

Ethical Becoming in School Leadership: A Photovoice Study of School Heads' Lived Ethical Practices

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived ethical practices and ethical becoming of school heads in Region XII, Philippines through a qualitative photovoice approach grounded in Michel Foucault's theory of ethical self-formation. While ethical leadership studies have largely focused on leadership behaviors, compliance, and organizational outcomes, limited research has examined how school heads constitute themselves as ethical subjects through lived experiences and reflective practice. Guided by the Foucauldian concepts of technologies of the self, parrhesia, and power/knowledge, the study investigated how school heads cultivate and transform their ethical identities, engage in truth-telling despite personal and professional risks, and negotiate institutional norms and policies that shape ethical discourse and leadership practice. Ten school heads from elementary, secondary, and integrated schools participated in photovoice activities, reflective narratives, and focus group discussions guided by the SHOWeD framework. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings revealed that school heads enacted ethical leadership through integrity in decision-making, accountability, compassion, fairness, inclusivity, and professional responsibility. Their ethical practices reflected technologies of the self, as they continuously engaged in self-reflection, self-regulation, and deliberate ethical work to align their actions with professional and moral commitments. School heads also demonstrated parrhesia by speaking and acting according to ethical convictions despite challenges, tensions, and potential personal or professional consequences. Furthermore, their experiences highlighted the influence of power/knowledge relations, as institutional expectations, policies, and organizational structures both enabled and constrained ethical leadership practices. School heads navigated ethical dilemmas by balancing personal values and professional responsibilities, fostering collaborative relationships, demonstrating resilience, and exercising reflective ethical judgment. Ethical becoming emerged as a continuous, relational, and context-dependent process shaped by reflection, leadership experiences, and ongoing identity formation.

The study concludes that ethical leadership extends beyond behavioral compliance and should be understood as an evolving process of ethical self-formation situated within relations of power. By illuminating how school heads construct ethical identities, practice courageous truth-telling, and negotiate institutional expectations, the findings advance understanding of ethical becoming and ethical leadership in educational contexts while demonstrating the value of photovoice as a participatory methodology for examining the ethical dimensions of school leadership.

Keywords: ethical leadership, ethical becoming, photovoice, school heads, educational leadership, reflective practice

INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership extends beyond meeting performance targets and complying with policy requirements; it fundamentally involves ethical decision-making that affects learners, teachers, and the broader school community. School heads are expected to demonstrate ethical leadership while navigating complex and often competing institutional demands. However, existing literature frequently frames ethical leadership in terms of compliance with standards, codes, and observable behaviors, with limited attention to how school leaders actually experience, interpret, and negotiate ethical challenges in practice (Starratt, 2021; Shapiro & Stefkovich,

2022; Mahfouz & Greenberg, 2021). This creates a disconnect between prescribed ethical expectations and the lived realities of school leadership.

In the Philippine context, ethical conduct among school leaders is guided by national policies and professional standards that emphasize accountability and appropriate behavior. While these frameworks are essential for governance, they offer limited insight into how school heads construct ethical meaning in their everyday leadership practices. In Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), school leaders operated within diverse and often constrained environments shaped by resource limitations, stakeholder expectations, and institutional pressures. These contextual factors influenced how ethical decisions were made, experienced, and justified in practice. Despite this, ethical leadership is still largely treated as a set of observable actions rather than as a dynamic and evolving process.

This study was anchored in Michel Foucault's concept of ethical self-formation, which views ethics not merely as adherence to external rules but as an ongoing process of shaping oneself as an ethical subject through reflection, self-examination, and practice (Foucault, 1984). From this perspective, ethical leadership was understood as ethical becoming, a continuous process in which school heads actively constructed and reconstructed their identities through their engagement with ethical situations, institutional expectations, and reflective practice. Ethical practice, therefore, is not fixed or purely behavioral; it is formative, relational, and deeply embedded in context (Foucault, 1984).

Despite the relevance of this perspective, significant gaps remain in the literature. International research continues to emphasize leadership competencies, behaviors, and outcomes, with insufficient attention to the internal, reflective, and developmental dimensions of ethical practice (Mahfouz, 2023; Brown et al., 2021). In the Philippine setting, empirical studies that explore how school heads experience and construct ethical responsibility within their specific contexts are limited. This gap is particularly evident in Region XII, where research on principals' lived ethical experiences and identity formation remains scarce. The concept of ethical becoming, as a process grounded in lived experience and reflective practice, has not been adequately examined (Ryan & Deci, 2021; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2022; Kutsyuruba et al., 2022).

Moreover, conventional qualitative approaches such as interviews and surveys may not fully capture the complexity of ethical experiences, as they rely primarily on verbal articulation and may overlook tacit, emotional, and contextual dimensions of leadership. This limitation highlights the need for more participatory and reflective methodologies. Photovoice, as a visual and participatory approach, enables participants to document and interpret their lived experiences through images and narratives, providing deeper insight into how they make meaning of ethical situations (Liebenberg, 2021; Latz, 2022). However, its application in educational leadership research, particularly among school heads in the Philippine context, remains limited.

In response to these gaps, this study explored ethical becoming in school leadership among principals in Region XII using photovoice. It focused on how school heads represented their lived ethical practices, how they navigated ethical situations within their institutional contexts, and how they constructed and reflected on their identities as ethical leaders. By foregrounding ethical self-formation, this study aimed to generate a more nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of ethical leadership as a lived, reflective, and developmental process.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design utilizing photovoice as a participatory research methodology. Photovoice enabled participants to represent and reflect upon their ethical leadership experiences through photographs, narratives, and reflective discussions.

Participants of the Study

The study involved ten school heads from elementary, secondary, and integrated schools in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), Philippines. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their

administrative experience and active engagement in school leadership. The respondents represented different school settings and community contexts, allowing the researcher to gather diverse perspectives regarding ethical leadership practices in educational administration.

Table 1. Distribution of School-Head Respondents

Type of School	Number of Respondents
Elementary School	7
Secondary School	1
Integrated School	2
Total	10

Table 2. Participant Profile Matrix of School-Head Respondents

Participant Code	School Type	Position	Years of Administrative Experience	Community Context
Participant 1	Elementary	School Head	5 years	Rural
Participant 2	Elementary	School Head	5 years	Rural
Participant 3	Elementary	School Head	6 years	Urban
Participant 4	Elementary	School Head	6 years	Rural
Participant 5	Elementary	School Head	7 years	Rural
Participant 6	Elementary	School Head	7 years	Rural
Participant 7	Elementary	School Head	8 years	Urban
Participant 8	Secondary	School Head	8 years	Urban
Participant 9	Integrated	School Head	7 years	Rural
Participant 10	Integrated	School Head	8 years	Rural

As shown in Table 2, seven participants were school heads from elementary schools, one participant was from a secondary school, and two participants were from integrated schools. The respondents had administrative experience ranging from five to eight years, indicating that they possessed adequate leadership experience to provide rich and relevant insights into ethical practices in school administration. The inclusion of participants from different school types and community contexts enabled the study to explore how ethical leadership is practiced across diverse educational settings.

