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Virtues for Principals to Enact Ethical Leadership: An Education Policy Perspective

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Abstract. Ethical leadership is a core characteristic of a transformative authentic way of how principals should lead schools in contemporary times. However, an absence of policy insights into ethical leadership contributes to pedestrian knowledge about the discourse. As such, the purpose of this paper was to present education policy perspectives regarding policy virtues that can support principals in transforming the way they think about and enact ethical leadership. Significantly, education policy contains a collection of actions and options that, when deciphered, can give direction on how principals' ability to enact ethical leadership can be strengthened. This qualitative conceptual study applied the ethical leadership theory and policy text analysis as a research method to analyse texts in the *Policy on the South African Standards for Principals* and *South African Schools Act* to provide insights into how principals can become stronger ethical leaders. The findings revealed that *practical wisdom*, *parrhesia*, *homo virtus*, and *self-critique* can be considered relevant policy virtues that can guide principals in becoming the bearers of ethical leadership in schools. As such, this paper recommends that an application of the proposed virtues should be seriously considered by principals to assist them in adjusting their current perspectives toward maximizing their ethical leadership aptitudes.

Keywords: education policy, ethical leadership, principals, schools, virtues

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership is the enactment of normatively proper behaviour through interpersonal and individual relationships and the promotion of such behaviour to others through interaction, support, and decision-making (Brown et al., 2005).

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This view communicates the expectation that individuals should model attitudes and behaviours such as impartiality and trustworthiness that emphasizes their legitimacy as role models. In the South African context, the Policy on the South African Standards for Principals (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2015) indicates that *“Ethical leadership in all its various facets, and more particularly in leading diversity, is of paramount importance for an effective principal”* (Section 6). In the same policy, the expectation is that principals should *“behave with integrity towards people of all cultures and instilling positive values and ethical perspectives”* (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.4(b)). This policy expectation aims to guide principals to lead and manage schools in ethically acceptable ways. Albeit the expectation that principals should lead in ethically accepted ways; they still struggle with the enactment of ethical leadership. Vikaraman et al. (2021) note that Malaysian principals practice a high level of ethical leadership, yet there they are also limited by frequent policy changes. In the Botswanan context, a strong concern is the prevailing presence of Eurocentric ways of approaching educational matters in Botswana education policies which create huge challenges for the enactment of ethical leadership in African schools (Pansiri et al., 2021). The authors (Pansiri et al., 2021) indicate that one possible solution would be to conduct more research to propose actions to guide school leaders (principals) on how to become ethical and moral educational ambassadors. In a South African study, Hlongwane (2021) reported that principals hold the view that policy content does not work for them because of an absence of training and support in understanding policy content. In this regard, a lack of adequate support does not help principals to effectively deal with ethical dilemmas they may face in schools. From a policy perspective, this paper takes cognizance of principals’ struggles regarding the enactment of ethical leadership in schools. As such, this paper continues the debate on ethical leadership, and asks the following question: *What virtues can be derived from an analysis of education policy texts to guide principals to enact ethical leadership in schools?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Thoughts about ethical leadership

In this section, we have shared thoughts about ethical leadership from Western, African, and South African perspectives. Thereafter, we put forward a combination of these different thoughts to arrive at a conceptualization of ethical leadership as it is used in this paper.

From a Western perspective, Zhu et al. (2019) observed that the purpose of ethical leadership has been to guard against unethical conduct in the workplace. Arar’s (2016) study in Israel highlighted unethical decision-making by principals and deputy principals as an example of ethical misbehaviour. Such unethical leadership implies, amongst others, that principals’ lives have become fraught with ethical dilemmas, problems are experienced with teachers’ performance, an enactment of positional superiority, and unfairness in the workplace (Arar 2016). Considering this notion (Arar, 2016), ethical leaders should contribute to ethically effective organisations and positive outcomes (Byun et al. 2018), whilst the emphasis is placed on creating harmony, behaving friendly, equality, justice, reasonable teaching approaches, and protecting the rights of others (Göçen 2021). Papaloi et al. (2023) examined the connection between ethical climate and ethical

leadership in European educational administrations. A significant finding was that Greek principals pay less attention to guiding teachers ethically and neglect the advancement of ethical education. The authors advise that this finding should be considered by education policy makers so that ethical behaviour is promoted in schools.

