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Ethical and accountable leadership as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable education ecosystems: Evidence from primary schools in the Capricorn South District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

Letswalo Valesa Moshibud

Department of Educational Leadership and Management, University of South Africa, Pretoria

Corresponding Author Email: marumoletswalo@gmail.com

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Abstract

Ethical and accountable leadership has become increasingly important in promoting school effectiveness, equitable resource allocation, and sustainable educational improvement. Despite growing recognition of its significance, limited empirical evidence exists on how ethical leadership influences academic performance, institutional culture, stakeholder engagement, and governance within resource-constrained primary schools in South Africa. This study explored the role of ethical and accountable leadership in fostering inclusive and sustainable education ecosystems in six purposively selected public primary schools in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. Guided by Ethical Leadership Theory and Accountability Theory, the study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with head teachers, focus group discussions with teachers, and document analysis of school governance and performance records. The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis framework, with methodological triangulation enhancing the credibility of the findings. The study found that schools characterised by transparent financial management, equitable personnel practices, effective policy implementation, and collaborative stakeholder engagement consistently demonstrated stronger academic performance, higher teacher commitment, improved institutional culture, and greater community trust. Conversely, schools with weak accountability

mechanisms experienced declining learner outcomes, reduced stakeholder confidence, and fragmented organisational cultures. The findings suggest that ethical leadership functions as a performance multiplier by strengthening trust, accountability, and collaborative governance, thereby enabling sustainable school improvement even within resource-constrained contexts. The study recommends strengthening values-based leadership preparation, enhancing School Governing Body capacity, improving district-level accountability systems, and embedding ethical governance practices within school leadership development programmes to support inclusive and sustainable educational improvement.

Key terms: ethical leadership, accountable leadership, school governance, inclusive education, sustainable education ecosystems; school effectiveness; South Africa.

1. Introduction

The contemporary educational landscape demands leadership that extends beyond administrative competence to encompass ethical practice, accountability, and a commitment to fostering inclusive learning environments. Increasingly, ethical and accountable leadership is recognised as a critical determinant of school effectiveness because it shapes school culture, strengthens stakeholder trust, and influences learner participation and academic performance. This shift reflects a growing emphasis on values-based leadership that promotes transparency, fairness, and responsibility in educational institutions.

Ethical leadership is characterised by integrity, honesty, fairness, and respect in decision-making and interpersonal relationships. Within primary schools, these values influence not only leadership practices but also educator–learner interactions, school policies, and the overall organisational culture. In a study conducted at Marymount University in the United States, Mason (2025) found that principals who consistently model integrity contribute to stronger and more coherent school cultures. Similarly, Macpherson (2025) argues that schools should be understood as moral communities in which leadership decisions prioritise the dignity, well-being, and holistic development of all stakeholders. Reinforcing this perspective, Shapiro and Stefkovich (2021) contend that ethical leadership provides an essential foundation for addressing systemic inequities and rebuilding trust within educational environments.

Closely linked to ethical leadership is accountability, which requires school leaders to accept responsibility for educational processes and outcomes while remaining answerable to learners, parents, teachers, communities, and education authorities. According to MacNeil, Butler and Schnellert (2023), accountability in educational leadership extends beyond compliance with policy to include responsibility for ensuring educational quality, equity, and continuous improvement. Effective accountability frameworks balance professional autonomy with external oversight, enabling school leaders to make contextually appropriate decisions while maintaining transparency in academic performance, learner welfare, and resource management (Ehren & Baxter, 2021). Empirical evidence from Rivers State, Nigeria, further demonstrates that principals who prioritise ethical conduct create psychologically safe learning environments where learners feel valued, participate more actively in learning, and benefit from equitable allocation of school resources (Mbarawii & Amabibi, 2024).

Within the South African education system, the importance of ethical and accountable leadership is amplified by persistent challenges relating to governance, resource constraints, educational inequality, and community engagement. While national policies advocate transparent and participatory school governance, implementation remains uneven, particularly in rural and peri-urban contexts. Studies

conducted in Limpopo Province have highlighted challenges related to school governance and stakeholder participation within secondary schools (Morowane, 2022; Maifala, 2024). However, there remains limited empirical evidence on how ethical and accountable leadership influences learner participation and academic performance in primary schools, particularly within the Capricorn South District.

