

ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSIVITY IN EDUCATION: PATHWAYS TO PROMOTING EQUITY AND DIVERSITY

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Abstract

The study theoretically investigated how ethical leadership and inclusivity in education can promote equity and diversity. The objective of the study was to theoretically discuss the concept of ethical leadership in education; investigate the concept of inclusivity in education; discuss the concept of equity and diversity, and investigate how ethical leadership and inclusivity in education can promote equity and diversity. Secondary data, i.e review of relevant literature, were used in the study. Hence, scholarly materials such as journals, books, internet and other published materials related to the subject matter written by different authors on the subject matter were tapped from. The study was anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory proposed by James MacGregor Burns in his book "Leadership" published in 1978. Based on the review of relevant literature and discussions carried out, the study showed that ethical leadership and inclusive education promote equity and diversity. As a result, the study concluded that ethical leadership and inclusive education are critical drivers in advancing equity and diversity, each reinforcing the other to create more just and supportive environments. Among others, the study recommended that school leaders should exemplify ethical behavior by consistently demonstrating fairness, integrity, and respect in their actions and decisions, thereby promoting an environment of trust and inclusivity.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Inclusivity, Education, Equity, and Diversity

Declaration of conflicting interests: The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Introduction

The promotion of equity and diversity takes a lot of effort from educational leaders. This makes the intersection of ethical leadership and inclusivity in education a pertinent area of study as schools and educational institutions strive to create environments where every student can thrive. The concept of ethical leadership in education has gained increasing attention as educators and administrators strive to create environments that uphold integrity, fairness, and respect. Ethical leadership is characterized by leaders who not only adhere to moral principles but also actively promote ethical practices within their institutions (Northouse, 2018). This form of leadership is pivotal in shaping school cultures where equity and inclusivity are prioritized. Leaders who embody ethical values can influence policy and practice, setting a precedent for how diversity and equity issues are

addressed. The impact of ethical leadership is evident in the creation of transparent decision-making processes and in fostering a school environment where all members feel valued and supported (Eisenbeiss, 2012).

Inclusivity in education refers to practices and policies designed to ensure that all students, regardless of their background or abilities, have equitable access to educational opportunities. The goal of inclusive education is not merely to accommodate differences but to actively embrace and support diverse student needs (Ainscow, 2020). This approach necessitates a departure from traditional, one-size-fits-all models of education towards more flexible and responsive practices that recognize and address the varied experiences and needs of students. Effective inclusive education requires systemic changes within schools, including curriculum adaptations, differentiated instruction, and the removal of barriers

to participation (Hattie, 2009). Research has shown that inclusive practices can lead to better educational outcomes and greater student engagement, highlighting their importance in promoting educational equity (Skerrett, 2013).

The intersection of ethical leadership and inclusivity in education offers a robust framework for advancing equity and diversity. Ethical leaders are instrumental in driving policies and practices that support inclusivity and address systemic inequalities (Dimmock & Walker, 2005). By integrating ethical considerations into leadership practices, educational leaders can ensure that inclusivity is not merely a goal but a fundamental aspect of the school's ethos. This alignment of leadership and inclusivity is essential for creating educational environments where all students have the opportunity to succeed and where diversity is embraced as a strength rather than a challenge (Keddie, 2012). Such integration requires leaders to engage in continuous reflection and adaptation of their practices to better meet the needs of diverse student populations.

