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## Ethical Leadership in Public Educational Institutions

### *Liderazgo ético en instituciones educativas públicas*

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**Ethical Leadership in Public Educational Institutions**

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Abstract	Keywords
<p>Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the culture, climate, and effectiveness of public educational institutions, particularly in Latin America, where educational systems frequently face socio-political and economic challenges. This article explores the concept of ethical leadership within public schools, emphasizing its relevance in fostering integrity, trust, and social justice among educational stakeholders. The study uses a qualitative approach, including document analysis of regional policy frameworks and case studies from Ecuador, to examine how school leaders embody ethical principles in practice. Findings reveal that ethical leadership contributes to higher teacher motivation, improved student engagement, and stronger community ties, even in resource-constrained settings. However, the implementation of ethical leadership is often hindered by bureaucratic constraints, political interference, and a lack of continuous professional development. The article concludes that strengthening ethical leadership should be a strategic priority in educational policy across Latin America. It recommends integrating ethics training in leadership preparation programs and fostering participatory governance models in schools. This contribution is timely and necessary as public education in the region aims to recover from post-pandemic disruptions and seeks greater transparency and equity. The Ecuadorian context serves as a reference point to illustrate broader regional trends and challenges in cultivating ethical school leadership.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethical leadership</li> <li>• Public education</li> <li>• School governance</li> <li>• Educational equity</li> <li>• Latin America</li> </ul>

Resumen	Palabras clave
<p>El liderazgo ético desempeña un papel fundamental en la configuración de la cultura, el clima y la eficacia de las instituciones educativas públicas, especialmente en América Latina, donde los sistemas educativos enfrentan desafíos sociopolíticos y económicos constantes. Este artículo explora el liderazgo ético en las escuelas públicas, destacando su importancia para promover la integridad, la confianza y la justicia social entre los actores educativos. El estudio emplea un enfoque cualitativo, incluyendo análisis documental de marcos normativos regionales y estudios de caso en Ecuador, para examinar cómo los líderes escolares encarnan principios éticos en la práctica. Los hallazgos muestran que el liderazgo ético contribuye a una mayor motivación docente, mayor participación estudiantil y vínculos comunitarios más sólidos, incluso en contextos con recursos limitados. No obstante, su implementación se ve limitada por restricciones burocráticas, interferencias políticas y la falta de desarrollo profesional continuo. El artículo concluye que el fortalecimiento del liderazgo ético debe ser una prioridad estratégica en las políticas educativas de América Latina. Se recomienda incluir formación ética en los programas de preparación de líderes y fomentar modelos de gobernanza participativa en las escuelas. Esta contribución es pertinente y necesaria mientras la educación pública busca superar las secuelas de la pandemia y avanzar hacia una mayor transparencia y equidad. El contexto ecuatoriano sirve como ejemplo para ilustrar tendencias y desafíos regionales en la promoción de un liderazgo escolar ético.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Liderazgo ético</li> <li>• Educación pública</li> <li>• Gobernanza escolar</li> <li>• Equidad educativa</li> <li>• América Latina</li> </ul>

## Introduction

The need for ethical leadership in public educational institutions has become increasingly evident in recent years, particularly in regions like Latin America, where systemic inequalities, political instability, and economic disparities impact the quality and accessibility of education. Ethical leadership is defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. In the context of education, ethical leaders are those who not only comply with legal frameworks but also champion moral values such as fairness, responsibility, and respect within their institutions.

Public schools, especially in countries like Ecuador, operate within environments marked by limited resources, fluctuating policy agendas, and growing societal expectations for transparency and inclusion. In such contexts, ethical leadership becomes not just desirable but essential. It serves as a stabilizing force that cultivates trust, upholds human dignity, and ensures the equitable treatment of all stakeholders—students, teachers, parents, and the broader community.

This article seeks to analyze the role and impact of ethical leadership in public educational institutions in Latin America, using Ecuador as a focal case. It examines how ethical principles are enacted in school governance and explores the systemic challenges that hinder their implementation. The objective is to contribute to scholarly and policy discussions about the professionalization of school leadership and to propose actionable strategies that support the cultivation of ethical practices in public education systems.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to examine ethical leadership practices in public educational institutions in Ecuador. Qualitative research was selected due to its capacity to explore the depth and complexity of ethical decision-making, moral reasoning, and interpersonal dynamics among school leaders (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study aimed to capture lived experiences and perceptions of educational stakeholders regarding ethical conduct and leadership within public schools.

