Ethical Leadership Practices and Trust Among Public School Leaders in Malaysia

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Abstract: Integrating values in managing a school is crucial to balance the role of school leaders as leaders and managers under one roof. This study highlights the practice of ethical leadership (branch of value-based leadership) based on seven dimensions. Using a mixed method (QUAN-qual) approach, this study i) identifies the level of principal's ethical leadership practices and trust in leader as perceived by primary and secondary school teachers of Malaysia, ii) explores the relationship between both variables and classifies accordingly the subconstructs of ethical leadership practices that significantly contribute to developing trust in their leaders, iii) ascertain the understanding and practices of ethical leadership style among the principals as perceived by the principals themselves. The quantitative data were collected via Ethical Leadership at Workplace (ELW) and Trust in Leader (TL) questionnaire. A total of 438 public school teachers nationwide responded to the questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical method. The findings show that principals throughout the country practiced high ethical leadership. The level of teacher's trust in principals was also high. The inference analysis found very strong significant relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' trust on their principals. A semi-structured interview with three school principals was conducted to collect the qualitative data revealed that the Malaysian principals lacked the understanding of ethical leadership style, nevertheless practiced several dimensions of ethical leadership in their school administration. The study suggests ethical leadership to be integrated into current school leadership practices to further understand its impact.

Keywords: Ethical leadership, School Leadership, Trust in Leader, Value-based Leadership

1.   Introduction

In the 21st century, where human is controlled by technology and have high tendency to neglect the importance of ethics at work, it is high time that value-based leadership styles that focus on ethical practices come in handy for school leaders. Leadership styles, practices, and theories carry the same definition or weightage of effectiveness everywhere in the world based on the current needs. Factors such as school needs, teacher needs, innovative practices, student performance, national initiatives, policy changes, education improvements, and school-related problems may highly impact the selection of best school leadership practices (Amanchukwu, Stanly, & Ololube, 2015; Park, 2012, Jibril Qaralleh, 2021). Experienced principals and novice principals's leadership practices in the 21st century seem to be taking different routes, behavioral perspectives, and models in leading an organization (Bush, 2007; Ahmad Mukhtar & Chan, 2020). This is also due to the flow of information, technology advancement, rapid societal changes, and educational system change worldwide that helps and guides leaders to choose their preferred leadership style. Therefore, the change in school leadership practices locally and internationally ought to be investigated or used as a benchmark for continuous innovative school improvement measures.

In accordance with looking at contemporary leadership practices, a research in South Africa presents an ethical structural model that represents the relationship between ethical leadership, trust and engagement in the private business context (Engelbrecht, Heine, and Mahembe, 2014). The research showed a positive relationship between a) ethical leadership and trust from the structural equation model used, and b) employee performance increased and improved when trust and confidence in leadership traits are developed. The authors have recommended the concept and theoretical evidence of ethical leadership to be explored in various contexts as a contribution to the field of value-based leadership (Engelbrecht et al., 2014; Hendrikz & Engelbrecht, 2019). Hendrikz and Engelbrecht (2019) have named transformational leadership, authentic leadership, spiritual leadership, and ethical leadership as agents of value-based leadership.

Naylor (1999) focused on values resulted from using the heart rather than the head to show leader efficiency in management and work productivity. Naylor's work compared a manager to a leader and illustrated the values needed by a leader that encompasses around the human values. Copeland (2014) noted that value-based leaders' behaviors are rooted in ethical and moral foundations, are people-orientated, and focus on moral sensitivity toward employees. O'Toole (2008) shared that value-based leadership focuses on practicing strong positive values that guide leader's actions and behavior which in return has a deep impact on the follower's belief, needs, goals, and work commitments. Gurusamy and Thambu (2018) stated that a morally motivated human being makes effective decision based on ethics at any critical situation. Accordingly, value-based leadership helps establish a climate conducive to effective teaching and learning practices as well as building of trust as principals constantly face issues of dishonesty, unfairness, decision-making, and empowerment (Copeland, 2014). Hence, value-based leaders who are morally motivated, concentrated on employing core values and view them as selfless principles that guided the behavior and action of the members when facing difficult decision-making moments.

Value-based leadership is now an emerging theme in Malaysian school leadership practices whereby the focus is on using transformational and authentic leadership styles to manage a school. Currently, ethical leadership as a value-based leadership style has been overlooked by school leaders and is categorized as under-researched in Malaysia. The conceptual understanding of ethical leadership is ignored though it may be in practice as a value of integrity. School leaders are unaware of the benefits of practicing ethical leadership to improving organizational behavior compared to popular beliefs on common school leadership styles like instructional, transformational, authentic or distributional. Nevertheless, local authors have shared the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement, healthy organization, teacher empowerment, organizational commitment, and job

satisfaction (Ismail & Daud, 2014; Somasundaram, 2016; Vikaraman et al., 2018) in recent studies to validate the importance of integrating ethical leadership into current common leadership practices.

It was found that, some dimensions of ethical leadership are practiced "unconsciously" as similar traits of other popular school leadership styles such as instructional or transformational (Hendrikz & Engelbrecht, 2019). For example, being people-orientated is needed in practicing instructional leadership, but leaders are unaware that "people orientation" is a dimension of ethical leadership. Thus, the thought of integrating ethical practices as a contributing factor in effective leadership and current practices is significant. Value-based leadership, namely ethical leadership, may show its significance in this digital era whereby leaders tend to forgo trustworthy conducts while leading an organization and focus more on managing a team. Having to play multiple roles as a leader may also be a factor in the downfall of practicing value-based leadership practices.

