

# Inspirational Messages to Next-Generation Principals on Enacting Transformative Ethical Leadership in Schools

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**Abstract:** Ethical leadership is increasingly vital in today's complex world, advancing credibility, trust, reputation, and workplace morale. Yet, it remains uncertain, with no definitive rules guiding principals' enactment. This paper explores challenges and opportunities for next-generation principals, offering transformative insights to inspire them as agents of ethical leadership in schools, equipping them with innovative ideas to navigate contemporary uncertainties and uphold morally acceptable conduct in educational leadership. Although we approached five schools, seven staff members from three schools agreed to participate in this study. Having employed ethical leadership theory and through thematic analysis, this paper obtained participants' understanding of ethical leadership, perceptions about transformative ethical leadership (TEL), and inspirational messages for next-generation principals on enacting transformative ethical leadership in schools. The findings, derived from the participants' messages, indicated that next-generation principals should engage in constant moral learning, apply ethical leadership as a moral influence, and that ethical leaders must be loyal individuals dedicated to ensuring care and justice in schools. The paper recommends

that consideration of these messages can assist next-generation principals in appreciating the beauty of ethical leadership in schools. The implications of these inspirational messages suggest that next-generation principals should regularly keep reflective journals regarding their ethical practices, conduct ethics dialogues with other principals, and ensure that school policies are regularly revised and implemented thoroughly. Furthermore, the implication of this study for the literature is that more research should be conducted to explore TEL and its implications for the enactment of ethical leadership in schools.

**Keywords:** Inspirational messages, moral influence, moral learning, next-generation principals, transformative ethical leadership.

## 1. Introduction

Sabir (2020) asserts that ethical leadership remains a hot topic in educational conversations, particularly in the debate about how next-generation principals can be prepared to be moral leaders in schools. Next-generation school principals are individuals who aspire to become principals in the future, or teachers who are empowered with leadership capacity in preparation for principal succession (Bryant, Escalante & Selva, 2017). The expectation is that next-generation principals should be equipped with knowledge of how to understand the science of moral behaviour and how to lead others morally through effective communication and decision-making (Ahmed, 2023; Bryant et al., 2017). Despite these expectations, the problem is that individuals who aspire to be principals in the future sometimes lack an understanding of and motivation for what it means to enact leadership ethically. Torlak et al.'s (2022) study in Iraq reports that the issue with ethical leadership is that principals do not always involve teachers in decision-making, and some lack the motivation and intellectual capacity to perform their work ethically. This has resulted in teachers becoming dissatisfied, while principals are regarded as unfair, unproductive, self-interested, and relentless. The situation regarding principals' enactment of ethical leadership in Iraq is not much different from

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what research has found in other countries. The difficulty of enacting ethical leadership in Zimbabwean schools is attributed to principals' claims that the turbulence experienced in their country has forced them to act unethically (Chingwanangwanana & Kgari-Masondo, 2024). Principals indicated that, although they want to employ ethical leadership, their will to survive has compelled them to ignore what might be considered morally right. The findings of a recent South African study indicate that teachers and principals have differing perceptions of ethical leadership and its values, resulting in conflicting thoughts about the meaning of the phenomenon and its enactment (Madiga, 2022).

Challenges such as a lack of motivation and intellectual capacity, ignorance of what might be morally right, and differing perceptions of ethical leadership provide reasons why it was necessary to explore the phenomenon being studied from a transformative perspective. Notably, a lack of motivation, intellectual capacity, ignorance, and differences can negatively influence individuals' ability to persevere in leadership roles (Amadi et al., 2025). A transformative view on ethical leadership was necessary so that the impact on those who aspire to be principals in the future can take on new meaning (Vikaraman et al., 2021). In this regard, inspirational messaging can serve as a mechanism for promoting transformative ethical leadership (TEL). Significantly, we explain TEL as a combination of leaders' ability to transform unjust practices and the development of action-oriented ethical and transformative competencies while working towards constructing new moral realities. This definition forms the basis of discussions about TEL in the remainder of this paper.