It is this gap that the present study seeks to address. Specifically, the study investigates how ethical and accountable leadership shapes learner participation and academic performance in primary schools in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. By examining leadership practices through the experiences of school leaders and educators, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how transparent, participatory, and values-driven leadership can strengthen inclusive and sustainable education ecosystems while informing leadership practice and policy in South African primary education.

Despite significant post-apartheid education reforms and the enactment of the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996), which established School Governing Bodies (SGBs) as instruments of democratic school governance, many primary schools in the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province continue to experience inconsistent academic performance and persistent governance challenges. Although these reforms sought to strengthen accountability, stakeholder participation, and equitable school management, evidence suggests that implementation remains uneven. Departmental reports and previous studies highlight recurring concerns, including inadequate communication of financial information to stakeholders, personnel decisions perceived to be influenced by favouritism, delayed or inconsistent implementation of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), and School Governing Bodies whose oversight roles are often procedural rather than strategic and developmental.

While international and South African scholarship consistently demonstrates that ethical leadership, accountability, and a commitment to equity contribute to improved school effectiveness, important knowledge gaps remain. First, there is limited empirical evidence on how ethical leadership principles are enacted in practice, rather than merely articulated in policy, within resource-constrained primary schools. Second, the effectiveness of existing accountability mechanisms—including School Governing Body oversight, district monitoring, and community participation—in promoting sustained school improvement has received limited attention at the primary school level in Limpopo Province. Third, little is known about how leaders' commitment to equity influences decision-making, resource allocation, and the development of inclusive organisational cultures within schools serving diverse learner populations across rural, semi-rural, and township communities.

These gaps limit understanding of the leadership practices that contribute to sustainable school improvement and risk directing policy attention towards procedural compliance rather than the ethical and accountable leadership behaviours that foster meaningful educational change. Addressing these shortcomings requires context-specific evidence on how ethical practices, accountability, and commitment to equity interact to influence school performance. Accordingly, this study examined these three interrelated dimensions of leadership to determine how they shape learner participation and academic performance in primary schools within the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province.

3. Research Objectives and Questions

The study was guided by the following research objectives:

1. To examine the relationship between ethical leadership practices and academic performance in selected primary schools in the Capricorn South District.
2. To explore the contributions of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and head teachers in promoting accountability and transparency within primary schools.

3. To analyse how leadership commitment to equity influences resource allocation and institutional culture in primary schools.

To address these objectives, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do ethical leadership practices influence academic performance in primary schools in the Capricorn South District?
2. How do School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and head teachers promote accountability and transparency in primary schools?
3. How does leadership commitment to equity influence resource allocation and institutional culture in primary schools?

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Transformational Leadership Theory, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Accountability Theory. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive analytical framework for examining how leadership practices influence academic performance, accountability, and equity within primary schools. Rather than operating independently, the three perspectives offer complementary explanations of how ethical and accountable leadership contributes to inclusive and sustainable school improvement.

4.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory, developed by James MacGregor Burns, posits that effective leaders inspire followers to achieve shared goals by fostering commitment, encouraging innovation, and prioritising collective interests over individual concerns (Kilag et al., 2024). Within educational settings, transformational leaders create a shared vision, empower teachers, promote collaboration, and cultivate school cultures that support continuous improvement. Recent studies have demonstrated positive associations between transformational leadership and organisational commitment, teacher efficacy, learner engagement, and overall school effectiveness (Algohani & Mydin, 2022; Li & Liu, 2022). In the context of this study, Transformational Leadership Theory provides a lens for understanding how ethical leadership practices motivate educators and other stakeholders to work collectively towards improved learner participation and academic performance.

