Assessing the Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Teacher Motivation: A Pilot Study in Sarawak Secondary Schools

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Abstract – Ethical leadership plays a crucial role in fostering teacher motivation and enhancing overall school effectiveness. However, limited research has explored this relationship within the context of secondary schools in Sarawak. This study aims to identify the level of ethical leadership among secondary school principals, assess the level of motivation among teachers, and examine the correlation between ethical leadership and teacher motivation. A pilot study was conducted with 100 secondary school teachers using a quantitative survey approach. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using correlation and regression techniques. The reliability analysis showed a high and acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.971 for ethical leadership and 0.731 for teacher motivation. The findings indicate that both ethical leadership and teacher motivation levels were high. Moreover, the results reveal a strongly significant positive correlation between ethical leadership and teacher motivation. This suggests that teachers who perceive their leaders as ethical report higher levels of satisfaction, commitment, and enthusiasm in their roles. These findings underscore the importance of ethical leadership in creating a supportive and motivational workplace culture. The study provides valuable insights for policymakers and school administrators in formulating leadership strategies to enhance teacher motivation and retention. Future research should expand the sample size and incorporate qualitative approaches to gain deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying this relationship.

Keywords – Ethical leadership, teacher motivation, school leadership, secondary education, Sarawak

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership at educational institutions has an essential effect on teachers' attitudes, behaviours, and motivation. The role of school leadership is critical in shaping the motivation and performance of teachers. Ethical leadership, among other leadership styles, has received a lot of attention because of its emphasis on moral standards, integrity, and fair decision-making. Ethical leadership is defined by leaders who are honest, transparent, and concerned about their subordinates' well-being. Leadership that is ethical, transparent, and value-driven has been increasingly recognized as a fundamental component in fostering a positive school culture and enhancing teacher commitment (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In the context of education, school leaders that demonstrate ethical leadership not only build trust with teachers, but also generate a healthy work atmosphere that boosts motivation

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and satisfaction. Given the significant role that teachers play in providing excellent education and determining student outcomes, understanding the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation is critical to increasing educational effectiveness. Ethical leadership, as conceptualized by (Brown et al., 2005), encompasses characteristics such as honesty, fairness, accountability, and role modelling of ethical behaviour. Principals who exhibit ethical leadership inspire trust and respect among their teachers, leading to a work environment where ethical values are upheld, and professional growth is encouraged (Gathenya, 2022). Given the increasing complexity of the educational environment in Sarawak, where schools operate in diverse cultural and socio-economic settings, it is imperative to examine how ethical leadership practices influence teacher motivation. Understanding this relationship is crucial for policymakers, school administrators, and educational stakeholders in their efforts to improve teacher retention and performance in public schools.

Teacher motivation has been widely studied as a key determinant of student success and overall school effectiveness (Deci & Ryan, 2001). Motivated teachers are more likely to exhibit high levels of commitment, innovation, and resilience, even in challenging circumstances. In Sarawak, where rural-urban disparities and resource limitations present significant challenges to educators, maintaining motivation is particularly critical. Ethical leadership can serve as a catalyst in this regard by fostering a school environment characterized by fairness, respect, and professional support. Studies suggest that when teachers perceive their leaders as ethical and supportive, they experience higher job satisfaction, reduced burnout, and a stronger sense of professional fulfilment (Asman et al., 2023). Despite the growing body of research on ethical leadership and teacher motivation, there remains a gap in studies focusing on the unique educational context of Sarawak. The region's educational institutions face distinct challenges, including remote school locations, multicultural student populations, and varying access to professional development opportunities. Investigating the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation in this setting will contribute valuable knowledge to the field of educational leadership and provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening school governance and teacher support systems.

