

# Ethical Leadership and Work Culture in National Secondary Schools: A Case Study in Malacca

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## ABSTRACT

In the ever-evolving educational landscape, ethical leadership is an important topic that affects not only academic achievement, but also teachers' well-being and job satisfaction. This study was conducted to examine the influence of the principal's ethical leadership practices on the work culture and interaction between teachers in a national secondary school in Malaysia. This is not only important to understand the dynamics of leadership in education but also to explore how such leadership affects the daily interactions of teachers and collaboration in organizations. By taking a qualitative case study approach and using a structured interview method, three teachers from three different secondary schools through carefully planned interview questions. It indicates that the study was conducted to explore teachers' opinions and experiences, as well as evaluate how ethical leadership of principals affects their daily interactions with colleagues and influences cooperation between teachers in shaping the work culture in schools. Interview data were analysed inductively using open coding to identify emerging themes. Findings show that the principal's ethical leadership practices such as transparency in decision-making, emphasizing the value of integrity and an inclusive approach have positively influenced the interaction among teachers. Teachers report improvements in communication, mutual support and collaboration when principals adopt the approach. Overall, the principal's ethical leadership was found to play an important role in creating a harmonious work culture in the school through practices such as transparent decision-making, giving autonomy to teachers, and promoting the value of integrity. This study concludes that there is a significant influence between the principal's ethical leadership practices and the improvement of a positive work culture that is reflected through the interaction and cooperation between teachers in the school.

**Keywords:** Ethical Leadership, High School, Teacher Interaction, Work Culture,

## INTRODUCTION

Globally, ethical leadership and teacher work culture are increasingly gained prominence as significant research focus within the educational context (Ghanem 2018). Implementing ethical leadership in the school context is not an easy task as principals often face various challenges such as academic achievement pressure, teacher conflict, student discipline issues and the need to comply with education policies. Education as a sector that plays a fundamental role in the development of society and the economy, is now increasingly emphasizing the need for ethical leaders in facing the complex challenges in the global education world (Othman et al. 2023). This importance is increasingly becoming a priority around the world, including in developed countries that are constantly studying the role of ethics in leadership to improve the quality of their education systems. Ethical leadership is important for creating a harmonious school environment and building a positive work culture that benefits the organization itself. The sustainability of school organizations is hindered by various issues including teacher dissatisfaction with excessive workload and challenges from policies enacted by the Ministry of Education Malaysia (KPM). In implementing the set policies, such as the 2013–2025 PPPM, there are disagreements between teachers and school leadership that can affect the teachers' work culture and subsequently affect the school's overall performance. Therefore, the principal's ethical leadership is a critical element in creating a harmonious, collaborative and integrity-based school environment. In line with previous research findings, ethical leadership practices that emphasize fairness, transparency and respect for teachers can foster a positive work environment and increase teacher motivation and commitment (Vikaraman et al. 2021).

In the school context, principals often face various challenges such as conflicts between teachers, student

discipline issues, and pressure to achieve high academic goals. Therefore, the principal's ethical leadership is very important in dealing with these issues wisely and fairly. According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), ethical leadership is closely related to the concept of trust that involves aspects of sincerity, predictability, respect, and shared values. When principals practice ethical leadership, it can build trust and encourage closer cooperation among teachers. This in turn creates a conducive work environment and promotes a positive work culture (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). In addition, a study by Engelbrecht et al. (2017) also found that ethical leadership of principals has a significant impact on teachers' commitment and motivation in carrying out their duties. However, it is important to understand that the definition of ethical leadership may vary according to individual perspectives. According to Northouse (2021), ethical leadership is a process in which leaders demonstrate normative and moral behaviour in their relationships with followers. On the other hand, Brown et al. (2005) defined ethical leadership as "the demonstration of appropriate normative behaviour through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the empowerment of such behaviour in followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making." Therefore, it is important to understand teachers' perspectives on the definition and elements of ethical leadership in their school context. Overall, previous studies emphasize the importance of ethical leadership of principals in creating a conducive school environment, increasing teacher motivation and commitment, and promoting a positive work culture. However, teachers' perspectives on the definition and practice of ethical leadership need to be understood more deeply to ensure its effective implementation in the school context.

