



Ethical Leadership Practices on Improving School Culture in Public Secondary Schools in Mkuranga District, Pwani Region-Tanzan

Mariam R. Msovu^{1*}, Georgina Mugisha², Raymond Ndomba³

¹ Mkuranga District

^{2,3} Department of Education Foundations, St. Augustine University of Tanzania

Correspondence e-mail * : raphaelmsovu85@gmail.com

Abstract : This qualitative multiple-case study, grounded in the Transformational Leadership Theory, explored the ethical leadership practices of heads of schools that influence school culture in public secondary schools in Mkuranga District, Tanzania. Utilizing data from interviews with heads of schools, teachers, students, parents, and Ward Education Officers, the study found that ethical leadership significantly shapes school culture primarily through fairness, transparency, and participatory decision-making such as School Management Team involvement and student governance, fostering trust and collaboration. The study also revealed positive outcomes include improved teacher morale through inclusive processes and enhanced student accountability due to the consistent application of rules and procedural justice. However, the findings also revealed a critical vulnerability: inconsistency in ethical practice. Specifically, a gap manifested by the failure to keep promises, aggressive communication styles, and a lack of support for teachers' personal welfare (like transfer requests), directly undermined the positive cultural foundations built by other ethical actions, leading to diminished trust and motivation. The study concludes that for ethical leadership to sustain a positive school culture, it must move beyond mere formal policies to demonstrate sustained consistency, integrity, and empathy in all actions. Consequently, the study recommends mandatory leadership development training focused on ethical consistency and the institutionalization of protocols for transparent and participatory governance to address these gaps.

Keyword : Ethical Leadership, School Culture, Public Secondary Schools

Article info: Submitted : 2025-09-17 | Accepted : 2025-10-20 | Published : 2025-12-17

Copyright © 2025, Authors.

This is an open-access article under the [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



INTRODUCTION

Ethical leadership has been increasingly recognized as a key factor influencing school culture, which encompasses shared beliefs, values, and practices that shape the behavior of school stakeholders (Leithwood et al., 2019). Ethical leaders promote trust, collaboration, and transparency qualities essential for fostering a positive learning environment and improving institutional performance (Northouse, 2018; Brown & Treviño, 2018). When school leaders act with fairness and integrity, they create conditions that enhance teacher motivation and student engagement (Holst, 2023). Conversely, unethical practices such as favoritism and poor accountability erode trust and morale, leading to negative school climates and diminished academic outcomes (Lawrence & Tar, 2018).

Globally, research shows that ethical leadership positively shapes school culture by encouraging shared decision-making, professional development, and inclusivity. In the United States, ethical leadership has been linked to improved teacher satisfaction and school effectiveness (Fullan, 2019; Webster & Litchka, 2020), while European studies emphasize moral responsibility and integrity as essential for democratic education and institutional harmony (Göçen, 2021). In West Africa, ethical leadership helps mitigate challenges like corruption and inadequate infrastructure by promoting transparency, mentorship, and professionalism (Ampomah, 2021; Diop, 2022; Traoré & Kouamé, 2023). When school principals fail to uphold ethical standards—such as in cases of bias or lack of consultation—teacher morale and student outcomes suffer (Oshia et al., 2022).

Similar trends appear in sub-Saharan Africa, where ethical leadership has been found to improve accountability and collaboration in resource-constrained schools (Mthethwa-Sommers & Ntombela, 2019; Wanjala & Ouma, 2020; Mutisya & Kiprop, 2021). In Uganda, ethical leadership correlates strongly with teacher commitment and organizational effectiveness, as leaders who model ethical conduct foster transparency, trust, and motivation (Adeoye, 2021). However, ensuring consistent application of ethical standards remains a challenge, underscoring the need for structured training and policy reforms to sustain positive school cultures. Such efforts are crucial in contexts where ethical lapses directly undermine educational quality and stakeholder engagement.

In Tanzania, school leadership is critical in addressing systemic educational challenges such as low morale, inadequate infrastructure, and poor community participation (URT, 2020; Mhando & Mgonja, 2021). Yet, research indicates that many school heads lack sufficient understanding of ethical principles and regulations, resulting in inconsistent leadership practices and weakened school culture (Mfaume & Bilinga, 2024; Boniface & Ngalawa, 2020). In Mkuranga District specifically, issues such as resource scarcity, absenteeism, and limited stakeholder collaboration are exacerbated by these leadership gaps. Consequently, this study seeks to explore how ethical leadership practices among school administrators can strengthen school culture by promoting accountability, professionalism, and mutual respect, ultimately contributing to sustainable improvement in public secondary schools.

Ethical leadership is recognized globally as a cornerstone for fostering a positive school culture, which is essential for teacher motivation, student engagement, and institutional effectiveness. Studies in various contexts, from the United States to West and South Africa, consistently demonstrate that school leaders who exemplify integrity, transparency, and inclusivity are more effective in cultivating collaborative and high-performing learning. Conversely, research from Nigeria starkly illustrates that unethical leadership practices such as favoritism, poor communication, and authoritarianism directly destroy teachers' morale and undermine school performance. Despite this well-established global connection, a notable gap exists in understanding the specific role and manifestation of ethical leadership found in areas with resource-constrained context of rural public secondary schools in Tanzania's Mkuranga District.