This paper investigates how ethical leadership practices among school principals influence teacher motivation in secondary schools in Sarawak. It aims to assess the level of ethical leadership among school principals and the level of motivation among teachers while examining the relationship between these two factors. By exploring how integrity, fairness, and ethical decision-making influence

teachers' professional engagement and job satisfaction, this research provides insights into leadership practices that enhance teacher well-being and educational outcomes in Sarawak's public schools.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The role of ethical leadership in shaping teacher motivation has gained increasing attention in educational research, particularly in the context of secondary schools. Ethical leadership, characterized by fairness, integrity, and ethical decision-making, is essential in fostering a positive school environment and promoting teacher commitment (Boydak Özan et al., 2017; Kalshoven et al., 2011). Despite its recognized importance, empirical studies examining the direct correlation between ethical leadership and teacher motivation remain scarce, particularly in Malaysian public schools, where issues such as teacher retention, workload stress, and job dissatisfaction persist (Asraf et al., 2023; Wong & Thien, 2020). As demands on educators continue to increase, it is critical to understand how school principals' ethical leadership influences teacher motivation and professional engagement.

Teacher motivation is a key determinant of high-quality education and student success. However, research suggests that many teachers experience low job satisfaction and diminished motivation due to ineffective leadership, lack of professional recognition, and workplace dissatisfaction (Ghanbari & Majooni, 2022; Ranganatha et al., 2023; Yildiz & Kilic, 2021). While ethical leadership has been linked to job satisfaction and organizational commitment, there is limited research on its direct influence on teacher motivation in the Malaysian education system (Muhammad Zerni & Bity Salwana, 2020; Syerwiah & Bity Salwana, 2020). Given that ethical leadership fosters trust, fairness, and transparency, it is imperative to investigate its role in addressing teacher motivation challenges in Sarawak's secondary schools.

Sarawak's public schools face unique challenges, including resource constraints, high student-teacher ratios, and rural school management issues, all of which may exacerbate teacher dissatisfaction and burnout (Yeo, 2023) Studies have shown that school leadership significantly influences teacher performance, well-being, and long-term commitment to the profession (Bujang et al., 2025; Maznah et al., 2022; Ranganatha et al., 2023). A lack of ethical leadership can lead to increased teacher burnout, lower job engagement, and reduced effectiveness, ultimately affecting student outcomes and overall school performance (Andrew & Christina, 2022; Mokhtar et al., 2021). Therefore, examining the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation is crucial for enhancing teacher well-being and improving educational outcomes in Sarawak.

This study aims to explore the influence of ethical leadership on teacher motivation among secondary school teachers in Sarawak. Given the importance of leadership practices in shaping the professional experiences and motivational levels of educators, this research focuses on assessing the reliability of the instruments used, the extent of ethical leadership demonstrated by school principals,

and the motivation level of teachers. Based on these aims, the study is guided by the following research objectives:
1. To determine the reliability level of the research instruments used in the study.
2. To examine the level of ethical leadership demonstrated by secondary school principals.
3. To examine the level of motivation among secondary school teachers.
4. To investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation among secondary school teachers.

In line with the fourth objective, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: There is a significant positive correlation between ethical leadership and teacher motivation.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical leadership has been increasingly recognized as a fundamental factor in shaping organizational culture, enhancing employee motivation, and fostering trust within educational institutions worldwide. Defined as the demonstration of normatively appropriate behaviour through personal actions, interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct among followers (Brown et al., 2005), ethical leadership plays a crucial role in influencing the psychological and professional outcomes of teachers. In schools, leaders who model ethical behaviour not only establish moral standards but also create supportive environments that directly impact teachers' motivation, engagement, and job satisfaction. Globally, numerous studies have highlighted the positive influence of ethical leadership on teacher motivation. In Portugal, (Neves, 2024) found that ethical leadership significantly enhanced teachers' intrinsic motivation and organizational commitment, with organizational commitment acting as a mediator in this relationship. Similarly, a study conducted by (Urooj et al., 2024) in Pakistan demonstrated that principals' ethical behaviours—characterized by honesty, ethical guidance, and respectful communication—were strongly associated with higher levels of teacher work engagement and commitment. These studies collectively affirm that ethical leadership serves not only to model ethical conduct but also to inspire positive attitudes and behaviours among teachers, contributing to both individual and organizational success.