In the African context, ethical leadership holds a reference to Bantu Philosophy where tribal groupings from diverse cultures live in harmony with each other. In this regard, Shakeel et al. (2019) explain that,

ethical leadership is the implicit and explicit pursuit of desired ethical behaviour for self and followers through efforts governed by rules and principles that advocate learning motivation, healthy optimism and clarity of purpose to uphold the values of empowerment, service to others, concern for human rights, change for betterment and fulfilling duties towards society, future generations, environment and its sustainability (p. 9).

This description of ethical leadership implies that sanity should prevail in any organisation, and that individuals (principals) should foster harmonious environments without strict monitoring because it is accepted that all individuals are conscious of the enactment of ethical behaviour. Chibaya (2024) explored ethical leadership in four Zimbabwean secondary schools. In Zimbabwe, education policy provides ethical expectations that guide the behaviour of those in public institutions and schools. The study advises that training about ethical leadership should be provided so that schools can flourish.

A South African perspective holds that ethical leadership is associated with Ubuntu philosophy which acknowledges that a human being cannot live in isolation, but there is a need, and awareness for co-existence and interaction with other people (Mabvurira, 2020). Such interaction should be based on ethical leadership behaviour that is grounded on virtues within an Ubuntu spirit (Nicolaides & Dlodla, 2023). Ubuntu virtues are exemplified in the iconic leadership and personality of Nelson Mandela, who challenged the way leadership is enacted and how individuals conduct themselves ethically. Mandela's views offer great value when considering how leaders (principals) ought to behave when making ethical decisions in schools (Nicolaides & Dlodla, 2023). In another South African context, Maimela (2023) explored how ethical leadership can contribute to promoting trust and accountability in two public schools. Although the author (Maimela, 2023) observed that principals, departmental heads and teachers must have the wisdom to understand the subtleties of leadership, it is mostly principals that experience difficulties when they are confronted with ethical decisions that are based on policy.

Drawing on the Western, African, and South African perspectives, we put forward a combined notion of ethical leadership in alignment with this paper (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Western, African, and South African perspectives on thoughts about ethical leadership

In line with the indicated combination, we have articulated ethical leadership as the promotion of acceptable behaviour through individual actions and social relations, and to promote equitable access and opportunity to all. In this sense, we advocate for a democratic view of ethical leadership. Our view is that a democratic view of ethical leadership acknowledges significant moral rights at play which might be substantial for the making of honourable decisions. In this regard, principals can navigate complex ethical landscapes with integrity. A democratic, ethical leader incorporates school reform, democracy, and social justice through dialogue and is guided by a sense of accountability to learners, families, and the community. Our view is strengthened by a seminal thought of Heifetz (1994) who once proclaimed that central to ethical leadership is a consciousness of respecting people's dignity, as well as being sensitive to their needs as opposed to self-aggrandizement, thus creating an environment of trust, safety, and reconciliation. For principals to be regarded as ethical leaders as we explained here, they must be empowered in how to be a certain kind of person. In this regard, and from an ethical perspective, we hold the view that a certain kind of person (principals) needs to be empowered on how to practice virtues so that ethical behaviour can be strengthened.

The strengthening of ethical behaviour through introducing virtues can be regarded as an investment into principals' human capital development. When principals have knowledge about virtues and relate it to the policies that guide them in their leadership practices at schools, the possibility exists that they will become more productive and honourable individuals. We; therefore, argue, that the significance of virtues in alignment with principals' human capital development can help them to remember (in case they have forgotten), be

informed (in case they did not know), and remind them (in case they do not understand the practice of virtues well).

2.2 The ethical leadership debate in education policy

In the South African context, Maimela (2023) explored how ethical leadership can contribute to promoting trust and accountability in two public schools. Although the author (Maimela, 2023) observed that principals, departmental heads and teachers must have the wisdom to understand the subtleties of leadership, it is mostly principals that experience difficulties when they are confronted with ethical decisions that are based on policy.

2.2 The philosophy of virtues

The philosophy of virtues hinges on the quest to understand and live a life of honourable disposition. Such a disposition assumes that individuals acquire virtue through practice. To explain the practice of virtues from a philosophical point of view, we consulted the Eurocentric thoughts of Aristotle (2014) and the Afrocentric views of Metz (2014).

