

Voices from the Halls: Master Teachers' Perspectives on the Ethical Leadership Practices of School Heads

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Abstract— This qualitative study explores how master teachers perceive the ethical leadership practices of school heads. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research uncovers four central themes shaping ethical leadership in educational institutions: Clear and Proactive Communication, Authentic Participative Practices, Transparent and Trusted Practices, and Genuine Compassion. These elements emphasize the importance of consistent communication, inclusive decision-making, accountable leadership, and empathetic relationships in building a positive school culture. The study involved translating and coding interview transcripts using QDA Miner Lite software, ensuring a reliable and culturally sensitive analysis. The findings underscore the necessity of ethical leadership in cultivating trust, fairness, and responsibility within school communities. Ultimately, the research advocates institutionalizing a Care Ethics Program to further develop and sustain these leadership values in schools. This work contributes to ongoing efforts in promoting ethical leadership frameworks responsive to the real-world experiences of educators.

Keywords— Care thics, Ethics of Care, Ethical leadership, Master Teachers, School Heads.

I. INTRODUCTION

Creating an ethical and caring work environment is fundamental in shaping individual well-being, organizational success, and a positive workplace culture. When leaders prioritize the well-being of others, carry out responsibilities with integrity, and uphold organizational values, it fosters trust, collaboration, and shared accountability (Alayoubi, Al Shobaki, & Abu-Naser, 2020; Newstead et al., 2021). In schools, these principles become even more vital. School heads not only manage operational tasks but are responsible for cultivating inclusive and compassionate environments where students and staff feel valued and supported. Leadership rooted in empathy and responsiveness fosters belonging and collective growth, especially when personnel feel genuinely heard, understood, and respected (Parveen et al., 2022; Karakose et al., 2021).

However, global reports have highlighted a disturbing reality: educators across countries are increasingly grappling with emotional exhaustion, high workloads, and inadequate support systems. In South Korea, over 100 public school teachers died by suicide between 2018 and mid-2023, a crisis that led to national protests and calls for reform (Chung, 2023).

In the Philippines, some similar cases have been reported and linked just the same, with mental health now recognized as a priority concern within the education sector (PBE, 2022). These events reveal a troubling gap between leadership mandates and the lived

experiences of teachers, bringing to light the consequences of neglecting care in leadership.

It is in this context that looking into ethical leadership once more becomes highly relevant, with an ethical perspective underscoring the moral significance of relationships, attentiveness, and responsiveness in leadership. Within educational institutions, applying Care Ethics or Ethics of Care could have been promising and impactful; thus, involving leaders in fostering trust, showing genuine concern, and promoting equity through compassionate actions (Melesse & Obsiye, 2022). School heads and administrators who demonstrate ethical leadership are more likely to influence positive organizational climates and increase professional fulfillment among teachers (Da'as, 2023; Lemon, 2022). This type of leadership does not merely comply with regulations; it also actively addresses human needs, nurtures well-being, and supports moral reasoning in everyday decision-making.

Ethical leadership, particularly within the context of the Department of Education (DepEd), involves guiding others based on moral principles such as honesty, fairness, and care. When practiced with consistency and sincerity, ethical leadership improves trust and motivates personnel to contribute meaningfully to their school communities (Bennett, 2023; Alishahi et al., 2021). It ensures that those in authority do not lead by control alone, but rather through modeling integrity and prioritizing relationships. These actions promote

sustainable change, empower educators, and create safe spaces for teaching and learning.

Moreover, integrating Care Ethics into educational policy and school culture can pave the way for holistic development. As Melesse and Obsiye (2022) argue, embedding care into the curriculum and institutional regulations cultivates responsible, emotionally intelligent citizens. For DepEd, such integration could serve as a framework to support both educators' and students' growth, strengthening not just academic outcomes but also human dignity within the learning environment. It is therefore crucial to assess whether such an approach is visible and valued in actual school settings.