In Mkuranga District, public secondary schools face significant challenges, including absenteeism, low teacher morale, and inadequate community involvement, which exacerbated by ineffective school management. Preliminary evidence suggests a systemic failure in ethical leadership, where a widespread lack of awareness of ethical leadership practices among heads of schools reflects a deeper leadership deficit in modeling and institutionalizing ethical standards. This is compounded by reports that school leaders often lack competency in the governing laws and regulations, leading to inconsistent handling of ethical issues and an over-reliance on external disciplinary bodies such as TSC for minor breaches. Consequently, there is an urgent need to

examine how ethical leadership practices connected to address directly these cultural and operational deficiencies. Therefore, this study investigated the specific role of ethical leadership practices in improving the overall school culture in Mkuranga District's public secondary schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Transformational Leadership Theory, a framework developed by Burns, Bass, and Avolio, which posits that effective leaders inspire and motivate followers through ethical influence to achieve shared goals. The theory's four components idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration provide a valuable lens for understanding how ethical leaders can foster a positive school culture characterized by trust, collaboration, and innovation, which is particularly relevant in the context of Mkuranga District. While the theory has been criticized for being overly idealistic and contextually limited, it remains a foundational model for this research, as it effectively explains the mechanisms through which ethical leadership can transform schools into motivated and cohesive learning environments in rural Tanzanian settings.

Empirical Literature Review

In Jordan-USA, Aljbour (2020) conducted a study aimed at identifying the extent to which public secondary school principals in Amman practice ethical leadership from the teachers' perspective. The study adopted a descriptive analytical approach. Using a random sampling method, the researcher selected a sample of

80 teachers from 10 public secondary schools in Amman, Jordan. Questionnaire forms were distributed by hand, and all were retrieved. Findings revealed that the extent of ethical leadership practice among principals was high from the teachers' viewpoint. Principals are perceived as honest, kind, supportive, and consistent in keeping promises. However, they fall short in engaging teachers in the decision-making process. Based on these findings, the researcher recommended that the Jordanian Ministry of Education develop a formal code of ethics reflecting ethical leadership to guide the conduct of administrative staff in schools.

Islam et al. (2021) in Canada examine the mediating role of green human resource management between ethical leadership and employees' citizenship behavior towards the environment, with the moderating effect of individual green values. The study collected data from 589 MBA administrative students with one year of working experience in various organizations at two various times using a questionnaire based survey method. The study applying structural equation modeling to the findings confirmed a direct influence of ethical leadership on employees' citizenship behavior towards the environment and an indirect effect through green human resource management. The study revealed that when teachers found their school leaders trustworthy, they were more likely to feel safe and secure in their work environment.

In Malaysia, the study conducted by Vikaraman et al. (2021) highlights the practice of ethical leadership, a branch of value-based leadership based on seven dimensions. The study used a mixed-method (QUAN-qual) approach using

interviews and questionnaires. Findings revealed that head of schools across the country demonstrated high levels of ethical leadership, and teachers' trust in their principals was similarly high. Principals were notably aware of the importance of fairness in their leadership practices. Fairness is demonstrated through equal opportunity in decision-making and by listening to teachers without judgment or discrimination. Every teacher allowed sharing ideas, knowledge, talent, and skills, and pursuing personal goals. Decisions were made collaboratively, with principals ensuring that all teachers had equal chances to express thoughts and disparities. Head of schools listened attentively to every opinion, thought, and suggestion before drawing conclusions, though they did not necessarily accept every input.

The study of Mbarawii & Amabibi (2024) in Nigeria investigated collaboration and accountability of principals' ethical behaviour and job commitment in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The study revealed that accountability and teamwork are significantly related to ethical leadership and enhancing school culture, such as job commitment among teachers. The study concluded that, collaboration and accountability in ethical leadership are crucial for fostering a dedicated teaching staff and a positive learning environment. The study further recommended that educational authorities and professional development organizations collaborate closely with institutional leaders to design leadership programmes that emphasize collaboration and accountability for school principals.

In Uganda, the study of Ssegawa & Matovu (2020) aimed at analyzing the relationship between heads of schools'

delegation practices and teachers' psychological job commitment in secondary schools in Kira Municipality. The results of Pearson's moment correlation coefficient indicated that there are strong and positive statistically significant relationships between heads of schools' assignment of responsibility and teachers' psychological job commitment. The findings further revealed that fairness and justice in ethical leadership, particularly through equitable delegation of responsibilities, significantly shape a positive school culture. By assigning tasks based on skills and experience, school leaders can boost teacher commitment and psychological buy-in. This practice builds a culture of trust and respect, where teachers feel valued and motivated to contribute beyond their basic duties.