2.2.1 *From the mind of Aristotle*

Aristotle regards ethical virtues as social skills, complex and rational (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022). However, Aristotle rejects the idea that to be entirely honourable individuals should acquire, through training, an understanding of what honesty is. Individuals should rather be made aware of how to live a decent life through proper upbringing and habits. To live a decent life in the school context, principals should “*instill values and ethical perspectives*” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.4(b)). If the enactment of values and ethics becomes habits, principals can be honourable individuals who can lead with integrity. Notably, principals should understand virtues, and such understanding can even be refined through habituation. By continually practicing virtuous actions, individuals can develop virtuous qualities (Aristotle, 2014). This process requires self-reflection, self-discipline, and a commitment to personal growth. Also, Aristotle (2014) acknowledges that the cultivation of virtues is not a solitary endeavour. It is through social interactions and communal relationships that individuals can truly develop and express their virtues. Thus, in the pursuit of living a virtuous life, principals should, according to policy directives, live in harmony with others, whilst they conduct themselves in an ethically sound manner.

2.2.2 *From the African voice of Metz*

In this section, we have explained the African perspective of virtues which centres on the community and how it aligns with school policies. Virtues are grounded in the salient sub-Saharan traditions in which a person is said to exist in a community, unlike the Western perspectives, which are more centred on individualism (Metz, 2014). As such, African philosophy advocates that the purpose of life is to serve or belong to a community. This extends to sharing, participating, promoting the good, identity, solidarity, and improving other people’s lives (Metz, 2014). The latter notion is further explained when Metz (2011) cites a view by Shutte which indicates that individuals’ greatest honourable responsibility is to have open and truthful relationships with others. In another

study, Metz (2014) also cites Kwame Gyekye, a Ghanaian, who argues that for his Akan people, ideal and moral virtues include kindness, compassion, consideration, generosity, and reverence, while respecting traditional values. These views (Metz, 2011; 2014) imply that ethical conduct should be geared toward sharing, caring, and improving the self, as well as the lives of others.

Considering Metz's (2014) views, principals are also guided by the policies that govern their conduct when performing their duties. According to the SASP (RSA, 2015), principals should:

behave with integrity towards people of all cultures and instilling positive values and ethical perspectives in educators and learners so that they will have as much respect for the cultural practices of others and of the school as they have for their own cultural practices (p. 10).

This suggests that principals should be part of a community, which is the school where harmony and respect for each other should prevail for effectiveness. As such, principals' actions should be a portrayal of strong ethics (aligned with learned virtues) so that all individuals in schools can experience a sense of belonging. Thus, when principals show respect for other's values, they may regard themselves as ethical agents, who promote the good, reverence identity, advance solidarity, and improve other people's lives.

Two important notions can be derived from these philosophical perspectives, namely by persistently exercising virtuous behaviour, people can acquire moral worth (Aristotle, 2014), and that people should realize that they live a life amid others (Metz, 2014). Whilst Aristotle (2014) argues for a more individualistic approach to virtues, Metz (2014) argues that individuals' virtuous actions should be to the benefit of the self and others. Our philosophical stance is that in the practice of virtues, whether for individualistic purposes or to benefit a coterie, principals should have the knowledge and skills to navigate ethical dilemmas effectively. Thus, when the practice of virtues becomes a habit, principals should be able to identify ethical challenges, explore different moral possibilities to solve problems, appraise the consequences of making decisions, and select options that align with moral principles.

3. Theoretical framework: Ethical leadership theory

Individuals are sometimes confronted with ethically questionable behaviour, and this may result in them violating their own values because they act out of self-interest - an act that is also referred to as motivated blindness (Bazerman, 2020). This kind of blindness appears when individuals have a particular stake in immoral activities, whilst trying to find ways to justify their conduct (Belludi, 2023). To counterbalance unethical behaviour, people should foster an observing attitude by continually questioning whether it is of any worth to conduct themselves unethically (Belludi, 2023, p. 1). In the education realm, and, in the context of this paper, a noticing mindset presupposes that principals should act with normatively acceptable behaviour through their actions and social relationships so that others' awareness of ethical behaviour is reinforced (Brown et al., 2005). As such, this paper employed ethical leadership theory which aims

to develop ethically acceptable principles, ideas, and thoughts to influence individuals' actions, work, and behaviour (Rabie et al., 2020). Influencing others requires an understanding of virtues that underpin acceptable ethical behaviour (Guo, 2022).

