

Chapter # 30

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP WOVEN WITH INTEGRITY: EMERGING PATHWAYS FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

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ABSTRACT

Recent research in the academic literature expressed the urgency for emerging pathways to assist school principals to understand ethical leadership (EL) toward leading with integrity. Notably, leading with integrity is a continuing learning process, yet the rewards are inevitable. The aim of this chapter, therefore, was to showcase how EL is woven with integrity, proposing moral pathways that can be used by school principals to act ethically in the line of their duties. Through the lens of integrity theory, this conceptual chapter presents an analysis of selected texts in the *South African Standard for Principalship* (SASP) which outlines significant pathways for school principals in supporting educational ethics. Data mining techniques were used to search for and select texts that could provide insights into school principals' application of EL toward acting with integrity. The findings suggest that *relational transparency*, *inclusive moral vision* and *moral reasoning* can be dynamic moral pathways to fuel school principals with innovative pathways on how to apply EL woven with integrity. These proposed pathways should be regarded as a source of light for the enactment of integrity in the hope that principals will be able to safely navigate issues of ethical concern in schools.

Keywords: emerging pathways, ethical leadership, integrity, school principals.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In the South African education context, many schools are plagued by adverse conditions such as poverty, a shortage of resources, and violence. These conditions have dire consequences for teacher morale and morality in schools (Msila, 2012; Monama, 2022). Another contributing factor to the worrisome situation in the South African education context is the fact that many schools are classified as underperforming schools, relating to those schools with a matric (grade 12) pass rate of less than 65% and where bachelor and diploma passes are below 30% (Monama, 2022). Adverse conditions like these and concerns about underperforming schools create the idea that some schools can be associated as educational spaces where equity and justice are absent, and which are regarded as “places in which ethical thought and action are needed” (Msila, 2012, p. 174). Principals who do not pay attention to improving conditions in schools are described as destructive, immoral and unethical. Contrary, principals can change situations in schools through fostering a culture of integrity, transparency and accountability (Ronnie, 2020). In this regard, EL can provide the equilibrium and ethical tutoring so that principals can lead with integrity toward nurturing a transformed sense of a positive school environment (Ahmed, 2023). Despite this expectation, there is a prevailing scepticism about EL, ranging from a negative attitude and a lack of integrity (Brown & Treviño, 2006) to blaming policies to be too wide-ranging, too ambiguous, and too intricate (Ngoepe-Ntsoane & Webb, 2021), thus creating confusion regarding EL. The problem with policy implementation is that individuals in schools might

be uninterested, demotivated or inexperienced to understand the attractiveness of policy benefits and crystallization of policy goals in practice (Ngoepe-Ntsoane & Webb, 2021). We, therefore, contend that it has become more urgent than before that researchers explore emerging pathways to arm educational leaders with moral ammunition to act decently and lead with integrity. We further assert that an analysis of policy texts can provide new directions into school principals' application of EL woven with integrity. Our claim is supported by the perception that, although policymakers and researchers paid some attention to looking at EL from different lenses, there remains an emptiness about leading ethically in contemporary educational spaces (Hsieh & Tai, 2023). Also, Mlambo (2021) asserts that, although legislation and ethical codes exist, unethical behaviour has not ended due to a lack of training and the development of attitudes and virtues for guiding human conduct. Considering the uncertainties regarding the phenomenon, we felt that it was a matter of utmost importance that EL should get the necessary consideration through proposing moral pathways that can be used by principals to lead with integrity in schools. In this regard, we asked the question: *how can an analysis of the South African Standard for Principals (SASP) contribute to an understanding of ethical leadership so that school principals can lead with integrity?* In responding to this question, we proposed moral pathways that can be used by school principals to lead with integrity and live honourable lives as moral agents in schools. To live honourably implies that principals need to strengthen their ability to recognize right from wrong, whilst taking responsibility for their decisions and actions in schools (*vide*: Beyers & Du Plessis, 2023).

2. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this chapter is to explore how an analysis of the South African Standard for Principals (SASP) can contribute to an understanding of ethical leadership so that school principals can lead with integrity. As such, the objectives were to:

- Obtain insight to ascertain how ethical leadership is woven into integrity; and to
- Propose moral pathways that can assist principals as to how to lead with integrity.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Ethical Leadership as an Art of Moral Behaviour

EL as an art of moral behaviour is not only about the application of policy regularities and general accountability rules. Our view is underscored by Hartley et al. (2019) who purports that EL can be regarded as capacities and skills to navigate uncertain and complex moral value-driven issues in ethically acceptable ways. In this regard, principals must be able to personify integrity (Zhu, Zhi & Fang, 2025) so that EL can be performed more lawfully and realistically, and therefore, be more relevant to the needs of individuals in schools. Significantly, EL asks from individuals to “*start at the back of the textile, work the needle and thread through the fabric, and return through the fabric to the backside of the tapestry*” (Lehman, 2023). This notion shows how EL is woven with integrity. Significantly, EL and integrity are entangled strings in the ethical framework of leadership (Ciulla, 2014). Integrity thus forms the nucleus of EL, implying the stable alliance between a leader's actions, values and words. Thus, when integrity is woven into leadership, it renders moral behaviour both credible and strong (Ciulla, 2014). This implies that EL cannot be regarded as superficial but rather requires a deep and patient investigation into the self and a careful crafting of principles toward creating a moral textile filled with pathways of integrity.

3.2. Ethical Leadership as an Art of Moral Behaviour

We hold the view that integrity is more than merely following the golden rule, rather, it requires the ‘stitching of ethical actions’ together towards fostering a culture of trust in schools. We considered the ‘stitching of moral actions’ as a combination of moral imagination and promise-keeping and proactive personality (Aghighi, 2020) – elements we regarded as representatives of floss for incessant moral crafting. Moral imagination, as the first ‘string’, involves the sewing of individuals’ specific ideals and morals with newfound ethical possibilities in particular situations (Rindova & Martins, 2023). In this regard, individuals anticipate and explore the ethical effects of decisions and actions (Gerrits et al., 2023). Representing the second ‘string’, promise-keeping is connected to truthfulness, suggesting that individuals evaluate their objectives and behaviour toward improving their conduct (*vide*: Mozumder, 2022). The third ‘string’, proactive personality, hinges on the belief that individuals frequently follow their instincts about what might be the right thing to do, yet they often change their frames of references about their ethical behaviour and “*if they see something that they don’t like, they keep changing*” (Aghighi, 2020, p. 16). These strings complement each other in the sense that ‘new ethical possibilities’ (moral imagination), ‘improving their conduct’(promise-keeping), and ‘frequently change’ (proactive personality), ask from ethical leaders to constantly assess and morally change their ways of acting with integrity.

3.3. Education Policy as a Moral Compass

Harman (1984) explains that education policy is a goal-oriented document that comprises of various courses of action. Fan and Popkewitz (2020) elaborate that education policy should be regarded as a code of conduct formulated to meet the needs of development in particular areas of education. As a “course of action” and “code of conduct”, education policy provides options for best practices to address issues of educational concern. These views (Fan & Popkewitz, 2020; Harman, 1984) align with the aim of this chapter which was to explore how an analysis of the South African Standard for Principalship (SASP) can contribute to an understanding of EL so that school principals can lead with integrity. The SASP explains the roles of school principals, focusing on their level of capabilities and expertise, and provide direction in terms of principals’ leadership and developmental needs (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015). For instance, one of the elements of the policy is indicated as principals’ responsibility to subscribe to educational ethics (RSA, 2015). In adherence to educational ethics, the SASP (RSA, 2015) oblige principals to “behave with integrity toward people of all cultures” (p. 10), “take responsibility and be accountable in all matters concerning the school” (p. 10), “lead diversity” (p. 20) and “make accurate judgments” (p. 20). The effect of these educational ethics on the work principals do is overtly stated in the SASP, indicating that “*ethical leadership in all its various facets, and more particularly in leading diversity, is of paramount importance for an effective principal*” (RSA, 2015, p. 3). This statement suggests that an application of EL must be an act of making reliable decisions in schools which can be associated with the making of choices that align with the enactment of integrity and building trust, whilst be cognizant about the consequences of decisions being made (Olasehinde, Onibon, Weya-Ajayi, & Adewale, 2025). As such, we delicately studied texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) to find fundamental pathways that can assist principals in leading with integrity in schools. Before presenting an analysis of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015), we first explain the theory that underpinned this study and then explain the research processes followed in this research study.