This study explored the presence and influence of ethical leadership within the context of DepEd Region III for the School Year 2024–2025. By centering the perspectives of master teachers, who serve as both classroom leaders and close observers of school governance, and mentors to fellow teachers, the research seeks to uncover how care is demonstrated, encouraged, or possibly overlooked in their institutions. Their insights would shed light on how ethical leadership is practiced on the ground and how it affects professional and organizational health. Through this, the study hopes to contribute to a more human-centered, sustainable model of educational leadership grounded not only in authority but also in care.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study involved school heads, also known as school principals, and master teachers from secondary schools in DepEd Region III, particularly within the Schools Division Offices (SDOs) of Balanga City, Bataan, Olongapo City, and Zambales, during School Year 2024–2025. The total number of secondary schools across these divisions is 105: four from Balanga City, forty-two from Bataan, seven from Olongapo City, and fifty-two from Zambales.

To ensure proportional representation across divisions, the sample size was calculated using G*Power 3.1, with an effect size of 0.5, a significance level of 0.05, and a statistical power of 0.95. An allocation ratio of 1:2 was applied, assigning two teachers under each school head's leadership. Based on this computation, 79 school heads and 158 teachers participated in the study.

Sampling involved two stages: stratified random sampling based on the number of schools per division

and simple random sampling to ensure equal chances of inclusion for all eligible respondents.

The study was limited to junior high schools under DepEd in Region III, excluding integrated and private schools, to maintain consistency in administrative structure and leadership dynamics. Only full-fledged school heads and master teachers were included, while those serving in acting capacities, such as officers-in-charge and teacher-designates, were excluded. This criterion ensured that participants held permanent positions with defined leadership roles and responsibilities. Master teachers were chosen for their instructional leadership and mentoring functions, which allowed for more informed and reflective responses on ethical leadership practices. These criteria helped maintain homogeneity among participants and aligned their professional roles with the study's objectives.

A validated interview guide was used to collect qualitative data from ten master teachers, providing structured yet flexible conversations around ethical leadership, communication, equity, and school climate. It was developed in alignment with the research questions to ensure relevance and focus. Expert validation was conducted by a registered guidance counselor and a university instructor affiliated with quality assurance, ensuring that the questions were clear, unbiased, and consistent with ethical leadership constructs. This process enhanced the instrument's reliability in capturing significant, experience-based insights.

The study employed a qualitative research design focused on gathering and analyzing rich, descriptive data about the lived experiences and perceptions of master teachers. The primary method of data collection was one-on-one interviews via MS Teams, which provided participants with the space to articulate their views in their own words. All interviews were recorded in Filipino and English, with data subsequently translated into English to maintain consistency in the analysis. Using QDA Miner Lite software, a structured three-phase thematic analysis was conducted. The first phase involved identifying significant statements from the transcripts. During the initial coding cycle, 40 open codes emerged, all labeled using English descriptive terms. In the second cycle, these codes were categorized under the broader framework of ethical leadership. The final thematic synthesis revealed four distinct yet interconnected themes that encapsulated the essential

traits of ethical leadership as perceived by the participants.

The study ensured ethical compliance through informed consent, confidentiality protocols, and the assignment of pseudonyms to master teachers who participated in the interview, MT with an assigned number, to protect the participants' identities. Strict data security measures were observed, including encrypted storage for digital files and locked cabinets for physical records. All data will be retained for five years and disposed of securely thereafter. To ensure trustworthiness, the researcher implemented triangulation, member checking, audit trail documentation, and reflexivity throughout the research process, thereby ensuring that the findings are credible, reliable, and transferable to similar educational contexts.

II. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of the interviews yielded four key themes central to ethical leadership among school heads.

The first theme, Clear and Proactive Communication, highlights the significance of open and consistent messaging between leaders and their staff. The participants admire the systematic and proactive actions taken by the school heads who anticipate the support and resources that they would need to implement a policy or a new mechanism. The most important resource that they emphasize is clear and detailed information, which is supportive, contextualized, and continuous. They have the opportunity to ask questions and are given other resources like flow charts, materials, and references to support them in implementation, considering that one-shot information dissemination may not be enough. The importance of this clear and sufficient information is further emphasized by participants who expressed challenges in implementing policies with limited information and multiple interpretations, especially when the school principals delegate the task of dissemination through the department heads.

For instance, one master teacher shared, "MT4: Our principal is proactive in communication. When there is a new initiative, she does not leave us guessing about what to do. She uses flowcharts and visual aids to make the instructions clearer. It is such a helpful approach because it reduces our stress." This quote exemplifies how practical, visual support tools clarify expectations and alleviate teachers' cognitive load.

