

SCHOOL HEADS' ETHICAL LEADERSHIP STYLES: A CASE STUDY OF SELECTED GWERU DISTRICT SCHOOLS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The subjectivity of ethics in leadership makes ethical decision-making a challenge for school heads, particularly when faced with ethical dilemmas. Informed by Ethical Leadership theory. A mixed methods research design was used to explore ethical leadership styles used by school heads when confronted with ethical dilemmas with a view of profiling school heads' ethical leadership styles and common sources of ethical dilemmas. An Ethical Leadership Style Questionnaire (ELSQ) and semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from 50 primary and secondary school heads in the Gweru district in the Midlands province of Zimbabwe. The findings of the study were that school heads had a high preference for using duty ethics more than the other styles. Care ethics, Justice Ethics, utilitarian ethics virtue ethics, altruism ethics, and egoism ethics followed respectively. Sources of ethical dilemmas were found to be based on inequality issues in schools, dishonesty, personal conflict, and bullying. It was concluded that school heads had a preferred ethical leadership style. There are more ethical leadership styles that school heads use than previously profiled. It is recommended that school heads must be staff-developed in ethical leadership and decision-making to improve their leadership effectiveness.

Keywords

Leadership, ethics, decision-making, ethical leadership, ethical dilemma

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INTRODUCTION

Decentralization of educational management in Zimbabwe has put school heads at the center of decision-making regularly, exposing them to numerous ethical dilemmas in their decision-making. Many Zimbabwean school heads have faced litigations where their leadership decisions were contested in courts. As a school head, the researcher came across such humiliating experiences more than once. The researcher came to realize that the problem was ethical dilemmas school heads face in their decision-making. This later motivated the researcher to dedicate a study on ethical decision-making in education. How these dilemmas are resolved is a concern for school managers because school organizations grow, prosper, or fail at least in part, as a result of decisions made by their leaders. The most cited, generally accepted constructs or approaches to decision-making in management are based on rational decision-making and bounded rationality (Robins & Judge, 2019). These decision-making constructs suggest that decision-making follows a series of relatively predictable objective steps. If decision-making was such a predictable and straightforward process, schools were not going to experience the perilous decisions that are so common in many school organizations today.

The researcher's point of departure in this study is that decision-making is a highly complicated and subjective activity, riddled with ethical dilemmas, and how school heads make decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas needs deeper exploration. This is because the process of decision-making is not based on facts (rationality) only but also on feelings surrounding the facts and upon the values, beliefs, and virtues that shape those feelings (Zollo, Pellegrini & Ciappei, 2015). As such, rational approaches to decision-making popularised by literature alone are not enough to assist school managers in making 'good' decisions about their schools,

particularly where ethical dilemmas are involved. In addition to that, whilst current decision-making theory is clear about the steps to be followed when making decisions (Robins & Judge, 2019), there is a gap. The theory does not enlighten us about the moral bases upon which school heads draw to manage ethical dilemmas associated with decision-making; the researcher's point of departure. This research study tried to narrow this research gap by exploring ethical dilemmas commonly faced by school heads and the moral bases, informed by Ethical Leadership theory, upon which the heads draw to make leadership and management decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature covering the theory of ethical leadership, ethics, ethical dilemmas faced by school heads, and ethical leadership styles will be covered among others, as a way of building up to the identification of the study's research gap.

Ethical leadership

Since this paper draws heavily on the concept of ethical leadership, an unpacking of the concept is explicated. Ethical leadership is, "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making" (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). While ethical leadership is a leadership style, it can also be seen as a way of life for the leader, inspired by inner morality. The ethical leader strives to model positive leadership behaviors and makes the right leadership decisions guided by inward virtues. As such, educational leaders who choose ethical leadership live a life of honesty, caring, serving, justice, respect, and responsibility, and are also known to be principled individuals who make fair

and balanced decisions (Aljbour, 2020; Northouse, 2019). The leader is considered ethical when inward virtues and ethics direct the leader's decision-making process. Because of the importance of ethics in ethical leadership, the concept of ethics is discussed in some detail below.