In the school context, employees refer to teachers who play a key role in educating and guiding students. In addition, employees who are highly motivated and committed to organizational goals will contribute to improved school performance and success (Salleh, S. M., et al. 2016). Therefore, ethical leadership plays an important role in creating a positive and productive work culture among teachers. A study by Ng and Feldman (2015) found that ethical leadership has a positive effect on employee affective commitment, which is the emotional feeling that binds employees to the organization. When employees have high affective commitment, they are more likely to remain in the organization and make maximum contributions. In addition, ethical leadership is also associated with increased motivation among employees (Bao, Y., & Li, C. 2019). Leaders who practice ethical values such as fairness, honesty and integrity can encourage employees to put in greater effort in carrying out their duties. In the context of schools, ethical leadership by principals can have a positive impact on teacher motivation and commitment. For example, principals who practice ethical leadership practices such as respecting teachers' opinions, communicating transparently, and making fair decisions can increase trust and a sense of appreciation among teachers (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). This will in turn increase teachers' motivation and commitment to their duties, as well as create a positive and productive work culture in schools. However, it is important to understand that ethical leadership is not the only factor that influences employee motivation, commitment and performance. There are other factors such as rewards, professional development opportunities, and the work environment that need to be taken into account (Salleh et al. 2016). However, ethical leadership is an important element that can contribute to the formation of a healthy and productive work culture in an organization, including schools.

In addition, according to Shapiro & Stefkovich (2016) emphasized the importance of ethical leadership in the context of education, that school leaders often face complex ethical dilemmas. They suggest an approach based on ethical principles such as equality, justice, and care to make responsible decisions. Through the "Multi-Paradigm Ethics" Model, they outline the need for educational leaders to consider multiple viewpoints and their implications for all parties involved, assessing situations from multiple ethical perspectives to make fair, transparent, and responsible decisions. Bon, S. C. (2012) highlights the importance of integrating ethical values into educational leadership, asserting that school leaders must not only excel in management and administration but also possess the capacity to make sound ethical decisions in complex and challenging situations. In the context of education in Malaysia, there is a gap in the literature that studies in depth how ethical leadership by principals. Despite the recognized importance of ethical leadership in fostering positive educational outcomes, a lack of such leadership practices in schools has been associated with low teacher morale, ineffective collaboration, and diminished job satisfaction. These challenges negatively impact the overall work culture and hinder teachers' ability to create supportive and cohesive educational environments. In Malaysia, while much of the existing research has predominantly focused on the relationship between leadership and students' academic achievement, there is a noticeable lack of studies examining how principals' ethical leadership directly influences teachers' work environments and their professional interactions. This gap in the literature highlights an

incomplete understanding of how ethical leadership shapes the daily experiences and practices of teachers. To address this issue, this study specifically investigates teachers' perceptions and experiences of their principals' ethical leadership practices. By focusing on the ways in which such leadership influences teacher collaboration, communication, and mutual support, the study aims to provide deeper insights into the role of ethical leadership in shaping a positive work culture within secondary schools. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Explore teachers' views on ethical leadership practices practiced in schools.
2. Explore the reality of teachers' experiences related to ethical leadership of principals in daily interactions with colleagues in schools.
3. Identify teachers' views on the extent to which ethical leadership shapes the work culture in schools.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Malaysia, with the spirit of transformation in the field of education, the effectiveness of principal leadership has become an issue that is increasingly receiving attention (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2020; Noman 2017). Malaysia is a country committed to improving the quality of education, experiencing significant transformation in the structure of education and school management (Hussin S. 2014; Baco B. Arifin K. & Awang A. 2020). The importance of ethical leadership in educational institutions, especially at the secondary school level, has received increasing attention in recent years. This study examines the influence of various aspects of ethical leadership on fostering a positive work culture within school organizations. School leaders are key to organizational success. Authoritative leaders are the main elements that bring excellence to an organization (Baskaran & Aida Hanim 2020). In general, good leadership can influence teachers in a school to carry out tasks to achieve their goals (Johansson Miller & Hamrin 2014). Therefore, school administrators need to be smart and equip themselves with various administrative and organizational management skills, especially ethical leadership styles in cultivating a more positive and sustainable teacher work.

