

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AS A DELICATE EMBROIDERY FOR INTEGRITY: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Sipiwe Mudadigwa, & Edwin Darrell De Klerk

Professional Studies in Education, North-West University: Mahikeng Campus (South Africa)

Abstract

Recent research in the academic literature expressed the urgency for new directions to assist school principals to understand ethical leadership toward leading with integrity. Notably, leading with integrity is an ongoing learning process, yet the advantages are undisputable. The aim of this paper, therefore, was to showcase ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery for the enactment of integrity, proposing moral ribbons that can be used by school principals to act ethically in the line of their duties. Through the lens of integrity theory, this conceptual paper presents an analysis of selected texts in the *South African Standard for Principalship* (SASP) which outlines key ribbons for school principals in subscribing to educational ethics. Data mining techniques were used to search for and select texts that could provide insights into school principals' application of ethical leadership toward acting with integrity. The findings suggest that *having and doing one's own, an escape from the cave, and integrity kingship* can be vital moral ribbons to fuel school principals with new directions on how to apply ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery for the enactment of integrity. This paper should be regarded as an act of planting fresh seeds for the enactment of integrity in the hope that principals will reap the fruits of living an honourable life as moral agents in schools.

Keywords: *Delicate embroidery, ethical leadership, integrity, new directions, school principals.*

1. Introduction

In the complex landscape of modern-day education, ethical leadership (EL) must provide the steadiness and moral coaching so that principals can lead with integrity, honesty and fairness toward fostering a renewed sense of a positive school environment (Ahmed, 2023). Despite this expectation, there is a prevailing cynicism about EL, ranging from a negative attitude and a lack of integrity (Brown & Treviño, 2006) to blaming policies to be too comprehensive, too vague, and too elaborate (Ngoepe-Ntsoane & Webb, 2021), thus creating confusion regarding ethical leadership. The problem with policy implementation is that individuals in schools might be uninterested, demotivated or inexperienced to understand the attractiveness policy benefits and realization of policy goals in practice (Ngoepe-Ntsoane & Webb, 2021). We, therefore, contend that it has become more urgent than before that researchers explore new directions to arm educational leaders with moral ammunition to act ethically and lead with veracity. We further assert that an analysis of policy texts can provide new directions into school principals' application of ethical leadership toward acting with integrity. Our contention is supported by the notion 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 end 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 high time that ethical leadership, like a delicate embroidery, should get the required attention through proposing moral ribbons 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 Principalship (SASP) contribute to an understanding of ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery so that school principals can lead with integrity?* In responding to this question, we proposed moral ribbons that can be used by school principals to lead with integrity and live honourable lives as moral agents in schools.

2. Ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery

Embroidery is the art of decorating already existing fabric (Rani, Jining & Shah, 2021) with needle and thread with meaningful and symbolic connotations (Von Kürthy et al., 2023). When approached

delicately, an embroidery “*shape the feelings and thoughts*” (Rani et al., 2021, p. 9), influences the mind and can promote change within individuals’ lives (Von Kürthy et al., 2023). Drawing on the mentioned authors (Rani et al., 2021; Von Kürthy et al., 2023), we believe that the act of embroidery has a transformative influence on the way school principals perform ethical leadership in schools. We aligned ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery with a seminal view of Lloyd (1957) who purports that when something is regarded as an embroidery, it serves as a discovery and promotion of elementary principles into attractive moral floss appropriate for people to use. In this regard, principals must be enlightened of how to be authentic and intrinsically motivated so that they can lead with integrity (Terzieva, 2023). In this regard, ethical leaders should personify integrity (Zhu, Zhi & Fang, 2025) so that ethical leadership can be performed more legitimately and effectively, and therefore, be more relevant to the needs of individuals in schools. Significantly, ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery 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, n.p.). This implies that ethical leadership 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 ribbons of integrity.