Ethical practices may vary according to the type of school managed by the school head. Elementary school heads often deal with ethical concerns related to learner welfare, parental involvement, resource allocation, and the provision of a safe and supportive learning environment. Their decisions frequently emphasize care, fairness, and the protection of young learners. In contrast, secondary school heads may face more complex ethical challenges involving student discipline, academic integrity, adolescent behavior, and stakeholder expectations. School heads in integrated schools manage both elementary and secondary programs, requiring them to address a broader range of ethical concerns and ensure consistency in leadership practices across different educational levels.

Years of administrative experience may also influence how school heads approach ethical issues. Participants with five to six years of experience may rely more heavily on established policies, regulations, and guidance from educational authorities when making decisions. Those with seven to eight years of experience may demonstrate greater confidence in addressing ethical dilemmas through professional judgment and practical leadership experience. Although the range of experience among participants is relatively narrow, differences in years of service may still contribute to variations in decision-making approaches and leadership strategies.

Community context is another important factor that shapes ethical leadership practices. School heads serving rural communities often face challenges associated with limited resources, geographical constraints, and close relationships with community stakeholders. As a result, ethical leadership in these settings may focus on transparency, fairness, and collaboration with parents and community members. On the other hand, school heads

in urban communities may encounter larger student populations, greater diversity among stakeholders, and increased accountability demands. Ethical practices in urban settings may therefore emphasize inclusivity, equity, conflict management, and transparent governance.

Despite differences in school type, administrative experience, and community context, all participants share the responsibility of upholding ethical standards in educational leadership. Their experiences highlight the importance of integrity, accountability, fairness, respect, and professionalism in guiding decisions and actions within schools. These varying perspectives contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership practices among school heads in Region XII and provide valuable insights into how ethical principles are applied in different educational environments.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore the lived ethical practices of school heads using photovoice, with particular focus on how these practices reflect their ongoing process of ethical becoming in school leadership.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do school heads represent their lived ethical practices through photovoice within their school contexts?
2. How do school heads experience and navigate ethical situations in their leadership roles?
3. How do school heads construct and develop their ethical identities, and how can these insights inform a framework for ethical becoming in school leadership?

Significance of the Study

This study on ethical becoming in school leadership, focusing on school heads' lived ethical practices through photovoice, was expected to provide meaningful insights into how school heads experience, reflect on, and enact ethical responsibilities within their leadership contexts. By centering school heads as participants, the study foregrounds their perspectives, enabling a deeper understanding of ethical practice as an ongoing, reflective, and context-bound process. The findings of this study were expected to benefit the following:

Students. Students benefit from the outcomes of this study through the development of more ethically responsive school leadership. As principals deepen their reflective awareness of ethical practices, this may contribute to school environments that promote fairness, inclusivity, and student well-being.

Teachers. Teachers may benefit from leadership practices that are more reflective, transparent, and ethically grounded. Insights from principals' lived experiences may inform more consistent and context-sensitive decision-making, which can strengthen trust, collegial relationships, and professional support within the school.

School Administrators. This study directly benefits school heads by providing a structured opportunity to reflect on and articulate their lived ethical practices through photovoice. The process may enhance their reflective awareness and support their ongoing ethical becoming. For aspiring school leaders and other administrators, the findings may serve as a resource for understanding the complexities of ethical leadership in practice and for informing leadership development and training programs.

Parents. Parents may indirectly benefit from school leadership that is more attuned to ethical considerations in decision-making. As principals strengthen their ethical practices, this may improve communication, trust, and collaboration between schools and families, particularly in matters affecting student welfare and school policies.

Future Researchers. This study contributes to the field of educational leadership by offering both conceptual and methodological insights. It advances understanding of ethical becoming as a lived and reflective process and demonstrates the use of photovoice as a participatory approach in leadership research. Future researchers may

build on this study by exploring similar constructs in different contexts or by further developing research on ethical practice and leadership identity.

Scope and Delimitation

This study included ten (10) school heads from the Department of Education (DepEd) Region XII with at least three (3) years of experience in school leadership. It was conducted in selected public schools within DepEd Region XII, identified based on accessibility and participants' willingness during the first semester of Academic Year 2026. The study employed a qualitative research design using the photovoice method, where participants documented their lived ethical practices through photographs and reflective narratives for analysis of their ethical becoming in school leadership.

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. First, the use of photovoice may have been influenced by its public and participatory nature, particularly the anticipation of a possible exhibit or presentation of outputs. This may have led participants to present idealized or socially desirable representations of their ethical practices rather than fully capturing challenges or less favorable experiences.

Second, the study was limited to school heads as participants, focusing solely on their lived ethical practices in school leadership. It excluded other stakeholders such as teachers, learners, parents, and community members, which may have provided additional perspectives on ethical leadership practices. However, to enhance credibility and contextualize participant accounts, supplementary relevant school documents (e.g., commendations, transparency records, logbooks) were gathered. These external sources provided triangulation and helped validate the photovoice narratives.

Third, the scope of inquiry was confined to ethical dimensions of leadership and excluded other administrative functions unless they were directly related to ethical decision-making. As a result, the findings primarily reflect ethical becoming and moral experiences rather than the full range of school leadership responsibilities.

Finally, the study was limited to selected public schools within DepEd Region XII, which may affect the transferability of findings to other regions or educational contexts.