## 1.1 Research questions

Considering the introduction and problem statement, we asked the question: *How can next-generation principals be inspired to become agents of transformative ethical leadership in schools?* In seeking answers to this research question, we formulated the following sub-questions:

- What information can enhance the understanding of transformative ethical leadership for next-generation principals?
- What messages can be communicated to inspire next-generation principals to enact transformative ethical leadership in schools?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The relationship between transformative leadership and ethical leadership

Shields (2020) asserts that the enactment of transformative leadership has the potential to create school environments that are socially just, unbiased, and inclusive, even amidst the unstable, ambiguous, multifaceted, and uncertain landscape of education today. Shields's (2020) use of the terms "socially just," "unbiased," and "inclusive" establishes a direct alignment between transformative leadership and ethical leadership. In this regard, Caldwell et al. (2012) observe that

*transformative leadership is an ethnically based leadership model that integrates a commitment to values and outcomes by optimising the long-term interests of stakeholders and society and honouring the moral duties owed by organisations to their stakeholders. It is in living the highest standards of moral leadership that leaders merit the trust and followership of others* (p. 176).

Considering this view, our stance is that transformative leadership provides an enlightening understanding of how to act ethically in a different manner, enabling next-generation principals to contribute to re-establishing justice within the school context. Two important connections between transformative leadership and ethical leadership emerge from Caldwell et al.'s (2012) assertion. Firstly, transformative leadership is associated with a commitment to honouring moral duties and ethical values (Caldwell et al., 2007). Secondly, transformative leadership "*draws on the ethical disposition of the individual leader*" (Bukusi, 2020, p. 88). Arguably, principals' consideration of ethical behaviour to effect change in schools can be regarded as a transformative leadership activity

(Langlois, 2011). Our view is that the connection between transformative leadership and ethical leadership be labelled as transformative ethical leadership (TEL).

Earlier in this paper, TEL is explained as a combination of leaders' ability to transform unjust practices and the development of action-oriented ethical and transformative competencies while working towards constructing new moral realities. We align TEL with three characteristics: *moral intelligence, wisdom, and a doxastic account of trust*. Firstly, moral intelligence denotes the idea that ethics "*is not just a matter of choice, rather a necessity if the human race is to survive for generations to come*" (Singh, 2025, p. 9). The application of moral intelligence requires individuals to exhibit ethical attitudes by demonstrating that they can discern between right and wrong, with their actions influenced by ethical performance (Mohammadi et al., 2025). Individuals should, therefore, learn how to act ethically and use such knowledge to transform their leadership in schools. This implies that next-generation principals should cultivate an ethical mindset and dispositions so that they can easily differentiate right from wrong and, in doing so, act with integrity.

Secondly, wisdom is the capacity to judge and understand situations (Stupu & Rusu, 2022). Notably, "*a wise person not only has a profound insight into what is true and good ... a wise person is someone who not only has wisdom but also uses and lives it*" (Jonkers, 2020, p. 262). When individuals use wisdom, they demonstrate the ability to manage their own lives, make critical decisions, and act prudently to exercise a positive and significant effect on human life (Bao et al., 2022). To do this, individuals must cultivate a transformative mindset, open themselves to new moral possibilities, and set the stage for a fulfilling and successful TEL journey. In doing so, individuals may be able to withstand ethical pitfalls through an intellectual application of approachability, creativity, and behaviour modification, thereby adjusting their ways of doing things in a transformative ethical manner. In line with this study, next-generation principals should not only be able to discuss ethics but should also exhibit an ethical lifestyle and act ethically in all that they do.

Thirdly, a doxastic account of trust implies that the act of trusting others to do something is based on the belief that such individuals will indeed commit themselves to fulfilling their promises (Hawley, 2019). In this regard, the act of trusting others should not be based on altering attitudes to win their favour; rather, leaders must entirely transform their own and others' attitudes so that trust holds value (Patrizio, 2024). The aim would be to promote transformative ethical liberty, implying that next-generation principals should focus on others' moral abilities to make the school a better place. TEL can inspire next-generation principals to seek transformative moral solutions while creating an inclusive, equitable, and deeply ethical culture in schools.

## **2.2 The transformative role of next-generation principals as ethical leaders**

Schleicher (2020) asserts that next-generation principals are school leaders who will be able to employ ingenuity, responsiveness, flexibility, and ethical entrepreneurship to instil a passion for morality in schools. As moral agents, principals need assistance in using ethical tools and agency to enact ethical leadership in a transformative manner (Cherkowski, Walker & Kutsyuruba, 2015).