4.2 Ethical Leadership Theory

Ethical Leadership Theory explains how leaders influence organisational behaviour through moral decision-making, integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability. Ethical leaders model behaviours that promote trust, justice, and respect while creating organisational cultures that reinforce ethical conduct among staff and other stakeholders (Dahiya et al., 2025; Modise, 2025). In educational contexts, ethical leadership is reflected in equitable resource allocation, transparent financial management, consistent policy implementation, and fair treatment of learners and staff. Furthermore, principals who consistently demonstrate ethical behaviour establish norms that encourage similar conduct among teachers, thereby strengthening institutional integrity and professional accountability (Siahaan et al., 2023). This theoretical perspective therefore provides the conceptual foundation for examining how leadership commitment to equity influences school culture, governance, and resource allocation.

4.3 Accountability Theory

Accountability Theory, originally articulated by Levin (1974) and subsequently refined by later scholars, provides a framework for understanding how educational leaders are held responsible for their decisions,

actions, and organisational outcomes. Contemporary perspectives distinguish among hierarchical accountability to education authorities, horizontal accountability to professional colleagues, and participatory accountability to parents, School Governing Bodies, and the wider community (Smith, 2025). Effective accountability systems combine professional responsibility with transparent governance structures that enhance stakeholder confidence, strengthen financial stewardship, and improve educational performance (MacNeil et al., 2023). Within the South African context, Accountability Theory is particularly relevant because it provides a lens for examining how school leaders navigate legislative requirements, historical inequalities, and community expectations while promoting governance practices that reflect the principles of collective responsibility and *ubuntu* (Sipondo, 2025; Mbatha, 2024).

4.4 Integration of the Theoretical Framework

The three theories are complementary and collectively underpin the study's analytical framework. Transformational Leadership Theory explains how school leaders inspire and motivate stakeholders towards shared educational goals. Ethical Leadership Theory provides insight into the moral principles and values that guide leadership decisions and foster equitable school cultures. Accountability Theory, in turn, explains the governance mechanisms through which leaders remain answerable for educational quality, resource utilisation, and institutional performance. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for examining how ethical leadership practices, accountability mechanisms, and leadership commitment to equity interact to influence learner participation and academic performance in primary schools in the Capricorn South District.

5. Literature Review

This review is organised around the three interrelated dimensions underpinning the study: ethical practices in school leadership, accountability in educational governance, and leadership commitment to equity in primary education. For each dimension, the review synthesises international and South African scholarship, identifies areas of consensus and remaining knowledge gaps, and demonstrates how the present study contributes to advancing understanding of ethical and accountable leadership in resource-constrained primary schools.

5.1 Ethical Practices in School Leadership

Ethical leadership has emerged as a defining characteristic of effective school leadership because it shapes organisational culture, strengthens stakeholder trust, and promotes educational quality. Across diverse educational contexts, there is broad consensus that ethical leadership is characterised by honesty, fairness, transparency, respect, and a commitment to social justice (Biniaminov & Moshel, 2025; Vikaraman et al., 2021). These values extend beyond individual leader behaviour to influence school policies, professional relationships, and decision-making processes that directly affect teaching and learning.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate the positive influence of ethical leadership on school effectiveness. Research conducted in Malaysia and Israel found that principals who model ethical behaviour cultivate trust among teachers, demonstrate moral courage when addressing complex challenges, and foster school cultures in which learner well-being is central to decision-making (Kulophas & Hallinger, 2022). Similarly, Imran and Akhtar (2023), in a study conducted in Karachi, Pakistan, reported that teachers working under ethical leaders exhibited higher levels of organisational commitment, psychological safety, and professional efficacy, all of which contribute to improved instructional quality and positive classroom environments.

Comparable findings have been reported within the South African context. Edwards, Schmidt and Mestry

(2023) identified honesty, fairness, respect, and courage as the core ethical values underpinning effective school leadership, particularly when principals navigate competing institutional and community expectations. Collectively, these studies suggest that ethical leadership strengthens both organisational performance and educational outcomes. However, most existing research has focused on identifying ethical leadership characteristics rather than examining how these principles are enacted in the everyday management of resource-constrained primary schools. In particular, limited attention has been given to how ethical leadership influences financial reporting, personnel management, policy implementation, and stakeholder engagement within primary schools in Limpopo Province. The present study addresses this contextual and empirical gap.