Research Design

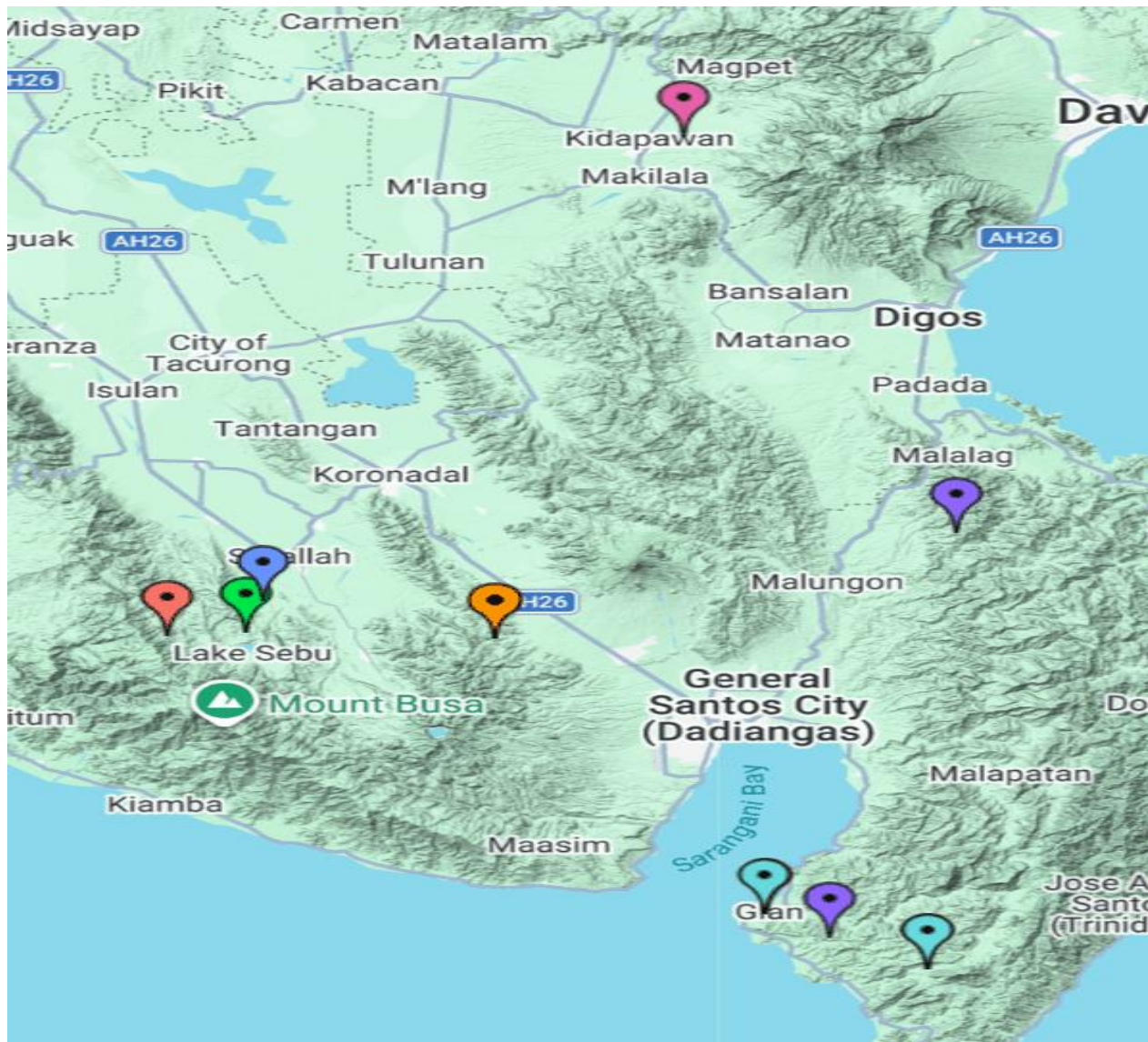
This study employed a qualitative, non-experimental, and exploratory research design using photovoice within a participatory research framework. Photovoice is a visual and narrative methodology that enables participants to document, reflect on, and communicate their lived experiences through photographs and structured dialogue (Wang & Burris, 1997). Grounded in participatory action research traditions, photovoice positions participants as co-constructors of knowledge, allowing their voices, interpretations, and reflections to actively shape the research process (Freire, 1970; Latz, 2022; Regalado, 2020). To deepen critical reflection and meaning-making, this study integrated the SHOWed framework (Wallerstein, 1987) as a guiding structure for participants' photographic narratives and discussions.

The use of photovoice, supported by the SHOWed framework, was appropriate for this study as it aligns with the examination of ethical becoming in school leadership as a lived, reflective, and evolving process. Ethical leadership experiences are often complex, context-bound, and emotionally nuanced; thus, the SHOWed questions, *What do you See here? What is really Happening? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation exist? and What can we Do about it?* enabled school heads to critically interpret their visual representations, articulate ethical dilemmas, and surface deeper insights that were not fully captured through conventional interview methods alone.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in selected integrated school, public elementary and secondary schools in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), Philippines. The research setting included schools located in both urban and rural contexts to capture variations in leadership experiences influenced by socio-cultural, institutional, and community

conditions. This setting was appropriate for exploring how ethical becoming unfolds across diverse educational environments where school heads navigate different leadership challenges and ethical demands.



1.0 Schools in Region XII

Figure 1: Shows the Location of the selected public elementary and secondary schools in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN), Philippines.

Research Instrument

The primary instruments used in this study included participant-generated photographs captured using mobile phones or digital cameras, a researcher-developed photovoice orientation guide, a reflection guide based on the SHOWeD framework (Wallerstein, 1987), and researcher-developed prompts for focus group discussions and reflective sessions. These instruments were designed to capture school heads' lived ethical practices and to facilitate critical reflection aligned with the study's focus on ethical becoming as a process of ethical self-formation.

Participant-generated photographs served as visual representations of school heads' lived ethical experiences, particularly the ethical situations, tensions, and decision-making contexts encountered in their leadership roles. Consistent with the Foucauldian perspective, these images functioned as entry points for examining how principals interpret, negotiate, and construct ethical meaning within institutional structures and everyday practice. The photovoice orientation guide provided participants with direction on ethical photography practices,

confidentiality, and the purpose of documenting experiences, ensuring that the process remains reflective, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded.

The reflection guide, adapted from the SHOWeD framework, facilitated structured critical reflection by guiding participants in interpreting the meaning of their photographs in relation to their lived experiences. This process supported ethical self-examination and meaning-making, which are central to ethical self-formation. In addition, the researcher-developed prompts for focus group discussions and reflective sessions enabled deeper dialogue, allowing participants to articulate, question, and reconstruct their ethical understandings and identities. Through this combination of visual documentation and guided reflection, the instruments collectively supported the exploration of ethical becoming as a lived, reflective, and evolving process within the complex realities of school leadership.

Data Gathering Procedure

This part discusses the procedure undertaken in obtaining the data needed in the study.

Before gathering the data, the researchers secured ethical clearance and obtained informed consent from all ten (10) participating public school heads in Region XII (SOCCSKSARGEN). Following that, the researchers utilized purposive sampling techniques in which the participants were identified based on predefined inclusion criteria relevant to school leadership experience and ethical decision-making practices. An initial coordination with relevant school authorities was also conducted to formally inform them about the study and to ensure proper endorsement and access to the identified participants.

Afterwards, the researchers conducted an orientation session to introduce the participants to the objectives of the study, the photovoice methodology, and the ethical considerations in visual documentation. During this session, participants were guided on responsible image-taking, confidentiality, and ethical representation of their lived experiences as school leaders. They were instructed to document situations that reflect their ethical practices in school leadership, particularly focusing on ethical responsibility, ethical decision-making, and moral challenges encountered in their daily administrative roles.

Forthwith, the researchers proceeded to the standard procedure of photovoice which included five (5) phases. These phases were adapted from Wang and Burris (1997) and Hehir et al. (2018), along with photovoice applications in educational research contexts. The process was conducted in a systematic manner to ensure the validity and richness of the data gathered.