Özgenel and Aksu (2020) conducted a quantitative study focusing on whether Turkish principals' ethical leadership behaviours influence institutional well-being. A valuable message from the study was that when principals adopt moral values such as responsiveness and act according to those values, they can gain teachers' trust and lay the groundwork for institutional well-being. A study on the African continent by Mbarawii and Amabibi (2024) explored the accountability and collaboration of principals' moral conduct in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. A strong message from the study was that cultivating ethical leadership practices among principals should be regarded as important, as it may strengthen accountability and collaboration in schools. Close to home, Hlongwane and Bhengu (2023) conducted a qualitative study about the benefits, contradictions, and complexities of ethical leadership practices. An important message from the

study was that it remains imperative for principals to seriously consider the multifaceted influences of numerous aspects of ethical leadership.

Derived from the messages in the indicated studies, words like “adopt,” “prepare,” “the cultivation of,” and “it remains imperative” provide reasons why the transformative role of next-generation principals as ethical leaders should be regarded as important. Mbarawii and Amabibi (2024) assert that such messages can be aligned with *“the transformative impact of ethical leadership in educational settings”* (p. 363). In this regard, we drew from Fenwick (2023), who suggests that next-generation principals should be equipped with knowledge to support them in their roles as transformative ethical leaders while navigating unnecessary pitfalls during the enactment of leadership responsibilities in schools. Notably, the role of next-generation principals requires them to adopt a transformative position to question inequities and immoral behaviour in order to positively influence colleagues and learners while creating the conditions for an ethical school context. As such, the development of transformative ethical leadership for next-generation principals should be geared towards providing them with insight, novelty, and transformative ideas so that they can be inspired to become intelligent agents of moral conduct in schools.

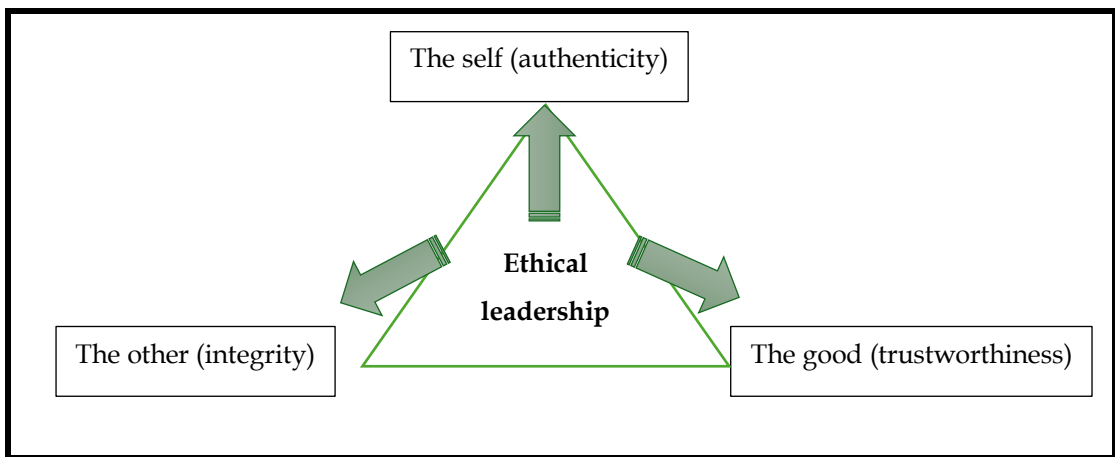
### **2.3 The act of inspiring next-generation principals to be transformative ethical leaders**

In an era of extraordinary transformations in the educational arena, inspiration has become a cornerstone, acting as a guiding light and advancing the notion that next-generation principals should embrace a stronger spirit of how to be TEL in schools. We relied on a seminal yet robust perspective to explain the meaning of inspiration as, *“A breathing in or infusion of some idea, purpose, into the mind; the suggestion, awakening, or creation of some feeling or impulse, especially of an exalted kind”* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 1036). Inspiring next-generation principals to be agents of TEL requires the infusion of ideas to awaken moral feelings for ethical leadership behaviour in the future. Lemana II et al. (2024) advise that next-generation leaders should be inspired to cultivate ethical beliefs, use moral influence, and implement ethically sound strategies to enact ethical leadership in the 21st century. Interestingly, Lemana II et al. (2024) recommend that a transformative stance should be considered in terms of individuals’ understanding of equity, inclusivity, transparency, and adaptability.