3. Integrity as a process of continuous moral crafting

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. Drawing from, we considered the ‘stitching of moral actions’ as a combination of moral imagination and promise-keeping (Robinson, Parry & Sun, 2016) and proactive personality (Aghighi, 2020) – elements we regarded as representatives of floss for continuous moral crafting. Firstly, moral imagination, as the first ‘stitch’, involves the stitching of individuals’ specific ideals and values with new 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 stitch, promise-keeping is associated with truthfulness, suggesting that individuals assess their intentions and actions toward improving their conduct (*vide*: Mozumder, 2022). The third stitch, proactive personality, hinges on the notion that individuals repetitively follow their instincts about what might be the right thing to do, yet they frequently 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 stitches 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.

4. Education policy texts as threads for delicate embroidery

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 paper which was to explore how an analysis of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) can contribute to an understanding of ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery so that school principals can lead with integrity. The SASP explains the roles of school principals, focusing on their level of competencies and professionalism, and provide guidance in terms of principals’ leadership and developmental needs (RSA, 2015). The SASP explicitly indicates 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 implies that an application of ethical leadership must be an act of making sound judgements in schools. We carefully studied texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) to find key ribbons that can assist in leading with integrity in schools.

Before presenting an analysis of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015), we first delineate the theory that underpinned this study and then explain the research processes followed in this research study.

5. Application of integrity theory

This paper adopts 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 intelligent ability to make knowledgeable choices that embrace answerability when they act upon the choices they make. Such answerability requires leaders to act in tandem with moral principles to avoid 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 ethical leadership, 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.

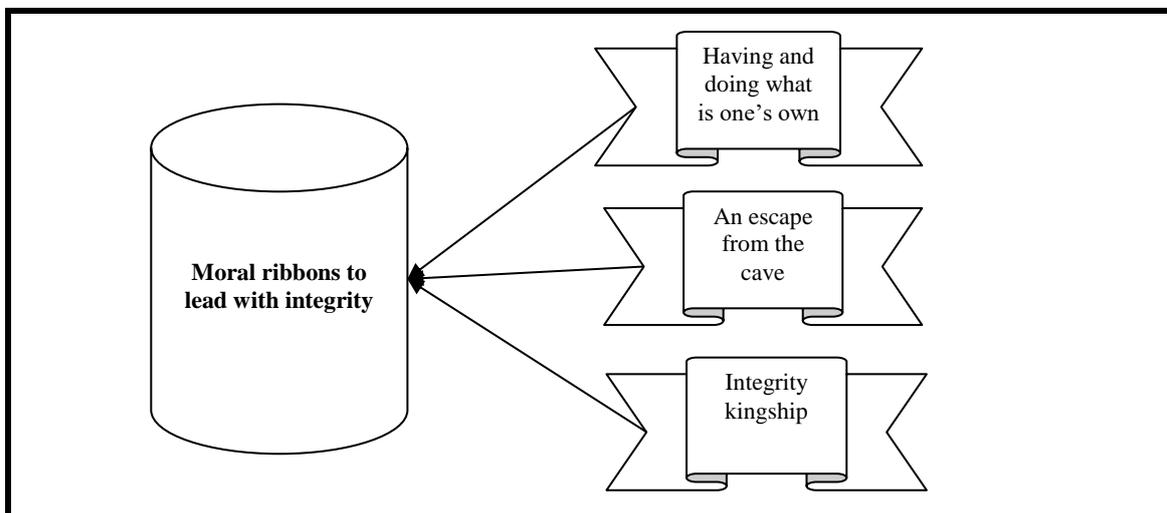
6. Methodology

This conceptual paper 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 paper, 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 ethical leadership 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 ethical leadership 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 ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery of integrity: *having and doing what is one’s own*, *an escape from the cave*, and *integrity kingship*.

7. Results and discussion

As a reminder to the reader, this paper asked the following question: *how can an analysis of the South African Standard for Principalship (SASP) contribute to an understanding of ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery so that school principals can lead with integrity?* Derived from the SASP (RSA, 2015), we next discuss the three identified moral ribbons (Figure 1):

Figure 1. Moral ribbons 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, when delicately sewed together, align with Plato’s view of *having and doing one’s own – a form of justice* (Wright, 2020), and becomes a valuable ribbon for principals to enact ethical leadership. As such, the SASP (2015) reminds principals that they should refine their knowledge (having) about acts of justice and revisit their understanding (having) of what is morally right. Principals are supposed to be individuals with well-ordered souls, implying that they ought to know what justice is and should, therefore, act according to the knowledge they have (Wright, 2020). In this regard, justice aligns with integrity, specifically when school principals are able “to align their inner thoughts and intentions with their outward

words and actions” (Khaulah, Komariah & Kurniady, 2024, p. 421). When principals would adopt this kind of attitude of justice, they may have a deeper sense of *having* and *doing* integrity as advised by the SASP (RSA, 2015).