Another participant affirmed this: "MT2: When there are changes in assignments, she does not just send out a

memo immediately. She speaks to us personally, especially if the adjustment is significant. She said she does not want to surprise us; it is better if we discuss things."

Participants also highlighted the importance of orientation meetings and personal communication during departmental changes. One teacher recounted, "MT10: When there was a reorganization in our department, she talked to us one by one. She does not want anyone to be overlooked, so she wants everyone's roles to be clear. She is hands-on with these matters. She says, 'If you have questions, do not hesitate to ask.' She is always open to feedback."

Another one echoed this: "MT1: Our principal is very clear when it comes to role changes. For instance, when there was a new project, she immediately organized an orientation meeting. She explained each role one by one, including expectations. She always says that she does not want anyone to be confused, so everything should be clear."

These testimonies illustrate the school head's commitment to clarity, consistency, and emotional intelligence, hallmarks of ethical leadership that reduce ambiguity and build trust. Research supports this by asserting that clear communication strategies are essential in reducing uncertainty, encouraging feedback, and enabling smooth transitions (Klimova et al., 2023). Moreover, when leaders communicate not only what is changing but also why it matters, they foster stronger buy-in from teachers (Arar & Saiti, 2022). Sanjani (2024) emphasized that transparent and proactive communication during change implementation lowers resistance, fosters preparedness, and empowers teachers to adapt effectively.

Altogether, the data affirm that proactive communication is not merely a logistical function but a relational one. School heads who prioritize clarity, listen actively, and communicate supportively foster a sense of psychological safety and readiness among teachers. These practices build a communicative culture that enhances collaboration, reduces stress, and contributes to a more resilient and agile school community.

However, while some teachers acknowledged efforts by their school leaders to communicate clearly and equitably, others observed inconsistencies in how opportunities were distributed. MT2 noted that at first, she thought all teachers were given the same opportunities, but later she noticed that some got special

treatment. This account highlights a disconnect between the school head's perceived fairness and later experiences of favoritism. Clear communication alone is not enough – trust requires consistent, equitable actions. As DiPaola and Wagner (2021) noted, effective leadership aligns open communication with fairness and impartiality.

Another major theme that emerged is the value of Authentic Participative Practices, which characterizes ethical leadership as collaborative, inclusive, and grounded in mutual respect. The participants appreciate authentic participation through collaborative decision-making and planning. This not only allows them to have input into the policies and mechanisms, but also communicates that the school heads value their experiences and expertise. This makes them feel like valued members of the school community. This is in contrast to token efforts where the admin consults with people when, in fact, the decision has already been made.

One participant noted, "MT6: Our principal has a great approach. She always says that policies are not just for her but for everyone. She always invites teachers to give feedback before finalizing any rules, projects, programs, and activities. We even have brainstorming sessions at every faculty meeting to make the process truly collaborative." This kind of consistent engagement signifies more than a tokenistic approach. It reflects genuine recognition of teachers as co-creators of school policy and practice.

In discussing role changes, MT2 shared, "When there was a change in the school designations of teachers, she created a committee with representatives from each department." This participative structure allowed teachers to voice their concerns and contribute to decisions that directly impacted them.

A different master teacher, MT1, echoed this sentiment, "Our principal is great because when there is a new policy, she does not just issue a memo. She holds an orientation and brainstorming session. She said we are the frontliners in the classrooms, so we know what works best. It is great because her approach is collaborative."

Such participative leadership models promote fairness and reinforce collective responsibility. These strategies also communicate respect for teachers' professional judgment, helping to foster a culture of empowerment. Research supports these findings, showing that when

school heads involve teachers in school-wide decisions, transparency and job satisfaction increase (Yuan et al., 2023). Participative leadership enhances team cohesion, motivation, and commitment to institutional goals (Fan et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2023). Additionally, Liu et al. (2023) argue that the formation of committees with teacher representation ensures more equitable decision-making, especially during major organizational changes.

Transparency also plays a key role in authentic participation. Islam et al. (2024) and Asif et al. (2022) emphasize that when school leaders clearly explain the rationale for decisions and provide structured opportunities for staff involvement, they reduce ambiguity and cultivate a sense of shared direction. These findings mirror what was heard from respondents: that inclusive leadership nurtures trust, strengthens relationships, and sustains collaboration.