A study by Sharmini Vikaraman et al. (2019) stated that ethical leadership is a term used to refer to leaders in the new era where they tend to forget their behavior. Meanwhile, a study by Shafinaz et al. (2017) found that effective leadership influence is important to create a more sustainable school environment and is driven by the guidelines, objectives, vision and mission of a leader who has various good ethical leadership abilities in the organization. In an educational environment, ethical leadership has an impact on interpersonal dynamics and decision-making processes. Therefore, school leadership, especially principals, need to improve their skills by using various leadership styles, especially ethical leadership, in their efforts to deal with disagreements in the organization. This is confirmed by a study conducted by Mohammad Yusof et al. (2016) which states that the existence of conflict stems from poor management levels and impacts a positive school environment while well-managed conflict can lead to increased school achievement. In a case study by McGregor F. (2023), it was shown that principals' misconduct and manipulation of teachers and their workplace well-being were listed as unacceptable behavior; ineffective communication; not being aware of teachers' feelings and needs; unfair workload; spying; threatening; and being overly critical. Referring to the study by Muhammad Faizal et al. (2015), it was stated that principals' weaknesses in financial management stem from negligence, lack of knowledge and skills in financial management, and misuse of school funds. Situations like this can cause misunderstandings that affect the smooth running of the school system led by principals, which will result in teachers being less motivated to cooperate with principals. A study by Nawi (2021) showed that principals who practice ethical leadership play an important role in improving the moral competence of teachers in management subjects. In this study, principals' ethical care for teachers' welfare was high, and there was a significant relationship between principals' ethical leadership and teachers' moral competence, although the relationship was weak. In particular, the principal's ethical justice dimension showed a very strong and significant relationship with principals' ethical leadership. This underlines the importance of the ethical justice dimension in shaping positive ethical leadership. Supported by the study of Fitria H. (2018) stating that by understanding the impact of ethical leadership and conflict resolution on teachers' work environments, we can make a positive contribution to increasing teacher job satisfaction, which in turn can have a positive impact on the quality of education.

A study by Benevene et al. (2018) found that ethical leadership has a positive relationship with job satisfaction and affective commitment among teachers in Italy. They emphasized that teacher involvement in decision-making processes and transparent leadership practices is important to enhance a positive work culture. This study

highlights how ethical leadership practices can increase employees' motivation, job satisfaction, and emotional commitment to the organization, which in turn contributes to the creation of a conducive and productive work environment. Thus, these findings provide valuable insights for educational leaders on the importance of promoting leadership styles that prioritize fairness, transparency, and respect for individuals, as a foundation for improving work and trust among teachers, while strengthening the foundation of a positive organizational culture in the education sector. In a study by Feng (2016), the role of principals' ethical leadership was identified as a key predictor of teacher performance in schools in China. With a sample of 385 teachers as respondents, the study found that principals' ethical leadership had a significant direct effect on teacher performance. In addition, ethical leadership also had an indirect effect on teacher performance through teacher self-efficacy as a mediator. This finding is in line with previous studies that show leadership practices based on values such as integrity, fairness, and honesty can increase teachers' motivation, commitment, and self-confidence (Benevene et al., 2018; Öqvist & Malmström, 2018). Meanwhile, Kutsyuruba et al. (2010) also emphasized the importance of ethical leadership in building a culture of trust and encouraging teacher involvement in decision-making, thus increasing their commitment to the organization. Thus, these findings further strengthen the recommendation to strengthen ethical leadership practices at the school level to create a conducive and encouraging work environment for teachers to perform their duties more effectively. Supported by the study by Sesen, H., et al. (2017) in Turkey, it was found that ethical leadership of principals has a positive relationship with organizational commitment and teacher job satisfaction. They suggested that principals practice ethical leadership to improve teacher performance and school success. Thus, a study by Kutsyuruba et al. (2010) in Canada showed that ethical leadership plays an important role in creating an inclusive school culture and encouraging teacher participation in decision-making. This indirectly increases teacher commitment and motivation. In addition, ethical leaders who prioritize justice and transparency in decision-making can foster a culture of trust and integrity in the organization (Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

Overall, ethical leadership practices by principals and school leaders not only increase organizational commitment and teacher job satisfaction, but also contribute significantly to the formation of a more inclusive school culture and encourage teacher involvement in the decision-making process. This further strengthens the importance of ethical leadership practices as a key pillar in achieving better teacher performance and ensuring overall school success. Therefore, ethical leadership has proven to be an important element and plays a pivotal role in creating a conducive environment for teachers to carry out their responsibilities more effectively, thus ensuring overall school success. Therefore, it is very critical for educational institutions to integrate ethical leadership principles in an integrated manner in professional development and leadership training programs. This step aims to produce leaders who practice noble values such as integrity and justice, thus creating a stimulating learning environment to achieve educational excellence in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach with a single case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore teachers' perspectives on the ethical leadership practices of principals at a national secondary school in the state of Malacca. This school was chosen purposively because the principal of the school was identified as an individual who practices ethical leadership and has brought success in terms of academic achievement and excellent school management. In-depth face-to-face interviews were used as the main instrument to collect data from three teachers at the school. The study participants were purposively selected (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on their varied experiences and length of service at the school. by taking into account the differences in their experience and length of service at the school. This aimed to obtain diverse perspectives and represent various contexts within the same school environment. The interview process was conducted face-to-face in the school environment and recorded with the participants' permission for data analysis purposes. By concentrating on a single school, this study offers a detailed and contextual understanding of how the principal's ethical leadership practices affect teachers. Additionally, selecting a school with exemplary academic and management performance allowed the researcher to identify effective ethical leadership practices that could serve as models for other schools. Interview questions were designed to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences related to principals' ethical leadership practices in their schools. Among the aspects explored were the principals' exemplary integrity, leadership style, and concern for teachers' welfare. Interview data were analyzed using inductive coding (Saldaña, 2016) to identify emerging themes and sub-themes. The coding process was carried out in stages, starting with open coding, followed by axial coding, and finally selective coding to produce main