Ethics

According to Northouse (2019), ethics is concerned with the kinds of values and morals an individual or a society finds desirable or appropriate. Furthermore, ethics is concerned with the virtuousness of individuals and their motives. Vikaraman et al. (2018), Alireza, Jafar, and Amin (2019), and Bansal and Kumar, (2018) all concur that schools benefit from ethical leadership. In a study by Adeoye (2021), it was confirmed that there was a positive correlation between ethical leadership, employee commitment, and organizational effectiveness due to improved decision-making by educational managers.

This paper argues that in any decision-making situation, ethical issues are either directly or indirectly involved. However, when trying to make good decisions, school managers face numerous ethical dilemmas. It is not easy to choose amongst competing alternatives when faced with a problem where ethics are involved. The issues of ethics, values, beliefs, or ideas are riddled with subjectivity and this increases ambiguity and ethical dilemmas for school heads. An ethical dilemmatic condition arises when different approaches to decision-making yield different decisions and there are arguments for and against each decision and there is no obvious right decision to follow (Shockley-Zalabak & Polok, 2014).

There seems to be no adequate support given to school heads in overcoming the ethical dilemmas they encounter regularly as they strive to make good decisions about contentious issues confronting their schools (Hlongwane, 2021).

In addition to that, school heads operate in the isolation of their offices and we know very little about the ethical principles they base on to solve ethical dilemmas they encounter in their leadership and management work. I propose that rethinking decision-making in the context of leadership ethics will go a long way in assessing educational managers' decision-making approaches as they confront ethical dilemmas in their decision-making. This improves school heads' understanding of ethical decision-making and leadership in their practice. As Aristotle in Price (2008) puts it, ethics ensure that when we feel a certain way or engage in particular decision-making actions, we will do so at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way.

Common ethical dilemmas often faced by school heads

In an outline of the main findings from an international literature review in indexed journals between 1991 and 2019 focused on ethical leadership, Chik (2020) identified Ubuntu cultural values as one of the sources of ethical dilemmas faced by school heads when trying to make ethically sound decisions. Ubuntu cultural values compel the leader to be human, and this usually contradicts provisions of the law governing staff conduct when a transgression has been committed. On the other hand, Hlongwane (2021) found out that school heads grapple with issues relating to the breach of educators' codes of professional ethics very often as school leaders. In such cases, school heads face a dilemma as to whether to fire the teacher or not. Also, in many cases, administrators are challenged to act morally versus legally. This was affirmed in a study by Masanja (2018) who found that another common challenge involves adherence to policy or considerable leniency toward the employees.

Commonly used ethical leadership styles

In different studies, Masanja (2018) and Arar and Saiti (2022) found that leaders often resort to ethics of care and justice when dealing with ethical dilemmas. Ethics of care and justice were also discussed by Oduol and Cornforth (2019) as effective ethical styles/bases for resolving ethical dilemmas. However, in all these studies, the range of ethical leadership styles considered in the studies was limited and this will be broadened in this current study. More ethical leadership styles/bases that may guide leaders when resolving ethical dilemmas that were included in this study will be discussed.

More ethical leadership styles

Ethical leadership styles/bases for decision-making may help us understand the black box of decision-making in the context of ethical dilemmas. Ethical leadership styles provide a system of rules or principles that guide us in making decisions about what is right or wrong and good or bad in a particular situation. The section that follows briefly looks at seven ethical leadership styles that may assist school heads in making ethically good decisions when faced with an ethical dilemma. This study is based on these ethical leadership styles and theories from which they are drawn as possible bases for school heads' ethical decision-making.

Teleological theory

From the teleological perspective, what is right or what is wrong when faced with an ethical dilemma is judged by looking at the results or outcomes of a particular action. If the action produces unfavorable results it is wrong, and if it produces good results, it is right. For example, if a decision to send away learners for non-payment of fees results in more learners paying fees arrears then the decision is right. However, if more learners drop out of school as a result of this

decision, the decision is wrong. Three approaches can be used to assess moral conduct under teleological theories namely; ethical egoism, utilitarianism, and altruism.

1. *Ethical egoism* states that a person should act or make decisions that create the greatest good for her or himself when faced with an ethical dilemma. If an action/decision serves self-interest, the action/decision is good. For example, if allowing teachers to knock off early on Friday will result in the teachers rating the school head positively, then this decision is good. If telling the truth on your Curriculum Vitae will weaken the CV and result in a demotion and on the other hand telling lies on your CV would result in a promotion, then the decision to tell lies is the right one according to ethical egoism. Ahmad, Ansari, and Aafaqi (2005) and India (2022) studied the use of ethical egoism in decision-making and found it to be a very useful ethical leadership style in certain leadership/management situations. Whilst group interests or the interests of others are important, StudyCorgi (2022) claims that ethical egoism is the only ethical leadership style that sees the interests of the moral agent as equally important when making decisions.