Despite the recognized importance of both ethical leadership and inclusivity, the practical application of these concepts within educational settings remains complex and often inconsistent. While ethical leadership provides a strong foundation for promoting inclusivity, translating these principles into effective practices can be challenging (Gvirtz & Dembowski, 2018). Issues such as inadequate resources, limited professional development, and entrenched biases can hinder the successful implementation of inclusive practices. Furthermore, there is a notable gap in empirical research exploring how specific ethical leadership strategies influence the effectiveness of inclusivity initiatives and overall equity outcomes (MacBeath, 2006; Ainscow, 2020b; Shields & Hesbol, 2019; Ali *et al.*, 2024). This gap underscores the need for further investigation into how ethical leadership and inclusivity can be effectively integrated to advance equity and diversity in education.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the paper was to theoretically investigate how ethical leadership and inclusivity in education can promote equity and diversity. Specifically, the study intended to:

1. discuss the concept of ethical leadership in education.
2. investigate the concept of inclusivity in education.
3. discuss the concept of equity and diversity.
4. investigate how ethical leadership and inclusivity in education can promote equity and diversity.

Theoretical Framework

This study is built on the Transformational Leadership Theory. Transformational Leadership Theory was proposed by James MacGregor Burns in his book "Leadership" published in 1978. The theory suggests that effective leaders inspire and motivate their followers to achieve exceptional results by appealing to their higher-order needs and values. Transformational leaders stimulate intellectual growth, foster creativity and innovation, and empower individuals to transcend their self-interests for the collective good. Key assumptions of Transformational Leadership Theory include:

- i. Leaders have the ability to inspire and motivate followers to pursue common goals and vision.
- ii. Transformational leaders exhibit charisma, vision, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.
- iii. Followers are willing to exert extra effort and commitment to achieve organizational objectives when inspired by transformational leaders.
- iv. Leadership is a relationship between leaders and followers based on mutual trust, respect, and influence.

The justification of the Transformational Leadership Theory as the theoretical base of this study is based on the fact that the theory explains and predicts how transformational leaders in educational institutions can inspire ethical behaviours and inclusiveness, thereby promoting equity and diversity. Transformational Leadership Theory provides a robust framework for understanding ethical leadership in the context of promoting equity and diversity in education. This theory emphasizes leaders who inspire and motivate their followers to achieve higher levels of performance and engage in positive change, fostering an inclusive and equitable environment (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders are particularly effective in driving inclusive education practices because they focus on individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, which align with the goals of enhancing diversity and addressing inequities (Northouse, 2018). By championing these principles, transformational leaders can create a more supportive and equitable educational environment that values all students' contributions and ensures equal opportunities for success.

The Concept of Ethical Leadership in Education

Ethical leadership is a critical component in guiding organizations toward ethical behavior and decision-making. It involves leaders who consistently adhere to moral principles and values, thereby setting a standard for their organizations and fostering a culture of integrity and respect. Ethical leadership involves leaders and managers making decisions based

on the right thing to do for the common good, not just based on what is best for themselves or for the bottom line (Kirk, 2024). Instead of perceiving ethical leadership as preventing people from carrying out inappropriate acts, authors suggest that one should view it as enabling people to do the right thing (Kapur, 2016). An ethical leader is a person living up to the principles of conduct that are crucial for him. To be an ethical leader, one needs to observe to a more universal standard of moral behaviour. Leading ethically is believed to be a process of investigation, one should be aware of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate and mode of conduct. Ethical leadership sets an example for followers and others about the righteousness or injustice of particular actions. Ethical leaders are characterized by their commitment to ethical principles such as honesty, fairness, and transparency, which they embody in their actions and decision-making processes (Brown & Treviño, 2006). These leaders are instrumental in influencing organizational norms and practices, ensuring that ethical considerations are central to the organization's operations and culture. By demonstrating ethical behavior, leaders help establish a foundation of trust and respect, which is crucial for effective organizational functioning and employee satisfaction (Wang *et al.*, 2014).