This current study chooses to discuss logical reasoning for ethical leadership practices and trust in leaders from Malaysia. Malaysia is a developing country that uses a centralized ministry (Ministry of Education) to administer the education system and policy settings. School leadership policies, perspectives, and initiatives by the ministry take different implementation measures based on demographics, economics, school performance, teacher needs factors, and current issues in the school. Therefore, this study brings forward significant new findings as effective measures to be shared with stakeholders in the leadership field on the current status of Ethical Leadership practice that can be adapted and integrated as a leading school leadership practice together with what is being practiced commonly by principals and headmasters.

The current popular school leadership styles practiced and highly recommended of its effectiveness in Malaysia are transformational (Abdul Wahab, 2014), instructional (Machmudi Isa et al., 2018), transactional (Mammen & Pushpanadham, 2018), and technology (Mohd Hamzah et al., 2016). These practices are constantly researched on and have become a commonly heard leadership styles among the Malaysian school principals. Currently, the many roles played by principals are figurehead, leader, liaison, monitor, disseminator, spokesperson, entrepreneur, disturbance handler, and guardian (Mansor & Baki, 2007). Despite knowing their roles, principals still face media critics and competence issues when balancing management and leading a school (Mansor, 2006). Curriculum and cocurricular management are also on the list of the many roles played by the Malaysian principals (Mohd Hamzah & Ayob, 2015). Apart from these roles played, principals' self-competence in managing and leading in student affairs, finance, office administration, human resource, community relationships, school environment, and infrastructure are also part of principals' responsibilities (Alias et al., 2010). Balakrishnan (2005) highly recommended shifting bureaucratic practices of leading a school toward empowering teachers as a "proactive self-management" strategy. According to OECD (2014), principals' roles these days tend to lean toward administration and management, and lack the focus on the teachers' well-being. This causes teachers to feel neglected of care but forced to work. Eventually, teachers lose trust in their leaders and face workplace burnout, not passionate about work, and lack the dedication to teach (Iliya & Ifeoma, 2015; OECD, 2014; Saidun et al., 2015). The traditional leadership practices such as effectively lead, manage, and inspire others are now seen as minimal requirements of a leader (Herold, 2016; Mohammed Zabidi, 2020).

2.   Research Problem

In Malaysia, to date there no clear evidence of policies or training best fit for principals as exclusive as what we have ongoing for teachers. The only government-certified established course for a principal is conducted by Institut Aminuddin Baki (IAB), an institution to train prominent teacher leaders to become principals. Teacher leaders are selected based on their years of experience, position, or as a promotion to undergo a course, namely the National Professional Qualification for Educational Leaders (NPQEL), as a requirement later for them to become a principal later. The average age to be appointed as a principal in Malaysia is rather older compared to other countries in the Teaching and

Learning Instructional Survey (TALIS) list. Hence, years of experience dropped and significantly affects the practice of leadership whereby years of experience plays a role in school principalship. Potential teacher leaders are not given early exposure to becoming a full-fledged principal, eventually leading to rejecting a climate change and new administrative styles when facing issues that need to be managed as a school leader.

On top of that, OECD's press release in 2014 reported that principals were undertrained in leadership aspects and only received formal training after appointment as principals. Prior to that, Bajunid (2000) shared, that the existing training and exposure provided for principals seemed to be still inadequate in terms of catering to human development, knowledge management, knowledge (talent) distribution, and teacher motivation. Rizvi (2008) suggested the need for training in high-quality mentoring and leadership practices to handle teachers, relationships, teacher needs, and various other situations. This is because managing people in an organization needs careful and precise skills in tackling day-to-day challenges for maximum sustainable work output. Also, people resourcing, and management take time, experience, and knowledge.

There is also evidence of a slow rise in principals' unethical actions in schools and this may tarnish the image of school leaders of the future and disrupt or fail the government's ongoing initiatives (Abdullah & Mohamed Adnan, 2015; Abu Bakar, 2006; Hassan, 2004; Hassan, Silong, & Muslim, 2009; Mahmood & Wan Abdullah, 2008; Singh & Esa, 2008). Due to integrity issues, teachers have either lost or are slowly losing trust in their leaders based on the current ineffective practices. Abdullah, Abd. Aziz, and Tang (2008) in a case study on principal misconducts toward teachers shared the indirect forms of principals' manipulation that affects teacher workplace well-being as harsh behavior toward teachers, unaware of teachers' feelings and needs, hurtful communication, manipulation and avoiding empowerment, unfairness and bias, biasness, overloading work, spying, threatening, and being too critical. Generally, it is of great interest to many scholars to explore areas of unethical behavior and social conducts which take place actively in both the public and private sectors, especially by top administrators (Lawton & Paez, 2015). Hassan et al. (2001) shared factors affecting leaders' characters and conducts as – abrupt changes in technology usage (information and communications technology [ICT]), societal demand in service provision, large scale transformation within organization, and economy or financial pressure. Corruption, injustice against justice, numerous client protests and issues (Abdullah et al., 2015; Abu Bakar, 2006), and misuse of power (Hassan et al., 2009) are some misconducts identified in the public sector.