In a localized investigation within Tunduma Town Council, Mwampashi (2023) explored the connection between ethical leadership demonstrated by school heads and the subsequent motivation levels of secondary school teachers. The research adopted a mixed-methods descriptive approach, gathering insights from 113 participants through observations, interviews, and questionnaires. Findings identified several key leadership practices that boost teacher motivation, such as showing respect, delegating responsibilities, encouraging participatory decision-making, and fostering a trustworthy, non-discriminatory team environment. The study established a strong positive correlation between these ethical leadership behaviors and enhanced teacher motivation. Consequently, the performance of both teachers and students improves in environments where leaders uphold strong ethical values. Based on

these outcomes, the study advocates for educational managers to integrate formally ethical leadership principles into their daily management practices to benefit the entire school community.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research approach, using case study design. The study was conducted in Mkuranga District, Pwani, Tanzania. Snowball and purposive sampling were applied to get samples. A total of 24 participants, including one (2) Ward Education Officers (WEO), two (2) heads of schools, eight (8) teachers, four (4) parents and eight (8) students were involved in semi structured interview. This sample size was reasonable to provide the requisite information for the research. The analysis employed thematic analysis to examine the data obtained from interview. The study used emerged themes relation to the purpose of the study as subtitle in presenting data. The data presented in quotations followed by interpretation and discussion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study is to assess the ethical leadership practices of heads of schools that influence school culture. The study used interviews to obtain data from the heads of schools, teachers, WEO, and students. The findings presented in themes as follows:

School Head's Leadership Style in relation to Ethical Practices

In order to explore detailed information, the first aspect demanded that teachers explain how they describe their school heads' leadership style in terms of ethical practices like fairness, transparency,

accountability, and integrity. It was discovered that ethical leadership practices in Mkuranga District schools significantly shape school culture through fairness, transparency, consistency, and inclusivity, though challenges remain. Teachers emphasized that participatory decision-making involving the School Management Team (SMT) fostered trust, collaboration, and shared ownership, while inconsistencies in promise-keeping and aggressive communication styles undermined morale and trust.

Fairness Practices among Heads of schools

To begin with, the study interviewed the teachers to state the fairness practices among heads of schools in their working stations. Generally, most teachers lamented that some heads of schools are ethical and equitably treat teachers by applying consistent, transparent, and non-discriminatory actions in their daily activities inside and outside school activities. One of the teachers from school 'A' described the school head's leadership style in relation to ethical practice on the grounds of fair practices by stating that:

I would describe it as fair and transparent. This is demonstrated by the consistent involvement of the School Management Team (SMT) in key decision-making processes. The head of school genuinely values input on matters such as curriculum changes and disciplinary issues, making participation more than a formality. Decisions are therefore not made in isolation but emerge from collaborative discussions that consider diverse perspectives. This inclusive approach fosters trust within the SMT. In turn, it strengthens relationships and

promotes a positive culture among the entire school staff (Interview, Teacher, July 2025).

This implies that the teacher's statement emphasizes fairness, transparency, and inclusivity in decision-making as hallmarks of the head of school's leadership style. Specifically, the quote highlights that the head of school consistently involves the School Management Team (SMT) in critical decisions, such as curriculum changes and disciplinary actions. This approach is a genuine effort to incorporate diverse perspectives, ensuring that decisions are collaborative rather than unilateral. From an ethical leadership perspective, the key values demonstrated here are integrity, acting honestly, and involving stakeholders in meaningful ways. Fairness, ensuring decisions reflect collective input rather than favoritism. This kind of ethical decision-making fosters trust, strengthens relationships among staff, and promotes a sense of ownership in school governance. It also discourages authoritarian practices, which often breed resentment and conflict, negatively affecting school culture.

The statement aligns strongly with ethical leadership principles as found in recent educational leadership literature, which emphasise shared decision-making and participatory governance. Ethical leadership is not only about following rules but also about creating an environment where all stakeholders feel valued and respected. By consistently involving the School Management Team, the head of school demonstrates procedural fairness as a critical dimension of ethical leadership stressed in studies of school culture and ethical practice (Abdullah et al., 2025). In school settings, inclusive decision-making fosters

collaboration, reduces internal conflicts, and promotes mutual respect. Teachers who believe their opinions are heard are more likely to support institutional changes and uphold school norms, leading to a positive, cohesive school culture.

The findings concur with the findings by Vikaraman et al. (2021), who discovered that heads of schools in the studied schools demonstrated fairness as a core aspect of their ethical leadership. Teachers reported high levels of trust in their principals, largely because decisions were made transparently and inclusively. Fairness is reflected in the provision of equal opportunities for teachers to participate in decision-making processes and in the willingness of principals to listen to teachers' views without judgment or discrimination. Teachers were encouraged to share ideas, knowledge, and skills, as well as to pursue personal goals within a supportive environment. Moreover, decision-making was conducted collaboratively, ensuring that all teachers had equal chances to express their opinions and even disagree respectfully. Such practices reinforced trust and strengthened professional relationships between teachers and their principals. Moreover, the statement suggests that ethical leadership empowers middle-level managers (SMT members), enabling them to act as role models for fairness within their departments. This cascading effect strengthens the entire organizational culture, reinforcing ethical standards at all levels.

Honest and Consistence Practices by Heads of Schools

The study had this theme emerged from the interview, whereby teachers explained the issue of the school head's

leadership style in relation to ethical practices. The interviewees, particularly teachers, pointed out matters concerning the integrity. According to them, some heads of schools are always truthful, having strong ethical principles and consistently adhering to them in all actions and situations, regardless of external pressure, but others do not. The interviewed teachers also raised the issue of the level of honesty and consistency in keeping promises as practiced by their head of school. One teacher from school B said:

In some matters, our head of school shows honesty and consistency, like when he shares school updates or treats teachers fairly in staff meetings. However, there are times when this is not sustained. For instance, he once promised to reward teachers whose students achieved grades 'A' and 'B,' but unfortunately, the payment was never made. This makes us feel that while he can be honest in communication, he is not always consistent in keeping commitments. Such situations affect our trust and motivation (Interview, Teacher, July 2025).