Ethical leadership has increasingly been recognized as a vital dimension in shaping effective school environments and enhancing teacher performance. In the Malaysian context, Vikaraman et al., (2021) investigated ethical leadership practices among public school leaders and revealed a significant positive relationship between such practices and the level of trust teachers place in their principals. While the study noted that many leaders were not formally trained in ethical leadership, they nonetheless practiced key values such as integrity, people orientation, and fairness—core attributes that foster relational trust and a supportive school climate. In East Malaysia, particularly Sarawak, the educational landscape presents unique challenges that further emphasize the importance of ethical and responsible leadership. Gabriel & Bity Salwana, (2024)

identified administrative difficulties, infrastructural limitations, and socio-economic constraints as major contributors to student dropout in rural Sarawak. The study called for targeted leadership strategies that prioritize equity, ethical conduct, and policy intervention to address these systemic barriers. Meanwhile, Jusoh et al., (2024) explored sustainable leadership and its influence on teacher performance, arguing that leadership grounded in ethical values significantly boosts instructional quality and student engagement. Their study found that teachers under supportive and principled leaders demonstrated higher motivation and professional growth. Collectively, these findings affirm that ethical leadership not only builds trust and morale among teachers but also plays a crucial role in sustaining academic excellence and mitigating systemic challenges within diverse Malaysian school settings.

Given these unique challenges, it is crucial to explore how principals' ethical leadership behaviours support, sustain, and enhance teacher motivation in Sarawak. Addressing this research gap is vital not only for enriching the understanding of ethical leadership in diverse educational settings but also for providing practical insights that can inform leadership development programs and policy interventions tailored to the needs of East Malaysian schools. In line with the empirical foundations outlined, the conceptual framework proposed for this study is shown below. Ethical leadership is conceptualized as the independent variable that directly influences teacher motivation as the dependent variable.

This study's conceptual framework is grounded in Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown et al., 2005) and Achievement Motivation Theory by McClelland (1978). Ethical leadership, as defined by Brown et al., refers to the demonstration of appropriate conduct through personal actions, fairness, integrity, and two-way communication. It is expected that such leadership behaviours from school principals will positively influence teachers' work motivation. Teacher motivation is treated as the dependent variable in this study, while principal ethical leadership is the independent variable. According to McClelland as stated by Evonne & Gregory, (2017), individuals are driven by the need for achievement, and in the context of education, motivated teachers tend to be more committed, goal-oriented, and professionally effective. This framework allows the study to explore how ethical leadership practices by principals contribute to enhancing teacher motivation in Malaysian secondary schools.

Figure I: Conceptual Framework

IV. METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design using a quantitative research approach (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation by collecting data at a single point in time. Data were collected through the direct distribution of survey questionnaires to teachers from national secondary schools in Sarawak, coordinated by the respective school administrations.

Population and Sampling

This study employed a simple random sampling method, with participation being entirely voluntary. After completing the instrument validation process, several national-type secondary schools were contacted and invited to participate. Teachers who agreed to participate completed the questionnaires with full understanding that their involvement was voluntary and without any coercion. A total of 100 completed questionnaires were collected and subsequently used for data analysis.

Instrument

The instruments used in this study were adapted from established measures to suit the Malaysian secondary school context. Ethical leadership was measured using the Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW) Questionnaire developed by (Kalshoven et al., 2011), which categorized into seven domains: people orientation, fairness, power sharing, concern for sustainability, ethical guidance, role clarification and integrity. A total of 37 items were used to measure these dimensions. Teacher motivation was measured using the Measure of Individual Differences in Achieving Tendency (QMAT) Questionnaire developed by Mehrabian dan Bank (1978) and adapted by (Evonne & Gregory, 2017), which covers three domains: the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power, comprising 14 adapted items. Both instruments underwent a content validation process involving expert reviews to ensure their relevance and clarity before being utilized in this study. Respondents indicated their agreement with the statements on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). A pilot test was conducted to refine the items and verify the instruments' internal consistency, assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficients.