5.2 Accountability in Educational Governance

Accountability is widely recognised as a cornerstone of effective educational governance because it promotes transparency, responsible decision-making, and continuous school improvement. Contemporary perspectives emphasise that accountability extends beyond compliance with statutory requirements to include meaningful participation by teachers, parents, communities, and governing bodies in school governance (Mifsud & Wilkins, 2025). Effective accountability systems therefore combine professional responsibility with participatory governance structures that enhance institutional legitimacy and stakeholder confidence.

Evidence from developing-country contexts demonstrates that weak accountability structures characterised by unclear governance arrangements, limited stakeholder participation, and inconsistent policy implementation undermine school effectiveness and educational quality (Dyantyi & Cishe, 2025). Within South Africa, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) provide the statutory mechanism through which participatory and horizontal accountability is exercised. Their effectiveness, however, depends on members' capacity to fulfil governance responsibilities while upholding principles of transparency, ethical conduct, and shared accountability (Sari, 2023; Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2024).

Research undertaken in Limpopo secondary schools indicates that principals who actively promote stakeholder engagement and transparent governance achieve stronger educational outcomes despite operating within resource-constrained environments (Morowane, 2022; Maifala, 2024). Likewise, Kruger, Beckmann and Du Plessis (2022) highlighted the persistent governance tensions arising from overlapping responsibilities between principals and School Governing Bodies in South African public schools. While these studies have expanded understanding of school governance, relatively little is known about how accountability mechanisms operate within primary schools in the Capricorn South District, particularly regarding the interaction between SGB oversight, district monitoring, and school leadership. Addressing this gap forms an important focus of the present study.

5.3 Leadership Commitment to Equity in Primary Education

Leadership commitment to equity is increasingly recognised as fundamental to creating inclusive, sustainable, and high-performing schools. Ethical leaders promote equitable access to educational opportunities by cultivating organisational trust, strengthening collaborative cultures, retaining skilled educators, and responding fairly to the diverse needs of learners and communities (Boeske, 2023; Islam et al., 2024). Equity is therefore understood not only as the fair distribution of resources but also as the creation of educational environments in which every learner is recognised, valued, and supported to succeed.

International evidence reinforces the importance of equity-oriented leadership. Neves (2025) found that ethical leadership positively influences teacher motivation and organisational commitment in Portuguese schools, while broader comparative reviews indicate that schools led by ethically grounded leaders

consistently report stronger teacher morale, enhanced collaboration, improved learner well-being, and higher academic performance than schools where leadership prioritises compliance over values (Mason, 2025; Mbelu, 2025).

Within South Africa, Sipondo (2025) argues that ethical leadership should be interpreted through culturally responsive perspectives that integrate the principles of *ubuntu* with formal accountability systems. This perspective recognises that equity is both distributive and relational, requiring school leaders to ensure not only equitable allocation of resources but also inclusive participation in decision-making and recognition of diverse stakeholder voices. Although existing scholarship has established the importance of equity-oriented leadership, there remains limited empirical evidence on how leaders' commitment to equity influences resource allocation and institutional culture within primary schools in the Capricorn South District. This study responds directly to this gap by examining how equity is enacted through everyday leadership practices within resource-constrained school contexts.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative multiple-case study design to investigate how ethical and accountable leadership practices influence academic performance in primary schools within the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of leadership practices within their natural school contexts. The multiple-case study design further enabled the examination of similarities and differences across schools operating under varying organisational and socio-economic conditions, thereby strengthening the analytical depth and credibility of the findings (Halkias et al., 2022; Vohra, 2024). Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the design supported analytical generalisation by identifying recurring patterns of ethical leadership and accountability across contrasting school contexts.

6.2 School Selection and Sampling

Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich cases capable of providing diverse perspectives on ethical leadership and accountability in primary schools. Six public primary schools were selected from the Capricorn South District using five predefined sampling criteria.

First, schools were selected to represent three academic performance categories based on the most recent Annual National Assessment (ANA) results, with two schools drawn from each category: high-performing (Schools A and D), moderately performing (Schools B and E), and low-performing (Schools C and F). This enabled comparisons across different levels of academic achievement.