Ethical leadership in education involves guiding educational institutions with a commitment to integrity, fairness, and respect, setting a tone that permeates the entire organization. At its core, ethical leadership is about making decisions that prioritize the welfare of students, staff, and the community while upholding moral principles. Leaders who exhibit ethical behavior serve as role models, demonstrating how to navigate complex situations with transparency and fairness. They foster an environment where ethical considerations are central to decision-making processes, promoting a culture of trust and accountability within schools. Ethical leaders are expected to address issues such as equity, inclusivity, and the proper allocation of resources in a way that reflects their commitment to justice and ethical conduct (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

One of the fundamental aspects of ethical leadership in education is the ability to model and promote ethical behavior among staff and students. This includes creating and enforcing policies that align with ethical standards, such as ensuring equitable treatment of all students and providing a safe and supportive learning environment. Ethical leaders are tasked with implementing fair disciplinary practices, supporting professional development opportunities for teachers, and advocating for policies that support diversity and inclusion. Their leadership style often emphasizes open communication, shared decision-making, and active engagement with the school

community, all of which contribute to a positive and ethical school culture (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005).

Moreover, ethical leadership in education has significant implications for educational outcomes and organizational effectiveness. Leaders who prioritize ethical practices are more likely to foster an inclusive environment where diverse perspectives are valued, and all students have the opportunity to succeed. By addressing issues such as bias and inequality and promoting transparent and fair practices, ethical leaders contribute to improved student engagement, achievement, and overall school climate. Their approach not only enhances the educational experience but also builds a foundation of trust and respect within the school community, ultimately leading to better outcomes for students and staff alike (Ryan & Rottmann, 2012; Turner *et al.*, 2007).

In summary, ethical leadership is fundamental to promoting and sustaining an ethical organizational environment. It involves leaders who model ethical behavior, shape organizational culture, and make decisions guided by moral principles. The impact of ethical leadership is far-reaching, influencing organizational culture, decision-making processes, and employee behavior. As organizations face increasing scrutiny and ethical challenges, the role of ethical leadership becomes even more critical in ensuring that ethical standards are upheld and organizational integrity is maintained (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Wang *et al.*, 2014).

The Concept of Inclusivity in Education

Inclusivity in education is an attempt at educating students with special educational needs (Luis, 2018). Under the inclusion model, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with non-disabled students regardless of their strengths or weakness in any area, and seek to maximize the potential of all students. Successful inclusive education happens primarily through accepting, understanding, and attending to student differences and diversity, which can include physical, cognitive, academic, social, and emotional (Abbotti, & Cribb, 2001). This is not to say that students never need to spend time out of regular education classes, because sometimes they do for a very particular purpose for instance, for speech or occupational therapy. But the goal in this should be the exception. The driving principle is to make all students feel welcomed, appropriately challenged, and supported in their efforts. It's also critically important that the adults are supported, too. This includes the regular education teacher and the special education teacher, as well as all other staff and faculty who are key stakeholders and that also includes parents.

Inclusivity in education is seen by UNICEF (2017) as an education system that includes all

students, and welcomes and supports them to learn, whoever they are and whatever their abilities or requirements. This means making sure that teaching and the curriculum, school buildings, classrooms, play areas, transport and toilets are appropriate for all children at all levels. Inclusive education means all children learn together in the same schools. No-one should be excluded. Every child has a right to inclusive education, including children with disabilities. Inclusive education is important because it: improves learning for all children – both those with and without disabilities; promotes understanding, reduces prejudice and strengthens social integration, and ensures that children with disabilities are equipped to work and contribute economically and socially to their communities.

Inclusivity in education involves a procedural approach to educate all school age children/youths in a general school setting where everybody belongs, accepted and supported notwithstanding his abilities or disability conditions. Inclusive education is basically a procedure or all about the practice of carrying out educational and ancillary services for children with special needs in an inclusive education setting. This practice as pointed out by Ajuwon (2008) anchors on the notion that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture. What this implies then is that both children with disabilities and their peers without disabilities benefit from their experience of being together in the same school.