themes and sub-themes related to principals' ethical leadership practices. To increase the validity and reliability of the study findings, several steps were taken, such as triangulation of data sources (interviews with teachers from various schools), peer review, and participant verification (member checking) of the interview results and data analysis. In addition, the researchers were also aware of and controlled the influence of their own background and assumptions throughout the research process through self-reflection and discussions with fellow researchers.

The researchers aimed to examine the role of principals in ethical leadership and its impact on teachers' work culture in National Secondary Schools. The themes for each variable studied were identified through a careful reading of the transcribed interviews using coding techniques. This technique was suitable for this study because its purpose was to explore the experiences, meanings and realities of the participants (Braun & Clarke 2006). During the transcript review, themes that emerged from the texts were coded and categorized using Nvivo software, for qualitative research. Data analysis using Nvivo software version 14.0 found that there were many sub-themes under three main aspects, namely to understand teachers' views on the concept of ethical leadership in the school context, to explore teachers' experiences in carrying out their duties under the ethical leadership of the principal and finally to identify the role of ethical leadership in shaping the work culture in the school. In this study, data coding and data categorization were done based on three research questions related to the theme of ethical leadership in the school context. Three study participants, who were members of the school community, were interviewed to gain their views on this topic. The answers given by these participants were then analysed through a coding process and categorized to facilitate understanding and interpretation of the data.

The first question was "How would you describe ethical leadership practiced in schools?" aimed to gather the participants' subjective views on the definition and elements that constitute ethical leadership in the school environment. The answers to this question helped determine the key characteristics considered important in ethical leadership, such as integrity, fairness, empathy, and so on. Next, the second question, "How does the ethical leadership of the principal in your school influence your daily interactions with colleagues?" focuses on the influence of the principal's ethical leadership on the dynamics of daily work in the school. The answer to this question helps identify how the ethical values applied by the principal affect the relationship between teachers and the general work environment. Next, the third question, "How does ethical leadership influence cooperation between teachers and shape the work culture in the school?" aims to explore the practice of ethical leadership on group cooperation and work culture in the school. This question reveals how ethical leadership practices can promote collaboration, effective communication, and a positive work environment. By using a qualitative approach and a multi-case study design, this study is able to obtain an in-depth picture of the ethical leadership practices of school principals from the perspective of teachers. The findings of this study are expected to provide a better understanding of the importance of ethical leadership practices in the school context and subsequently contribute to efforts to improve the quality of school leadership in Malaysia. In this regard, data coding and categorizing of data have been done from three research questions that have been interviewed with three study participants.

For the first research question (RQ1) related to the context of ethical leadership, study participants stated that principals practice fair resource allocation, involve teachers in the decision-making process, assess students fairly, resolve issues fairly, and are very firm in upholding the academic aspects of the school. For the second research question (RQ2) regarding ethical leadership influencing interactions, study participants stated that they work together to find solutions, principals are responsible and ethical, principals prioritize justice in every decision, care about the well-being of students, there is a more harmonious and mutually needy atmosphere, and ethical leadership can improve the quality of teaching and create a harmonious work atmosphere. Next, for the third research question (RQ3) regarding cooperation in shaping the work culture in schools, study participants stated that there are teachers who still work separately, but meetings are held regularly, participants are aware of the importance of working together, they support each other, and there is a strong spirit of cooperation among teachers in the school. Overall, this data provides an overview of teachers' perspectives and experiences regarding principals' ethical leadership, interactions among teachers, and the culture of cooperation in the school. It also reflects the diversity and richness of data obtained from interviews with different study participants.