Second, contextual diversity was incorporated by selecting schools from rural, semi-rural, and township communities, thereby reflecting the geographical and socio-economic variation characteristic of Limpopo Province.

Third, variation in governance structures was considered by including schools with differing levels of School Governing Body (SGB) functionality, ranging from schools with active parent participation and functional governance committees to those experiencing weaker stakeholder engagement. This facilitated examination of how governance practices influence leadership effectiveness.

Fourth, only schools where head teachers had served in their positions for a minimum of three years were included. This criterion ensured that leadership practices examined in the study reflected sustained institutional processes rather than transitional management.

Finally, participation was entirely voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from the head teacher and the School Governing Body chairperson of each participating school. Schools unable or unwilling to participate in all phases of data collection were replaced using the same selection criteria.

The inclusion of six cases aligns with methodological recommendations for qualitative multiple-case studies, which suggest that between four and ten carefully selected cases provide sufficient depth for cross-case comparison while remaining manageable for detailed qualitative analysis (Halkias et al., 2022).

6.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary qualitative methods to facilitate methodological triangulation and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30–45 minutes were conducted with the six head teachers to explore leadership philosophies, ethical decision-making processes, accountability practices, and perceptions of their influence on learner achievement. The flexible interview format enabled participants to elaborate on issues that emerged during the discussions while ensuring consistency across cases.

Focus group discussions involving six to eight teachers were conducted in each participating school. Lasting between 45 and 60 minutes, these discussions explored teachers' experiences of school leadership, ethical practices, governance processes, organisational culture, and their perceived influence on teaching and learner performance.

Document analysis complemented the interview and focus group data by examining School Governing Body minutes, financial reports, school improvement plans, policy implementation records, and other relevant governance documents. Documentary evidence provided an independent source for corroborating participants' accounts, identifying organisational practices, and examining patterns of leadership and accountability over time (Chand, 2025).

All interviews and focus group discussions were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent. Transcripts were prepared verbatim, and pseudonyms were assigned to all schools and participants to protect confidentiality and ensure anonymity throughout the reporting process.

6.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The analysis began with repeated reading of interview transcripts, focus group discussions, and documentary evidence to achieve familiarity with the data. Initial codes were then generated systematically before being organised into broader categories and candidate themes. These themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, defined, and named to ensure that they accurately represented participants' experiences and addressed the study's research objectives.

Methodological triangulation across interviews, focus groups, and document analysis enhanced the credibility of the findings by enabling comparison of evidence from multiple sources and identifying areas of convergence and divergence (Flick, 2022). Cross-case analysis was further undertaken to compare leadership practices across the six schools and to identify recurring patterns associated with variations in academic performance.

6.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was

strengthened through prolonged engagement with participating schools, methodological triangulation, and member checking, whereby participants reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of interview interpretations. Dependability was supported through comprehensive documentation of research procedures and the maintenance of a detailed audit trail. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive journaling and regular peer debriefing, enabling continuous reflection on potential researcher bias and interpretation (Grant & Lincoln, 2021; Kocaman, 2025). Transferability was facilitated by providing rich descriptions of the study context, participant characteristics, and research procedures to enable readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authorities before commencement of the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty.

7. Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the three dimensions that guided the study: ethical leadership practices, accountability mechanisms, and leadership commitment to equity. Consistent with the study's theoretical framework, the discussion integrates empirical findings with existing scholarship to explain how ethical and accountable leadership contributes to improved academic performance in primary schools within the Capricorn South District.

7.1 Ethical Practices and Academic Performance

7.1.1 Financial Transparency and Academic Outcomes

The findings indicate a strong relationship between financial transparency and improved academic performance across the participating schools. Schools A, D, and E demonstrated well-established financial accountability systems characterised by regular reporting to School Governing Bodies (SGBs), transparent budget discussions during parent meetings, and systematic financial auditing. As Principal A explained:

"At the beginning of each year, and again each term, our financial statements are reported to the School Governing Body, and a detailed briefing on the finances is presented to parents at meetings. When people see how funds are allocated for textbooks, maintenance, extracurricular activities, and travel allowances for teachers attending workshops, they develop confidence in us and engage more actively."