2. *Utilitarianism*, states that we should behave or make decisions that will create the greatest good for the greatest number (Northouse, 2019). For example, if expelling ten learners from school because they were caught dealing with drugs will serve the remaining one thousand learners who were at risk of being initiated into drug abuse, then the decision to deny the ten learners education is good. Also in a school setup, if the school head decides that the new fee structure be decided by a majority vote, the head is using utilitarianism as a base for decision-making. With Utilitarianism, the school head chooses decisions that will win the support of the majority or a decision that benefits the greatest number of individuals concerned. In a study by Beekun (2010), it was concluded that women leaders use Utilitaria-

nism often when faced with ethical dilemmas in the medical field.

3. *Altruism* is an ethical leadership style that suggests that good decisions or actions are those that promote the best interests of others. With altruism, the school head will forego his or her interest and work to help others realize their self-interest. A good example is Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years in prison for the sake of South Africans' freedom or Mother Teresa who devoted her entire life to serving the poor. As such, such school heads may sacrifice their earnings to buy school provisions for some poor learners. They sacrifice their family time by being at work over weekends and holidays and working overtime without pay for the sake of the success of their schools. The use of altruism in decision-making was mentioned in studies by (Fujiwara, Hoegen, Gratch, & Dunbar, 2022; Lee, Song, Kim, & Chae, 2019; Xiong et al., 2020). However, whilst the studies were quite informative, they were in fields outside of educational management.

Deontological perspective (Duty ethics)

The deontological perspective fronted by Kant (1875) focuses on the actions of the leader and his or her moral obligations/duty and responsibilities to other individuals or society to do the right thing. The core concept behind this is that duties and obligations are required of all people. When faced with an ethical dilemma, the educational manager ought to identify his or her moral duty or obligations to the school, parents, and the Ministry of Education and make an appropriate decision. It is expected that the action of the educational manager itself must be inherently good; it must conform with universal laws or principles, it must not infringe on others' rights, and must further the moral rights of others. For example, in the example of expelling learners from school, we would say, was the school head fair? Did s/he follow the rules?

Did s/he act responsibly, did s/he not infringe on the rights of the learners, and therefore was this a good decision?

Virtue ethics

Whereas teleological and deontological theories approach ethics by looking at the behavior of a leader, virtue-based theories approach ethics and ethical leadership from the viewpoint of a leader's character. Virtue-based ethics are about being and becoming a good, worthy human being. Commenting on the utility of virtues when making decisions, when faced with ethical dilemmas, Linda Zagzebski in Wagner and Simpson (2009, p. 40) asserted that;

No one can know what to do in every case, but someone of virtue—that is, a person of courage, patience, honor, and loyalty, respectful of self and others, disciplined, honest, and compassionate—is more likely to do right by self and others than is someone who is unreflective, is overly confident in a prescribed set of rules.

A virtuous head is therefore someone who commands a lot of respect from peers and followers. The decisions he or she makes are well thought out and weighted on a moral scale for dignity, discipline, honor, and compassion.

Justice ethics

The ethic of justice focuses on upholding human rights and observing the rule of law. Education managers become concerned with issues of equity and equality; the fairness of rules, regulations, laws, and policies, democracy, and freedom when making decisions about staff and learner conduct. Justice ethics as an ethical leadership style was demonstrated in a motion on school girls' pregnancy raised by the then Zimbabwean minister of education Larry Mavhima. He argued that,

The current practice in our education system has it that if two learners have an affair and the girl ends up pregnant, the male student can continue with his education while the female student is expelled from school. Section 75 of the constitution bans discrimination on the basis of gender (Muchemwa, 2019).

In trying to fully address issues of equity and equality and the fairness of rules, girl child activists argued that when the girl leaves school and goes on maternity leave, the boy must also apply and go on leave so that the two assist each other with maternity issues. This way, they argued, the new law will make sure that it is not the girl only who loses attending lessons at school. The debate resulted in a new bill that would allow pregnant girls to continue with their education whilst pregnant and only take a short leave to go and deliver.