Data Collection Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed manually to teachers through their respective school administrations. Teachers were provided with clear instructions and assurances of confidentiality. The completed questionnaires were retrieved within an agreed-upon timeframe for analysis purposes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 29.0. Descriptive statistics, including mean (M) and standard deviation (SD), were used to describe the levels of ethical leadership and teacher motivation. Interpretation of the mean scores followed the guidelines by Alias (1997): a mean score of 1.00 to 1.99

indicated low levels, 2.00 to 2.99 indicated moderate levels, and 3.00 and above indicated high levels.

TABLE I: MEAN SCORE INTERPRETATION

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00 to 1.99	Low
2.00 to 2.99	Moderate
3.00 and above	High

Correlation analysis examined the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation. The interpretation of the correlation coefficient (r) was based on Alias (1997): ±0.01 to ±0.20 as very weak, ±0.21 to ±0.40 as weak, ±0.41 to ±0.60 as moderate, ±0.61 to ±0.80 as strong, and ±0.81 to ±1.00 as very strong.

TABLE II: CORRELATION COEFFICIENT INTERPRETATION

Correlation Coefficient (r)	Interpretation
±0.01 to ±0.20	Very Weak / Very Small
±0.21 to ±0.40	Weak / Small
±0.41 to ±0.60	Moderate / Medium
±0.61 to ±0.80	Strong / Large
±0.81 to ±1.00	Very Strong

Ethical Considerations

Participation in the study was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before taking part. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, with data used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval was obtained, and every effort was made to maintain the integrity of the research process.

V. FINDINGS

This study aimed to examine the reliability of the research instruments, the levels of ethical leadership and teacher motivation, and the relationship between these two variables among secondary school teachers in Sarawak. The findings are presented according to the research objectives (RO) and hypothesis (Ha) tested in the study.

RO1: To determine the reliability level of the research instruments used in the study.

TABLE III: RELIABILITY STATISTICS FOR RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Ethical Leadership	37	0.971
Teacher Motivation	14	0.731

Reliability analysis was conducted to assess the internal consistency of the research instruments used. As shown in Table 1, the Ethical Leadership questionnaire demonstrated excellent reliability, achieving a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.971 across 37 items. The Teacher Motivation questionnaire exhibited acceptable reliability, with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.731 across 14 items. These results confirm that both instruments were sufficiently reliable for use in this study.

RO2: To examine the level of ethical leadership demonstrated by secondary school principals.

TABLE IV: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

N	Mean	Standard Deviation
100.0	3.86	0.36

Descriptive statistics were used to determine the level of ethical leadership among secondary school principals. The findings, as summarized in Table 2, indicated a high level of ethical leadership, with a mean score of 3.86 and a standard deviation of 0.36. Based on the interpretation guideline where a mean score of 3.00 and above reflects a high level, it can be concluded that principals generally exhibited strong ethical leadership behaviours.

RO3: To examine the level of motivation among secondary school teachers.

TABLE V: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR TEACHER MOTIVATION

N	Mean	Standard Deviation
100.0	3.91	0.41

Descriptive statistics were also used to determine the level of motivation among secondary school teachers. As shown in Table 3, the mean score for teacher motivation was 3.91, with a standard deviation of 0.41, indicating a high level of motivation among teachers. This suggests that the majority of teachers demonstrated strong motivational levels in their professional responsibilities.

RO4: To investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation among secondary school teachers.

In line with the fourth objective, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

Ha: There is a significant positive correlation between ethical leadership and teacher motivation.

TABLE: PEARSON CORRELATION BETWEEN ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER MOTIVATION

Variables	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance (p-value)	Strength of Relationship
Ethical Leadership and Teacher Motivation	0.676	0.000	Strong

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation. As presented in Table 4, a strong positive correlation was found between the two variables (r = 0.676, p < 0.001). The results indicate that higher levels of perceived ethical leadership are significantly associated with higher levels of teacher motivation. Therefore, the study's hypothesis was supported, confirming that ethical leadership plays a crucial role in influencing teacher motivation among secondary school teachers in Sarawak.