Significantly, virtues do not exist in isolation because they link individuals' character, the common good, and the economy in a unifying way. In this regard, Arjoon (2000) purports that ethical leaders should have a strong understanding of the common good and the means to promote it – thus applying ethical virtues to lead people to attain goals relating to the common good. From an ethical perspective, leadership for the common good presupposes the juxtaposition and tolerance of different perspectives in terms of what is ethically right, fair, and just (*vide*: Wilson, 2022). In the context of this paper, ethical leadership for the common good refers to the collocation of virtues that can be inculcated through proper disposition as acts, habit, and then character. This implies that principals, as moral agents in education, should know and enact virtues so that they can be cognizant of the bad and good, and wrong and right. Arguably, virtues are not just about action, but also perception, motivation, and justification (Wright et al., 2021). Therefore, an interpretation of virtues (Wright et al., 2021) can include inputs (incidences in the environment, policies, and people's minds can be construed as virtue-relevant or not); intermediate processing (views about virtues should be interpreted to find possible meanings thereof); and outputs (actions should be taken to bring meaning to the interpreted virtues). Krettenauer and Stichter (2023) indicate that an interpretation of virtues should not be linked to global understanding only. Rather, individuals should be cognizant that virtues hold a reference to the notion that life is about belonging to and serving the community (Iroegbu, 2005). Whilst service to the community encompasses activities directed to help others (Nichol et al., 2023), belonging to the community requires an ethical way of life in relation to the values of that community (Michalski, 2020). Similarly, Nkondo (2007), a South African, remarks that an Ubuntu philosophy holds that virtues (from an ethical perspective) should be seen as an obligation as to what leaders (principals) should do ethically right within the community.

Significantly, ethical leadership theory is underpinned by principles of moral community, respect, service, justice, and honesty. The principle of moral community implies the fostering of shared values so that ethical thinking can be understood and adhered to, and where people are inspired to achieve the goals of an organization (see also: Tirri & Kuusisto, 2022). Respect as an acknowledgement of the value and worth of other individuals, and should be accompanied by listening, empathy and tolerance (Northouse, 2013). The service principle implies that ethical leaders choose to perform selfless services to promote harmony and community ethics rather than practicing self-interest (Wirba, 2023). Justice is applied when principals influence moral behaviour in the pursuit of fairness, consistency, equity and transparency (Alhaidan, 2024; Dimitriou & Ducette, 2018). According to Enwereuzor et al. (2020), leaders must be honest about their conduct so that they can be held accountable for their actions. We contend that these principles are not merely ethical ideas, but shape behaviours and actions of

individuals' everyday experiences and practices. Rather, these principles can be translated into virtues which find meaning in policies, thus providing guidance in what people can learn and how they can find ethical purpose to existence and actions. According to Gentry and Fleshman (2020), virtues can help principals to advance their ethical leadership skills, thus cultivating the desired habits to work with prudence.

Considering the perspectives of the authors in this section, our view is that virtues can be regarded as an enactment of what is ethically right and fair to help others and to do what is morally acceptable in the community. To assist principals in doing what is ethically right, it is necessary to articulate how virtues can be implemented (Woodcock, 2021). In this paper, texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) were analyzed to derive virtues that can be regarded as ethical capabilities to assist principals in navigating multifaceted and complex ethical dilemmas toward inclusive and sustainable schools.

Before an analysis of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) were presented, we first explicated the research design and methodology applied in this paper.

4. Research design and methodology

4.1 Research design

We employed a Conceptual Research Design (CRD), which is a qualitative research design associated with ideas and concepts about a phenomenon being studied, attempting to suggest possible solutions to real-life problems (Hirschheim, 2008). According to Vargo and Koskela-Huotari (2020), conceptual research differs from empirical research because the latter usually emphasizes evidence that is based on explanations regarding phenomena of interest. Conceptual research applies evidence grounded in recent literature, supported by intelligible, captivating reason. In this paper, the focus was not on the knowledge and experience of human beings, but on policy perspectives regarding virtues that can support principals in transforming the way they think about and enact ethical leadership. In policy studies, an application of CRD supports researchers in scrutinizing policy content, allowing them to hollow out potential policy solutions to address educational matters (Farrell & Coburn, 2016). In this paper, a CRD was useful because it enabled us to search for advanced thoughts in two education policies to guide principals about how to use virtues to enact ethical leadership in schools. Of further significance, a CRD was useful to *"bridge existing theories in interesting ways, link work across disciplines, provide multi-level insights, and broaden the scope of our thinking"* (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015, p. 128). We consulted education policies and engaged respectfully with existing literature to provide novel thoughts about virtues for principals to enact ethical leadership. In so doing, we believe that information about virtues in alignment with ethical leadership should not be considered the same as before. According to Vigani (2024), virtues cannot be regarded as inborn, and the enactment of virtues should be regarded as a moral tradition, implying that the cultivation of a virtue should be regarded as the ability to learn while performing duties. We; therefore, associate ourselves with the view that knowledge and truth about phenomena are subjective and should, therefore,