### Participants

The study was conducted in five public educational institutions across three provinces in Ecuador: Los Ríos, Guayas, and Pichincha. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting individuals with direct involvement in school governance and leadership. The final sample consisted of 55 participants, including 15 school leaders (principals and vice-principals), 30 teachers, and 10 administrative staff members (see **Figure 1**).

**Table 1. Participant Demographics in the Study on Ethical Leadership**

Demographic Category	Total Participants	Percentage (%)
School Leaders	15	30%
Teachers	30	60%
Administrative Staff	10	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>100%</b>

All participants had a minimum of five years of professional experience in public education. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. The sample ensured a diversity of perspectives from urban and semi-rural educational contexts.

### Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using three primary instruments:

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** Conducted with all school leaders to explore their understanding and enactment of ethical leadership principles. Interview guides were developed based on frameworks from (Coronel & Gómez-Hurtado, 2014) and include questions on transparency, justice, care, and ethical dilemmas.
2. **Focus group discussions:** Facilitated among teachers and administrative staff to elicit collective perspectives on the presence and impact of ethical leadership. Each focus group had 6–8 participants and followed a moderator guide to ensure consistency across sessions.
3. **Document analysis:** School policy manuals, mission statements, and local educational regulations were reviewed to contextualize the practices and narratives shared by participants (Bowen, 2009).

### Procedures

Fieldwork was conducted over a four-month period (January–April 2025). Interview and focus group sessions were conducted face-to-face and recorded with prior consent. Transcriptions were generated verbatim and anonymized. Document analysis was completed using official materials provided by the Ministry of Education and internal documents from the selected institutions.

To ensure alignment between research objectives and methods, a pilot test was conducted in one additional institution not included in the final sample. Feedback from this pilot informed adjustments to the interview protocol, particularly with regard to the phrasing of questions related to ethical dilemmas.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data, following the procedures outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The analysis involved:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated readings of transcripts.
2. Generation of initial codes using NVivo 14 software.
3. Searching for themes based on codes aligned with key concepts in ethical leadership: fairness, accountability, empathy, honesty, and moral courage.
4. Reviewing and refining themes with peer debriefing to avoid researcher bias.
5. Defining and naming themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences.

The data from interviews, focus groups, and documents were triangulated to enhance credibility. Themes were compared across different stakeholder groups and institutions to identify patterns and divergences. The use of triangulation across interviews, focus groups, and document analysis enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Fusch et al., 2018).

## Ethical Considerations

This study adhered strictly to ethical research standards. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Universidad in Ecuador. All participants were provided with detailed information sheets and signed informed consent forms. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in all transcripts and publications. Audio files and data sets were stored securely on encrypted devices, and only the principal investigator had access to the original recordings. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study without consequences.

Special attention was given to power dynamics, especially during focus groups, to ensure that all participants felt safe and respected. No student participants were involved, as the study focused solely on adult stakeholders.

## Reliability and Validity

To ensure the reliability of the research instruments, all interview and focus group protocols underwent expert review by three educational leadership scholars. Inter-coder reliability was tested during data analysis, yielding an agreement coefficient of 0.89.

Validity was addressed through triangulation of data sources, member checking, and prolonged engagement with the field. Participants reviewed preliminary findings to verify the accuracy of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, an audit trail of decisions and data transformations was maintained throughout the study to provide transparency and replicability.