**a. Research Question 1: How to describe ethical leadership in the school context?**

**Table 1**

Cluster1 Firm Academic Enforcement with Fair Student Assessment	Cluster 2 Decision Making with Fair Solutions	Cluster 3 Effective and fair in the distribution of available resources	Cluster 4
Very firm in academic enforcement Student assessment is done fairly	Fair solutions Decision Making	Resource Distribution	

**b. Research Question 2:** How does the ethical leadership of the principal in the school influence your daily interactions with colleagues?

**Table 2**

Cluster 1 Harmonious Collaboration that Needs Each Other	Cluster 2 Quality Teaching for Student Well-being	Cluster 3 Ethical and Responsible Decisions with Justice	Cluster 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working together to find solutions</li> <li>More Harmony and Needs Each Other</li> <li>Harmonious Work Environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Student well-being</li> <li>Improving the quality of teaching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Responsibility and ethics</li> <li>Justice in every decision</li> </ul>	

**c. Research Question 3:** How does this ethical leadership influence collaboration among teachers and shape the work culture in the school?

**Table 3**

Cluster 1 Supporting Each Other with a Spirit of Cooperation	Cluster 2 Routine and regular meetings	Cluster 3 Autonomous Work	Cluster 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The importance of working together</li> <li>Supporting each other</li> <li>Strong spirit of cooperation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular meetings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Working separately</li> </ul>	

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

**a. Research Question 1:** The following is an interview on how to describe ethical leadership in the school context by study participants (P1) (P2) (P3).

...ethical leadership is strongly emphasized by our principal. He places great emphasis on transparency in decision-making. For example, in the issue of resource allocation, the principal will hold a meeting with all teachers to discuss and decide on a fair solution...(P1)

...is very firm in upholding academic justice. He ensures that student assessments are done fairly. His data-based approach to resolving conflicts also helps us as teachers to understand school policies more clearly...(P2)

...strongly emphasizes integrity and honesty. He uses problem-solving techniques to resolve conflicts, which encourages cooperation among teachers and students...(P3)

Based on interview data, data from three study participants, P1, P2, and P3, show different but complementary perspectives on their principals' leadership practices. P1 emphasized how the principal prioritized transparency in decision-making, especially in resource allocation issues. The principal held meetings with all teachers to discuss and decide on fair solutions, demonstrating a commitment to the principles of justice and collaboration. This approach not only ensured fairness in resource allocation, but also engagement among teachers. According to participants P2, on the other hand, it provided insight into the principal's firmness in upholding academic justice. Student assessments were conducted in a fair manner, and the principal adopted a data-based approach to resolving conflicts. This approach helped teachers understand school policies more clearly, increased transparency, and strengthened accountability in the educational process. This data-focused leadership also ensured that decisions were made based on objective evidence and analysis, minimizing bias and subjective errors. According to study participants P3, it highlighted how the principal emphasized the values of integrity and honesty. The principal's technique in delving into the problems that occurred showed a commitment to a deep understanding of the conflict and finding effective solutions. This approach encouraged collaboration among teachers and students, creating a supportive environment for ethical learning and interaction. Through this approach, the principal successfully created an atmosphere where ethical values were instilled in every aspect of school activities. In conclusion, the data from the three study participants paints a comprehensive picture of ethical leadership practices in schools. From transparency in decision-making to an emphasis on integrity and data-based conflict resolution, these principals successfully implemented effective and ethical leadership principles, which ultimately formed a positive and productive work culture in the school. Findings showed that the principal's ethical leadership had a significant influence on teachers' work culture, interactions between teachers, as well as the quality of teaching and student well-being.

### Teachers' Perceptions of Ethical Leadership

The study findings showed the relationship between ethical leadership and practices such as transparency in decision-making, prioritizing justice, and emphasizing the value of integrity. Transparency in the decision-making process is seen as the main foundation of ethical leadership, where teacher involvement and views are taken into account. This approach is considered to reflect justice and promote a culture of trust in the school organization. Meanwhile, the emphasis on the value of integrity and honesty in the actions of leaders was also identified as an important element of ethical leadership. Teachers felt that this aspect was able to create a healthy and ethical work environment, in addition to being a role model for students. Supported by Engelbrecht et al.'s (2017) study of 204 respondents as a sample consisting of employees operating in various organizations in South Africa, it shows that ethical leaders who prioritize fairness and transparency in decision-making can foster a culture of trust and integrity in the organization. This is further supported by the findings of previous studies which show that ethical leaders who prioritize fairness and transparency in decision-making, emphasize the values of integrity and honesty, and take into account subordinates' views can foster a culture of trust in the organization, create a healthy and ethical work environment, and serve as positive role models, especially in the context of education (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Engelbrecht et al., 2017; Kal Shoven et al., 2011; Şahin, 2020; Ehrich et al., 2015).