Document analysis corroborated these perceptions. The three schools consistently produced quarterly financial reports, maintained comprehensive audit records without significant irregularities, and allocated between 42% and 56% of discretionary expenditure directly to teaching and learning resources. During the same period, learner pass rates increased steadily from 69% to 80% in School A, 73% to 83% in School D, and 67% to 78% in School E.

Conversely, Schools B, C, and F demonstrated weaker financial governance. Financial reports were either incomplete or absent, teachers reported uncertainty regarding resource allocation, and requests for instructional materials were frequently delayed or declined without explanation. These governance weaknesses coincided with declining learner performance across the three schools.

These findings support previous research showing that transparent financial management strengthens stakeholder confidence and contributes to improved educational outcomes through more effective allocation of instructional resources (MacNeil et al., 2023; Ehren & Baxter, 2021). The findings further extend the work of Edwards et al. (2023) by demonstrating that financial transparency is not merely an ethical obligation but also an important organisational mechanism through which ethical leadership

contributes to sustained academic improvement.

7.1.2 Equity in Personnel Management

Equitable personnel management emerged as another important characteristic distinguishing higher-performing schools from lower-performing schools. Schools A, D, and E demonstrated transparent procedures for allocating responsibilities, recognising teacher performance, and providing access to professional development opportunities. A teacher from School A explained:

“Our principal does not show favouritism. Regardless of your seniority or employment status, everyone is given an equal opportunity for workshops and leadership positions. This inspires us to perform at our best.”

Supporting documentary evidence showed clearly defined committee appointment criteria, rotational leadership responsibilities, and substantially lower teacher absenteeism than the district average.

In contrast, participants from Schools B, C, and F consistently described favouritism in allocating professional development opportunities and leadership responsibilities. Documentary evidence supported these perceptions, revealing that a small number of teachers attended the majority of external training activities, while staff grievance records reflected concerns regarding inequitable treatment.

These findings reinforce earlier studies demonstrating that ethical leadership promotes organisational commitment, psychological safety, and teacher motivation (Imran & Akhtar, 2023; Kulophas & Hallinger, 2022). Within the present study, equitable personnel management contributed to higher teacher morale, stronger professional collaboration, and ultimately improved learner achievement.

7.1.3 Policy Compliance and Educational Standards

The study further established that schools demonstrating stronger ethical leadership also exhibited higher levels of policy compliance. Schools A, D, and E maintained current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) documentation, regularly monitored curriculum coverage, conducted internal assessment moderation, and ensured that teachers received timely professional development following policy revisions.

By comparison, Schools B, C, and F relied on outdated policy documents, recorded lower curriculum coverage, and experienced repeated assessment moderation concerns identified during district reviews.

These findings suggest that ethical leadership extends beyond interpersonal relationships to include institutional commitment to educational standards and continuous improvement. Consistent with Ethical Leadership Theory, leaders who model accountability establish organisational cultures that encourage compliance, professionalism, and instructional quality (Dahiya et al., 2025; Siahaan et al., 2023).

Table 1 summarises the relationship between ethical leadership indicators and academic performance across the six participating schools.

Table 1. Cross-Case Leadership Scores and Academic Performance (3-Year Average)

School	Financial Transparency	Equity Score	Policy Compliance	3-Year Avg Pass Rate	Performance Trend
School A	80/100	90/100	80/100	69%	+11%
School B	40/100	50/100	50/100	62%	−3%
School C	50/100	50/100	50/100	65%	−4%

School D	90/100	80/100	90/100	73%	+10%
School E	80/100	80/100	80/100	67%	+11%
School F	50/100	40/100	50/100	70%	−11%

Across all six cases, schools that consistently achieved leadership scores of 80% or above demonstrated sustained improvements in learner achievement, whereas schools scoring below 50% experienced declining academic performance. Although the study does not imply a direct causal relationship, the consistency of these patterns indicates that ethical leadership constitutes a significant organisational factor associated with improved school performance.