Although we could not find specific information in the academic literature regarding inspiring next-generation school principals about TEL, we consulted the works of authors who addressed the development of principals’ leadership skills. Jackson and Moraquez’s (2025) study explored educational practices aimed at advancing aspiring principals’ critical awareness in the United States of America. Participants in the study indicated that leadership learning activities are fraught with ethical dilemmas and that it is necessary for aspiring principals’ critical awareness skills to be developed for future leadership actions. Therefore, it remains imperative to *“seek to develop new conditions for school leadership better suited to respond to current and future educational environments”* (Pont et al., 2008, as cited in Uleanya & Naicker, 2024, p. 1). In line with this perspective, an analysis of teachers’ inspirational messages contributed to the sharing of motivational strategies to inspire next-generation principals to cultivate a culture of ethical conduct in schools. Ramirez (2016) asserts that *“inspiration isn’t something that just happens upon us, spontaneously and without intention; it’s something that we can very well play a part in encouraging and evoking”* (p. 1). Thus, by evoking inspiration, next-generation principals can cultivate mindfulness and passion for enacting ethical leadership. It, therefore, makes sense that teachers’ inspirational messages could be analysed and transformed into new possibilities for next-generation principals regarding the enactment of ethical leadership. Notably, an act of inspiration can serve as a propellant for change, assisting in further unleashing the transformative power of next-generation principals’ ability to enact ethical leadership.

### 3. Theoretical Orientation

Leadership in schools is associated with enhancing values, dignity, fairness, integrity, and innovation without jeopardising expected behaviours (Lawton & Páez, 2015). Therefore, this paper applies ethical leadership theory (ELT). ELT posits that individuals should be mindful that modern ethical leadership depends on principles such as *trustworthiness, integrity, and authenticity*. Firstly, trustworthiness is the disposition to fulfil promised commitments in good faith (Kelp & Simion, 2023) and a character trait that avoids unfulfilled promises (Hawley, 2019). Secondly, integrity serves as a beacon of credibility and trust, guiding leaders to avoid actions that might compromise their ethical standards (Othman & Rahman, 2014; Sharma et al., 2019). Thirdly, authenticity relates to the principle of the true self, acting as an inner compass that directs individuals away from immoral behaviours (Zhang et al., 2019). These three principles provide direction regarding the ability of next-generation principals to understand ethical leadership as the natural enactment of the good (trustworthiness), the self (integrity), and morality (authenticity). Trustworthiness, integrity, and authenticity – conceptualised as a triangle – offer a framework for how next-generation principals can make ethical decisions concerning the self, the good, and the other. Drawing on Rossouw (2023), we explain this triangle in the following way (Figure 1)



**Figure 1:** Triangle of authenticity, trustworthiness and integrity (Adapted from Rossouw, 2023)

Ethical leaders should portray an authentic self, aligning their thoughts, words, and actions with the moral values they uphold, enabling them to act in a fair, just, and trustworthy manner. In the words of Rossouw (2023), *“this character of ethical interaction is well encapsulated in the golden rule that states that one should do good to others, as one expects others to do good to oneself”* (p. 5). Consequently, next-generation principals should understand the vocabulary of ethics, how to represent ethics, how to enact ethics, and how to ensure that others imitate moral behaviour. The application of the ELT was therefore useful in this paper, as it guided our thinking in understanding teachers’ inspirational messages to next-generation principals on enacting TEL in schools.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research paradigm

This paper is situated within the interpretivist paradigm due to its focus on understanding how human beings experience the social world (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Consequently, it draws on the experiences and knowledge of principals, departmental heads (DHs), and teachers regarding how next-generation principals can be inspired to act as agents of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) in schools. We adopted a relativist ontology, recognising that a single phenomenon, such as ethical leadership for next-generation principals, has multiple interpretations and that we cannot rely

on ultimate truths or grand narratives concerning this phenomenon (*vide*: Hammersley, 2013). We, therefore, engaged with the participants in a way that allowed for a deep understanding of how meaning could be co-created and interpreted.

## **4.2 Research design**

Complementary to the interpretivist paradigm, we employed phenomenology as the research design because it involves intellectual engagement with individuals to understand their lived experiences at a conscious level (Qutoshi, 2018). For this paper, we approached the participants to share and interpret their understanding of how next-generation principals can enact TEL in schools. We did this because “*reality is internal to the knower*” (Neubauer, Witkop & Varpio, 2019, p. 92), implying that the participants provided us with important insights into the phenomenon being studied (Sol & Heng, 2022, p. 81). We applied bracketing to set aside our assumptions, knowledge, and prior understanding of TEL. This means that we erased all information about the application of TEL and suspended our scientific convictions regarding the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1994, as cited in Dörfler & Stierand, 2020, p. 11). The application of phenomenology was beneficial in this paper because the participants' views resulted in compelling narratives about how next-generation principals can be inspired to become agents of TEL in schools.