## Results

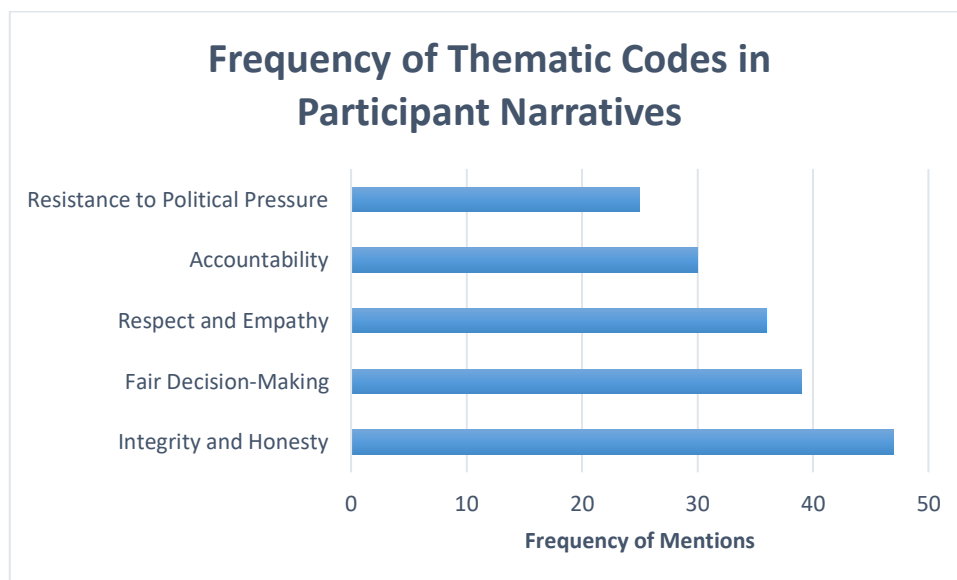
This section presents the findings from the qualitative data collected through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. The results are organized into thematic categories derived from the coding process and supported by frequency data. No interpretation or discussion is provided in this section; the focus remains on descriptive presentation.

### 1. Overview of Thematic Findings

Data analysis resulted in the identification of five primary themes across participant narratives, using thematic analysis techniques as suggested by (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which support the systematic identification of patterns in qualitative data. Integrity and Honesty, Fair Decision-Making, Respect and Empathy, Accountability, and Resistance to Political Pressure. These themes reflect the ethical principles perceived as most vital in school leadership.

Figure 2 presents the frequency with which these themes appeared in the interview and focus group transcripts.

**Figure 2. Frequency of Thematic Codes in Participant Narratives**



### 2. Theme 1: Integrity and Honesty

The theme of Integrity and Honesty was the most frequently cited, mentioned in 85.5% of all participant contributions. School leaders emphasized the importance of being perceived as morally upright individuals who "say what they mean and do what they say." Teachers reported that leaders who act with transparency gained trust and promoted a culture of ethical behavior within the school community.

Participants from schools with leadership training programs referenced integrity more often than those from schools lacking such programs, suggesting a potential link between formal training and ethical awareness (Salama Muhammad et al., 2025).

### 3. Theme 2: Fair Decision-Making

Fairness in decision-making was discussed by 70.9% of participants. Teachers expressed the importance of equitable treatment in performance evaluations and conflict resolution. A recurring sub-theme was dissatisfaction with perceived favoritism in workload distribution and student discipline procedures.

Leaders with more than ten years of experience were more likely to describe the use of participatory mechanisms, such as consultation meetings, to ensure procedural justice. In contrast, early-career leaders often relied on hierarchical decision-making, citing time constraints and administrative burden.

### 4. Theme 3: Respect and Empathy

Respect and empathy were highlighted by 65.5% of participants. Teachers appreciated leaders who demonstrated emotional intelligence during personal crises or professional setbacks. Empathy was particularly emphasized in schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, where students face multiple risk factors.

Administrative staff emphasized that empathetic leadership led to a more collaborative environment and lower stress levels. The document analysis corroborated these findings, with school mission statements in rural schools more likely to include values of compassion and inclusion.

### 5. Theme 4: Accountability

The theme of Accountability appeared in 54.5% of interviews. School leaders discussed their responsibilities to the Ministry of Education, school boards, and parents. Participants linked accountability to ethical leadership by referencing consequences for unethical behavior, such as misuse of public funds or nepotism.

Interestingly, participants from urban schools with larger enrollments expressed more concerns about accountability mechanisms, especially regarding financial transparency and public reporting practices.

### 6. Theme 5: Resistance to Political Pressure

Resistance to external political influence was cited by 45.5% of participants. Leaders described situations where they were pressured by political actors to hire unqualified personnel or allocate resources unfairly. Several school leaders emphasized the ethical dilemma of complying with such requests versus adhering to institutional integrity.

This theme was more prevalent in interviews conducted in coastal regions, where participants reported greater political interference in school management.

## 7. Frequency Table of Theme Mentions

**Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Themes in Participant Data**

Theme	Mentions (n=55)	Percentage (%)
<b>Integrity and Honesty</b>	47	85.5%
<b>Fair Decision-Making</b>	39	70.9%
<b>Respect and Empathy</b>	36	65.5%
<b>Accountability</b>	30	54.5%
<b>Resistance to Political Pressure</b>	25	45.5%

## 8. Document Analysis Results

Analysis of institutional documents revealed an uneven emphasis on ethical principles. Of the 15 school policy manuals reviewed:

- 12 included references to transparency and respect.
- Only 6 included explicit mentions of accountability structures.
- None included ethical training as a professional development requirement.