Five Phases of the Standard Procedure of Photovoice

Figure 2: Standard Photovoice Process adapted from Wang & Burris (1997) and Hehir et al. (2018)

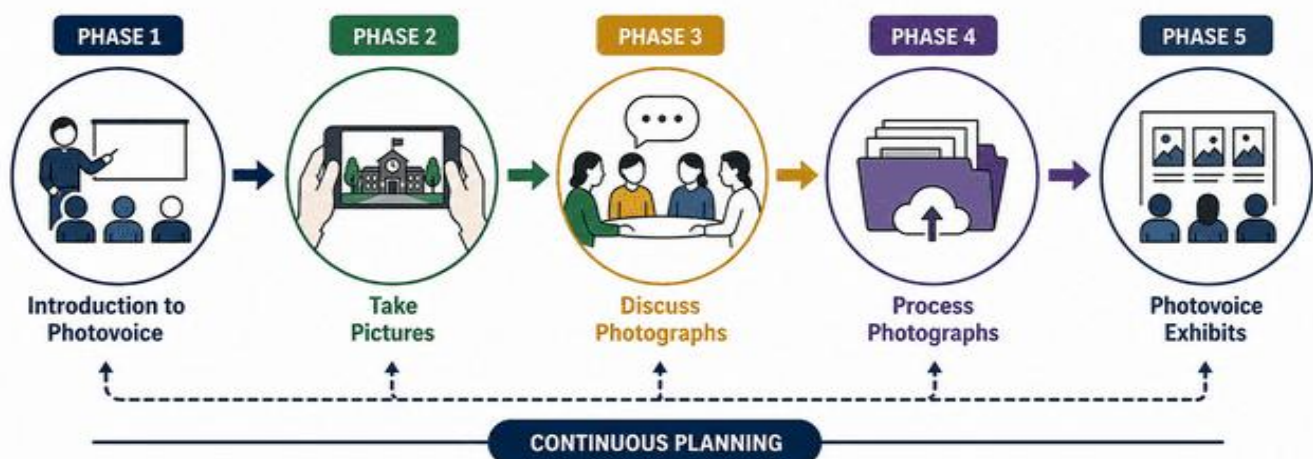


Figure 2: Standard Photovoice Process adapted from Wang & Burris (1997) and Hehir et al. (2018)

Phase 1: The participants were oriented on photovoice procedures, research objectives, and ethical considerations to ensure full understanding of their role in the study.

Phase 2: The participants were given a designated period to take photographs using their mobile devices that reflect their lived ethical experiences in school leadership. They were encouraged to capture meaningful situations that illustrate ethical responsibility, decision-making, and leadership challenges in their school context.

Phase 3: The participants selected their most significant photographs and engaged in reflective discussions through focus group discussions (FGD) and individual sharing sessions. Their narratives and captions were guided using an adapted SHOWED framework (Wallerstein, 1987), which encouraged critical reflection on what is seen in the image, what is really happening, how it relates to their leadership practice, why the situation exists, and what it reveals about their role as ethical school leaders.

Phase 4: The collected photographs and narratives were compiled, organized, and securely stored in a digital repository. Transcriptions of interviews and FGDs were prepared for systematic analysis to identify emerging themes on ethical becoming, reflective awareness, and professional identity development.

Phase 5: A photovoice exhibit conducted where participants' selected photographs and narratives were presented and validated. This served as a collaborative space for reflection and dialogue among stakeholders, allowing deeper interpretation of the lived ethical experiences of school heads in relation to school leadership practice. To enhance credibility and contextualize participant accounts, the study also incorporated brief interviews with teachers and supervisors and reviewed relevant school documents (e.g., commendations, transparency records, logbooks). These supplementary sources provided external perspectives that triangulated the photovoice data.

To ensure credibility and contextual depth of the findings, data triangulation was employed through brief interviews with selected teachers and supervisors, as well as a review of relevant school documents such as commendations and complaint records. These sources were used to contextualize and validate participant narratives.

Data Analysis

The data obtained for this research were analyzed and interpreted through thematic analysis. The photographs taken by the ten (10) school heads were first systematically reviewed, organized, and grouped into meaningful visual patterns based on similarities in content, context, and expressed ethical experiences. Following the approach of Klee (1940, cited by Regalado, 2020), the images were categorized into picture patterns to facilitate structured interpretation. The participants then engaged in initial grouping of their selected photographs according to shared ethical situations in school leadership. These visual clusters served as the foundation for identifying recurring patterns related to ethical leadership, ethical decision-making, reflective practice, and professional identity formation.

After the initial organization of photographs, collaborative deliberations were conducted among the participants through Google Meet. During these sessions, participants discussed and validated the grouped images, allowing them to collectively construct meanings from their lived ethical experiences. Through guided reflection using the adapted SHOWed framework (Wallerstein, 1987), participants explained what each photograph showed, what was happening in the situation, how it related to their leadership practice, why the situation occurred, and what it revealed about their role as ethical school leaders. These reflective discussions facilitated the emergence of shared themes that represented their lived experiences of ethical becoming in school leadership.

Finally, the generated themes were refined and analyzed in relation to the study's research questions, focusing on ethical representation, lived ethical experiences, and meaning-making processes. The first research question generated themes on how principals represent ethical practices through photovoice. The second research question produced themes describing how principals experience and navigate ethical situations in school leadership. The third research question yielded themes reflecting how principals interpret and construct meaning from their ethical experiences as part of their ethical becoming. All visual and narrative data were then consolidated and presented during a photovoice exhibit, which served as a venue for validation, reflection, and deeper interpretation of the participants' ethical leadership experiences.

Member Checking and Validation of Photovoice Narratives

The synthesized findings were returned to the ten school head participants for member checking to ensure accuracy and credibility. Participants reviewed the interpretations and confirmed that the results generally reflected their lived experiences in ethical school leadership.

No major disagreements were reported. However, minor refinements were suggested, particularly the explicit inclusion of compassion and inclusivity alongside integrity, accountability, fairness, and professional responsibility as core elements of ethical leadership. These refinements were incorporated into the final findings.

Overall, participants affirmed that ethical leadership goes beyond policy compliance and is grounded in moral responsibility, empathy, honesty, and commitment to learner welfare. They also confirmed that ethical leadership involves navigating moral tensions and institutional pressures through reflective decision-making, resilience, and open communication.

In summary, the validation process confirmed the trustworthiness of the findings, with only minor revisions made based on participant feedback. Triangulation was further achieved by comparing photovoice narratives with school heads' relevant documents, which confirmed and contextualized the participants' accounts.