Apart from the above, the School Audit Division in general reports weakness among principals in handling financial issues. According to A. Ghani et al. (2017), weakness in financial management is due to carelessness, lack of knowledge and skill in money management, and misuse of school funds. It was also reported that RM1.24 million involving 73 schools as missing or unable to show any systematic recording of money flow is caused by principals' dishonesty (attitude). Police have filed these cases as a criminal offenses or thefts. The research team concluded that, the majority of principals lack moral values and ethical practices while at work and further suggested frameworks to guide principals in their work giving importance to morality and ethics. Nevertheless, this cannot be made a general statement or stand in labeling school leaders as unethical. Another recent study among top and middle management leaders of national high schools in an unspecified district in Malaysia, backed up the school leaders' financial management skills as efficient, accountability and integrity as high, and taken as a benchmark by others (Syed Mohamad & Ibrahim, 2017). The case study team encouraged future research to be extended in this area and related findings to be shared with more school leaders and management teams.

Other than that, there is limited research pertaining to the effectiveness of ethical leadership and the understanding of the practices (Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011) in the public sector. To date, very minimal research has been done on the impact or influence of ethical leadership in

Malaysian public schools. Research on ethical leadership in the private sector highly recommends the use of the models and theories in the public sector.

3.   Ethical Leadership

Brown et al. (2006) defined "ethical leadership as a leader who abides by the moral values, principles, and moral conducts in their say, behavior, action, and decision-making, and being as such he or she is able to inspire the followers to be equally ethical in their drive to achieve a goal". The definition of ethical leadership by Brown (2005) clarifies the role of the leader as a "moral manager" and "moral person" whereby being able to balance the work of a leader as manager and an effective leader in the workplace. Principles and rules of conduct set by the leader must also be practiced by the leader himself. Barnes and Doty (2010) defined ethical leadership as "…the demonstration of proper behavior through individual actions and connections and the advancement of such conduct to subordinates through two-way communication along with decision-making."

Prior to this, Trevino et al. (2000) and Vikaraman et al. (2018) explains that, "ethical leaders have the capabilities of playing the role of a moral person – someone who practices good moral conducts and a moral manager – someone who can lead with ethical or moral conducts to achieve goals and develop the follower into a better person". This current case study explored the Ethical Leadership at Workplace (ELW) dimensions, namely – "people orientation, fairness, power sharing, concern for sustainability, ethical guidance, role clarification, and integrity" (Kalshoven et al., 2011) for leaders and their subordinates. These seven dimensions in the ELW were adapted to be applied to the school context for principal and teachers in this research.

Ethical leadership is practiced in various approaches, especially when the leader's role model ? shows good behavior, talks about ethics, shows how to make good decisions, sets moral standards, practices reward and discipline system, and shows trustworthy traits (Brown ~~and~~ & Trevino, 2006). Kanungo (2001) shared that ethical leaders engage in practices that benefit others and they refrain from behaviors that are harmful to others. Khuntia and Suar (2004) suggested that ethical leaders who incorporate moral principles in their beliefs, values, and behaviors can develop followers who less frequently cheat, misbehave, or misuse finance. Ethical leadership has shown positive impact on other organizational factors such as job satisfaction, work empowerment, work engagement, and citizenship behavior.

The influence of ethical leadership has been widely shared by many researchers but the knowledge lacks contribution to school leadership, especially in Malaysia. Nevertheless, several models that show the impact of ethical leadership on work behaviors and performance are gradually assimilating into current practices upon understanding that these models have worked in private organizations (non-school context). According to Freeman and Stewart (2006), for the development of effective leadership, the first step is to understand the need and impact of ethical leadership. Ethical leadership has been identified significantly strong on employee work pattern (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012), building trust in leader (Bello, 2012; Engelbrect et al., 2014; Yanik, 2018; Yozgat~~,~~ & Meşekıran, 2016), improving work engagement (Engelbrect et al., 2014; Lin, 2010), improving organizational commitment (Ismail & Daud, 2014; Poon, Rahid, & Othman, 2006; Yanik, 2018; Zhu, May, & Avolio, 2004), ethical decision-making (Arar, Haj, Abramovitz & Oplatka, 2016), job satisfaction (Yanik, 2018; Yozgat~~,~~ & Meşekıran, 2016), individual innovative work behavior (Yidong~~,~~ & Xinxin, 2013), employee creativity (Mehmood, 2016), job involvement (Ghani & Jusoff, 2009), organizational performance (Khademfar, & Amiri, 2013), and quality of job performance (Bello, 2012). Yukl (2002) in Majeed (2018) clearly presented the criteria for judging ethical leadership at workplace (see Table 1) which seems~~s~~ highly applicable to the school administration and management context.

Table 1. Criteria for Judging Ethical Leadership.

Criteria	Ethical Leadership
Use of leader's influence and power	Helps institutions and followers
Vision development	Vision is developed based on followers' inputs, values, and ideas.
Behavioral integrity	Value-based consistent actions
Risk-taking in decision-making	Takes personal risks
Communication of relevant information	Complete and timely disclosure of relevant information
Response to criticism and dissent	Encourages critical evaluation to find better solutions
Development of followers' skills	Trains, mentors, and coaches followers.
Handling diverse interest of stakeholders	Attempts to integrate and balance.