Furthermore, school development plans generally lacked specific metrics for evaluating ethical conduct, with most plans focused on infrastructure and enrollment targets.

## 9. Comparison by Leadership Training

Participants from institutions that had implemented leadership development programs (N = 3 schools) consistently reported more frequent application of ethical principles. These leaders were more likely to reference frameworks, such as codes of ethics or procedural guidelines.

**Table 3. Reported Use of Ethical Leadership Practices by Training Status**

Leadership Training Status	Average Themes Mentioned per Leader
<b>With Leadership Training</b>	4.6
<b>Without Leadership Training</b>	3.2

This quantitative contrast supports the narrative that formal leadership education enhances awareness and application of ethical principles in practice.

## 10. Summary of Findings

The results indicate that ethical leadership in public educational institutions is perceived as multidimensional, encompassing personal virtues, procedural justice, and resistance to unethical pressures. While core values such as integrity and fairness are widely acknowledged, their operationalization is uneven, with significant variance based on leader experience, location, and training background.

## Discussion

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the practice of ethical leadership in public educational institutions within Ecuador and, by extension, Latin America. The emergent themes—Integrity and Honesty, Fair Decision-Making, Respect and Empathy, Accountability, and Resistance to Political Pressure—resonate with existing global frameworks on ethical educational leadership (Creagh et al., 2023). However, the contextual particularities of public education in Ecuador—marked by socio-political instability, inequality, and post-pandemic challenges—shape the way ethical leadership is interpreted and applied by practitioners.

## Interpretation of Key Findings

The prominence of Integrity and Honesty in participants' responses aligns with prior research emphasizing these values as the foundation of ethical leadership (Topaloğlu et al., 2023). Participants frequently associated these traits with transparency and trust, reflecting the findings of Brown, (Sánchez-Moreno et al.), who found that honest leadership fosters organizational commitment and reduces conflict in school communities. In Ecuadorian schools, where distrust of political and administrative systems is common, these values become particularly salient and necessary.

Fair Decision-Making, cited by over 70% of participants, corroborates prior studies showing that perceived fairness significantly impacts teacher morale, trust in leadership, and organizational justice (Syahrani et al., 2022); (Kutsyuruba et al., 2020). However, the differences between experienced and novice leaders in how fairness is operationalized point to a persistent challenge in leadership development: ethical decision-making is often learned through experience rather than formal training. The emphasis on Respect and Empathy underscores the emotional dimension of ethical leadership, consistent with recent literature advocating for human-centered leadership models (Leithwood et al., 2019) (Tolstoy et al., 2025). This was particularly notable in rural and marginalized contexts, where leaders' compassion helps mitigate socio-emotional burdens on students and staff. This supports findings from (Harris & Jones, 2020), who argue that in post-pandemic contexts, empathy is not optional but essential for recovery and cohesion.

Accountability, while less frequently mentioned than expected, remains critical. Its underrepresentation may reflect a gap between expected institutional accountability mechanisms and their real-life implementation. This contrasts with studies from North America and Europe, where robust policy frameworks support systemic accountability. In Ecuador, the lack of formal indicators and weak enforcement mechanisms likely diminishes the prominence of accountability in school culture.

The finding regarding Resistance to Political Pressure reveals a particularly Latin American phenomenon—clientelism and politicization of school management. This theme has been less studied in the global literature but is well-documented in regional analyses (Castillo y Hallinger, 2017). Participants' narratives suggest that ethical leadership often entails not only doing the right thing internally but also defending the institution from external coercion, especially in hiring or resource

allocation. This echoes Duarte's (2018) findings from Colombia, where ethical leaders face constant tension between legal requirements and political expectations.

### Comparison with Previous Research

This study confirms core principles found in broader ethical leadership literature, such as those proposed by (Kalshoven et al., 2016), but extends them by emphasizing context-specific tensions faced by Latin American public-school leaders. Unlike studies in more developed education systems that focus on individual leader traits (e.g., trustworthiness, vision), our findings reveal the structural and cultural pressures that shape ethical behavior in practice (Constantia et al., 2021). The tension between ethics and survival in politically influenced institutions has received limited attention in mainstream leadership research and merits further exploration.