4. APPLICATION OF INTEGRITY THEORY

This chapter adopted Williams' (2002) explanation of integrity theory as individuals' ability to "*follow the internal route, and expresses the self in authentic way, in which we should follow our deepest impulses, listen to ourselves within, be true to ourselves and expresses ourselves sincerely, thus a true self is revealed*" (p. 184). This frame of thinking implies that individuals have the intellectual capacity to make informed choices that embrace accountability when they act upon the choices they make. Such accountability requires leaders to act in tandem with ethical moralities to circumvent any actions that might compromise their moral values (Zarghamifard & Danaeefard, 2020) so that they can guide, influence, and inspire others to uphold similar ethical standards. When aligned to the application of EL, an application of integrity theory (Williams, 2002) guided our thinking in terms of school principals' ability to present their true selves and avoid actions that may compromise their moral values, while they guide, influence, and inspire others ethically.

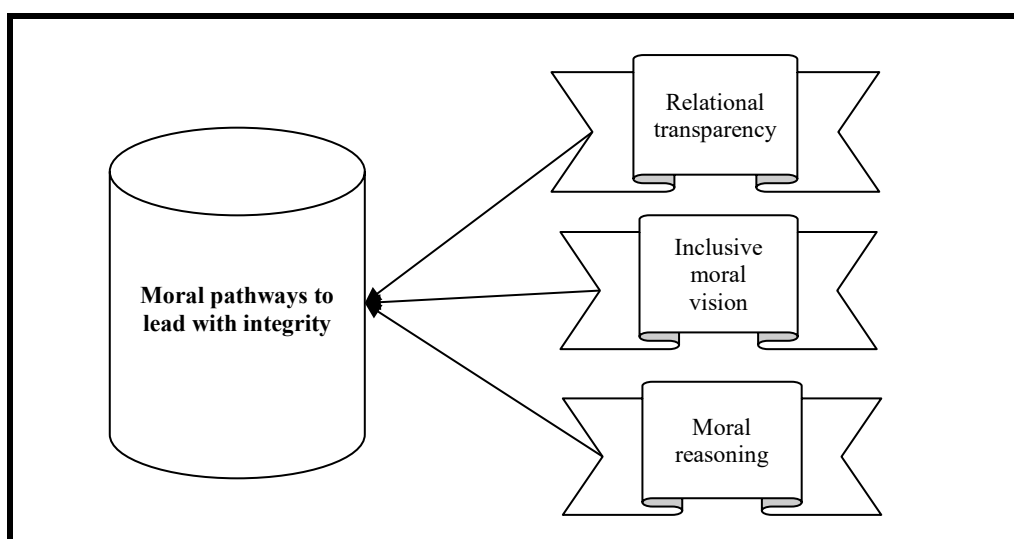
5. METHODOLOGY

This conceptual chapter employed a qualitative approach, analysing the content in documents, allowing researchers to understand how ideas and information are presented and what meanings can be derived about phenomena (Dalglish, Khalid, & McMahon, 2020). In this chapter, data is represented by selected texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015). We first scrutinized several South African education policy documents and found that the SASP (RSA, 2015) provides the strongest information that could be used to find information about how EL can be regarded as a delicate embroidery so that school principals can lead with integrity. We employed data mining, which is an exploratory method of knowledge finding, focusing on the detection and mining of significant patterns of information (Rasid et al., 2017). Firstly, we thoroughly combed through the large volume of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and transferred relevant information to a WORD document (which we called our georgette – a relatively delicate silk). Secondly, we arranged the texts on the 'georgette' in layers ranging from mostly relevant to less relevant. Thirdly, we worked delicately to select those texts with the strongest connection to EL and integrity. Notably, we gently performed the text selection to avoid the georgette from twisting, implying that we were cautious not to leave out important information toward analysis. Next, we scrutinized the texts and were able to identify understandable, valid and useful patterns, which, after another round of scrutiny, assisted us to identify three moral ribbons that represent EL as a delicate embroidery of integrity: *relational transparency, inclusive moral vision and moral reasoning*.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Derived from the SASP (RSA, 2015), we next discuss the three identified moral pathways (Figure 1):

Figure 1.
Moral pathways to lead with integrity.



Firstly, the SASP (RSA, 2015) is adamant that principals should act with “*fair-mindedness, patience, empathy, compassion, respect and humility in all dealings with others*” (p. 6). These ethical characteristics (RSA, 2015) make relational transparency probable and reliable. The enactment of relational transparency implies that EL allow others to voice their own true emotions, thoughts, opinions and ideas (Rego, Pina e Cunha, & Giustiniano, 2022). In so doing, principals may obtain a deeper sense of what it means to enact integrity in the line of their duty. In this regard, principals must build trust and always be honest with the individuals they work with. Principals must, therefore, be willing to acknowledge when they make mistakes – which is a sign of acting in conjunction with morals and values. When principals would prioritize transparency, they create a culture of ethical behaviour founded on loyalty, respect and trust (Biancone, 2024). In this regard, relational transparency becomes a valuably beacon of integrity for principals to enact ethical leadership. It is thus not strange that the SASP (RSA, 2015) reminds principals that they should refine their knowledge about integrity, whilst constantly revisit their understanding of what is morally right. Principals are supposed to be individuals with well-ordered souls, implying that they ought to know how to act transparently in terms of the knowledge they have about doing things in the right way and making decisions that are morally acceptable (Wright, 2020).