Being ethical is objectively following the right conducts, practicing integrity but even more to making effective decisions, portraying characters that develop morality in the organization, and instilling awareness in the importance of being ethical. Yukl's (2002) criteria above share a spectrum of understanding of how ethical leadership could assimilate into the educational leadership practice in a much deeper context than what is perceived currently.

4. Trust in Leader

Whitmore (2007) conceptualized "trust as an attitude wherein perception and belief built by the trustor (teacher) toward the trustee (principal) are based on the perceived actions, behaviors, thoughts, and values through interpersonal interactions. Leader characteristics thought to influence trust include managerial trustworthy behavior, leader consistency, honesty, integrity, competence, ability, communication, demonstration of concern, benevolence, professional credentials, as well as transactional and transformational leadership styles". The six dimensions of trust discussed widely in this study are benevolence, competence, integrity, personality characteristics, history of interactions, and openness (Bews & Martin, 2002).

Employees start trusting their leaders and perform better in their assigned task when their leaders constantly demonstrate ethical traits (Bello, 2012; Engelbrecht et al., 2014; Vikaraman et al., 2018). Unethical decision-making leads to increase of distrust and lack of job commitment. Leh and Kanesan Abdullah (2014) conducted a study on the practice of trust in leaders in the educational organizations. Trust and commitment were discussed for better understanding of ethical leadership and employee job performance (Vikaraman et al., 2018). Good working relationship and organizational trust were found to create a positive working attitude that brought about the feeling of security, needed by the immediate leader as well as putting greater efforts in work (Lin, 2009; Sibamba, 2017). Many important organizational outcomes are affected by the trust the followers have for their leaders, including "job performance, support for and commitment to authorities, goal commitment, and follower willingness to behave in ways that benefit the organization, organizational citizenship behavior, and job satisfaction" (Vikaraman et al., 2018).

5.   Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Background

This study investigates and explores the relationship between teacher perceptions of ethical leadership practices and trust in their leaders in secondary schools. Ethical leadership practices among principal's act as the independent variable and trust in leader acts as the dependent variable. The dimensions of each variable are illustrated in Figure 1.
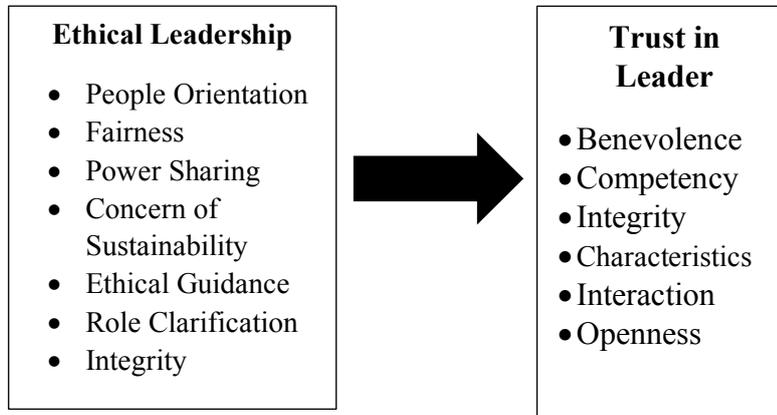

Ethical Leadership	**Trust in Leader**
• People Orientation • Fairness • Power Sharing • Concern of Sustainability • Ethical Guidance • Role Clarification • Integrity	• Benevolence • Competency • Integrity • Characteristics • Interaction • Openness

Fig. 1 Research model (Engelbrecht, Heine, & Mahembe, 2014).

Sources: Ethical leadership (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011), Trust in leader (Bews & Martins, 2002).

According to Engelbrecht et al. (2014), 204 employees from different companies and industries (private organizations) showed positive ethical leadership influence on work engagement based on trust built upon their leaders in a non-school context. The main finding indicated a positive relationship between ethical leadership and trust in the leader. In the practice of ethical leadership, employees build trust (Bews & Rossouw, 2002) and are likely to enhance productivity, creativity, and innovation. The team encouraged future studies to develop the existing model by finding other aspects that may influence organizational behavior, using similar variables in a different working context.

This study is underpinned by two fundamental theories, – namely ethical leadership and the leader-member exchange theory (LMX). Ethical leadership theory emphasizes the leader's right actions to influence the followers to achieve organizational goals. Ethical leaders focus on practicing ethics to reciprocate followers and achieve organizational aims (Mayer et al., 2010). Ethical leaders not only model good behavior in thoughts, words, and actions, but also discipline and reinforce being ethical to their followers. The LMX theory is a dyadic theory that emphasizes relationship and shared values between leaders and their followers. Bligh (2017), linked the LMX theory to trust, by exploring numerous studies on leadership and trust, stating that employees have different relationships with employers who are trusted compared with employers who are not trusted. On the other hand, trust in leader was considered critical in determining employee positive work involvement.

6.   Research Objectives

This research has motivated several objectives:

i. To explore the level of principal's ethical leadership and trust in their principal in Malaysia.
ii. To measure the relationship between ethical leadership practices and trust in leader in Malaysian schools.