**b. Research Question 2:** The following is an interview on how the ethical leadership of the principal at school influences daily interactions with colleagues by the study participants (P1) (P2) (P3).

.... the principal's inclusive approach has brought about a harmonious work environment. We as teachers feel valued and acknowledged. Although we face challenges in our workload, we can work together to find solutions.... (P1)

.... the ethical leadership of the principal at our school has had a great impact on my interactions with colleagues. Our principal strongly emphasizes the importance of transparency and fairness in every decision. This makes me feel more responsible and ethical in my actions. We as teachers work in a more harmonious and mutually supportive atmosphere, which directly improves the quality of teaching and the well-being of students.... (P1)

.... the principal's ethical leadership has had a positive impact on the way I interact with colleagues. Our principal emphasizes the importance of work ethics and integrity, which helps create a work environment based on trust

and respect. This has changed the way we work together, especially in dealing with student issues and curriculum planning. I feel that there is an increase in communication and mutual understanding between us...(P2)

.... the principal's ethical leadership greatly influences my interactions with colleagues. Our principal adopts an open and inclusive approach, which makes all teachers feel valued and acknowledged. This encourages us to collaborate and share ideas more effectively. I feel more respected and trusted, which increases my motivation and dedication in teaching and working with colleagues... (P3)

Based on the interview data collected from three study participants, P1, P2, and P3, it provides a rich perspective on the impact of the principal's ethical leadership in schools, especially in the aspects of interactions between teachers and the work atmosphere. According to study participant P1, it illustrates how the principal's inclusive approach creates a harmonious work environment, where teachers feel valued and acknowledged. Despite the challenges in workload, this approach facilitates effective collaboration among teachers in finding solutions. According to study participant P2, with a similar emphasis, it states how the principal's ethical leadership has a great impact on their interactions with colleagues. The principal's emphasis on transparency and fairness in every decision has strengthened the sense of responsibility and ethics among teachers, creating a more harmonious and mutually supportive work environment. This directly contributes to the improvement of the quality of teaching and the well-being of students. Meanwhile, according to the P3 study participants, they acknowledge the influence of the principal's ethical leadership in changing the way they interact with colleagues. Principals who emphasize the importance of work ethics and integrity have helped to create a work environment based on trust and respect. This has changed the way teachers work together, especially in dealing with student issues and curriculum planning, as well as improving communication and mutual understanding between teachers. Overall, the testimonies from the three study participants show that the principal's ethical leadership not only improves the work dynamics among teachers, but also builds a positive work culture, based on appreciation, trust, and collaboration. The principal's inclusive and open approach has created an environment conducive to the professional development of teachers, increasing their motivation, and indirectly contributing to the improvement of the quality of teaching and the well-being of students. This leadership approach has proven effective in forming a high and ethical educational community.

### **Ethical Leadership and Teacher Interaction and Collaboration**

The findings of the study show that ethical leadership by principals has a positive impact on interaction and collaboration among teachers. When principals adopt an inclusive approach to decision-making and encourage teacher involvement, a more harmonious work environment can be created. Teachers are reported to feel valued and their contributions are recognized, thus increasing motivation and enthusiasm to collaborate with colleagues. An ethical leadership approach that emphasizes fairness and open communication also fosters an atmosphere of mutual support among teachers, increasing intimacy and trust in the organization. In addition, the findings also show that ethical leadership practices lead to increased cooperation and collaboration among teachers. Principals who practice values such as transparency, integrity, and mutual respect have succeeded in creating a more cohesive and effective teamwork culture. Teachers feel more open to communicating, sharing ideas, and solving problems together, replacing competition or distrust that may have existed before. The findings of this study are supported by previous studies that ethical leadership by principals has a positive impact on interaction and collaboration among teachers. An ethical leadership approach that emphasizes values such as trust, fairness, inclusivity, transparency, integrity, and mutual respect has been shown to increase a harmonious work environment, motivation, a spirit of cooperation, open communication, trust, camaraderie, and a more cohesive and effective teamwork culture among teachers (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Kutsyuruba et al., 2011; Sammons et al., 2011).

**c. Research Question 3:** The following is an interview on how ethical leadership affects cooperation between teachers by study participants (P1) (P2) (P3).