VI. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the reliability of the instruments used to measure ethical leadership and teacher motivation, determine the levels of these two constructs among secondary school teachers in Sarawak, and investigate the relationship between them. The findings provide important insights into the role of ethical leadership in shaping teacher motivation within the Malaysian education context. The results indicated that both research instruments demonstrated satisfactory reliability. The Ethical Leadership questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.971, reflecting excellent internal consistency. Similarly, the Teacher Motivation questionnaire showed acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.731. These findings confirm that both instruments were suitable for assessing the intended constructs among the study population.

In terms of the level of ethical leadership, the findings revealed a high level among secondary school principals, with a mean score of 3.86. This suggests that teachers perceive their school leaders as consistently demonstrating fairness, integrity, ethical guidance, and people-oriented behaviours. This result is consistent with previous studies conducted by (Vikaraman et al., 2021) and (Jusoh et al., 2024), which also found that ethical leadership practices are prevalent among educational leaders in Malaysia. Similarly, the level of teacher motivation was found to be high, with a mean score of 3.91. This indicates that teachers generally possess strong intrinsic motivation and professional engagement in their roles. The finding aligns with previous research by (Andrew & Christina, 2022), who reported that a supportive and ethical school environment contributes to sustained teacher motivation and job satisfaction.

The correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation ($r = 0.676$, $p < 0.001$). This result supports the study's hypothesis (H1) that ethical leadership is significantly associated with higher levels of teacher motivation. The finding is in line with global studies, such as those by (Neves, 2024) and (Urooj et al., 2024), which emphasized that leaders who model ethical behaviours contribute to enhanced trust, psychological safety, and professional commitment among teachers. The strong correlation observed in this study highlights the critical role of ethical leadership in promoting teacher well-being and motivation, particularly within the unique socio-cultural and logistical challenges faced by Sarawak's schools. These findings carry important practical implications. School principals who consistently demonstrate ethical leadership behaviours can significantly influence the motivational levels of their teaching staff. Efforts to strengthen leadership development programs, focusing on ethics, transparency, fairness, and interpersonal respect, are crucial for sustaining a motivated teaching workforce. Policymakers and education authorities may consider incorporating ethical leadership principles into professional development frameworks for current and aspiring school leaders.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between ethical leadership and teacher motivation among secondary school teachers in Sarawak. It also assessed the reliability of the research instruments and identified the levels of ethical leadership demonstrated by principals and the motivation levels of teachers. The findings revealed that both the Ethical Leadership and Teacher Motivation instruments possessed satisfactory internal consistency, indicating their suitability for the research context. The results showed that the levels of ethical leadership and teacher motivation were high among the respondents. Moreover, a strong positive correlation was found between ethical leadership and teacher motivation, confirming the study's hypothesis. These findings highlight the crucial role that ethical leadership plays in enhancing teacher motivation within Malaysian secondary schools. Principals who exhibit ethical leadership behaviours can foster a supportive environment that promotes teacher engagement, satisfaction, and professional commitment. While the study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish causal relationships between ethical leadership and teacher motivation. Second, the study focused only on public secondary schools in Sarawak, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions or types of schools, such as primary schools or private institutions. Additionally, data collection relied solely on self-reported questionnaires, which may introduce common method bias or social desirability bias. Future research should consider using longitudinal or experimental designs to explore the causal effects of ethical leadership on teacher motivation over time. Expanding the sample to include a more diverse range of schools, including different geographic regions and school types, would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Incorporating mixed-methods approaches, such as interviews or observations, could also provide deeper insights into how ethical leadership practices are perceived and enacted in educational settings. Furthermore, future studies might explore potential mediators or moderators, such as trust in leaders or organizational commitment, to better understand the mechanisms linking ethical leadership to teacher outcomes.

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