Inclusivity in education especially targets those children traditionally excluded from general education for reasons of gender, geographic remoteness, ethnicity, poverty, and disability (Abosi & Koay, 2008). The principle of inclusion promotes the idea that in order to receive a quality education that is equal and accessible; children must be educated to the best of a community's ability in a general education classroom. Inclusive education is moreover a method of creating communities, schools, and societies free of discrimination. Inclusive education is a commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate, considering his abilities and disabilities. As revealed by Obani (2004) the goal of inclusive education is not to erase (or deny the existence of) differences, but to enable all students to belong to an educational community that values and validates their individuality. The concept of inclusive education is therefore about the child's right to participate and the schools' duty to accept him/her.

The Concept of Equity and Diversity

Equity and diversity are fundamental concepts in contemporary discussions about social justice, inclusion, and organizational development. Equity refers to the principle of fairness and justice, where resources and opportunities are distributed based on

individual needs and circumstances rather than uniform standards (Ladson-Billings, 2014). It seeks to address imbalances and disparities that arise from historical and systemic inequalities. Diversity, on the other hand, encompasses the range of differences among individuals, including race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, and socioeconomic background (Bourke & Dillon, 2016). Together, equity and diversity aim to create inclusive environments that recognize and value each person's unique contributions and perspectives.

The concept of equity has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, equity was understood as equal treatment, but contemporary interpretations focus on providing different levels of support based on individual needs to ensure fair outcomes. For example, in educational settings, equity means not only providing all students with access to resources but also tailoring support to address specific barriers faced by marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 2014). This approach contrasts with equality, which assumes that the same resources or opportunities will yield the same results for everyone, ignoring underlying differences in individual circumstances. Thus, equity is a more nuanced and targeted approach that acknowledges the complexities of social disparities.

Diversity, as a concept, highlights the importance of representing a wide range of perspectives and experiences within a given context. A diverse environment, whether in the workplace, educational institutions, or community organizations, brings together people with varying backgrounds and viewpoints, fostering innovation and problem-solving (Page, 2007). Research shows that diverse teams are often more creative and effective because they incorporate multiple perspectives, which can lead to better decision-making and performance outcomes (Bourke & Dillon, 2016). However, achieving diversity is only the first step; it must be accompanied by efforts to ensure that all individuals feel valued and included.

Implementing equity and diversity policies can present challenges, especially in addressing entrenched systemic inequalities and resistance to change. Organizations must be proactive in creating strategies that go beyond mere compliance and actively work to dismantle barriers that perpetuate discrimination and exclusion. For instance, companies often face difficulties in moving from diversity quotas to genuine inclusion, where all employees feel they have an equal opportunity to succeed and contribute (Catalyst, 2020). This process requires continuous evaluation and adaptation of policies and practices to ensure they are effectively meeting the needs of all members of the organization.

In the realm of education, equity and diversity are pivotal in creating inclusive learning environments that cater to all students' needs. Equity in education

involves recognizing and addressing the varying levels of support that students require based on their individual circumstances. For instance, students from disadvantaged backgrounds may need additional resources, such as tutoring or counseling, to achieve academic success (Ladson-Billings, 2014). At the same time, promoting diversity in educational settings involves creating curricula and environments that reflect and respect different cultural perspectives and experiences. This approach not only supports equitable outcomes but also enriches students' learning experiences by broadening their understanding of the world (Banks, 2008). Implementing effective strategies for both equity and diversity in education can lead to improved academic performance and better preparation for a diverse workforce.

The benefits of fostering equity and diversity extend beyond individual organizations and contribute to broader societal progress. By promoting these values, societies can work towards reducing inequalities and building more cohesive communities. For example, inclusive education systems can help bridge educational gaps and improve social mobility, while diverse workforces can drive economic growth and innovation (OECD, 2018). Ultimately, equity and diversity are not just about addressing immediate needs but about creating sustainable systems that respect and uplift all individuals, leading to more just and equitable societies.