.... I think the biggest change lies in the aspect of supporting each other. Before the implementation of this ethical leadership of the principal, sometimes we worked separately. But now, there is a strong spirit of cooperation. The principal always emphasizes the importance of working together to achieve higher educational goals. We



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hold regular meetings to discuss strategies and ways to improve the teaching and learning process...(P1)

...in terms of cooperation, I see a significant change. The principal's ethical leadership strengthens our cooperation through the example shown. The principal often involves us in the decision-making process and provides opportunities to share views. This creates a working atmosphere where each teacher feels responsible for supporting each other, especially in facing challenges. We are also more open in discussing and solving problems, which strengthens our working relationship...(P2)

... our principal's ethical leadership has really changed the way we work together. Previously, there was sometimes a sense of competition or mistrust between us, but now, we focus more on cooperation for the good of the students. Our principal instills values such as cooperation, open communication, and mutual respect. This makes us work as a more cohesive team, where each teacher feels that their contribution is important and appreciated...(P3)

Based on the interview data collected from three study participants, P1, P2, and P3, this shows the role of the principal's ethical leadership in shaping the dynamics of cooperation and relationships between teachers. According to study participant P1, significant changes have occurred in the aspect of support among teachers since the implementation of ethical leadership. This change is seen from the shift from working individually to closer group cooperation, with the principal playing a role in holding regular meetings to plan strategies to improve the quality of teaching. According to study participant P2, it shows how the principal's ethical leadership has changed cooperation among teachers. The involvement of teachers in the decision-making process and the opportunity to share views has created a working atmosphere where each teacher feels responsible and involved, especially in facing challenges. This paves the way for increased communication and mutual understanding, as well as strengthening working relationships. Meanwhile, study participants P3 outlined how ethical leadership by principals has changed the way teachers collaborate. By instilling values such as collaboration, open communication, and mutual respect, principals have helped overcome elements of competition or mistrust that previously existed. This has encouraged teachers to work as a cohesive team, where every contribution is considered important and valued. Overall, the conclusions from this study show that ethical leadership by principals plays an important role in shaping the working environment in schools. This approach not only strengthens collaboration and relationships between teachers, but also positively influences teaching effectiveness and student well-being. This shows the importance of ethical leadership in creating a conducive and productive educational environment in Malaysia.

### **Ethical Leadership and Teaching Quality and Student Well-being**

This study also revealed that ethical leadership by principals has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and student well-being in schools. Teachers are reported to be more motivated and committed in carrying out their duties when principals practice ethical and responsible leadership. A harmonious and mutually supportive working atmosphere between teachers, as a result of ethical leadership, also increases the effectiveness of teaching and learning in schools. In a conducive working environment, teachers are more motivated to strengthen the educational process and improve the quality of knowledge delivery to students. Furthermore, the study findings show that ethical leadership also has a positive impact on student well-being. When teachers work in a productive and highly motivated atmosphere, this indirectly improves the quality of teaching and learning. A healthy, ethical school environment that emphasizes a collaborative spirit can create a more meaningful and student-centered learning experience. This ultimately contributes to improving the well-being and welfare of students from an academic, social and emotional perspective. It is supported by previous studies that ethical leadership by principals has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and student well-being in schools. Ethical leadership that emphasizes values such as responsibility, fairness, mutual respect, and open communication has been shown to increase teacher motivation and commitment in teaching, create a harmonious and conducive work environment for learning, and empower a more student-centered educational process (Cherkowski et al., 2015; Strain & Wooff, 2019; Hauserman & Stick, 2013; Leith wood & Jantzi, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). A healthy, ethical, and collaborative school environment resulting from ethical leadership by principals indirectly improves the quality of teaching and learning, thereby contributing to improved student well-being and welfare from an academic, social, and emotional perspective (Sebastian et al.,

2018; Berkovich & Eyal, 2017; Sammons et al., 2011).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support previous studies that show that ethical leadership plays an important role in creating a conducive and productive school environment (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Principals' ethical leadership practices such as transparency in decision-making, prioritizing fairness, and emphasizing the value of integrity have been identified as key elements that contribute to teachers' positive perceptions of leadership in schools. This is in line with the findings of Engelbrecht et al. (2017) which show that ethical leaders who practice fairness and transparency can foster a culture of trust and integrity in the organization. Furthermore, the findings of the study also support the role of ethical leadership in improving interaction and cooperation between teachers (Kutsyuruba et al., 2011; Sammons et al., 2011). The principal's inclusive approach in decision-making and encouraging teacher involvement has created a harmonious and mutually supportive work environment. This indirectly increases motivation and the spirit of cooperation among teachers. In addition, ethical leadership practices that emphasize values such as transparency, integrity, and mutual respect have led to increased cooperation and collaboration between teachers. This study also shows that ethical leadership by principals has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and student well-being in schools (Cherkowski et al., 2015; Sebastian et al., 2018). A harmonious and conducive work environment resulting from ethical leadership has increased teachers' motivation and commitment in their teaching duties. Furthermore, a healthy, ethical, and collaborative school environment also contributes to improving the quality of teaching and learning, as well as student well-being from an academic, social, and emotional perspective.