The above quote implies that ethical leadership is not a binary phenomenon but experienced by staff as a matter of degree and consistency. A significant theme that emerged is the critical importance of sustained integrity and promise keeping as a cornerstone ethical practice that directly shapes school culture. The narrative provided by one teacher offers a compelling case in point. The teacher acknowledged that the head of school demonstrates certain ethical practices, such as transparency in sharing school updates and procedural justice in treating teachers fairly during staff meetings. These practices are noted as positive contributors

to a culture of open communication and perceived fairness.

However, the exploration uncovered that the sustainability of these practices is a significant factor. The same teacher reported a critical incident where the head of school's failure to fulfill a promise, specifically, the non-payment of a promised reward for teachers whose students achieved high grades, served to undermine the positive cultural foundations his other actions had built. This inconsistency created what was interpreted as a say-do gap, where the leader's words did not match his actions. The immediate effect of this breach, as reported, was a direct negative impact on teacher trust and motivation. This finding indicates that the influence of ethical leadership on school culture is highly vulnerable to inconsistencies.

The findings are contrary to the study conducted by Ajbou (2020), who found that the extent of ethical leadership practice among principals was high from the teachers' viewpoint. Principals perceived as honest, kind, supportive, and consistent in keeping promises. These findings highlight the need for school leaders in Mkuranga District to demonstrate ethical consistency and transparency in their daily practices to rebuild confidence among teachers and stakeholders. It can be concluded that long-term commitment to ethical leadership is essential for creating a supportive and trusting school environment that encourages collaboration and sustained improvement.

Respecting and Supporting Teachers' Needs by the Heads of Schools

On this theme, the first teacher from school A asked to provide his views on

how the head of school supports the needs of the teachers. In exploring the role of leadership in shaping teacher motivation and commitment, it is important to recognize that leadership practices experienced differently across contexts. While some school heads emphasize accountability to ministry policies and institutional directives, others adopt approaches that are more responsive to teachers' personal and professional needs. The following teacher from school A illustrates a case where leadership was exercised in a rigid and results-oriented manner, raising concerns about the balance between institutional compliance and teachers' welfare. Then, she said:

Our head of school is very strict and focused mainly on results and following Ministry directives. He often says teachers must remain dedicated no matter their personal challenges. I have been requesting a transfer for two years so that I can live with my husband, who works in another region, but he keeps telling me the government has no replacement for that. He insists that I must remain in my current working station until I get someone to replace me in my transfer (Interview, Teacher, July 2025).

The quote from the visited teacher highlights a leadership approach that prioritizes results and strict adherence to Ministry directives while overlooking the personal and professional needs of teachers. Although dedication and commitment are essential qualities in the teaching profession, ethical leadership also requires respect for teachers' welfare and consideration of their circumstances. In this case, the teacher has repeatedly requested a transfer to reunite with her family met with rigid responses, indicating

limited empathy and support from the head of school. Such an approach risks lowering teacher morale, as it conveys the message that personal well-being is secondary to institutional compliance. Scholars of ethical leadership emphasize that respecting and supporting teachers' needs builds trust, loyalty, and motivation, which in turn enhances the quality of teaching and overall school culture. Therefore, while accountability to Ministry directives is important, balancing this with compassion and responsiveness to teachers' genuine concerns is critical in fostering an ethical and sustainable leadership practice.

In contrary the findings of Mwampashi (2023) who revealed that ethical leadership practices that influence teachers' motivation include respecting and supporting teachers' needs, delegation of activities to teachers by heads of schools, involvement of teachers in making decisions, trust-worthy, team working, commitment, feedback sharing, absence of segregation, discrimination, or isolation of teachers basing on tribes. The findings highlighted a notable relationship between ethical leadership and motivation of teachers. The study concluded that, ethical leaders had impact on school achievement due to the presence of ethical leadership values. This study recommended that educational leaders had to employ ethical leadership values in their management endeavours, due to their positive effect on schools, teachers, students, and community at large.

Implications Based on Ethical Leadership Practices

This focuses on ethical leadership practices practiced by school leaders that influence school culture in Mkuranga

District. Based on the presented quotes from teachers, the following implications emerge:

Ethical leadership promotes collaboration to improve school culture. The study found that ethical leadership promotes collaboration, which can significantly improve school culture by fostering trust and shared responsibility. The respondents, particularly teachers, lamented that schools in Mkuranga should institutionalize participatory structures such as SMT involvement in budgeting, policy changes, and disciplinary measures. They added that transparency in decision-making reduces suspicion and builds a culture of trust among staff. According to them, the trust developed translates into their morale and willingness to support institutional initiatives. Furthermore, WEO and some heads of schools argued that training programs for heads of schools should emphasize inclusive governance and ethical reasoning in decision-making. From this scenario, one of the visiting teachers from school A provided:

The leadership style is good in terms of student involvement since it incorporates the students' leadership in school affairs. I've noticed that our head of school has a strong commitment to ethical leadership, particularly in how they empower students. They have actively worked to incorporate the students' leadership government into important school affairs (Interview, Teacher, July 2025).