The alternative hypothesis for the study is:

H1: There is a significant correlation between ethical leadership practices and trust in leader in the Malaysian school context.

iii. To classify the subconstructs of ethical leadership practices that significantly contribute to developing trust in leaders based on the Malaysian school teachers' perspective.

iv. To explore the understanding of ethical leadership and how it is being practiced by national secondary school principals in Malaysia.

7.   Methodology

This study highlights the practice of ethical leadership (branch of value-based leadership) based on seven dimensions using a mixed method (QUAN-qual) approach.

The quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire that covered two sections: i) Ethical Leadership at Workplace (ELW) and ii) Trust in Leader. The questionnaire was adapted from Principal Ethical Leadership at Workplace Scale (ELW, – 18 items) by Kalshoven et al. (2011) and Trust in Leader Scale (TL, – 12 items) – by Bews and Martin (2002). Both sections of the questionnaire were widely used in international research. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from the authors. Authors were contacted via email for approval of using the questionnaires for this study. The items were translated using the back translation approach developed by Brislin (1986). Through this method, the original instrument (in English language) was translated into the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, and back into English language. Then, some of the subconstructs and related items were modified, rephrased, and reworded without amending the meaning for better understanding and adaptable to the research context culture. It was then validated by four experts in the field of school leadership and quantitative research methods. The questionnaire was pilot tested with 40 teachers from a selected secondary school. All four experts agreed verbally to the suitability of the three questionnaires chosen for this research and had confidence that the questionnaires would bring about useful findings to the field of research after improvement. There were suggestions on rephrasing both the English and Malay translation for better understanding by the respondents. 31 teachers' (about 78%) responses were considered appropriate and complete to be pilot analyzed. The Cronbach's alpha value for the questionnaire was 0.966. The internal consistency of the questionnaires was promising to be used for the actual study. The questionnaire was converted into a Google Form for smoother distribution nationwide (Malaysia) for data collection purposes. The Google Form was sent via emails to state education department officers, teachers, and via online social media channels.

Descriptive statistics such as mean (*M*) and standard deviation (*SD*) were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 22.0 with the aim of answering the research questions 1, 2, and 3. This study interprets the coefficient, *r* value based on Baba (1997). The measurement scale used in this is a six-point Likert scale categorized into three groups. A six-point Likert scale reduces bias opinions and gives respondents a flexible right or less frustration to choose their response without any force (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011).

The questionnaires were distributed to 500 secondary school teachers, selected randomly from teachers working in three states in Malaysia. 480 questionnaires were returned, keyed-in, and 463 data were analyzed.

A semi-structured interview protocol was developed and used to interview the three most experience principals (informants), suggested by the three State Education Department, from three different types of national secondary schools to collect the qualitative data. The three principals are from:

Principal 1 (P1): *National Religious school – High performing, fully residential, Cluster School of Excellence*
Principal 2 (P2): *National type school – Low performing, academically ranked lowest in the district.*

Principal 3 (P3)*: National type school – Average performance, high student intake, and feeder school for vernacular school students.*

The interview protocol had six questions that explored the understanding principals had of ethical leadership and how ethical leadership dimensions were practiced in their capacity in school. The interview protocol investigates the understanding the principals had on practicing ethical leadership based on the seven dimensions (Kalshoven et al., 2011). The bilingual semi-structured protocol was emailed to two experts for validation purposes before the interview. After the experts reviewed the protocol, there were some suggestions on improving the terminologies in the protocol with very minor editing. Then, the interview protocol was pilot tested on one principal prior to this case study for feedback on understanding the content of the protocol, to ensure that the informants would share their experiences in depth and the interviewer will be able to derive ample relevant information from the interview to answer the research questions. The interview protocol was peer reviewed and content reviewed by the informants before the interview session. It was emailed to the informants before the actual interview took place. Therefore, the informants had ample time to think and prepare themselves for the interview. All three principals preferred to speak in the Malay language. The researcher translated the audio recording into the English language. The interview was audio recorded for transcribing and future reference. Upon the completion of the interview, the informants were given a letter of consent to be signed as approval to use the interview findings in this study. The data collected via the interview were transcribed, thematically analyzed (based on the seven dimensions stated below), and cross-case analyzed. The following seven dimensions were adopted and adapted from Vikaraman et al. (2018) as the reference themes for this study, to be functional for a school context:

People orientation: focuses the relationship between the principal and teachers, two-way communication skills, builds trust, shows concern for teachers' welfare, and makes rational decisions.
Fairness: handles matters related to teachers' work obligations, decision-making, misconducts or challenges, misunderstandings, and provides space for negotiation.
Power sharing: empowers teachers to participate in crucial decision-making processes and spontaneously takes advice and assistance from teachers, delegates demanding assignments fairly, and gives opportunity to teachers themselves to plan their goals and progress.
Concern for sustainability: underlines the need for principal's concern in providing a healthy and friendly work climate.
Ethical guidance: explains ethics during work and code of conducts expected in the school.
Role clarification: makes clear the teacher's functions and performance expectations, teachers' obligations, and what is anticipated in and from working groups.
Integrity: demands principals to keep their promises and put into action and trusted to be committed to what they have said.

8.   Findings

8.1   Level of ethical leadership practiced among secondary school principals and trust in their principal as perceived by teachers.