be questioned so that new information thereof can be made known (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). As such, an application of CRD assisted us in rejecting final views regarding virtues, whilst we were able to identify potential policy options that assisted us in proposing a virtues framework to advance principals' ability to enact ethical leadership in schools. During the application of the research design, we took the stance that we would not follow the ideas and works of others dogmatically, but that we would engage respectfully with the academic literature to put forward innovative ideas regarding virtues for the enactment of ethical leadership in schools.

4.2 Research paradigm

In this paper, we employed interpretivism as a paradigm based on obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon from numerous perspectives because an interpretive attitude presupposes that reality is subjective and is constructed based on researchers' interpretation of the data (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This paper dealt with interpreting texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) to identify virtues applicable to the enactment of ethical leadership by principals in schools. We were cognizant that the interpretation of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) required an understanding of the meanings that could be found about virtues. Significantly, an interpretation of education policy texts is regarded as an original understanding of hidden meanings of education policy texts (Ball et al., 2011). To understand hidden meanings of texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996), we employed three criteria: *"who are interpreting, why they are interpreting and how they are interpreting"* (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022, p. 421). Firstly, *"who"* referred to the two authors of this paper, individuals who believed that by exploring virtues from a policy perspective, principals can be empowered to think differently about the enactment of ethical leadership in schools. Secondly, the reason *"why"* we interpreted texts in the mentioned policies was because policy interpretation is not just a matter of listening to the pronouncements of policymakers, but that we were aware that policy texts need to be deciphered when new meanings are searched for. Thirdly, we actively read the texts, made notes, and highlighted key points relevant to virtues until we reached a point where we found novel meanings of virtues for principals to enact ethical leadership in schools. Thus, interpreting education policy implies that meanings were exposed, and in the case of this paper, meanings of virtues were derived for the enactment of ethical leadership by principals. Notably, we believe that reality is multidimensional; therefore, the meanings of virtues in education policies are open to multiple interpretations. An application of interpretivism was useful because we obtained a greater understanding of policy virtues, which can be used to advance principals' ability regarding the enactment of ethical leadership in schools.

4.3 Research methodology

We used a qualitative methodology because of the need to have an advanced understanding of ideas regarding the phenomenon under study. The idea was to uncover fresh meanings of virtues (from policy texts) that can be regarded as relevant to principals' ability to enact ethical leadership in schools. Significantly, qualitative research is an exploratory method (Mohajan, 2018); seeks to explore and understand a phenomenon (Nassaji, 2020); and is non-mathematical,

contextualized, and interpretive (Nassaji, 2020). Thus, having employed a qualitative research approach, we were able to learn more about how education policies can contribute to innovative perspectives regarding principals' ability to enact ethical leadership in schools. Klag and Langley (2013) hold the view that interpretation suggests the detection of innovative ways to understand phenomena, whilst researchers can create and share new thinking, and, in the case of this paper, new thinking about virtues relevant to principals' ability to enact ethical leadership in schools.

4.4 Sampling

This paper has a conceptual underpinning, and no human beings were involved. Notably, texts in two education policies with a strong reference to virtues for ethical leadership embodied the conceptual sample for this research. These policies are the (a) Policy on the South African Standard for Principalship (RSA, 2015) and the South African Schools Act (SASA) (RSA, 1996).

With reference to the SASP, the South African Department of Basic Education (SADBE) has,

implemented a system of career pathing for education leaders and managers and to make available a framework of processes and programmes for developing leadership and management. These will be based upon an agreed understanding of the core purposes of a principal's leadership role, the key areas of such a role, the values which underpin them, and the personal and professional qualities required to fulfil the role (RSA, 2015, p. 3).