This quotation emphasizes the inclusion of students in decision-making processes through the students' leadership in government. This suggests that the head of school demonstrates ethical leadership practices by empowering learners to participate in school governance. Such

practices reflect democratic values, fairness, and respect for student voice, which are critical aspects of ethical leadership. The quote implies that the head of school recognizes students as key stakeholders and creates opportunities for them to influence decisions that affect their learning and school environment. This not only promotes transparency and shared responsibility but also builds students' confidence, leadership skills, and accountability. The importance of collaboration as ethical leadership also emphasized by previous scholars such as Mbarawii & Amabibi (2024) in Nigeria, who revealed that collaboration and accountability are significantly related to ethical leadership, and enhancing school culture, such as job commitment among teachers. The study of Mbarawii & Amabibi concluded that collaboration and accountability in ethical leadership are crucial for fostering a dedicated teaching staff and a positive learning environment.

Another teacher from school B argued:

Regarding fairness, I find the head of school quite aggressive in their approach, which sometimes creates tension. While I appreciate the head of school's passion, I have to be honest and say that their approach can be quite aggressive. When they are trying to be fair or transparent, their method sometimes comes across as demanding and uncompromising, which puts people on the defensive (Interview, Teacher, July 2025).

The quotation from the teacher reflects a perceived contradiction in the head of school's leadership approach: while fairness and transparency are intended, the manner of implementation is described as aggressive, demanding, and

uncompromising, which creates tension and defensiveness among staff. This suggests that ethical intent does not always translate into ethical practice when delivery style undermines core ethical values such as respect, empathy, and collaboration. Although the head of school demonstrates commitment to fairness, the approach lacks emotional intelligence and consideration for interpersonal dynamics, which are essential in ethical leadership. This behavior risks diminishing the positive impact of fairness by creating fear, resistance, or strained relationships, thereby weakening school culture.

Ethical leadership is not solely about fairness and transparency as outcomes; it also concerns the process and manner in which these values are upheld. Research emphasizes that how decisions are communicated and enforced is as important as the decisions themselves, particularly in contexts that require collaboration. The aggressive approach described in the quote introduces authoritarian undertones, which can erode trust and psychological safety among staff. When teachers feel defensive, they may become reluctant to share opinions, reducing participatory decision-making, a critical feature of ethical leadership. This tension can lead to a negative school culture, characterized by fear, reduced morale, and diminished cooperation among staff members. This finding highlights the complexity of ethical leadership: intentions of fairness and transparency balanced with empathy, dialogue, and respect for others' perspectives to sustain a positive culture. Failure to do so can lead to ethical dissonance, where leaders believe they are acting ethically but their behavior is perceived as coercive.

The other teacher said:

Transparency is about fifty-fifty; some decisions are made collaboratively with teachers, while others are made individually by the head of school. From my perspective, transparency in leadership is a mixed bag. It feels about fifty-fifty. There are times when the head of school is very open and collaborative with us. They will ask for our input, and we will feel like our opinions are truly valued. However, there are also times when decisions are made behind closed doors, with no input from the teachers (Interview, Teacher, July 2025).

The quotation from the teacher portrays a leadership approach where transparency is inconsistent, with decision-making sometimes being participatory and other times exclusive. This suggests that the head of school demonstrates ethical leadership only partially, creating a perception of mixed accountability. When decisions are made collaboratively, teachers feel respected, valued, and included in the governance process, which fosters trust and strengthens school culture. However, when decisions are made behind closed doors without consultation, it undermines confidence, creates uncertainty, and can breed feelings of exclusion among staff.

Transparency is a fundamental principle that enhances credibility and trustworthiness in leadership practices. From an ethical leadership perspective, the study discovered that transparency is a fundamental principle that enhances credibility and trustworthiness in leadership practices. The study discovered that heads of schools highlighted strong transparency and accountability towards ethical leadership. However, the teachers

insisted on a monopoly decision-making practiced by school heads. The inconsistency highlighted reflects a leadership gap that can negatively affect school culture. While collaborative decisions promote shared ownership and collegiality, one-sided decisions may create perceptions of favoritism or secrecy, leading to tension and reduced morale among teachers. This duality demonstrates that partial transparency can dilute the overall ethical climate of the school.

The implication for school culture is significant. Inconsistent transparency may result in unpredictable working relationships, where teachers are unsure whether their opinions are considered. This uncertainty can discourage proactive participation in school initiatives, weakening collaboration and collective responsibility. For ethical leadership to influence positively school culture, transparency must be consistent and institutionalized rather than dependent on the leader's discretion. Leadership development programs should therefore emphasize the importance of maintaining open communication channels and engaging staff meaningfully in all major decisions. Consistent transparency not only reinforces ethical values but also cultivates a school culture grounded in trust, fairness, and inclusivity.

Furthermore, the heads of schools also had their views reflecting their leadership style in terms of ethical practices. One of the visited heads of schools said:

Being responsible and transparent in decision-making makes teachers more committed to their duties. I always explain the reasoning behind major decisions, which builds trust and respect with my staff. This

openness helps teachers feel valued rather than being forced to decision made by the head of school. As a result, they share a stronger sense of purpose and responsibility. It encourages them to take ownership of their roles and contribute more actively to the school's success (Interview, HoS, July 2025).