Ethical leadership scored a mean of 4.41 (*SD* = .88) and trust in leader scored a mean of 4.49 (*SD* = 0.96). The level of ethical leadership practiced among secondary school principals and trust in their principal are both high as shown in Table 2. Ethical leadership dimension with the highest mean score was ethical guidance (*M* = 4.54, *SD* = .93). This is followed by role clarification (*M* = 4.45, *SD* = .93), integrity (*M* = 4.42, *SD* = 1.02), power sharing (*M* = 4.38, *SD* = .93), people orientation (*M* = 4.37, *SD* = 1.00), concern for sustainability (*M* = 4.36, *SD* = .99), and fairness (*M* = 4.35, *SD* = .95). Trust in leader dimension with the highest mean score was openness (Mean = 4.52, *SD* = 1.03 followed by personal trustworthy traits (*M* = 4.52, *SD* = 1.01), benevolence (*M* = 4.51, *SD* = 1.05), integrity (Mean = 4.50, *SD* = 1.04), competence (*M* = 4.45, *SD* = .99), and history of interactions (*M* = 4.45, *SD* = 1.04).

Table 2. Level of Ethical Leadership and Trust in Leader (*n* = 438).

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ethical Leadership	4.41	.88
Ethical Guidance	4.55	.93
Role Clarification	4.45	.93
Integrity	4.42	1.02
Power Sharing	4.39	.93
People Orientation	4.38	1.00
Concern for Sustainability	4.37	.99
Fairness	4.35	.95
Trust in Leader	4.49	.96
Openness	4.53	1.03
Trustworthy Traits	4.53	1.01
Benevolence	4.52	1.05
Integrity	4.50	1.04
Competence	4.46	.99
History of Interactions	4.45	1.04

8.2   Correlation between ethical leadership practices and trust in leader in the school context.

The correlation between ethical leadership practice and trust in leader was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. There was a very strong positive correlation between ethical leadership and trust in leader r(438) = .94, $p < 0.05$) among school principals and teachers. There is a statistically significant correlation between respondents' perception of the level of ethical leadership practice in their principals and their level of trust in their leaders (principals) because the Sig. 2-tailed level is .000. This means that when ethical leadership practices increase, the level of trust also increases. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted.

8.3   Subconstructs of ethical leadership practices that significantly contribute to developing trust in leaders.

There is a positive correlation ($p < 0.001$) between the development of trust in leader construct and the subconstructs of ethical leadership practices. Based on importance, the integrity subconstruct had the greatest impact (r (438) = .89, $p < 0.001$) followed by people orientation ($r(438) = 0.87, p < 0.001$), fairness (($438)r = 0.87, p < 0.001$), concern for sustainability ($r(438) = 0.86, p < 0.001$), ethical guidance ($r(438) = 0.84, p < 0.001$), power sharing ($r(438) = 0.83, p < 0.001$), and role clarification ($r(438) = 0.83, p < 0.001$). The results demonstrated that the two main practices, - namely integrity and people orientation as dimensions of ethical leadership were critical measures of building trust in a leader in the school context.

8.4   The understanding of ethical leadership and how it is being practiced by three national secondary school principals in Malaysia.

From the interview, it was identified that all three principals practiced ethical leadership. Nevertheless, the principals showed signs that they lacked the understanding of how ethical leadership had a significant impact on organizational behavior. The principals did not see ethical leadership to be accentuating teachers to respond to moral practices following their leaders, making effective decisions or even being environmentally concerned. Despite the practice of ethical leadership, it was found that the principals still faced ethical challenges such as being watched by others, fair distribution, following religious standards, being caring to all, differences in approaching senior and junior teachers, teacher

appraisals and rewards. The principals were asked "what are the key traits or behavior that an ethical leader should have in a school context." Responses given include the following:

"A principal must be sincere, fair and tolerant. I follow the 360° Leadership Style. It is a leading style that considers the well-being of all stakeholders…students and teachers." (P1)
"What is the meaning of ethical leadership? (Researcher explains) … "Being trustworthy, loyal, and sincere at work." (P2)
"Ethics refers to values or our attitude and as a public servant we must practice positive working ethics. Key features of being an ethical leader are…" (P3)

There were statements saying being ethical helped in building trust and therefore made things easier to be implemented or discussed in the workplace. This gave more support for teachers to work dedicatedly toward the school goals and individual performance. Being a good listener and understanding the teachers' problems were considered very important to build a good relationship with the teachers. The principals took every teacher as an individual and respected their views in any meetings or decision-making processes.

Integrity

In the school context, the principals agreed with practicing integrity in terms of being spiritual, financial management, and decision-making process. They confessed in following religious law, practicing religion and trust, and fear of God as practices of integrity. They managed finance lawfully by following the standard operating procedure (SOP) set by the Ministry of Education and by equally distributing funds where needed most in their school. When making decisions, the principals agreed on sticking to decisions made in meetings or with all the teachers. They kept to their words and were committed to the decision they made.
Responses given include the following:

"Integrity is very important. Careful with money. I listen and make good decisions. I have far goals and high moral standards… I like to maintain it. My duty to fulfil what I say." (P1)
"Being trustworthy, loyal, and sincere is important for me. Once trust is broken, people will get angry. If not with money, but our work. We must be sincere and not lie during our work. This I also tell my teachers to follow." (P2)
"…leaders must be trustworthy, loyal… responsible towards their work and what they say." (P3)