The use of "values" is an indication of the goal of the SADBE in terms of principals' development. Values are the standards by which individuals appraise thoughts, individuals, and actions as good, meaningful, necessary, incorrect, insignificant, or unwanted (Gökçe, 2021). The reference to "*actions as good*" (Gökçe 2021) aligns with the notion of virtues because the teaching of values is necessary to create needed virtues and habits (Gökçe, 2021). Furthermore, the SASP also foregrounded ethical leadership. This is evident in the indication that "*Ethical leadership in all its various facets, and more particularly in leading diversity, is of paramount importance for an effective principal*" (RSA, 2015, p. 25). The South African Department of Basic Education (SADBE) is adamant about principals' moral behaviour because ethical leadership in the school context is steered by veneration for values and persistent trust in the rights and dignity of others (*vide*: Bromley, 2020).

In terms of the South African Schools Act (SASA) (RSA, 1996), a principal of a school means "*an educator appointed or acting as the head of a school*" (Chapter 1, Section 1(xv)). According to Prinsloo (2016), principals have an ethical duty regarding the implementation of constitutional functions or policies regarding admission, language, religion, and school funds. Section 16A of the SASA designates the functions and powers of principals as the representatives of the Head of Department (HOD) in the governing body and are thus obliged to ensure departmental policies are implemented in a meaningful and professional manner. The use of "ensure" in the SASA holds a reference to the ethical preparation of principals in terms of the development of skills, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge

associated with competence in moral reasoning. It is; therefore, critical that principals adhere to sound ethical practices (RSA, 1996). Notably, principals have a moral obligation to be familiar with the principles, rules, ideals, and virtues associated with ethical conduct in schools (Mlambo & Khumalo, 2022).

Two important notions can be derived from these policies (RSA, 1996; RSA, 2015). Firstly, the SASA (1996, Section 16A(2)(I) requires that principals be prepared in how to enact ethical leadership in their engagements with people and managerial functions within the school. This notion in the SASA aligns with the belief that principals must have ethical competencies such as trustworthiness, responsibility, fairness, and honesty. Secondly, the SASP is adamant that principals should “*act in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, all the relevant laws and regulations, and the Code of Ethics of SACE*” (p. 12). This policy instruction aligns directly with the view that ethical behaviour is about leading, inspiring, and motivating following the ethical motives that are assigned to a particular work (Quynh et al., 2025). As such, an analysis of texts in the SASA (RSA, 1996) and SASP (RSA, 2015) can thus be considered relevant because we explored what virtues for principals’ ethical leadership can be derived from an analysis of texts in South African education policies.

4.5 Data generation

We applied text mining to examine the collection of texts in documents to search for information that may be useful (Gyódi et al., 2023) because it assists researchers in identifying the most important issues relevant to a phenomenon under study; highlights the connections between identified issues and the challenges about the phenomenon; and assists policy analysts to gain a better understanding of why an issue was put on the table of the policy agenda. As such, text mining assisted us in scrutinizing texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) to search for virtues applicable to the ethical leadership of principals as moral agents in education. We first scrutinized each policy separately and made notes of those texts that may speak strongly to ethical leadership. Secondly, we reread our notes and scrutinized the selected stipulations for a second time to label those that have the strongest connection to ethical leadership. This search for texts that speak about ethical leadership continued until no new information surfaced. We anticipated that the search for virtues about ethical leadership and its applicability to principals can be regarded as a refreshing and exciting research and development opportunity.

4.6 Data analysis

We made use of policy text analysis to analyse texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) to explore virtues for principals’ ability to enact ethical leadership. Policy texts provide guidelines for practice and consequently policy documents need to be understood at a depth that enables capable action to ensue (Cardno, 2018). We first scrutinized the content of the policies to find texts that can be associated with virtues, ethics and leadership. We then looked for implicit assumptions in each of the texts that might not have been immediately visible, but which could be revealed through careful analysis. In so doing, we could identify the worth of texts in terms of their significance to virtues. We performed a pre-analysis of identified virtues to understand their intent and effectiveness in

relation to the enactment of ethical leadership. After identifying virtues, we assigned a name to the virtues to make them nameable, followed by an explanation of each virtue, and converting them into practical actions that could be applied by principals when they would be confronted with issues of ethics in schools. Notably, the applied steps for policy text analysis were useful in this study because it created the platform for ethical leadership enactment that occurs around policy implementation.