Secondly, the SASP (RSA, 2015) provide principals with the opportunity to *escape from the cave* through shaping “integrity and fairness in all dealings with people” (p. 6). An escape from the cave resonates with Plato’s allegory, implying an escape from ignorance and a search for a different truth regarding things, which considers the implications of knowledge and responsibility (Makwudo & Nkwakudo, 2025). Responsibility presupposes that individuals take ownership of their actions and being answerable for the consequences. In relation to the SASP (RSA, 2015), responsibility implies that principals break free from unethical practices, cultivate a disposition to challenge difficult realities, and contest long-held convictions so that they can broaden their perspectives regarding integrity. Also, in terms of the SASP (RSA, 2015), an escape implies an ethical duty toward others, therefore, principals should 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.

Thirdly, principals must subscribe to 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). This text requires principals to act with *integrity kingship*. Interestingly, kingship is referred to as a characteristic belonging to an individual who represents a king, and who is regarded as extraordinary and respected, while acting with moral authority (Riccardo, 2005). According to Iq and Klein (2017), moral authority endows individuals the power to ascertain whether things are right or wrong in specific situations. When aligned to the SASP (RSA, 2015), ‘doing what might be right’ and ‘discarding what might be wrong’ should inform principals’ ability to act with integrity in schools. Notably, when principals interact with others, they should explicitly condemn unethical behaviour and strongly consider their kingship by honouring their moral commitments, even when it might not suit them (Isserow & Klein, 2017). As such, integrity kingship asks from school principals to garner honour as integrity mentors.

8. Conclusion

This paper asked the question: *how can an analysis of the South African Standard for Principalship (SASP) contribute to an understanding of ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery so that school principals can lead with integrity?* 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 textile filled with ribbons 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 *having* and *doing* what is one’s own, an escape from the cave and integrity kingship are representative of ethical leadership as a delicate embroidery to lead with integrity. Principals should adopt an attitude of justice to have a deeper sense of *having* and *doing* integrity. Also, principals should distance themselves from immoral behaviour toward searching for new opportunities and a greater understanding of how to act with integrity. Furthermore, principals should portray an extraordinary and respected attitude so that they take a strong stance in condemning immoral behaviour. This paper did not include the views of human participants; therefore, we suggest that an empirical study be conducted to elicit the voices of principals and other educational stakeholders about cultivation of integrity spaces for teaching and learning success in schools.

References

- Aghighi, A. (2020). The role of ethical leadership & proactive personality on organizational citizenship behaviors: Mediating role of positive & negative emotions. *International Journal of Ethics & Society (IJES)*, 2(2), 11-18. <http://www.ijethics.com/>
- Ahmed, E. I. (2023) A systematic review of ethical leadership studies in educational research from 1990 to 2022. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 2023, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143223119325>
- Brown, M. E., & Treviño, L. K. (2006). Ethical leadership: A review and future directions. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 17, 595-616. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1016/j.leaqua.2006.10.004>
- Dalglish, S. L., Khalid, H., & McMahon, S. A. (2020). Document analysis in health policy research: the READ approach. *Health Policy and Planning*, 35(10), 1424-1431. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czaa064>