Ethics of care

A school manager who is inspired by ethics of care, in his /her leadership and decision-making, when faced with an ethical dilemma, will adopt a leadership style that emphasizes care, concern, relationships and connections, a sense of belonging, empathy, and compassion toward others, and the general welfare of educators (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Zimbabwe's labor laws have a good example of an ethics of care provision for breastfeeding educators which states that:

A Female worker is entitled to paid nursing breaks (at least one hour or two 30-minute breaks) for the period during which she nurses her child for six months. The breastfeeding/nursing breaks can be combined with the normal breaks an employee receives. However, the grant of such a break is to be done without disrupting the normal production process in an enterprise (§18(8-11) of the Labour Act 1985).

The ethical leadership styles discussed above are used in this study as a lens through which ethical decision-making by school heads facing dilemmatic situations will be scrutinized. Literature on ethics, ethical dilemmas, and ethical leadership styles reviewed opens up an extensive area of study. To maintain a sharp focus on the study, the research objectives of the study are stated.

Objectives

The objectives of this study are therefore to;

1. Identify common ethical dilemmas experienced by school heads in their leadership and management practice.
2. Identify ethical principles used by school heads as bases/styles for ethical decision-making in dilemmatic conditions.

METHODOLOGY

This section explains the steps the researcher followed in order to conduct the research study.

Methods

The study is anchored on a Pragmatic philosophical paradigm. This worldview holds no allegiance to a particular set of rules or theories but rather suggests that different research methods may be useful in different research contexts. As such, pragmatism supports using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, places the research questions at the center of inquiry, and links all methodological decisions to the research questions (Leavy, 2017). In line with Leavy's (2017) assertion, this study adopted the mixed methods research design (MMR). The design combines both qualitative and quantitative methods to carry out a research study. A mixed method way of thinking recognizes that there are many

legitimate approaches to social research and that, a qualitative or a quantitative approach on its own will only yield a partial understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Mixing methods in this study gave a richer and more reliable, broader, and deeper understanding of a phenomenon than a single approach would yield (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018).

The mixed methods can be subdivided into numerous subtypes. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) suggest ten designs in MMR. Of these ten designs, this study utilized the Quasi-mixed design. Quasi-mixed design,

...are those in which both quantitative and qualitative data are gathered but which are not integrated into answering a particular research question, i.e. quantitative data might answer one research question and qualitative data another research question, even though both research questions are included in the same piece of research. (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018, p. 39)

True to the assertion by Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009), the researcher collected quantitative data on styles used by school heads to deal with ethical dilemmas using a questionnaire that generated quantitative data. The second question was on common ethical dilemmas faced by school heads in their management practice and data was collected using semi-structured interviews that generated qualitative data. The two sets of data focus on different issues and are not integrated into answering a particular research question.

Population and sampling

Gweru rural district has a population of one hundred and thirty primary schools with an average of twenty teachers. Fifty substantive school heads from primary schools in the district participated in the study. School heads who had served for more than five years as substantive heads were

purposefully sampled. The researcher wanted to tap from the wealth of experience of the substantive school heads.

Tools

The ten-item questionnaire used in this study was adapted from the Ethical Leadership Style Questionnaire (ELSQ) (Short Form) provided by Northouse (2019). A respondent was given an ethical dilemma and was asked to indicate their most preferred decision-making preference.

The questionnaire was scored by summing the number of times each of the ten items was chosen by all the respondents for each question. The highest score represents school heads' primary or dominant ethical leadership style, their second-highest score is the next most important, and so on. So, the scores represent school heads' preferred way of addressing ethical dilemmas. Given a situation with an ethical dilemma, this questionnaire points to what ethical perspective is behind the choices most school heads would make to resolve the dilemma.

A limitation of using this questionnaire is that it is a self-reporting questionnaire. With a self-reporting questionnaire, participants tend to want to appear good and as such deliberately choose responses that they think portray them positively. This was managed in this study by triangulating data-collecting instruments. Twenty participants participated in semi-structured interviews that were done at their schools by appointment.

Data analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed by summing responses for a named ethical base for decision-making. The total scores were ranked to establish the frequency of use of each ethical base. A column graph was used to illustrate this. Data from interviews were coded and categories emerged from the codes.

The categories were further synthesized to produce themes or meanings of the data.