The head of school's statement highlights a strong commitment to ethical leadership through consistent transparency and accountability in decision-making. By openly explaining the reasoning behind major decisions, the head of school fosters a sense of trust and mutual respect within the school community. This approach not only prevents feelings of imposition among teachers but also promotes inclusivity and shared ownership of the school's vision and goals. When teachers understand the context of decisions and feel valued as partners, they develop a stronger sense of belonging and responsibility toward the institution.

This practice illustrates a critical dimension of ethical leadership, creating a participatory environment where teachers' voices are recognized and their contributions appreciated. Such an environment enhances teacher motivation, as they are not merely passive recipients of directives but active collaborators in shaping the school's future. This level of engagement has a direct influence on school culture, fostering cooperation, collegiality, and a collective commitment to excellence. Research on ethical leadership underscores that transparency and open communication reduce organizational resistance, strengthen trust, and enhance professional relationships, all of which are essential for a healthy and productive school culture.

The implications for school culture are profound. Transparent decision-making encourages teachers to internalize the school's mission, leading to proactive attitudes and greater accountability in their daily roles. When teachers feel empowered and respected, they are more likely to contribute innovative ideas, support institutional policies, and maintain high professional standards. This collaborative culture ultimately translates into improved student learning experiences and overall school performance. For school leadership training programs, this statement reinforces the need to integrate practical strategies for transparent communication and participatory governance. Ethical leadership is not simply about fairness in principle but about creating a culture where openness and shared responsibility drive institutional success.

The other visited head of school added:

By consistently demonstrating transparency, honesty, integrity, and fairness, we set a clear benchmark for everyone. This not only influences the formal rules and norms but also shapes the unwritten values that guide daily interactions. When staff and students see leaders acting ethically, they are more likely to internalize these principles, leading to a culture where honesty is valued, respect is a given, and accountability is expected from all. Ultimately, it creates a moral compass for the entire school community (Interview, HoS, July 2025).

The head of school's statement underscores the centrality of modeling ethical behavior as a core leadership practice. By consistently demonstrating honesty, integrity, and fairness, the head of school sets a strong ethical tone that permeates both formal structures, such as

policies, rules, and informal norms, which shape daily interactions within the school community. This modeling effect is crucial because it signals to both staff and students that ethical conduct is not merely an expectation but a standard practiced by those in authority. When leaders exemplify these values, they create a powerful form of social learning, where others are more likely to emulate similar behaviors.

This approach aligns with Transformational Leadership Theory that emphasizes the importance of aligning leadership practices with moral and ethical standards, which is particularly significant in school settings. It underscores the leader's ability to inspire trust, promote collaboration, and create a shared vision, all of which are essential for fostering a positive school culture that enhances teacher morale, student engagement, and community involvement (Bass & Avolio, 2018). Leadership behavior acts as a moral compass, influencing the collective values and attitudes that form the foundation of school culture. A culture rooted in honesty, respect, and accountability fosters trust and cooperation among staff while promoting positive student behavior. Such a climate minimizes conflict, reduces incidents of misconduct, and enhances the sense of belonging for all members of the school community. In essence, the head of school's commitment to integrity does more than guide decision-making. It actively shapes a cohesive and value-driven environment that supports effective teaching and learning.

Justice and fairness foster accountability: Furthermore, the study involved students and their responses, presented in quotes with interpretation and discussion. Based on the students' responses, the visited schools seem to have

a strong emphasis on justice, consistent and fair application of rules and regulations. The students feel that teachers and leaders treat them well because they follow the established guidelines. The student who mentions joining instructions, for example, suggests a clear set of rules that students are aware of from the start. One of the visiting students said:

I feel teachers and school leaders treat us well by following the school's rules and regulations consistently. For example, when a student breaks a rule, the teachers apply the same consequence to everyone, whether it is a small offense like being late to class or not completing homework. We know what to expect, and that predictability makes us feel secure and treated fairly (Interview, Student July 2025).

The other student added:

Discipline is maintained fairly as punishments are given based on cases outlined in the school's joining instructions. We all get a copy of the school's rules when we first enroll, so there are no surprises. It is not about a teacher's personal feelings; it is about what the rules say. This process prevents favoritism and makes us feel that our well-being is a priority, not just punishing us for the sake of it (Interview, Student, July 2025).

These responses suggest that the school's leadership practices are built on a foundation of procedural justice. Students perceive their treatment as fair and ethical because it is predictable and consistent, not arbitrary. The school has a clear, documented set of rules, referred to as the "joining instructions," that are applied equally to all. This approach removes the ambiguity that can lead to feelings of

injustice or favoritism among students. The students' sense of well-being and security is directly tied to the consistency of the rules. They do not have to worry about a teacher having a bad day and unfairly punishing them. This situation fosters a sense of trust, fairness, and justice between the students and the school's leadership. The findings correlated with the findings of Ssegawa and Matovu (2020), who highlighted that fairness and justice in ethical leadership significantly shape a positive school culture.

