) Professional growth as a contributory factor to moral conduct

Q: What are your experiences about the level of professional growth of School Management Team in terms of leadership and moral conduct in the school?

A: *“We sometimes believe that if these leaders receive the necessary professional training and are rigorously monitored as they develop, they will be able to assist us in learning more about ethical leadership practices.” Because they are responsible for the poor leadership in our schools, our senior management teams must always promote ethical leadership.”*

(3) Perceptions and attitudes of regulating bodies' obligations and governance towards unethical behaviour

Q: What are your views on the Department of Basic Education and other educational regulating agencies on how to counteract unethical behaviour of school leaders?

A: *“The department must be forthright and have rules and regulations that addresses ethical leadership issues that are likely to cause divisions and chaos within the school”.*

!! END OF TRANSCRIPTS!!

APPENDIX Q: LANGUAGE EDITING CERTIFICATE

EDITING AND PROOFREADING CERTIFICATE

22 Osche Street

The Reeds

Centurion

0157

24 October 2025

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

This certificate serves to confirm that I have edited F.A. Mlambo's thesis titled, "**Exploring School Management Teams' Ethical Leadership Practices in Managing Schools in Tshwane West District 15, Gauteng Province.**"

I found the work easy and intriguing to read. Much of my editing basically dealt with obstructionist technical aspects of language, which could have otherwise compromised smooth reading as well as the sense of the information being conveyed. I hope that the work will be found to be of an acceptable standard. I am a member of Professional Editors' Guild.

Hereunder are my contact details:



Jack Chokwe (PhD – University of Leicester (United Kingdom)

Contact numbers: 072 214 5489

jackchokwe@gmail.com

Professional
EDITORS
Guild



APPENDIX R: TURNINIT REPORT

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PAPER NAME

FINAL DRAFT OF THESIS FOR EXAM.doc
X EXPLORING SCHOOL MANAGEMENT
TEAMS' PRACTICES IN MANAGING
SCHOOLS IN TSHWANE WEST DISTRICT
15,

AUTHOR

FREDDY ABILIO MLAMBO
770 6189

WORD COUNT

108373 Words

CHARACTER COUNT

710871 Characters

PAGE COUNT

334 Pages

FILE SIZE

809.5KB

SUBMISSION DATE

Jun 7, 2025, 9:42 PM
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