Fairness

The principals are quite aware that they have to practice being fair to all teachers. Fairness is practiced by giving equal opportunity, in making decisions, and listening without being judgmental or discriminating. Every teacher was given equal opportunity to share their ideas, knowledge, talent, skill, and space to achieve personal goals. A decision was made after the principals discussed with the teachers, whereby they had equal chance to share their opinions and disagreements. The principals listened to every idea, thought, and suggestions carefully before making conclusions and not necessarily accepted everything said by the teachers. Responses given include the following:

"I try to distribute work that they can do best…explain if they don't understand or are reluctant to follow rules… this is important in long run. I'm responsible if they don't know their work. I am lucky because I have vast experience and have gained enough knowledge to lead different group of teachers." (P1)
"I treat teachers equally. Every teacher has good points. They are given opportunity to share their knowledge. I try to reward them for their work." (P2)
"I have strong respect for teachers' rights, handle issues without discrimination or bias towards a culture or race…handle with calmness and avoid being harsh to all." (P3)

People Orientation

The principals found people orientation to be very important in their management and administrating practices in order to get teachers to follow their instructions or decisions without much problems. The principals practiced good listening habits, role modelling, collaborated decision-making, trusting their teachers, and occasionally having open discussions. They took heed in understanding teachers' personal issues and paid a lot of attention to their needs. They practice what they have preached to develop trust in their capabilities to lead. Responses given include the following:

"As a principal, you are alone, but you need the support of your subordinates. Because of the respect, teachers may avoid you, but we have to make friends. Being a role model to all – our attendance, teaching and how we behave. We are being watched and observed so we have to be careful. They assume we are perfect." (P1)
"I role model myself. I show good values. I take care of how they feel, their welfare and advise them like a friend. I humble myself to their level. I don't share their personal issues." (P2)
"…able to work as a team, I have good communication habits – verbally and non-verbal, treat everyone with care because big school and many teachers, humble and initiative to add knowledge…we are being watched, our clothes, how we dress-up, talk and behave." (P3)

Power Sharing

Only one principal shared about sharing commitments and power with the teachers, especially with the assistant principals, department heads, and subject panel heads. The principal also distributed work and responsibilities to their teachers when needed.

"I prefer teachers to share during meeting. Let everyone hear them talk and we make shared decisions." … "I practice 3600 Leadership style. From top to down, we give rights for everyone to share and take responsibility." (P2)

Ethical Guidance

Guidance was more focused on lesson preparation and school programs. There was a lack of ethical guidance given to teachers. Nevertheless, teachers were well briefed on work ethics as quoted by the Ministry of Education, for example *Kod Etika Kerja* and *Tonggak 12*, as reference to ethical codes to follow in schools.

"I advise my teachers to be loyal and sincere…always speak the truth." (P2)
"Principal must follow ethics to guide the teachers later on." (P3)

Role Clarification

Clarifying the roles each teacher plays in an organization is also a practice of being ethical. The principals share what is expected of a teacher clearly. In the interview, two principals mentioned that they explain what they expect from their teachers and staff during staff meetings and classroom observation.

"I prepare guidelines on procedures to work on somethings like desk files, work procedure manuals." (P3)

Concern for Sustainability

Concern for sustainability at school focusses on providing a conducive and safe workplace for teachers and staff to work. Apart from that, principals valuing the importance of caring for the environment is also considered an ethical practice. Only one principal spoke on providing a comfortable place for his teachers.

"I try to provide comfortable and safe place to work." (P1)

Table 3 shows the summary of ethical leadership practices by dimensions as reported by the principals. P1 practices five out of seven dimensions, P2 practices 4 four out of seven dimensions, and P3 practices five out of seven dimensions of ethical leadership. There were three dimensions of ethical leadership which were identified as practiced by all the principals (P1, P2, and P3), namely integrity, fairness, and people orientation.

Table 3. Ethical Leadership Dimensions Practiced by Principals.

Principals / Ethical Dimensions	P1	P2	P3
Integrity	√	√	√
Fairness	√	√	√
People Orientation	√	√	√
Power Sharing	√		
Ethical Guidance		√	√
Role Clarification			√
Concern for Sustainability	√		

9.   Discussion

Teachers in Malaysia were ethically guided by principals in schools as perceived by teachers. This is believed due to the SOP of work ethics provided to schools by the Ministry of Education, which is commonly discussed during school staff meetings, assembly, or when disciplinary issues among school staff arise. Principals clearly explain ethical conducts to mainly ensure that teachers practice integrity and clarify the likely consequences of possible unethical behavior by teachers. Teachers in Malaysia also trusted their principals because they were open and transparent in their decision-making and strategies. They expect empowerment from the principal they trust. This is similar to the fact that, teachers preferred their principals to communicate necessary information in an open and honest manner and constantly inform teachers the truth about changes in the school (Vikaraman et al., 2018).

Ethical leadership practices very strongly influence the building of trust in this study similar to what was reported in (Vikaraman et al., 2018). This finding is consistent with the findings by Engelbrecht et al. (2014), who found that ethical leadership practices contributed greatly to the development of trust in leaders, in the private sector context. This finding also supports the recommendation on the use of ethical leadership model in other research areas to see its relevance and benefits (Engelbrecht et al., 2014). All in all, ethical leadership is believed to be able to create strong positive organizational patterns such as trust, work engagement, job satisfaction, and empowerment when in practice or integrated into current leadership practices.