Ethical Considerations

The participants in this study, who were selected based on established inclusion and exclusion criteria, were deemed capable of providing informed responses and participated through written and signed informed consent. Prior to data collection, the researchers conducted an orientation via Google Meet, during which the objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study were clearly explained, together with an electronic copy of the informed consent form. Participation was strictly voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any form of penalty or any effect on their professional roles or access to institutional support.

Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously upheld throughout the research process. All photographs, narratives, and discussion outputs were securely stored in password-protected files and were de-identified to protect participant identity. In relation to the photovoice methodology, participants were explicitly instructed to exercise ethical responsibility in image capture by avoiding identifiable photographs of students, parents, or community members without consent, ensuring respect for privacy and dignity. All data were used exclusively for academic and research purposes in accordance with established ethical standards in qualitative research.

Researcher's Reflexivity

Consistent with qualitative and participatory research traditions, researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the conduct of this study to ensure rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness of findings. As the researcher engaged with school heads in exploring ethical becoming in school leadership through photovoice, continuous reflection was undertaken regarding personal positionality, assumptions, and potential influences on data interpretation, particularly in relation to ethical leadership, decision-making, and professional identity formation within the context of Region XII. To support this process, reflective journaling was employed during both data collection and analysis to critically examine interactions with participants and the development of emerging themes, ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in participants' lived experiences. This reflexive practice enabled the researcher to remain aware of how personal perspectives on educational leadership may shape analytical decisions while upholding respect, fairness, and fidelity to the participants' narratives and visual representations of their ethical practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants identified several salient themes across the three research questions during the photovoice analysis and interpretation of the study. These themes collectively illuminate the lived ethical practices of school heads and their ongoing process of ethical becoming within the context of school leadership.

For Research Question 1, which explored how school heads represent their lived ethical practices through photovoice within their school contexts, the themes that emerged were: (a) integrity in decision-making, (b) accountability in leadership, (c) compassion toward stakeholders, (d) fairness and inclusivity, and (e) commitment to professional responsibility. These themes reflect the ways in which school heads embody ethical principles in their daily leadership practices and interactions within the school community.

For Research Question 2, which examined how school heads experience and navigate ethical situations in their leadership roles, the findings revealed the following themes: (a) balancing institutional expectations and personal values, (b) managing ethical conflicts and dilemmas, (c) fostering collaborative and trust-based relationships, (d) resilience in addressing leadership challenges, and (e) reflective ethical decision-making. These themes demonstrate the complexities of ethical leadership and the dynamic processes through which school heads negotiate competing demands and responsibilities.

Lastly, for Research Question 3, which focused on how school heads construct and develop their ethical identities and how these insights may inform a framework for ethical becoming in school leadership, the themes that surfaced included: (a) continuous self-reflection, (b) moral growth and transformation, (c) values-driven leadership identity, (d) influence of relationships and community engagement, and (e) ethical becoming as an evolving leadership journey. Collectively, these themes underscore that ethical leadership is not a fixed condition, but an ongoing developmental process shaped by personal reflection, professional experiences, and social interactions within the educational environment.

Ethical Practices of School Heads Through Photovoice

The participants identified several themes in representing their lived ethical practices through photovoice within their school contexts. The themes that emerged were integrity in decision-making, accountability in leadership, compassion toward stakeholders, fairness and inclusivity, and commitment to professional responsibility. Through the photographs they presented, the participants illustrated how ethical practices are embedded in their daily leadership experiences and interactions within the school community.

Integrity in Decision-Making



Photo # 1 - Plants roots

The participants viewed integrity as an essential foundation of ethical school leadership. According to them, school heads are expected to make principled and transparent decisions despite the complexities and pressures within the school environment. One participant shared that integrity means remaining truthful and just in all decisions concerning the welfare of teachers and learners. He explained:

“This photo of plant roots symbolizes my lived ethical practices embedded within the school setting. The roots are deeply grounded in the soil and, although small and often unseen, they provide strength, nourishment, and stability to the plant. In the same way, my ethical leadership is reflected in my daily decisions and actions that sustain the school and guide its development. Ethical leadership, for me, means being firmly rooted in what is right, even when these actions are not immediately visible to others. My commitment to teacher development is part of this. When I joined the institution, many teachers were still in Teacher I positions; however, I encouraged

them to pursue postgraduate studies and participate in seminars and workshops from the school to the regional level. Through continuous support and natural vacancies under the ECP system, many of them were later promoted from Teacher III to Teacher VI. The interconnected roots also represent collaboration and unity among teachers through SLAC sessions and professional development activities, where we grow together in strengthening the school” (Participant 1).

The image of plant roots reflects integrity in ethical leadership as a foundational principle that guides decision-making and professional practice. It emphasizes that ethical leadership is grounded in consistency, moral responsibility, and sustained actions that, although often unseen, support the stability and growth of the school community (Researcher Reflection).



Photo # 2 - Bridge

“This photo of a bridge symbolizes my lived ethical practices in connecting people within and beyond the school community. A bridge allows people to cross safely despite obstacles, and in the same way, my ethical leadership serves as a connection that builds trust, unity, and collaboration among teachers, learners, parents, and stakeholders. Despite pressures from DepEd Orders and other policy requirements, I continue to remain committed to my responsibilities while balancing my roles as a father, husband, brother, church member, and school head. Ethical leadership, for me, requires consistency, integrity, and commitment in order to maintain a supportive and positive learning environment. The bridge represents how my ethical practices help connect people, strengthen relationships, and sustain the progress of the school community” (Participant 1).

The image of the bridge reflects integrity in ethical leadership as the consistent alignment of values and actions in maintaining trust and relational stability across the school community. It highlights the role of the school head in sustaining ethical connections despite institutional pressures and multiple responsibilities (Researcher Reflection).

Accountability in Leadership



Photo # 3 - The Clock

The participants also emphasized accountability as a significant ethical practice in leadership. They described accountability as taking responsibility for decisions, actions, and outcomes within the school community. One participant associated accountability with a clock. She shared:

“This clock reminds me that leadership is a continuous responsibility. As a school head, I must be disciplined and accountable because my actions affect the entire school community. Ethical leadership means being answerable for both achievements and shortcomings” (Participant 9). This reflection also reveals an underlying ethical struggle involving accountability and the pressure of constant responsibility. It highlights an ongoing tension between meeting institutional expectations and managing personal limitations, illustrating how ethical leadership is shaped not only by successes but also by learning from shortcomings and unresolved challenges in decision-making.”



Photo # 4 - Guiding Hands

Accountability strengthens trust and credibility because it demonstrates the willingness of leaders to own their decisions and continuously improve their practices (Researcher Reflection).

Another participant presented a photo entitled *“Guiding Hands.”* She explained:

“The hands in this photo symbolize guidance and responsibility. Ethical leadership means helping teachers and learners while also accepting accountability for the results of my leadership decisions” (Participant 4).