The students' comments directly reflect the success of a specific ethical leadership practice: leading through a consistent application of established policy. This practice positively influences the school culture in significant ways. It promotes a culture of trust and fairness, as students see rules applied consistently and without bias, which builds confidence in the leadership and reinforces the belief that the system is fair. It fosters predictability and security by creating an environment where students understand that their actions have clear, consistent consequences. This reduces anxiety and allows students to focus on their academic and personal development without fear of arbitrary punishment. In addition, it encourages a positive school climate, as fairness and consistency reduce the likelihood of rebellion against rules and increase respect for teachers and school leaders. The study established that school leaders are not just making ethical decisions; they are demonstrating them through action. The clear rules and consistent application of those rules create a school culture where students feel respected and secure, which is a hallmark of ethical leadership.

Moreover, the study involved parents to understand how justice and fairness foster accountability. Largely speaking, the analysis of parent interviews revealed that ethical leadership is a cornerstone of a positive school culture. Specifically, parents consistently identified fairness, transparency, and inclusive decision-making as the key ethical practices of the school leadership. These heads of schools are found to be fundamental in building trust, cooperation, and a strong partnership between the school and the community. One of the visited parents further added that;

The head of school treats all children equally and maintains good behavior standards without showing favoritism or discrimination. They do not favor some students over others based on personal preferences or background. The leadership gives every student an equal opportunity to achieve both academics and extra-curricular activities. Parents feel reassured that their children are judged fairly according to rules, not based on bias. This fairness creates a sense of trust between parents and the school leadership (Interview, Parent, July 2025).

The other parent stated:

The head of school regularly calls meetings and openly collaborates with parents on school matters. There are no hidden agendas or secretive decisions made without parental involvement. Parents are informed about policies, changes, and any issues affecting their children through clear communication. This open approach builds confidence among parents because they know what is happening in the school at all times. Transparency eliminates unnecessary rumors and

ensures honesty in all interactions (Interview, Parent, July 2025).

The responses from parents indicated that the school leadership practices ethical decision-making by involving stakeholders, maintaining fairness, and upholding transparency. Parents perceive that the head of school does not show favoritism and treats all students equally, which reflects adherence to ethical principles of justice and equality. The mention of collaborative meetings and open communication demonstrates transparency in leadership practices. In addition, parents are included in making important decisions, showing a participatory leadership style that respects stakeholders' opinions.

These findings suggest that ethical leadership positively shapes the school culture. When decisions are made collaboratively and openly, it reduces mistrust and potential conflicts between the school and parents. Transparency ensures that parents feel informed and engaged, which strengthens the home-school partnership. Fairness in leadership promotes a sense of justice and equality among students and parents, eliminating perceptions of bias or favoritism. Furthermore, involving parents in decision-making fosters a culture of shared responsibility and accountability within the school. It creates an environment where all stakeholders feel valued and respected. This inclusive approach not only builds trust but also enhances cooperation, making it easier to implement school policies and programs. Ethical leadership, therefore, becomes a cornerstone for building a positive school climate characterized by mutual respect, trust, and open dialogue.

The study established that ethical leadership practices positively shape the school culture. This assertion is supported by the work of Ogunruku and Tosin (2023), whose research in Nigerian secondary schools demonstrated that when decisions are made collaboratively and openly with parents, it reduces mistrust and potential conflicts between the school and parents. Their study found that transparency, particularly in financial dealings, ensures that parents feel informed and engaged, which significantly strengthens the home-school partnership. Furthermore, the authors emphasized that fairness in leadership promotes a sense of justice and equality among students and parents, eliminating perceptions of bias or favoritism. The research by Ogunruku and Tosin (2023) confirms that involving parents in decision-making fosters a culture of shared responsibility and accountability within the school. It creates an environment where all stakeholders feel valued and respected. Therefore, as evidenced by this study, ethical leadership becomes a cornerstone for building a positive school climate characterized by mutual respect, trust, and open dialogue.

The implication of these practices for school culture is significant. By maintaining fairness, transparency, and stakeholder involvement, the school fosters a culture of trust and shared governance. This culture reduces misunderstandings and resistance to change, as parents feel they have a voice in matters concerning their children. Ethical decision-making also reinforces discipline and consistency, as policies are applied uniformly and openly. In the long term, such practices lead to a stable and supportive school environment where students thrive academically and socially.

Parents become strong allies in promoting the school's mission because they trust the leadership's integrity. Overall, ethical leadership in decision-making not only strengthens school culture but also ensures sustainability in achieving educational goals.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

The study concludes that ethical leadership practices specifically fairness transparency and participatory governance are significant and multifaceted influences on school culture in Mkuranga District. While positive practices like the consistent involvement of the School Management Team (SMT) open communication and the consistent application of rules for students have fostered trust collaboration and a sense of justice among stakeholders (teachers students and parents) the overall ethical climate is vulnerable to inconsistencies. The findings revealed a gap in some instances where a lack of consistency in keeping promises and the use of aggressive communication styles coupled with a failure to prioritize teachers' personal welfare directly undermined teacher motivation and trust creating an ethical dissonance that negatively affects morale. Therefore, ethical leadership is not merely about having positive intentions or establishing formal policies but requires sustained visible consistency and empathy in all actions to cultivate fully a positive supportive and cohesive school culture grounded in trust and respect.