## **4.3 Population and sampling**

The population for the study consisted of all 97 schools in Mahikeng, in the North-West province of South Africa. We obtained a list of all the schools online, and our independent recruiter conveniently selected five schools that were easily accessible and within our reach. (Stratton, 2021; Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). Three of the five schools withdrew from the study due to the sensitivity of the topic. According to Westland et al. (2024), sensitive topics can contribute to participant discomfort; therefore, researchers should be cautious about the method of data collection. In light of this perspective, we avoided pressuring schools to participate in this study. The principal, one departmental head, and two teachers at a primary school (School 1), along with one departmental head and two teachers at a secondary school (School 2), agreed to share their views regarding the phenomenon being studied. Although this was a relatively small sample, we relied on Kim (2016), who asserts that it is not always about the number of participants but the quality of the data that justifies a qualitative study. Since we could find no other willing participants, we depended on the seven participants to share inspirational messages about how next-generation principals can enact TEL in schools. Before this study was conducted, we obtained approval from our university's ethics committee, permission from the North-West Department of Basic Education, and consent from the participants at the schools.

## **4.4 Data generation and analysis**

Considering the sensitivity surrounding research on ethical leadership, we could not collect data through interviews. Instead, we first built rapport with the participants, discussed the research processes with them, and explained the rationale behind conducting a study on TEL for next-generation principals. During this discussion, the participants expressed concerns about privacy issues, a lack of time, and mentioned that they would feel more comfortable sharing information in ways other than interviews. After careful consideration, the participants agreed to provide information through qualitative surveys (Qs). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), Qs collect long-form written or typed responses from participants. We clarified the purpose of the Qs, emphasised that there were no correct or incorrect responses, and highlighted our interest in the inspirational messages they could share about how next-generation principals could enact TEL in schools. When we collected the completed Qs, the participants indicated that they felt free and comfortable sharing their perspectives.

We used thematic analysis (TA), which involves scientifically connecting, systematising, and offering an understanding of patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As such,

we first familiarised ourselves with the data by carefully reading and rereading the views of the participants. Next, we created initial codes and then searched for keywords to code the data. These codes were regarded as groups of words that share the same meaning in the context of the research question. We then identified and formulated preliminary themes, reviewing the themes by revisiting the codes to ensure they shared a common meaning with the overarching theme. Eventually, we provided names for the themes and ensured they coincided with the research question. We analysed the responses, derived findings from the analysed data, and then discussed the findings. Having employed bracketing, we set aside our predispositions about the enactment of TEL in schools. We also requested colleagues from another university to review whether our interpretation of the data could be regarded as reliable. After we received confirmation about the acceptability of our interpretations, we rephrased some of our explanations as advised by the external reviewers. Notably, TA was useful because it assisted us in identifying the participants' inspiration regarding how next-generation principals can enact ethical leadership in schools. In this regard, three themes were derived from the data: *Understanding ethical leadership*, *perceptions about transformative ethical leadership* and *inspirational messages to next-generation principals*.

## 5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the participants' responses aimed to answer the main research question: *how can next-generation principals be inspired to be agents of transformative ethical leadership in schools?* In alignment with the three themes, the findings are presented, and a discussion is offered.

### 5.1 Understanding ethical leadership

The responses from the participants showed some consensus in terms of their understanding of ethical leadership, indicating that ethical leadership is about acting with "honesty" (DH1S1; T2S1), "integrity" (P1S1; T2S1), "responsibility" (P1S1; T1S1; T2S1; T1S2), "consistency" (T2S1), "fairness and accountability" (P1S1; T1S1; DH2S2; T2S2), "kindness" (DH1S1), and "transparency" (T1S1). The participants' understanding of ethical leadership resonates with the notion that an understanding of ethical leadership relates to principles such as "*trust, obligation, commitment, emotion, and a shared vision of the good*" (Ciulla, 2019, as cited in Rossouw, 2023, p. 1). As such, the principles mentioned by the participants align with integrity and trustworthiness as elements of the ELT. In this regard, integrity and trustworthiness serve as transformative forces that silhouette ethical leaders' behaviour, whilst they also influence the moral culture in schools (Aditama et al., 2025). In one of the remarks, a participant shared a thought not mentioned by others, indicating that he understands ethical leadership as "*selfless, generous and kind, trustful and honest to yourself and others, and wisdom, and be a courageous person*" (DH1S2). This view aligns with the authenticity of ethical leadership as indicated in ELT. Lloyd (2019) explains that selflessness provides a strong foundation for driving transformative change, implying that leaders place themselves in a position of humbleness, thus ensuring that others are morally empowered to do the right thing as well.