Compassion Toward Stakeholders

The participants described compassion as an important ethical value that allows school heads to understand and respond to the needs of teachers, students, and parents. According to them, leadership should be rooted in empathy and care for others. One participant used a photo of a helping hand to represent compassion. She explained:



Photo # 5 - Helping Hand

“This helping hand reflects how school heads should extend support to teachers and learners, especially during difficult situations. Ethical leadership is not only about policies but also about understanding the struggles of others” (Participant 5). This reflection also illustrates an ethical sensitivity toward others’ experiences, highlighting the school head’s recognition of empathy as a core element of leadership. It suggests an ongoing ethical challenge in balancing administrative responsibilities with compassionate engagement, where leadership decisions require attentiveness to human struggles alongside policy implementation.

Compassion allows leaders to create a supportive and humane school environment where stakeholders feel valued and respected (Researcher Reflection).

Another participant titled her photo *“Listening Ears.”* She stated:



Photo # 6 - Listening Ears

“The ears in this picture symbolize listening with empathy. Ethical leadership means listening to the voices of teachers, parents, and students before making decisions because their experiences matter” (Participant 6).

Fairness and Inclusivity

The participants highlighted fairness and inclusivity as ethical practices that ensure equality and respect within the school community. According to them, ethical leaders should avoid favoritism and promote equal opportunities for all stakeholders. One participant presented a round table as a symbol of inclusivity. She explained:



Photo # 7 - Round Table

“This round table represents equality because everyone has a place and voice in decision-making. Ethical leadership means treating all teachers and students fairly regardless of their status or background” (Participant 2).

Inclusivity promotes collaboration and mutual respect, which are essential in building a positive and ethical school culture (Researcher Reflection).

Another participant titled her photo *“One Path.”* She shared:

“The pathway symbolizes unity and equal direction. Ethical leadership means guiding everyone fairly and ensuring that no one is left behind in the school community” (Participant 8).



Photo # 8 - One

Commitment to Professional Responsibility

The participants further described commitment to professional responsibility as dedication to fulfilling their duties with competence, discipline, and ethical conduct. According to them, school heads must serve as role models within the educational institution. One participant associated professional responsibility with a lighted candle. She explained:



Photo # 9 - Lighted candle

“This candle symbolizes dedication and service. Ethical leadership means continuing to guide others despite challenges because school heads are expected to become examples of professionalism and integrity” (Participant 3).

The candle reflects the enduring responsibility of school leaders to inspire and lead their stakeholders through ethical practices and professional commitment (Researcher Reflection).

Lastly, another participant titled her photo *“The Leader’s Path.”* She stated:

“The pathway in this picture reminds me that leadership is a journey of responsibility and continuous growth. Ethical leadership means remaining committed to serving the school community with honesty and professionalism” (Participant 1).



Photo # 10 - The Leader’s Path

The participants framed ethical leadership as an ongoing, practice-based process expressed through integrity, accountability, compassion, fairness, inclusivity, and professional responsibility within their respective school contexts. Their photovoice narratives underscore that ethical leadership extends beyond compliance with formal policies or administrative decision-making structures; rather, it is most meaningfully enacted in day-to-day interactions, relational engagements, and moral commitments toward teachers, learners, parents, and the broader school community. These accounts further suggest that ethical practice is co-constructed through personal moral orientations and institutional conditions, requiring school heads to continually navigate tensions between organizational expectations and value-driven, humane leadership actions.

This interpretation is consistent with Brown et al. (2005), who defined ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through both personal behavior and interpersonal relationships, alongside the active promotion of such conduct among followers. Treviño et al. (2006) similarly distinguished ethical leaders as both moral persons and moral managers, emphasizing that ethical leadership is enacted through role modeling while also reinforcing ethical standards within organizational systems.

In the context of educational leadership, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) highlighted that ethical decision-making involves the integration of multiple ethical lenses justice, critique, care, and professional ethics particularly when addressing complex and often competing school-based demands. Starratt (2004) further argued that ethical

leadership is rooted in authenticity, moral responsibility, and a sustained commitment to cultivating ethically responsive educational environments where relationships and values guide practice.

More recent scholarship extends these perspectives by emphasizing the situated and relational nature of ethical school leadership. For instance, Campbell (2018) noted that ethical leadership is enacted through ongoing deliberation on competing responsibilities to multiple stakeholders within schooling contexts. Begley (2010) underscored the role of reflective practice in strengthening moral consciousness among school leaders, while Oplatka (2017) emphasized that leadership practices are deeply embedded in sociocultural and institutional contexts that shape ethical orientations and decisions. Additionally, Brooks and Normore (2020) highlighted that ethical leadership is sustained through relational trust, responsiveness to context, and continuous professional learning.

In synthesis, the literature and the present findings converge to indicate that ethical leadership among school heads is an evolving, reflective, and practice-embedded process shaped by lived experience, institutional complexity, and sustained relational engagement within the school community.

Ethical Experiences of School Heads in Navigating Ethical Situations (Photovoice)

The participants identified several themes in describing their lived experiences of navigating ethical situations in school leadership. The themes that emerged were: balancing institutional expectations and personal values, managing ethical conflicts and dilemmas, fostering collaborative and trust-based relationships, resilience in addressing leadership challenges, and reflective ethical decision-making. Through the photographs they presented, the participants illustrated how ethical leadership is experienced as a complex, situational, and reflective process within their school contexts.

Balancing Institutional Expectations and Personal Values

The participants described that ethical leadership often involves negotiating between mandated policies and personal moral judgment. According to them, school heads are frequently placed in situations where strict institutional guidelines must be weighed against the needs and welfare of stakeholders. One participant shared her photo of a weighing scale:



“This photo of the weighing scale represents how I balance institutional rules and my personal values as a school head. Sometimes policies are rigid, but I always consider what is fair and humane for teachers and learners” (Participant 7).

This reflects the ethical tension inherent in school leadership, where compliance must be carefully aligned with moral responsibility to the school community.

Another participant titled her photo *“The Forked Road.”* She explained:



Photo # 12 - The Forked Road

“The forked road symbolizes my experience of choosing between following strict directives or adjusting decisions based on context. Ethical leadership requires discernment in every situation” (Participant 4). This reflection highlights an ethical dilemma involving decision-making under institutional pressure, where the participant must balance compliance with flexibility. It illustrates the ongoing struggle between adhering to formal directives and responding to contextual realities, emphasizing that ethical leadership requires sound judgment, moral reasoning, and situational discernment in resolving complex administrative choices.”

Managing Ethical Conflicts and Dilemmas

The participants emphasized that ethical conflicts frequently arise in personnel issues, resource allocation, and stakeholder disagreements. One participant used a broken bridge as a metaphor:



Photo # 13 - Broken Bridge

“This broken bridge represents conflict situations in school where communication or relationships are strained. As a school head, I must find ways to rebuild trust and resolve issues fairly” (Participant 3).