Secondly, the SASP (RSA, 2015) provide principals with the opportunity to foster an inclusive moral vision through shaping “*integrity and fairness in all dealings with people*” (p. 6). An inclusive moral vision requires an escape from ignorance and a search for a different truth regarding things, which considers the implications of knowledge and responsibility (Makwudo & Nkwakudo, 2025). Within such a vision, principals may be able

to strengthen answerability, consultation and critical reflection (McAuliffe & Greenslade, 2025). While answerability requires principals to rationalise and justify their decisions, consultation is about obtaining the guidance of others to endorse significant values in the interests of prudence and integrity. Also, critical reflection encourages individuals to evaluate their decision-making processes and engage in self-reflection toward improving future moral practices. When aligned to the SASP (RSA, 2015), integrity, as a moral inclusive vision represents principals' ability to take a brave stance to distance themselves from immoral behaviour toward searching for new opportunities and a greater understanding of how to act with integrity. Immoral behaviour occurs when principals abuse their authority to threaten or intimidate others through discriminatory practices, defiance of rules, favouritism or discrimination (*vide*: Arslan, Polat, Gürler, & Bulut, 2024). Significantly though, when principals would distance themselves from immoral behaviour, they safeguard professional integrity, whilst creating opportunities to re-affirm moral standards in schools.

Thirdly, principals must be able to employ moral reasoning in terms of the way they lead others and the decisions they make. In this regard, the SASP is adamant that principals should understand the “core values that underpin everything that happens at a school and that inform everything that the principal does in leading and managing the school” (RSA, 2015, p. 9). Such core values align with those enshrined in the South African Constitution (RSA, 1996), for instance, principals should protect the dignity of everyone at schools, ensure that all individuals are treated fairly and without discrimination and protect individuals from the abuse of power. Moral reasoning, therefore, implies that principals must be “alert of everything that happens in the school” (RSA, 2015, p. 9) so that everyone can be treated as worthy citizens of this country and the world. To strengthen the ability of moral reasoning, principals must employ moral judgment which hinges on notions of personal interests (PI), maintaining norms (MN), and postconventional (PC) thinking (*vide*: Rest et al., 1999). While PI reflects a dedication to what is morally acceptable, MN focuses on a devotion to lawful actions. PC requires individuals to assess several views and employ nuanced moral reasonings. When principals employ moral judgment, they may be stronger in condemning unethical behaviour, while honouring their moral commitments, even when it might not suit them (Isserow & Klein, 2017).

7. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A valuable avenue for research would be to explore consolidative frames where integrity is theorized as equally an ethical orbit and behavioural model. Also, it might be interesting to investigate cross-cultural perceptions of integrity and how they shape ethical leadership depiction.

8. CONCLUSION

We first conducted a literature review and derived three valuable insights. Firstly, ethical leadership requires a deep and patient examination into the self and a careful crafting of principles toward creating a moral fabric filled with beacons of integrity. Secondly, integrity presupposes that moral imagination, promise-keeping and a proactive personality requires ethical leaders to continuously appraise morally transform their ways of doing things. Thirdly, education texts provide valuable options for the enactment of ethical leadership. After engaging with data mining of texts in the SASP, we found that an application of relational transparency can guide principals toward obtaining a deeper sense of what it means to enact integrity in the line of their duty. Also, principals should employ

an inclusive moral vision so that they can take a brave stance to distance themselves from immoral behaviour toward searching for new opportunities and a greater understanding of how to act with integrity. Furthermore, principals should employ moral reasoning so that they may be stronger in condemning immoral conduct, while honouring their moral commitments, even when it might not suit them. The noticeable impact of the SASP, as illustrated in this study, can be found in the focus on standards such as respect, integrity, accountability, human dignity and fairness. These standard may assist principals in understanding their ethical commitments beyond organizational effectiveness. Notably, the SASP can be useful in reducing vagueness in terms of decision-making and can thus guide principals to act in ways that are associated with professional and constitutional ethics.

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