The findings of this study support the findings of previous studies that emphasize the important role of ethical leadership in creating a conducive and productive school environment (Tschannen-Moran, 2014; Hauserman & Stick, 2013). Ethical leadership practices by principals such as transparency in decision-making, prioritizing fairness, and emphasizing the value of integrity have been identified as key elements that contribute to teachers' positive perceptions of leadership in the school. This finding is in line with the study by Engelbrecht et al. (2017) which shows that leaders who practice fairness and transparency are able to foster a culture of trust and integrity in an organization. A work environment based on noble values like this subsequently enables closer interaction and cooperation among teachers. Furthermore, the study findings also support the role of ethical leadership in increasing interaction and cooperation among teachers (Kutsyuruba et al., 2011; Sammons et al., 2011). The principal's inclusive approach in decision-making and encouraging teacher involvement has created a harmonious and mutually supportive work environment. Such an atmosphere has indirectly increased motivation and a spirit of cooperation among teachers. In fact, ethical leadership practices that emphasize values such as transparency, integrity, and mutual respect have led to increased cooperation and collaboration among teachers. This shows that ethical leadership has the potential to create a work environment that supports a culture of cooperation and collaboration among teachers. In this regard, this study also shows that the ethical leadership of principals has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and the well-being of students in schools (Cherkowski et al., 2015; Sebastian et al., 2018). A harmonious and conducive work environment resulting from ethical leadership has increased teachers' motivation and commitment in their teaching duties. Thus, it has a positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning in schools. Furthermore, a healthy, ethical, and collaborative school environment also contributes to improving the quality of teaching and learning, as well as the well-being of students from an academic, social, and emotional perspective. This shows that the ethical leadership of principals has an indirect impact on the quality of education received by students. Overall, the findings of this study support and strengthen the findings of previous studies regarding the important role of ethical leadership in creating a conducive school environment, increasing teacher collaboration, and strengthening the quality of teaching and learning in schools. It also explains that ethical leadership practices not only have a positive impact on teachers, but also benefit students in terms of improving the quality of their education and well-being.

## SUGGESTIONS

The study proposes several recommendations to improve ethical leadership practices in schools. These include organizing specific training programs, establishing clear ethical guidelines, creating advisory bodies, and fostering open communication channels. First, organizing specific training and professional development

programs to foster ethical leadership values among principals and head teachers. Such programs can provide exposure to the concepts and best practices of ethical leadership, as well as discuss the challenges that may be faced in its implementation. Next, the provision of clear guidelines and codes of ethics for school leaders is essential to serve as a guide in making ethical decisions and actions. This code of ethics should emphasize aspects such as transparency, fairness, integrity, and respect for teachers and students. In addition, the establishment of a committee or advisory body consisting of representatives of teachers, parents, and the community is important to monitor and provide feedback on ethical leadership practices in schools. This step will increase accountability and ensure that school leadership always practices appropriate ethical values. Finally, creating an open platform or channel of communication between principals, teachers, and students to discuss issues related to leadership and ethics in schools is very important. This approach will encourage open discussions and build a culture of trust within the school organization. In addition, the development of a specific framework or guideline to promote ethical leadership among future school leaders is important. Further research and sharing of best practices are also suggested to further strengthen understanding of the importance of this aspect.

## CONCLUSION

This case study highlights the significant role of ethical leadership in national secondary schools in Malacca. The findings show that ethical leadership, characterized by transparency, justice, and integrity, positively impacts teachers' work culture, collaboration, and student well-being. Ethical leadership fosters a harmonious work environment, motivating teachers and improving the quality of teaching and learning. This study contributes to the literature on educational leadership by emphasizing the importance of ethical leadership not only for academic success but also for creating a productive and supportive work culture. The results provide practical insights for principals and school administrators to enhance leadership practices, ultimately benefiting both teachers and students

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