Ethical considerations

Permission to carry out the study with school heads in schools was granted by the Provincial Education Director of the Midlands province. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants and their schools was a priority and no real names were used at any stage of the study. All data collected was used for research purposes only and will never be accessed for any other reasons. It was made clear to the participants that they were participating in the study voluntarily and were free to terminate their participation at any given time.

RESULTS

Sources of school heads ethical dilemmas

School heads reported many ethical dilemmas. Here, the most common ones will be discussed using identified themes.

Inequality

One of the most common ethical dilemmas faced by school heads is related to social inequality issues. The following are some of the responses from school heads that were typical and recurring in the interviews.

Inflation is skyrocketing and the only option was to peg fees in United States dollars or the equivalent. The high fees are out of reach for many of our poor learners. They are already dropping out in numbers. My challenge is how can we keep the poor learners in school (School head 8).

I am receiving reports of learners who have no stationery from class teachers. Our policy is to send them home with letters demanding stationery from the parents but the parents are poor and cannot afford the numerous demands of this competence-based curriculum. I realize that the poor

learners are missing out and I say, should I stop sending them home?... How then will they benefit if they remain in class without the necessary provisions? (School head 17).

Yes, teachers started doing extra lessons during holidays in response to Covid-19 Lockdown backlogs but these extra lessons have become the norm after the lockdowns. It is only those learners from well-up families who afford them. I don't know how best to deal with the bulk of learners who cannot afford to attend (School head 4).

Responses by the school heads point to inequalities amongst learners due to family background and rising poverty. Inequality was also cited in the literature as a major challenge for school administrators worldwide (Gray Group International, 2023; UNESCO monitoring report, 2020). The current economic challenges Zimbabwe is facing are the major driver behind inequalities faced by poor learners leaving school heads in dilemmas as to how their situation can be dealt with so that the learners have equal access to education. From the literature reviewed, it can be inferred that school heads concerned with equity and equality issues are inspired by justice ethics.

Dishonesty

Dishonesty was reported as a problem mostly with teachers. Some school heads reported dishonesty this way.

This teacher filled in sick leave forms and left the station. Two days later He was spotted on a bus to Mesina, South Africa on a shopping trip. If someone says they are sick and you know they are not sick but they produce a doctor's letter, you cannot argue but inward you have a dilemma. You proceed to sign their sick leave forms. What do I have to do (School head 11)?

Of late absenteeism has become a problem. Teachers cook stories and I am always in a dilemma to accept or not accept their stories (School head 15).

Nine school heads interviewed also cited dishonesty in evaluations done in teachers' records. As school heads, they end up being faced with tough decisions about whether to expose, demote, or charge the teachers, or not.

Dishonest was also reported in school heads' dealings with learners. For example,

We had a serious conflict between our grade four teacher and a parent. It looks like the learner did not want to go to school on that day for some reason. She told her mother that she would not go to school because she was beaten by the teacher every day. The mother stormed my office all guns blazing. My challenge was for me to think of the right way to handle this issue between the learner and the teacher after the parent had left my office (School head 4).

Similar incidences were also reported by school heads 5, 7, 8, 11, 19, and 20 suggesting that learner dishonesty was a serious problem with many school heads. In a study profiling learner indiscipline behaviors, Andrea and Leandry (2021) found that dishonesty and cheating were among learner behaviors that were a cause for concern in schools. From the literature reviewed (Wagner & Simpson, 2009), I note that school heads inspired by virtue ethics have a particular concern with their character and that of educators and learners.

Personal conflict

All school heads interviewed reported conflict among teachers, conflict amongst teachers and learners and parents, and conflict amongst teachers and administration. For example, one school head said;

One of my teachers was accused of ill-treating a learner by a parent. Three learners also witnessed the incident. I could not deny that this had happened. However, after the parent had gone, the teacher came fuming into my office saying I should not have supported the parent. I should have supported him and talked to him about the problem

afterward. However, the issue was so clear, and supporting him could have betrayed my trust and integrity before the parent (School head 20).

The Conflict was reported where learners told their parents blatant lies about teachers and in some cases the school head. Reporting on this issue, one school head said;

The parent came with a pack of dogs, an axe, and a knob Cary. He went straight to the teacher's class. The teacher sensing danger escaped through a window (School head 20).