### 5.2 Perceptions about transformative ethical leadership

A transformative position regarding ethical leadership requires principals to challenge inequality and foster social justice while cultivating a culture of collaboration and becoming champions of inclusion and equity (Gorman, 2015). Interestingly, some of the participants' responses align with the notion of transforming and improving school culture. They said:

*To me, a transformative view on ethical leadership is all about transforming and improving school culture, policies and practices to promote social justice. [T1S1]*

*The transformative view on ethical leadership in schools involves profound changes in school's culture, policies, etc. inspiring stakeholders and strive for social justice, equity and holistic development, leadership must inspire others to commit to shared goals, vision and ethical practices. [P1S1]*

*It is where leaders or principals encourage and empower others to enhance school cultures and student outcomes. [T1S3]*

The participants' views align with the notion that school culture must be based on inspiring others, strengthening their sense of belonging, and supporting them to adapt to changes (Kiersch & Peters, 2017), while deliberate efforts are made to promote diversity, equity, and social justice (Puccio et al., 2018). Firstly, diversity requires ethical leaders to maintain an authentic intercultural approach, implying that they must be humble, act with wisdom, and know how to balance moral responsibility (Geropoulos et al., 2024). Secondly, equity implies that principals should go beyond setting principles for fairness and honesty, focusing on constructing an environment where the school's morals become embedded in every decision and interaction (Nyamori, 2024). Thirdly, social justice requires principals to focus on equitable change in schools, which entails moving beyond merely fostering ethical behaviour to removing obstacles that may hinder morality in schools (Diaz et al., 2024). Some participants regard TEL as the pursuit of "moral courage for standing up for what is right even in the face of adversity" (T2S1), as well as "greatness and the pursuit of excellence is necessary, power sharing, gaining credence, and experiencing success" (DH1S1). The participants' use of "what is right", "excellence", "sharing", and "success" aligns with TEL as a transformative influence of ethical strengths towards creating fairness in schools (Gabriunas, 2023; Sherchan, Baskota & Saud, 2024). In this regard, fairness as an element of TEL assumes that principals should lead others towards maintaining safe thoughts about how to engage in ethically acceptable activities (Qasim & Laghari, 2025). As such, principals should act as transformative icons to stand up for what is right, while pursuing excellence and initiating ethical sharing to achieve moral success in schools.

The perceptions of ethical leadership align with integrity in ELT, implying that principals should act as morally conscious individuals while supporting others to do what is ethically right.

### **5.3 Inspirational messages to next-generation principals**

The participants also shared inspirational messages to motivate the next generation of principals on how to be transformative, ethical leaders in schools.

#### **5.3.1 Engage in constant moral learning**

The participants were of meaning that next-generation principals must engage in constant moral learning, indicating that,

*Future principals should engage in professional development so that they know how to lead by example. [P1S1]*

*Ethical leaders can shape the present and future through their works and deeds and this can be accomplished through learning because learning never stops. [DH1S1]*

*A useful way is that those who aspire to be principals in future should learn from experienced leaders how to model, guide and encourage others. [T1S1]*

*Ethical leaders should learn how to establish a transformative ethical leadership culture so that they align their actions with ethical principles. This may help them to demonstrate ethical behaviour in their interactions with others. [T2S1]*

Drawing from the works of Hafizi and Wiyono (2023), moral learning creates a basis for understanding and instilling ethical values, guides individuals when they encounter intricate ethical challenges, and contributes to the formation of beautiful, transformative, and honest lifestyles, which in turn can assist individuals in developing a solid base of morality. Through moral learning, next-generation principals may "know how to" (P1S1; T1S1) use moral intelligence to "help them" (T2S1) shape a beautiful "future" (DH1S1) so that they can act in a morally admirable way. Significantly, individuals with moral intelligence can distinguish right from wrong, influenced by deep moral values, and are fearless in their endeavours to fight against unethical conduct (Sadeghi et al., 2016).