Recommendations

To reinforce the positive impact of ethical leadership on school culture and

address the identified inconsistencies it recommended that the Mkuranga District Education Office implement mandatory practical leadership development training for all Heads of Schools. This training should specifically emphasize ethical consistency focusing on promise keeping compassionate communication and the balance between institutional compliance and teacher welfare. Furthermore formal protocols for transparent decision making especially concerning resource allocation rewards and teacher transfers should be institutionalized to ensure that collaborative involvement (e.g. SMT and parent participation) is a predictable standard not subject to the leader's discretion. Finally school heads must be actively encouraged to model empathetic and supportive behavior to close the "say do gap" fostering a culture where every staff member feels respected, their personal needs are acknowledged and their contribution is consistently valued.

REFERENCES

- Adeoye, A. O. (2021). Ethical leadership, employees' commitment, and organizational effectiveness: A study of nonfaculty members. *Athens Journal of Business & Economics*, 7(2), 161-172.
- Aljbour, H. R. A. (2020). The extent of practicing ethical leadership by public secondary school principals in Amman. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 11(15), 57-63.
- Ampomah, R. (2021). Ethical leadership and teacher professional values: Matters arising from the northern region of Ghana. *European Journal of Education Studies*, 8(7), 276-291.
- Asmawi, A., & Alam, M. S. (2024). Qualitative research:

- Understanding its underlying philosophies. *Forum for Education Studies*, 2(2), 13-20.
- Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (2018). Transformational leadership and its impact on organizational culture. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 13(2), 45-56.
- Boniface, R. M., & Ngalawa, C. F. (2020). Teachers' awareness of teaching professional code of ethics, acts and regulations in Mkuranga District, Tanzania. *Papers in Education and Development*, 38(2).
- Boniface, R., & Ngalawa, J. (2020). Awareness of professional ethics among secondary school teachers in Coastal Tanzania. *Tanzania Journal of Education*, 22(1), 45-60.
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2018). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(6), 595-616.
- Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Luppescu, S., & Easton, J. Q. (2020). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons From Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2021). *Research Methods in Education* (7th ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Epstein, J. L., Coates, L., Salinas, K. C., Sanders, M. G., & Simon, B. S. (2019). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. Corwin Press.
- Fullan, M. (2020). *The new meaning of educational change*. Teachers College Press.
- Göçen, A. (2021). Ethical leadership in educational organizations: A crosscultural study. *Turkish Journal of Education*, 10(1), 37-57.
- Holst, A. L. (2023). Finding a Moral Compass: Grounded Theory Research on Ethical Leadership Training for Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). In *Sustainable Development and Environmental Stewardship*.
- Islam, T., Hussain, D., Ahmed, I., & Sadiq, M. (2021). Ethical Leadership and Environment Specific Discretionary Behaviour: *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences/Revue Canadienne Des Sciences de L'Administration*, 38(4), 442-459.
- Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2019). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership revisited. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(1), 5-22.
- Mbarawii, W., & Amabibi, F. I. (2024). Collaboration and accountability: principal ethical leadership behaviour and job commitment in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. *International Journal of Institutional Leadership, Policy and Management*, 6(3), 348-365.
- Mhando, E., & Mgonja, M. (2021). Systemic challenges and leadership in Tanzanian secondary education. *East African Journal of Educational Research*, 4(1), 55-70.
- Mhando, N., & Mgonja, T. (2021). Leadership challenges in Tanzanian rural schools: A case of resource scarcity and stakeholder

- involvement. *African Education Review*, 18(2), 235-250.
- MthethwaSommers, S., & Ntombela, S. (2019). Ethical leadership and its impact on teacher collaboration in South African schools. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 22(3), 315-328.
- Mwampashi, A. P. (2023). *The Influence of Ethical Leadership on Teachers' Motivation in Secondary Schools in Tunduma Town Council, Tanzania*. Master's thesis, The Open University of Tanzania.
- Northouse, P. G. (2018). *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (8th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Oshia, E. C., Chukwudi, R. U., & Obionu, U. A. (2022). Principals' authentic leadership practices as correlates of teachers' organizational citizenship behaviour in public secondary schools in Anambra State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 5(5), 18.
- Republic of Tanzania (URT). (2020). *National Strategy for Inclusive Education in Tanzania 2020–2025*. Dar es Salaam: Ministry of Education and Vocational Training.
- Ssegawa, D., & Matovu, M. (2020). Headteachers' delegation practices and teachers' psychological job commitment in secondary schools in Kira Municipality, Wakiso District, Uganda. *European Journal of Special Education Research*, 6(1), 101-114.
- URT (2020). *Education sector development plan (2018/192024/25)*. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.
- Vikaraman, S. S., Mansor, A. N., Mohd Nor, M. Y., Alias, B. S., & Gurusamy, V. (2021). Ethical leadership practices and trust among public school leaders in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 17(3), 175-188. <https://doi.org/10.24191/ajue.v17i3.14509>
- Webster, K., & Litchka, P. (2020). Planning for Effective School Leadership: Teachers' Perceptions of the Leadership Skills and Ethical Behaviors of School Principals. *Journal of Educational Planning*, 27(1), 31-47.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Yukl, G. (1999). An evaluation of conceptual weaknesses in transformational and charismatic leadership theories. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10(2), 285-305..

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: All authors ;

Methodology: All authors ;

Investigation: All authors ;

Writing – original draft preparation: All authors ;

Writing – review and editing: All authors ;

Visualization: All authors ;

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.