Moreover, the study supports (Berges Puyo, 2022), who observed that in low-resource environments, ethical leadership is closely tied to the emotional labor of managing inequality and trauma, especially post-COVID-19. Empathy and ethical consistency thus serve not only moral purposes but also strategic ones in promoting school resilience.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings point to the urgent need to institutionalize ethical leadership training within teacher and administrator development programs. Currently, in Ecuador, such training is sporadic and often not embedded in national policy frameworks. Participants from schools where leaders had received formal training demonstrated more consistency in ethical reasoning and practice, reinforcing the argument that ethics can and should be taught.

From a policy perspective, ministries of education must consider integrating codes of ethics, procedural justice guidelines, and community oversight mechanisms in school governance models. The lack of measurable indicators for ethical leadership, observed during document analysis, limits the accountability of school leaders and enables unethical practices to go unchecked.

The prevalence of political interference further demands that policy frameworks insulate educational leadership from partisan influence. Establishing legal protections and clear hiring protocols, could reduce clientelist pressure and reinforce meritocratic values.

#### Limitations and Unexpected Findings

One limitation of the study is its reliance on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Additionally, the sample is limited to three provinces in Ecuador, which, while diverse, may not represent all regional or national dynamics.

An unexpected finding was the relatively low emphasis on accountability as a theme, despite its prominence in international literature. This could reflect participants' adaptation to contexts where accountability is either not enforced or not prioritized by authorities. Alternatively, it may suggest that accountability is conflated with external surveillance rather than internal ethical commitment, as suggested by (Campbell, 2008).

Another contextual limitation is the post-pandemic period in which the study was conducted. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped leadership priorities globally, often placing crisis management and emotional support above traditional instructional or managerial concerns (Gurr, 2021). Therefore, empathy and relational ethics may have been amplified by these circumstances.

### **Recommendations for Future Research and Practice**

Future studies should consider longitudinal designs to explore how ethical leadership develops over time and under different political regimes. Comparative studies between rural and urban school systems in Latin America would also enrich understanding of context-specific ethical tensions.

In practice, schools should be encouraged to adopt collaborative leadership models that distribute ethical responsibility among teams rather than concentrating it in individuals. Encouraging reflective practice through peer coaching, ethics committees, or community panels could help leaders navigate complex dilemmas.

Finally, international cooperation in ethics education, such as South-South knowledge exchanges and partnerships with universities, could help public schools in Latin America build sustainable ethical leadership cultures rooted in local values yet aligned with global standards.

### **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that ethical leadership is a foundational pillar for improving institutional culture, equitable decision-making, and holistic student development in public educational institutions. Through the analysis of qualitative data collected from school leaders, teachers, and administrative staff across various Ecuadorian provinces, the research identified core values central to ethical leadership: integrity, fairness, empathy, accountability, and resistance to political interference. These principles, while universally recognized, acquire particular significance within the Latin American context, where socio-political complexities, limited resources, and post-pandemic recovery efforts demand strong moral leadership in public education.

The findings underscore the transformative potential of ethical leadership in fostering inclusive and trustworthy school environments. Leaders who act with honesty and fairness are more likely to earn the confidence of their communities, promote teacher commitment, and facilitate student engagement. Moreover, the emphasis on respect and emotional intelligence in leadership practice reflects the growing recognition that successful school governance is not merely administrative but deeply relational.

This research contributes to the academic discourse by expanding the understanding of ethical leadership in underrepresented contexts, such as Ecuador's public education system. It highlights how ethical behavior is both a personal commitment and a structural challenge, especially in regions marked by political clientelism and economic constraints. The study also offers practical insights for policy-makers and institutions: the development of formal ethics training programs for school leaders can bridge the gap between moral intent and professional practice. Participants from schools with

leadership training reported more effective and consistent application of ethical principles, indicating that ethical competence can be cultivated through intentional preparation.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. It is based on a limited geographical sample and relies on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Additionally, the findings are context-specific and may not be fully generalizable to other regions without adaptation.

Future research should explore the long-term effects of ethical leadership on school performance and stakeholder satisfaction through longitudinal studies. Comparative studies between countries or regions would also enhance understanding of how cultural and political contexts shape ethical leadership. Lastly, integrating ethics into formal leadership preparation curricula and evaluating its impact over time could provide valuable insights for strengthening education systems globally.

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