As such, next-generation principals are advised to engage in moral learning and to use moral intelligence to skilfully make the best, caring decisions necessary so that they can be admired as agents of morality.

### 5.3.2 Ethical leadership as moral influence

Some participants advised that next-generation principals regard ethical leadership as moral influence. Therefore, they must, *“when they start acting morally, they should influence others to act in the same manner”* (T1S) and *“influence others through motivation and empowerment”* (T2S2). Ethical leaders can considerably influence others to assist them in refraining from unethical behaviour (Manara et al., 2020). Such influence accentuates the transformative power of learning and understanding moral principles to cultivate good behaviour and character. In this regard, next-generation principals must be at the forefront of creating an environment where others experience a sense of psychological safety, have the courage to voice their ethical concerns, and the freedom to suggest alternative paths for corrective action (Ughulu, 2024). To demonstrate their moral influence, next-generation principals must work collaboratively with staff members to investigate ethical dilemmas and explore diverse solutions, so they can develop a strong sense of accountability and advocate for equity and justice.

### 5.3.3 Ethical leaders must be loyal

One of the participants remarked that next-generation principals should be *“loyal to the values of the institution”* (DH2S2). Drawing from the seminal works of Josiah Royce in Thilly (1908), loyalty is explained as:

*“the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause. Whoever is loyal, whatever be his cause, is devoted, is active, surrenders his private self-will, controls himself, is in love with his cause, and believes in it. Loyalty tends to unify life, to give it centre, fixity, stability”* (p. 541).

The use of “surrender” calls next-generation leaders to make emotional and ethical shifts in the way they enact leadership in schools. Emotions directly influence cognition and judgment (Vanlommel & Schildkamp, 2019); therefore, next-generation principals should be transformative in how they exercise loyalty. This implies that they must have a transformed sense of being just to justice, good to goodness, and true to truth (Thilly, 1908). Next-generation principals should thus be able to question the justice of their decisions, always choose the right actions, and demonstrate the strength that comes from living in truth.

These inspirational messages align with authenticity, trustworthiness, and integrity as elements of ELT. Next-generation principals are inspired to act with moral conscience (authenticity), consistently display a set of acceptable beliefs, values, and behaviours (integrity), and handle school affairs with moral competence (trustworthiness).

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This paper attempted to answer the question: *How can next-generation principals be inspired to be agents of transformative ethical leadership in schools?* Several schools were approached, but only one secondary and one primary school in Mahikeng, in the North-West province of South Africa, agreed to participate in this study. One principal, two deputy heads, and five teachers shared their views on how next-generation principals can be inspired to be agents of transformative ethical leadership in schools.

The first finding suggests that the participants associate ethical principles as fundamental to understanding ethical leadership. Secondly, next-generation principals must live a life of service to ensure that others are empowered to act with moral righteousness. Thirdly, for principals to enact transformative ethical leadership, they should focus on constructing an environment where the school's morals become embedded in every decision and interaction. Next, the participants shared

three inspirational messages, indicating that next-generation principals should engage in constant moral learning, using moral intelligence to skilfully make the best caring decisions necessary so that they can be admired as agents of morality. Additionally, next-generation principals should regard ethical leadership as moral influence, implying that they should work collaboratively with others to jointly investigate ethical predicaments and explore diverse solutions. Furthermore, next-generation principals should be cognisant that ethical leaders must be loyal, implying that they must surrender existing ways of leading ethically and cultivate a transformed sense of being just to justice, good to goodness, and true to truth. These messages can be regarded as valuable principles for the enactment of transformative ethical leadership, and the hope is that they will motivate next-generation principals to act with moral enthusiasm and build trust while enhancing their reputation. We suggest that a deeper philosophical analysis may be useful in unearthing new modes of thinking regarding the enactment of ethical leadership. Such an analysis may provide more answers to ontological and epistemological questions in understanding the experiences, behaviours, and perceptions surrounding transformative ethical leadership.

## 7. Limitations of the Study

Although seven schools were approached, only seven participants from three schools were willing to take part in this study. It was not unexpected that some participants would be uncomfortable engaging in interviews; therefore, this study had to rely on the use of Qs. This placed constraints on the generalisability of the findings and on the comprehensive explanation of the application of the inspirational messages for practice.

## 8. Declarations

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