Ultimately, authentic participative practices are a vital component of ethical leadership. School heads who engage staff meaningfully in the decision-making process build more than consensus; they build community. In doing so, they affirm the professional worth of their teachers, elevate collective morale, and lead schools that are not only better managed but more deeply unified in purpose.

However, while some teachers reported that their school heads encouraged participation, others made unilateral decisions. MT2 remarked that sometimes decisions were already made before consulting them, and they were just informed afterwards. This reveals a gap between the ideal of participatory leadership and its actual practice. When decisions are made beforehand, teacher involvement becomes superficial. Genuine participation, as Nguyen et al. (2021) emphasized, builds respect and shared ownership of school outcomes.

The qualitative findings also underscore that ethical leadership rooted in transparency and fairness plays a vital role in cultivating an environment of trust, equity, and shared responsibility; thus, another central theme, Transparent and Trusted Practices, emerged. Participants show that the school head earns their trust based on their observed processes, especially regarding transparency, capacity, and sustainability. First, the school heads who practice transparency in budgeting or expenditure, hiring, and promotion practices earn the overall trust of the participants. When the school head presents how he or she adheres to objective and fair

standards, it becomes easier for the teachers to accept results even when these do not favor them because they respect the process presented with complete transparency. This is in contrast to favoritism, veiled or not. Second, teachers trust school heads if they believe they have the capacity to make a sound decision based on sufficient information or in-depth data gathering during issues, in contrast to hasty judgments. Finally, they earn teachers' admiration and trust in their sustainability project when teachers see their passion, in contrast to projects made for mere compliance.

One participant, MT2, shared how fairness was evident when the school head was tasked with recommending a teacher for a scholarship: "When she had to choose a teacher to recommend for a scholarship, I saw her fairness. She carefully reviewed everyone's qualifications and did not base her decision on popularity. She gave all of us a chance to submit our portfolios, and when she announced her choice, she explained why. It was based on clear criteria. It was amazing because there was no favoritism!" Such actions reinforced perceptions of impartiality and strengthened morale among staff.

Participants also valued the school head's consultative decision-making style, particularly in leadership designations. Recalling a specific instance, MT6 noted that her school head held a consultation meeting where they were allowed to share their opinions before the assignment of a new program leader. This process reflects an ethical commitment to inclusivity and accountability. Rather than relying on personal preference or unilateral decisions, the school head applied objective criteria and opened space for dialogue, practices that deepened her credibility and promoted teacher engagement.

Moreover, transparency extended into conflict resolution, where the school head's impartiality was instrumental in diffusing tensions. As MT5 described, "even though the discussion was heated before, it was resolved smoothly because she was fair." This consistency in upholding fairness, especially in difficult moments, contributed to a stable, respectful, and inclusive school climate.

These findings align with the literature, which emphasizes that transparency in school leadership enhances motivation, trust, and collaboration (Ullah et al., 2021; Chukwu et al., 2023). Leaders who consistently involve stakeholders and clearly explain the

rationale behind their decisions are more likely to reduce perceptions of favoritism and foster a sense of institutional justice (Buchanan et al., 2022). In this regard, transparency functions not only as a procedural principle but as a mechanism that strengthens the ethical fabric of school governance.

However, a participant, MT6, stated that their school head is fair, but there are instances when some teachers are favored in workloads and responsibilities. The participant noted general fairness but pointed out occasional favoritism in task assignments. Such inconsistencies, even if unintentional, can undermine trust and perceptions of fairness. As Berkovich and Eyal (2020) emphasized, everyday fairness is key to a leader's credibility and ethical authority.

Finally, the fourth theme that emerged is Genuine Compassion. Participants characterized the school head's leadership as deeply compassionate, extending beyond administrative responsibilities to include concern for teachers' emotional and personal well-being. Her attentiveness was described not as performative but as sincere and consistent. One teacher, MT8, highlighted this when noting that "when a teacher is absent due to illness, she sends a message to check on them," adding that "there was also a time she gave us a wellness day." These simple yet meaningful gestures communicated care and underscored the school head's commitment to humane leadership.

Teachers reported that this personal concern significantly impacted their morale, especially during times of stress or hardship. The school head's open-door policy was perceived as more than symbolic. MT10 explained, "She always says her door is open for us, and it is not just a promise. Even when busy, she makes time for every teacher's concerns." This consistency in emotional availability fostered trust and conveyed that teachers were seen as individuals, not just employees.