Integrity was perceived by teachers as the strongest predictor of building trust. Integrity is believed to be a trust building catalyst and a reliability behavior by followers. A morally consistent, credible, and trustworthy leader can foster the feeling of trust. Leader integrity has a significantly positive influence on the trust in the leader (Engelbrect et al., 2017). People orientation was the second strongest predictor of developing trust in leaders. Human-centered leaders make people feel good about themselves and the work they do. They put a lot of effort into creating professional bonds that influence workers to work for a common goal with the organization. It makes decision-making smooth and meaningful whereby the leader and followers already have a mutual understanding and cooperativeness in the team. These findings differ from a study by Ismail and Daud (2014) in the northern region of Malaysia whereby "people orientation and role clarification" demonstrated the greatest impact on

organizational commitments. In another case study involving two schools in the southern region of Malaysia, integrity and concern for sustainability were predictors of better work engagement among teachers (Vikaraman et al., 2018). Consequently, from the quantitative data, it can be concluded that integrity and people orientation are substantial and effective predictors of building trust as well as factors in planning for strategies to improve work engagement patterns of an organization such as school.

From the qualitative data, this study favors to conclude that there is ample room to deepen the knowledge and understanding of ethical leadership style among principals in Malaysia. The principals interviewed in this study, shared some traces of their understanding of what ethical leadership is, but lacked the knowledge of how ethical leadership influences teachers' positive work patterns or holistic school success. Ethical leadership sounded like a newfound terminology in their principalship tenure. The findings from this study may be taken as a benchmark for sharing effective practices in the future as well as working toward understanding the impact of ethical leadership. The understanding of ethical leadership practices will be meaningful in many ways to school principals if they understood the impact it had on employee work patterns, performance, and behaviors. Traditional leadership practices can be alternated with ethical leadership. Ethical leadership may perfectly be integrated into other commonly practiced leadership styles. Ethical leadership as a branch of value-based leadership may perfectly be adapted into future leadership training modules. Although much attention has been paid to ethical leadership recently in the international arena, not much has been explored in the local context, especially in schools. This study contributes to extending existing understanding in the area of ethical leadership development, as well as the influence processes that enable organizations to develop ethical and effective leaders.

10.   Conclusion

The role of the school principal in the Fourth Industrial Revolution era differs from the past, where the focus on technology-based resources and human resource development needs equal attention for optimum organizational success. An effective principal will be skillful in balancing the role of a leader and a manager for the best school performance outcomes and positively leading people practices toward professionalism and notable administrative measures (Mansor & Baki, 2007; Rizvi, 2008). The current study shares that all seven dimensions of ethical leadership are predictors of building trust among principals in Malaysia. The findings of this study involving the perception of 438 teachers nationwide and three principals can be considered an innovative model of school leadership and a benchmark for integrating ethical leadership dimensions or practices into current leadership styles. The structural model adapted to this study, initially made a positive outcome for the private organizational context, giving it a positive indication to be implemented in public schools based on the findings of this study. Therefore, this model is highly recommended in public schools.

Principals in Malaysia highly depend on new developments and insights on improving their leadership quality. Traditional leadership styles no longer work in current complex situations and dilemmas in the school context. In recent years, leaders from the private and public sectors have started integrating value-based leadership practices for better role credibility (Copeland, 2014) and as role-balancing initiatives. Nevertheless, being dependent on policy and higher authority demands limits the idea of being innovative and self-maneuvering ideas, especially in the school leadership system. Hence, the findings of this study are highly recommended for Malaysian school principals as a reference or guide to effective school leadership practices. The research deeply explores ethical leadership practices and trust in leader dimensions and relationship in the school context. Ample future initiatives dealing with principals and teachers will be able to use the data provided to further improve on existing training modules, frameworks, and models highlighting ethical leadership or building trust for a highly goal driven, sustainable, and continuously developing human capital force in the field of education. This

study supports and highly recommends ethical leadership as an alternative or integration into current school leadership practices such as instructional, transformational, and technology leadership.

Ethical leadership focusses on building leadership qualities that balance the role of a principal as a manager and a leader whereby the principal is able to administer the school and care for teachers' well-being for overall school success via good interpersonal relationship and personal activities, for instance decision-making, role modelling, and communicating. Current school leaders, especially the principals, need to practice a leadership style that develops trust, sustain the trust, and create a belief system that can also morally motivate teachers to produce quality work, respect their organizational decisions, and work toward a common goal. Thus, integrating ethical leadership practices is believed to help principals play these multiple roles in their daily work endeavors in a balanced manner which in return benefits teachers too. Ethical leadership style of school leaders is likely to create an ethical and trusting work climate conducive enough to promote positive work behavioral patterns of teachers. This is likely to enhance teacher efficiency as well as creativity and innovation (Yidong & Xinxin, 2013). The use of an ethical model in higher education institution was researched by Abd Ghani and Jusoff (2009). The findings encourage future studies to focus on higher institution leaders' ethical leadership impact. This current study supports the recommendations for future research to highlight the benefits of ethical leadership in the higher education institution context as well.

11.   References

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