Almost all school heads reported that parents sometimes come demanding that their children be moved from one class to the other citing teacher incompetence. The school heads reported decision dilemmas responding to the parent's request and also facing the teacher with this issue.

These tensions between parents and teachers as well as school administration were described as mostly related to a parental reaction to decisions made in attempts to resolve disciplinary issues with students. In the interviews, school heads said there were no easy solutions to resolving such conflict situations.

Bullying

Bullying amongst learners was reported as a common problem by all school heads interviewed. For example, one school head said;

Bullying occurs here at school and also along the way as learners come or go home. I face a dilemma when such cases require expulsion or when the facts of a case are not clear because it involves Early Childhood Learners (School head 14).

This finding about bullying confirms that of Andrea and Leandry (2021) who found that bullying among learners was the most common indiscipline behavior that puts a lot of pressure on school administrators. Only two school heads reported bullying among staff members. However, this may

not necessarily suggest that it is rare among staff. It may be that it is not reported for other reasons.

School heads styles/bases for ethical decision-making

Faced with ethical dilemmas in their decision-making, school heads consciously or subconsciously base their decisions on particular ethical standards related to some ethical theories discussed earlier. The table and graph show data generated by the questionnaire on School heads' bases for decision-making.

Data in Figure 1 has the highest score for duty ethics. According to Northouse (2019), a preference for duty ethics means participants follow the rules in doing what they think they are supposed to do when facing ethical dilemmas. They focus on fulfilling their leadership and management responsibilities and doing what they think is the right thing to do. Not over-emphasizing the bureaucratic nature of school management in Zimbabwe, the finding is in line with Naing (2012) and Köybaşı, Teyyar, and Bakir (2017) who say bureaucratic systems base decision-making on rules and guidance from statutes.

Figure 1 also shows that caring ethics is the second most common base for decision-making by school heads. This suggests that school heads give attention to their relationships and those with whom they share a personal bond or commitment when facing ethical dilemmas. They particularly strive to serve the best interests of students and teachers. Smit and Scherman (2016), and Oduol and Cornforth (2019) made a similar finding in different studies that, school heads use care ethics in their decision-making. In different studies, Masanja (2018), Arar and Saiti (2022), and FitzGerald, MacCormack, and Sider (2022) also found that educational leaders often resort to ethics of care and justice when dealing with ethical

dilemmas. However, unlike in the current study, the studies mentioned here did not state how often the style was used.

The third most common base for ethical decision-making is justice ethics (7) and utilitarian ethics (7). This suggests that a significant number of school heads 14 out of 50 base their decisions on treating others fairly and making sure the benefits and burdens of decisions are shared equitably between everyone concerned (Justice ethics). The finding is consistent with findings by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) and Arar and Saiti (2022) who concur that the sincere, objective, and equal behavior of the school leader guides his or her decision-making.

The findings of the study point to leaders equally trying to do what is best for most people overall (Utilitarian ethics) when facing ethical dilemmas; the heads focus on what will create happiness for the largest number of learners, educators, and parents. The equal use of justice and utilitarianism in decision-making in this study is consistent with findings by Beekun et al. (2010) who found that women relied on both justice as well as utilitarianism when making moral decisions but without stating if they were used in equal measure or differently. This differentiation was made in this study.

Only four school heads out of fifty indicated that they use virtue ethics as a basis for ethical decision-making when faced with ethical dilemmas. Such school heads pull from who they are (their characters) when facing ethical dilemmas. Hlongwane (2021) claims that by and large, when applied to school leadership, ethics are about the character of the principal. They act out of integrity, and they are faithful to their own principles of goodness. Like this study, Aljbour's (2020) study confirmed that the use of virtue ethics by school heads is moderate.

The second last ethical decision-making base used by school heads is Altruism. Using altruism for decision-making suggests that school heads believe that actions are moral if their

primary purpose is to promote the best interests of others. Altruism was found to be a preferred but moderately used decision-making style in research studies carried out in education and other contexts (Fujiwara, Hoegen, Gratch, & Dunbar, 2022; Lee, Song, Kim & Chae, 2019; Xiong et al., 2020). Hlongwane (2021) recommends altruism but warns that educators who breach the code of conduct tend to abuse the soft hearts of altruists.