The school head's compassion also extended to students and the broader school community, creating a ripple effect of empathy throughout the institution. Her leadership inspired teachers to embody the same ethic of care in their classrooms, contributing to a more nurturing school environment. This aligns with studies that suggest emotionally intelligent and empathetic leaders play a crucial role in enhancing teacher retention, reducing burnout, and promoting school-wide well-being (Liu & Yin, 2023; Martin et al., 2022).

In totality, the data reveals that ethical leadership manifests through daily acts of care and understanding. Compassionate leadership strengthens professional relationships, reinforces resilience, and promotes a culture where both personal and institutional growth can flourish. In contexts where educators face increasing workloads and emotional strain, such leadership not only supports but sustains the workforce, creating schools that are not only functional but also humane.

However, a participant noticed an apparent contrast in the school head's display of empathy, particularly in how it was more consistently extended toward students than teachers. This suggests a selective manifestation of compassion depending on who is involved.

MT7 said that on the brighter side, her school head is very kind when dealing with students. If a child is crying, she really empathizes and solves the issue. As strict as she is, she is also kind, especially to the learners, but when it comes to teachers, it is not quite the same. The observation highlights the school head's genuine concern for students, reflecting an ethical awareness aligned with Care Ethics. However, the less empathetic approach toward teachers suggests inconsistency in applying care. As Shields (2020) emphasized, ethical leadership must demonstrate empathy for all to foster trust and moral influence within the school.

To sum up, the study shows that ethical leadership is both a guiding principle and a practical requirement for a successful school. The main themes – Clear and Proactive Communication, Authentic Participative Practices, Transparent and Trusted Practices, and Genuine Compassion – point to the importance of an environment where trust, respect, and shared decision-making are key. School leaders need not only good administrative skills but also the ability to listen carefully, involve others sincerely, and respond with empathy to the needs of teachers and students. When these values are part of leadership training and daily routines, schools can nurture an ethical culture based on care and shared responsibility.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that ethical leadership, as perceived by master teachers, is grounded in Clear and Proactive Communication, Authentic Participative Practices, Transparent and Trusted Practices, and Genuine Compassion. These themes form the foundation for leadership that not only ensures administrative effectiveness but also nurtures

professional well-being and relational trust within schools. As ethical leadership continues to gain attention in educational discourse, these insights can inform the development of leadership training, school policies, and professional development initiatives. Most importantly, the study supports the formulation of a Care Ethics Program for DepEd that institutionalizes these ethical practices, thereby promoting a culture of care, fairness, and accountability in the Philippine education system.

Ultimately, ethical leadership is about possessing the right values and ensuring that these values are experienced equitably. Addressing the perception gaps requires reflective leadership practices, feedback mechanisms, and continuous dialogue to ensure that ethical principles translate into coherent, inclusive, and consistently applied actions.

IV. RECOMMENDATION

Given the emergent themes: Clear and Proactive Communication, Authentic Participative Practices, Transparent and Trusted Practices, and Genuine Compassion, it is recommended that school leaders be supported in embedding these ethical practices into their leadership routines. These values should not remain aspirational but must be operationalized through concrete policies, leadership benchmarks, and professional development initiatives. School leaders would benefit from structured training that strengthens their skills in open communication, shared decision-making, accountability, and empathetic engagement with their stakeholders. Furthermore, establishing a school-based ethical leadership monitoring system and feedback mechanism could ensure that these leadership behaviors are consistently demonstrated, evaluated, and reinforced.

In line with this, the Department of Education (DepEd) is encouraged to institutionalize a Care Ethics Program that formally supports and sustains the integration of ethical leadership across all schools. Such a program would serve as a foundational framework promoting compassion, fairness, and moral responsibility within the educational system. It would also affirm the critical role of care and ethical responsiveness in addressing challenges such as teacher burnout, disengagement, and professional isolation.

Additionally, it is recommended that the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH) be enhanced by explicitly incorporating a domain on ethical leadership and Care Ethics. While domains like

Leading Strategically and Building Connections support moral and relational dimensions implicitly, the growing complexity of school leadership demands a more intentional focus on values such as empathy, fairness, and trust. Embedding Care Ethics directly into the PPSSH will guide school heads to lead not only with competence but also with conscience, helping build school environments where respect, dignity, and shared responsibility thrive.

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