7.2 Accountability Mechanisms and Institutional Outcomes

7.2.1 Effectiveness of School Governing Bodies

The findings revealed substantial variation in the effectiveness of School Governing Bodies as mechanisms of institutional accountability. Schools A, D, and E demonstrated active governance characterised by regular meetings, high parent participation, meaningful budget oversight, and collaborative decision-making between principals and governing bodies.

As the chairperson of School A observed:

“We do not simply serve as rubber-stampers. We ask hard questions about finances, evaluate procedures, and hold the principal accountable. We also support the school’s vision and work with management.”

In contrast, governing bodies within Schools B, C, and F were largely procedural, meeting infrequently and engaging minimally in strategic oversight. Participants acknowledged limited understanding of financial reports and governance responsibilities, resulting in reduced accountability and weaker institutional performance.

These findings support previous South African studies highlighting the importance of effective School Governing Bodies in strengthening educational governance and promoting accountability (Khanyile & Mpuangnan, 2024; Kruger et al., 2022). They also demonstrate that governance structures contribute meaningfully to school effectiveness only when members possess the capacity and confidence to perform their statutory responsibilities.

7.2.2 District Monitoring and Support

Participants acknowledged several positive aspects of district support, including curriculum guidance and emergency infrastructure assistance. However, district monitoring was widely perceived as infrequent and insufficiently rigorous to address persistent governance challenges.

Schools demonstrating stronger internal leadership generally implemented policy reforms proactively regardless of district supervision, whereas weaker schools often delayed implementation without experiencing meaningful consequences.

This finding suggests that accountability remains uneven across different levels of the education system and supports MacNeil et al.’s (2023) argument that effective accountability requires complementary internal and external oversight mechanisms.

7.2.3 Collaborative Stakeholder Relationships

Schools characterised by ethical leadership also demonstrated stronger collaboration between principals, School Governing Bodies, parents, and district officials. These partnerships fostered shared responsibility for school improvement, strengthened communication, and enhanced stakeholder trust.

Conversely, schools experiencing conflict between leadership and governance structures reported weaker organisational cohesion, lower stakeholder confidence, and reduced institutional effectiveness.

These findings reinforce Transformational Leadership Theory by illustrating how collaborative leadership strengthens organisational commitment and collective responsibility for school improvement (Algohani & Mydin, 2022; Kilag et al., 2024).

7.3 Leadership Commitment to Equity, Resource Allocation and Institutional Culture

7.3.1 Equitable Resource Allocation

Schools demonstrating stronger ethical leadership consistently adopted needs-based approaches to resource allocation, prioritising instructional materials, learner support, and classroom improvement. Documentary evidence indicated more efficient utilisation of school resources, lower wastage, and better maintenance planning than was observed in lower-performing schools.

These findings support previous research suggesting that equity-oriented leadership contributes directly to improved educational outcomes by ensuring that limited resources are allocated according to educational priorities rather than administrative convenience (Boeske, 2023; Islam et al., 2024).

7.3.2 Institutional Culture and School Transformation

Leadership commitment to equity also influenced institutional culture. Teachers from Schools A, D, and E consistently described supportive, collaborative, and professionally rewarding working environments, whereas participants from Schools B, C, and F reported cultures characterised by mistrust, limited collaboration, and low staff morale.

The experience of School A illustrates this relationship clearly. Following the appointment of a new principal, transparent governance, equitable decision-making, and regular stakeholder communication contributed to sustained improvements in school culture and learner achievement over four years.

These findings suggest that ethical leadership functions as an organisational catalyst, enabling schools with similar material resources to achieve markedly different educational outcomes through differences in leadership practice. This observation extends existing scholarship by demonstrating that leadership quality amplifies the effectiveness of available resources rather than merely compensating for resource limitations.

7.4 Cross-Cutting Findings

Across all six cases, five overarching findings emerged.

First, ethical leadership functioned as a performance multiplier, with leadership quality explaining substantial differences in school performance despite comparable resource environments.