Photo # 14 - Crossroads

Another participant presented a photo entitled “*Crossroads.*” She stated:

“At crossroads, I am forced to make difficult decisions involving competing interests. Ethical leadership means choosing the option that serves the greater good even when it is unpopular” (Participant 2).

Fostering Collaborative and Trust-Based Relationships



Photo # 15 - Interlocked Hands

The participants highlighted that ethical leadership is strengthened through collaboration, trust, and open communication among stakeholders. One participant presented interlocked hands:

“The interlocked hands symbolize unity among teachers, parents, and school leaders. Ethical leadership is not done alone; it requires cooperation and trust” (Participant 5).



Photo # 16 - Open Circle

Another participant titled her photo “*Open Circle.*” She explained:

“The circle represents inclusivity and trust. In my experience, ethical leadership is possible when stakeholders feel valued and involved in decision-making” (Participant 6).

Resilience in Addressing Leadership Challenges

The participants described resilience as an essential ethical quality in dealing with pressure, uncertainty, and institutional demands. One participant used a mountain as a symbol:



Photo # 17 - Mountain

“The mountain represents the challenges I face as a school head. Ethical leadership means continuing my responsibilities despite difficulties” (Participant 1)

Another participant shared:

“Leadership is exhausting at times, but I remain committed because my role is to serve the learners and protect the integrity of the school” (Participant 10). This statement reflects an ethical struggle rooted in emotional and professional fatigue, highlighting the personal cost of sustained leadership responsibility. It also shows an unresolved tension between exhaustion and duty, where commitment to learner welfare and institutional integrity motivates continued ethical action despite challenges.”



Photo # 18 - Road Under Pressure

Reflective Ethical Decision-Making

The participants emphasized reflection as a key process in navigating ethical leadership situations. One participant used a mirror:



Photo # 19 - Mirror

“The mirror represents self-reflection. As a school head, I need to constantly evaluate my actions to ensure fairness and integrity” (Participant 9).



Photo # 20 - Quiet Space

Another participant titled her photo “*Quiet Place.*” She stated:

“This quiet space symbolizes my need to pause and reflect before making decisions. Ethical leadership requires thoughtful and deliberate judgment” (Participant 8).

Generally, the participants experienced ethical leadership as a continuous and interpretive process of negotiating institutional mandates, resolving value-laden conflicts, cultivating collaborative relationships, demonstrating resilience under pressure, and engaging in reflective and context-sensitive decision-making. Their photovoice narratives underscore that ethical navigation in school leadership is not linear or procedural; rather, it is emergent, situational, and shaped by shifting institutional, relational, and moral demands. This positions ethical leadership as an ongoing praxis rather than a fixed competency, requiring school heads to continuously balance competing responsibilities, stakeholder expectations, and professional values within complex educational ecosystems.

These findings are strongly anchored in established ethical leadership scholarship. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) define ethical leadership as the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, reinforcing the relational and behavioral dimensions evident in the participants’ experiences. Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, and Kish-Gephart (2006) further elaborate that ethical leaders operate simultaneously as moral persons and moral managers, actively shaping ethical climates while also embodying ethical standards in decision-making processes.

Complementing this, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) advance the Multiple Ethical Paradigms framework justice, critique, care, and profession which reflects the multidimensional reasoning observed in school heads as they confronted competing moral imperatives. Similarly, Starratt (2004) emphasizes ethical leadership as grounded in responsibility, authenticity, and reflective practice, highlighting the moral reflexivity evident in participants’ narratives. Sergiovanni (1992) also underscores leadership as a moral craft, where authority is legitimized through ethical commitments rather than positional power alone, aligning with the participants’ emphasis on relational trust-building and collaborative governance.

Further supporting these interpretations, Begley (2006) argues that ethical school leadership is inherently interpretive, requiring leaders to make sense of ambiguous moral situations through reflection and judgment rather than rule-based compliance. Campbell (2003) likewise stresses that ethical administrators must engage in “ethical knowledge-in-action,” where moral reasoning is embedded in everyday leadership practices. In addition, Maxey (2002) highlights the moral complexity of educational leadership, noting that principals frequently operate in “ethical grey zones” where competing goods must be negotiated rather than resolved definitively.

Across these perspectives, ethical leadership among school heads emerges as an evolving, reflexive, and contextually embedded process shaped by institutional demands, relational dynamics, and moral complexity.

Ethical Identity Construction and Ethical Becoming of School Heads Through Photovoice

For Research Question 3, which examined how school heads construct and develop their ethical identities and how these insights inform a framework for ethical becoming in school leadership, the findings revealed the following themes: (a) continuous self-reflection, (b) moral growth and transformation, (c) values-driven leadership identity, (d) influence of relationships and community engagement, and (e) ethical becoming as an evolving leadership process. Through photovoice, the participants illustrated that ethical identity is not fixed but is continuously shaped by experience, reflection, and interaction within the school environment.

Continuous Self-Reflection

The participants emphasized self-reflection as a core process in constructing their ethical identity as school leaders. According to them, ethical leadership requires constant examination of one’s actions, decisions, and intentions to ensure alignment with moral standards. One participant shared a photo of a mirror:

“This mirror represents how I assess myself as a leader. I need to constantly reflect on whether my decisions are fair and beneficial to the school community” (Participant 3).



Photo # 21 - The Mirror

The mirror symbolizes the ongoing internal dialogue that school heads engage in to ensure ethical consistency in leadership practice.

Another participant titled her photo “*Quiet Corner.*” She stated:

“This space reminds me that I need time alone to reflect before making important decisions. Ethical leadership begins with self-awareness” (Participant 2).

Moral Growth and Transformation



Photo # 22 - Quiet Corner

The participants described ethical identity as something that develops over time through experiences, challenges, and learning. One participant used a seed growing into a tree:



Photo # 23 - Growing Seed

“This seed represents my beginning as a school head. Over time, I have grown through experience and learned to make better ethical decisions” (Participant 1).



Photo # 24 - Tree of Growth

Another participant shared:

“Every challenge I face contributes to my growth as a leader. Ethical identity is not instant; it is formed through experience and learning from mistakes” (Participant 7).



Photo # 25 - Compass

Values-Driven Leadership Identity

The participants emphasized that their ethical identity is anchored on core values that guide their leadership practice. One participant presented a compass:



Photo # 26 - The Light

“The compass symbolizes my guiding values in leadership. No matter the situation, I always return to what is right and fair” (Participant 5).

Another participant titled her photo *“Light Within.”* She explained: *“This light represents my internal values that guide my decisions. Ethical leadership is grounded in strong moral principles” (Participant 6).*

Influence of Relationships and Community Engagement



Photo # 27 - Interwoven Hands

The participants highlighted that ethical identity is shaped through interaction with stakeholders within the school community. One participant used interwoven hands:

“These interwoven hands represent my relationship with teachers, parents, and learners. My identity as a leader is shaped by my interactions with them” (Participant 4).