Promoting Equity and Diversity Through the Instrumentality of Ethical Leadership and Inclusivity in Education

Ethical leadership plays a pivotal role in advancing equity and diversity within educational settings by establishing a culture grounded in integrity, fairness, and respect. Leaders who model ethical behavior set a powerful example for staff and students, creating an environment where equitable treatment and inclusivity are prioritized. Such leaders actively promote policies that address systemic inequalities and advocate for practices that support diverse student needs. By embedding ethical principles into the organizational framework, educational leaders can drive systemic change that fosters an inclusive environment and ensures that all students have access to equitable opportunities (Brown & Treviño, 2006).

Incorporating inclusivity into educational practices is essential for promoting equity and diversity. Inclusive education involves designing curricula and teaching methods that accommodate diverse learning needs and reflect the varied backgrounds of students. This approach not only helps in addressing educational disparities but also enriches the learning experience by exposing students to a range of perspectives and cultural experiences. By adopting inclusive teaching practices, educators can ensure that

all students are engaged and supported, regardless of their individual differences or challenges (Florian, 2014). This inclusivity in education is crucial for closing achievement gaps and fostering a more equitable learning environment.

Ethical leadership in education also involves the implementation of policies and practices that actively support and promote diversity. Leaders should ensure that their institutions have clear policies for hiring, training, and supporting staff from diverse backgrounds, as well as programs that specifically address the needs of underrepresented students. For instance, creating support systems such as mentoring programs and academic resources tailored to marginalized groups can help level the playing field and provide equitable opportunities for all students (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). These policies are essential for creating a supportive and fair educational environment that values diversity.

Furthermore, ethical leaders must facilitate open dialogue about diversity and inclusion within their institutions. Encouraging conversations about these topics helps to build a culture of understanding and mutual respect. Regular forums and discussions allow students and staff to voice their experiences and perspectives, which can lead to greater awareness and collective efforts to address issues related to equity and diversity. Such dialogue is crucial for identifying and addressing any barriers to inclusivity and ensuring that all members of the educational community feel valued and heard (Ryan & Rottmann, 2012).

In conclusion, ethical leadership and inclusivity are key components in promoting equity and diversity within educational settings. By modeling ethical behavior, implementing inclusive practices, and fostering open dialogue, educational leaders can create environments where fairness and respect are central values. These actions not only support the immediate needs of diverse students but also contribute to long-term improvements in educational equity. Ultimately, integrating ethical leadership with inclusive education practices helps build a more equitable and inclusive educational system where every student has the opportunity to succeed and thrive.

Conclusion

Theoretically, the paper, through extant literature review, has revealed that ethical leadership and inclusivity in education, promote equity and diversity. As a result, the study concludes that ethical leadership and inclusive education are critical drivers in advancing equity and diversity, each reinforcing the other to create more just and supportive environments. Ethical leaders establish a culture of fairness and respect by embodying principles of integrity and advocating for policies that address systemic inequalities and promote inclusivity. Their

commitment to ethical standards not only shapes organizational practices but also fosters an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and equity is actively pursued. Concurrently, inclusive education practices ensure that all students receive the support they need to succeed, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities, by adapting curricula and teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning needs. The synergy between ethical leadership and inclusive education creates a framework where diversity is embraced, and equity is realized, leading to improved outcomes for individuals and fostering a more equitable society. By integrating these principles into both organizational and educational contexts, we pave the way for environments where every individual has the opportunity to thrive and contribute meaningfully.

Recommendations

1. School leaders should exemplify ethical behavior by consistently demonstrating fairness, integrity, and respect in their actions and decisions, thereby promoting an environment of trust and inclusivity.
2. Regular training programs should be conducted to educate educators and students about the importance of diversity, equity, and ethical behavior, thereby building awareness and promoting a culture of respect and inclusivity.
3. Leaders should actively work to build an educational culture that values and respects diverse perspectives, hence promoting equity and diversity both among educators and learners.
4. Educational institutions should establish support systems, such as mentorship programs and counseling services, to address the specific needs of marginalized and underrepresented groups, hence helping to ensure equitable opportunities for success.

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