Second, stakeholder trust emerged as the principal mechanism linking ethical leadership with improved organisational effectiveness and learner achievement.

Third, accountability remained considerably stronger within schools than within district support structures, indicating persistent weaknesses in system-level oversight.

Fourth, schools experienced either virtuous or vicious organisational cycles, depending largely on the quality of leadership and governance practices.

Finally, sustained community engagement strengthened accountability, reinforced institutional trust, and supported continuous school improvement, highlighting the importance of participatory governance in achieving equitable educational outcomes.

8. Conclusions and Recommendations

8.1 Conclusions

This study examined how ethical and accountable leadership influences academic performance, institutional culture, stakeholder engagement, and educational equity in primary schools within the Capricorn South District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. Using a qualitative multiple-case study design, the study demonstrated that ethical leadership is a critical organisational resource for improving school effectiveness, particularly in resource-constrained educational contexts.

Across the six participating schools, the findings consistently showed that principals who demonstrated financial transparency, equitable personnel management, and strong policy compliance led schools that achieved better academic performance, stronger stakeholder trust, more collaborative organisational cultures, and more effective governance structures. In contrast, schools characterised by weak accountability, limited transparency, and inequitable leadership practices experienced declining learner performance, lower teacher morale, and reduced community confidence.

The study further established that ethical leadership functions as a performance multiplier by strengthening the effectiveness of existing school resources, governance structures, and stakeholder relationships. Rather than material resources alone determining school performance, the findings suggest that the quality of leadership shapes how available resources are mobilised, managed, and translated into improved educational outcomes. These findings reinforce the propositions of Transformational Leadership Theory, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Accountability Theory by demonstrating that ethical leadership creates the organisational conditions necessary for sustainable school improvement.

Overall, the study contributes to the growing body of evidence indicating that ethical and accountable leadership is not simply a desirable leadership attribute but a fundamental determinant of educational quality, organisational effectiveness, and sustainable school improvement in South African primary schools.

8.2 Recommendations

Drawing on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed.

Policy and leadership development. The Department of Basic Education and the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education should strengthen leadership development programmes by incorporating ethical leadership, financial accountability, equitable decision-making, and *ubuntu*-informed governance into principal preparation, induction, and continuous professional development. These competencies should also be considered within leadership appraisal and promotion processes.

District-level accountability. District education offices should strengthen school support through regular developmental monitoring, structured follow-up on identified governance challenges, and targeted leadership coaching. Monitoring should extend beyond procedural compliance to include evaluation of ethical leadership practices, stakeholder engagement, and organisational improvement.

Capacity building for School Governing Bodies. School Governing Bodies should receive ongoing

training in financial oversight, policy implementation, governance responsibilities, and strategic school improvement planning. Strengthening the governance capacity of parent and community representatives would enhance institutional accountability and promote more informed participation in school decision-making.

School leadership practice. School principals should institutionalise ethical leadership through transparent financial reporting, equitable personnel management, participatory decision-making, and regular communication with teachers, parents, and governing bodies. Embedding these practices into routine school management can strengthen trust, improve organisational culture, and support sustained learner achievement.

Future research. Future studies should examine ethical and accountable leadership across larger and more diverse samples of primary schools, including schools from multiple provinces. Longitudinal research would provide further insight into how leadership practices influence school improvement over extended periods, while mixed-methods studies could strengthen understanding of the relationship between leadership behaviours and measurable learner outcomes.

8.3 Limitations and Concluding Remark

This study was limited to six purposively selected primary schools within the Capricorn South District and therefore seeks analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Nevertheless, the detailed cross-case analysis provides valuable insights that are transferable to similar educational contexts characterised by resource constraints and governance challenges.

The findings underscore that sustainable improvement in primary education depends not only on policy reforms or increased resource investment but also on the quality of ethical and accountable leadership exercised within schools. By fostering transparency, equity, trust, and shared accountability, school leaders create organisational conditions that enable teachers to perform effectively, learners to succeed academically, and communities to participate meaningfully in educational improvement. Ethical leadership should therefore be recognised as a strategic driver of inclusive, high-quality, and sustainable education systems.

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