Photo # 28 - Community Circles

Another participant stated:

“Leadership is relational. My experiences with people help me understand what ethical leadership truly means” (Participant 10).

Ethical Becoming as an Evolving Leadership Process

Finally, the participants described ethical identity as an ongoing and evolving process rather than a fixed characteristic. One participant used a road extending forward:



Photo # 29 - Road Ahead

“This road ahead represents my journey as a school head. Ethical leadership is a continuous process of becoming better” (Participant 9).



Photo # 30 - Unfinished Path

Another participant titled her photo *“Unfinished Path.”* She stated:

“My leadership journey is still ongoing. I am continuously learning, adapting, and improving my ethical practice” (Participant 8).

Overall, the participants' ethical identities as school heads were constructed through an iterative and developmental process characterized by sustained self-reflection, moral learning, values-oriented practice, relational engagement, and continual ethical refinement. Their photovoice accounts indicate that ethical identity is not fixed or predefined but is progressively shaped and reshaped through lived professional experiences, institutional demands, and everyday interactions within the school environment. This underscores ethical becoming as a fluid and contextually embedded process, emerging from the interplay between individual moral agency and the structural and relational conditions of educational leadership.

This interpretation aligns with Starratt (2004), who conceptualized ethical leadership as an ongoing process of becoming grounded in moral responsibility, authenticity, and presence in educational practice. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) further elaborated that ethical decision-making in educational leadership is multidimensional, integrating justice, care, critique, and professional ethics as overlapping lenses that shape leadership identity formation. Burns (1978) similarly underscored leadership as a transformative moral process, where reflective practice and value clarification contribute to the evolution of ethical consciousness over time. Northouse (2022) also emphasized that leadership identity develops through the continuous interaction between personal values, behavioral practices, and contextual influences.

Complementing these foundational perspectives, more recent scholarship reinforces the developmental and situated nature of ethical identity formation in school leadership. Ehrich et al. (2015) highlighted that school leaders routinely encounter complex ethical dilemmas that require adaptive judgment and reflexive practice, thereby shaping their moral identities over time. Campbell (2018) argued that ethical leadership in education is sustained through deliberative reflection on competing responsibilities to students, staff, and broader communities. Begley (2010) emphasized the role of reflective self-awareness in cultivating ethical leadership dispositions, noting that leaders' moral identities are continually reconstructed through experience. Oplatka (2017) pointed out that principals' leadership identities are deeply embedded in sociocultural and organizational contexts, which significantly influence their ethical orientations and decision-making patterns. More recently, Brooks and Normore (2020) reinforced that ethical school leadership is an evolving practice shaped by relational trust, contextual responsiveness, and ongoing professional learning.

The literature and the present findings consistently indicate that ethical identity among school heads is a dynamic and evolving construct, continually shaped by reflection, lived experience, relational engagement, and the ongoing negotiation of moral and professional responsibilities within complex educational contexts.

FINDINGS

The following were the general findings of the study:

1. **Ethical Practice in Leadership.** School heads exhibited ethical leadership through integrity, accountability, compassion, fairness, inclusivity, and professional responsibility in decision-making and interactions. Supporting documents such as visitor logbooks and transparency records confirmed accountability practices and reinforced parents' assurance of school safety.
2. **Navigating Ethical Challenges.** Participants addressed ethical dilemmas by balancing institutional demands with personal values, fostering trust-based relationships, showing resilience, and engaging in reflective decision-making. Minutes of meetings and governance records supported evidence of inclusive and collaborative leadership.
3. **Ethical Becoming and Identity Formation.** School heads continuously shaped their ethical identities through reflection, moral development, values-driven leadership, and community engagement, framing ethical leadership as an ongoing process. School reports on outreach and mentoring activities corroborated narratives of service, compassion, and professional growth.
4. **Triangulated Findings.** Perspectives of school heads, supported by records such as commendation letters, incident and complaint reports, and documented administrative actions, generally corroborated the

narratives. These sources affirmed integrity-based and accountable leadership while adding contextual depth to ethical challenges and decision-making processes.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The participants concluded that ethical leadership is deeply rooted in integrity, accountability, compassion, fairness, inclusivity, and professional responsibility. Their lived ethical practices revealed that school leadership goes beyond compliance with institutional policies and requires school heads to embody moral responsibility, empathy, and honesty in their daily interactions and decision-making processes. Through their experiences, the participants realized that ethical leadership is sustained through trust-building, service to stakeholders, and commitment to the welfare of the school community.
2. The lived experiences of the participants in navigating ethical situations revealed that school leadership is filled with moral tensions, institutional pressures, and complex decision-making responsibilities. The participants experienced challenges in balancing organizational expectations with personal values, resolving ethical conflicts, and maintaining collaborative relationships within the school community. Despite these challenges, reflective ethical decision-making, resilience, and open communication enabled them to manage ethical dilemmas responsibly and maintain integrity in leadership practice.
3. The participants concluded that ethical identity and ethical becoming are continuous and evolving processes shaped by self-reflection, moral growth, values-driven leadership, and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Their experiences taught them that ethical leadership develops through learning from challenges, reflecting on decisions, and strengthening relationships within the school community. More importantly, reflective practice, community engagement, strong moral values, and commitment to continuous improvement served as essential foundations in sustaining ethical becoming among school heads.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the summary of findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. School heads, educational leaders, and policymakers may strengthen capacity-building programs on ethical leadership by focusing on integrity, accountability, compassion, fairness, inclusivity, and professional responsibility. Training sessions, leadership development programs, and mentoring activities should be enhanced to further support ethical decision-making and reflective leadership practices among school heads.
2. The Department of Education and other concerned agencies should institutionalize structured support systems that will help school heads manage ethical dilemmas in school settings. These may include ethics-focused learning action cells (LACs), peer mentoring systems, and reflective practice sessions that allow school leaders to share experiences and develop strategies in handling complex ethical situations.
3. Schools and educational institutions should promote wellness and reflective spaces that encourage school heads to engage in continuous self-reflection and moral growth. Programs that support mental well-being, leadership coaching, and values formation should be strengthened to sustain ethical resilience and professional commitment among school leaders.
4. Teachers, parents, and stakeholders should actively participate in strengthening collaborative and trust-based relationships within the school community. Open communication, shared decision-making, and active engagement in school programs should be encouraged to support a more inclusive and ethical school culture.
5. Future researchers are encouraged to utilize the findings of this study as a basis for further exploration of ethical becoming in educational leadership. Similar studies may be conducted in different contexts or using other qualitative approaches to validate and expand the understanding of ethical leadership practices among school heads.

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