Only two school heads indicated that they rely on egoism ethics. This suggests that the school heads do what is best for themselves when facing ethical dilemmas. They are not afraid to assert their own interests and goals when resolving problems (Northouse, 2019). In their paper, StudyCorgi (2022) claims that most ethical theories do not consider the interests of the moral agent (egoism) when offering frameworks for ethical decision-making. Related studies by Ahmad, Ansari, and Aafaqi (2005) and India (2022) confirm that ethical egoism is a valid framework for moral action which leaders use but rarely in their decision-making.

DISCUSSIONS

The data presented revealed that school heads' sources of ethical dilemmas in decision-making were many and varied. Social inequality resulting in relatively rich and poor learners was one of the most common sources of ethical dilemmas faced by school heads. Other equally important sources of ethical dilemmas were dishonesty by learners and educators. When the truth is discovered, the school heads face the dilemma of whether to follow the rules and punish the culprits. A similar finding was made in a study by Masanja (2018). Conflicts among educators, parents, learners, and school heads were found to be rampant, and resolving these conflicts posed many ethical dilemmas for school heads. Bullying among learners and also among teachers was found to be

another source of ethical dilemmas. In all cases, school heads found it very difficult to arrive at a ‘good decision’ because of conflicting and shifting values and morals associated with each case.

It also came out that school heads’ decision-making could be traced and associated with particular ethical approaches. For example, it came out that most school heads use duty ethics as a base for ethical decision-making when faced with an ethical dilemma. This may be expected taking into consideration the bureaucratic nature of the Ministry of Education in Zimbabwe. Also, many school heads fell back on care ethics when resolving ethical dilemmas. The popularity of care ethics in schools may be attributed to the ‘best interests of the student’ (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) mantra and the *loco parentis* doctrine. Schools are generally expected to protect the learners and also their interests and as such school heads have a duty of care for learners and even educators.

Following, care ethics are justice ethics and utilitarian ethics. School heads often consider fairness and decisions that serve the interests of the greatest number when making decisions. This popularity of using care ethics and justice ethics to guide decision-making when faced with ethical dilemmas is in line with findings by many other researchers (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Masanja, 2018; Oduol & Cornforth, 2019) cited in the literature review. Virtue ethics, altruism, and egoism ethics were some of the ethical bases that inspired school heads’ decision-making when faced with ethical dilemmas but were used less often. Whilst care ethics and justice ethics were cited in the literature as ethical decision-making bases that inspire school heads’ decision-making, the data of this study revealed many other ethical decision-making styles may be influencing school heads’ ethical decision-making that may still be profiled in other studies.

CONCLUSIONS

It was concluded from the study that school heads face a myriad of ethical dilemmas when making leadership decisions. Common ethical dilemmas that were strongly featured in the interviews stemmed from inequality, dishonesty, personal conflict, and bullying by educators, learners, and parents. The study also generated data that revealed bases or styles of ethical decision-making based on mainstream ethical leadership theory. From the findings, it was concluded that when faced with ethical dilemmas, school heads used the following bases or styles for decision-making in the following order: duty ethics, care ethics, justice ethics, utilitarian ethics, virtue ethics, altruism ethics, and egoism ethics.

The study results go a long way in assisting educational leaders in making theory-informed decisions when faced with ethical dilemmas. Management leadership behavior in times of crisis and ethical dilemmas can be predicted using the likelihood of the use of each ethical leadership style as outlined in the findings of this study. Whilst these bases or styles for ethical decision-making may appear to be standing in silos, there is a possibility that some school heads may use more than one ethical base at the same time. Before this study, it was noted that there was a gap in the literature where the current literature did not enlighten us about the moral bases or ethical leadership styles upon which school heads draw to manage ethical dilemmas associated with decision-making. This study managed to cover this gap by identifying ethical leadership styles that inform school heads' decision-making when faced with ethical dilemmas.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study, it is recommended that teacher training institutions should include a training module on ethical decision-making theory to complement the current

rational theories of decision-making in the preparation of school heads. School heads need regular training and development from the Ministry of Education to effectively deal with ethical dilemmas when making leadership and management decisions. In addition, the Ministry of Education is encouraged to have an evaluation of leadership and management challenges creating dilemmas for school heads with a view to ameliorating ethical dilemmas faced by school heads. Turning to other researchers, new studies need to be carried out to explore possible combinations of bases or styles for ethical decision-making by school heads.

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APPENDICES

Figure 1

School heads styles/bases for ethical decision making