- Fan, G., & Popkewitz, T. S. (2020). *Handbook of education policy: Value, governance, globalization and methodology*. Volume 1. Springer Open. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-13-8347-2_2
- Gerrits, E. M., Assen, L. S., Noordegraaf-Eelens, L., Bredenoord, A. L., & Van Mil, M. H. W. (2023). Moral imagination as an instrument for ethics education for biomedical researchers. *International Journal of Ethics Education*, 8, 275-289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40889-023-00171-z>
- Harman, G. (1984). Conceptual and theoretical issues. In J. R. Hough (Ed.), *Education policy: An international survey* (pp. 13-27). Australia, Sydney: Croom Helm Ltd.
- Hsieh, C., & Tai, S., & Li, H. (2023). A bibliometric review of ethical leadership research: Shifting focuses and theoretical insights. *AERA Open*, 9(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584231209266>
- Isserow, J., & Klein, C. (2017). Hypocrisy and moral authority. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, 12(2), 191-222. <https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v12i2.224>
- Khaulah, S., Komariah, A., & Kurniady, D. A. (2024). Integrity and professionalism driven visionary leadership of school principals for enhancing school quality. *Tadbir: Jurnal Studi Manajemen Pendidikan [Tadbir: Journal of Educational Management Studies]*, 8(2), 417-436. <http://dx.doi.org/10.29240/jsmp.v8i2.11501>
- Lehman, C. (2023, November 21). *Embroidery: meaning, types & examples*. <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-does-embroidery-mean-in-textiles.html>
- Lloyd, D. (1957). *Classification of art and design*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Makwudo, K. K., & Nkwakudo, A. E. (2025). Escaping the cave: A platonic analysis of "Japa" as the philosopher's journey from darkness to light. *Trinitarian International Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 1(1), 45-61. <https://journals.ezenwaohaetorc.org/index.php/TIJAH/article/view/3126/3253>
- Mlambo, F. A. (2021). Exploring the ethical leadership practices of school management teams in selected secondary schools in Gauteng Province (MEd dissertation, University of South Africa). <https://uir.unisa.ac.za/handle/10500/28273>.
- Mozumder, N. A. (2022). Can ethical political leadership restore public trust in political leaders? *Public Organization Review*, 22(3), 821-835. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-021-00536-2>
- Ngoepe-Ntsoane, M. J., & Webb, W. N. (2021). Ethical leadership: Resolving the failure of public policies in corruption prevention. *Journal of Contemporary Management*, 17(2), 86-108. https://doi.org/10.35683/jcm20_3.134
- Rani, S., Jining, D., & Shah, D. (2021). Embroidery and textiles: A novel perspective on women artists' art practice. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 13(4), 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v13n4.37>
- Rasid, N., Nohuddin, P. N. E., Alias, H., Hamzah, I., & Nordin, A. I. (2017). Using data mining strategy in qualitative research. In H. B. Zaman, P. Robinson, A. F. Smeaton, T. K. Shih, S. Velasting, T. Terutoshi, A. Jaafar & N. M. Ali (Eds.), *Advances in visual informatics* (pp. 100-111). *Proceedings of the 5th International Visual Informatics Conference, IVIC 2017*, Bangi, Malaysia, November 28-30, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-70010-6_10
- Republic of South Africa (RSA). (2015). *Policy of the South African Standard for Principalship*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Riccardo, G. (2005). *Kingship: An overview* [Blog post]. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/kingship-overview>
- Rindova, V., & Martins, L. L. (2023). Moral imagination, the collective desirable, and strategic purpose. *Strategy Science*, 8(2), 170-181. <https://doi.org/10.1287/stsc.2023.0190>
- Terzieva, K. (2023, February 28). *The rise of ethical leadership in modern business enterprises* [Blog post]. <https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbescoachescouncil/2023/02/28/the-rise-of-ethical-leadership-in-modern-business-enterprises/>
- Von Kürthy, H., Aranda, K., Sadlo, G., & Stew, G. (2023). Embroidering as a transformative occupation. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 30(4), 647-660. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2022.2104349>
- Williams, B. (2002). *Truth and truthfulness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:INQU.0000019140.71721.d1>
- Wright, W. (2020, August 28). *A critique and defense of Plato's "just state"* [Blog post]. <https://www.wrightswriting.com/post/a-critique-and-defense-of-plato-s-just-state>
- Zarghamifard, M., & Danaeefard, H. (2020). What drives leader integrity? *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics*, 14(1), 1-33. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJBGE.2020.104685>
- Zhu, J., Zhi, W., & Fang, Y. (2025). Ethical leadership, organizational learning, and corporate ESG performance: A moderated mediation mode. *International Review of Economics and Finance*, 98(2025), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iref.2025.103966>