5. The significance of policy analysis

Fan and Popkewitz (2020) articulate education policy as,

a code of conduct, a normative existence, and a tool employed by a policy entity to govern the educational cause. Educational policy carries the feature of timeliness as it is formulated to meet the needs of development in a particular period in response to the problems existing and emerging in the education field in this particular period (p. xi).

In the context of this paper, “educational cause” held reference to policy perspectives on virtues for principals’ enactment of ethical leadership. There is, however, no explicit meaning that can be attached to the intentions of policies and how policy directives should be enacted. It is, therefore, necessary that the reading of education policy should not be only a matter of comprehending its instructive context or reading it as declarations of policymakers, but rather to consider that: “the discursive formations they contain... await decoding” (*vide*: Olssen et al., 2004). Significantly, reading, and interpreting education policy texts should be an exercise of respectful engagement because an understanding of what policies intend needs effort, control, and persistence, implying that interpretation entails numerous appraisals and innovative categories of analysis (Derrida, 1995). Notably, a thorough reading and analysis of education policy texts should lead to the development of human agency. This aligns with human capital development in that human beings’ productive capacity should be increased through training and talent development (Ross, 2023). In the context of this paper, a thorough reading and interpretation of the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996) should lead to knowledge acquisition and training of principals in terms of virtues for the enactment of ethical leadership in schools. In the search for virtues for ethical leadership development, we asked the following questions to get a grip on the significance of policy analysis in terms of the texts found in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996):

- What are the dominant discourses regarding virtues and ethical leadership?
- What can be regarded as hidden meanings about virtues locked in the policy texts?
- How can an analysis of texts in these policies contribute to human capital development (in the case of this paper: virtues as human capital for the enactment of ethical leadership)?

We believe that the significance of policy analysis in this paper can be regarded as important because it can play a crucial role in shaping principals’ ability to enact ethical leadership in schools.

A combination of information from the literature review and texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996), assisted with the identification of virtues for the enactment of ethical leadership. An explication follows on how the identified virtues, *practical wisdom*, *parrhesia*, *homo virtus*, and *self-critique*, became visible in this paper.

5.1 Virtue 1: Practical wisdom

Practical wisdom includes a set of skills, a process of making wise decisions, and high intelligence guided by moral virtues (Jeste et al., 2019, p. 2018). The theory of "practical wisdom," also renowned as *phronesis* in Greek, was originally used by Aristotle who regarded it as a logical virtue, implying that individuals do not only have knowledge to make ethical decisions but also the capacity to perform in a sound manner in actual situations (Massingham, 2019). Jakubik (2021) explored the fundamental leadership and management practices and how practical wisdom can become visible in such practices. The finding revealed that it is necessary that practical wisdom should be cultivated in leadership and management practices because it is important for ethical decision-making in handling complexity and unpredictability. In the literature study conducted in this paper, practical wisdom as a virtue surfaced by "*a person should be taught*" (Aristotle, 2014, p. 5), "*ethical conduct should become an informed habit*" (Metz, 2014, p. 4), "*establish a disciplined environment*" (RSA, 2015), and "*express opinions*" (RSA, 1996). By obtaining wisdom as explained by the authors (Jeste et al., 2019; Aristotle, 2014; Metz, 2014; RSA, 2015; RSA, 1996), principals can be guided on how to use knowledge and skills to understand how to act ethically.

5.2 Virtue 2: Parrhesia

Parrhesia is known as the ethical motivation to tell the truth and holds a reference to the notion that individuals must care enough for themselves to change their lives to ensure that their conduct can be regarded as ethically acceptable (Posselt, 2021,). Parrhesia originated from the Greek word, 'language', and has a reference to the act of speaking freely without any favour or fear, allowing individuals to behave themselves in the best possible manner (Cavin et al., 2024). It is a movement using voice in which speakers have a close relationship with truth-telling even though it might be risky and dangerous (Cavin et al., 2024). In his study, De Klerk (2014) referred to parrhesia as a practice that can be applied by teachers to understand the lived educational truths they are experiencing through education policy discourses. In understanding what policy expects from them, teachers may be motivated to engage in truth-telling about their behaviours and actions in schools. In this paper, parrhesia as a virtue is recognized in the use of "*contribute to ethically effective organisations*" (Byun et al., 2018, p. 5), "*reflect and refine their understanding*" (Aristotle, 2014, p. 5), "*sharing, caring, and improving*" (Metz, 2014, p. 4), "*behave with integrity*" (RSA, 2015), and "*take into account*" (RSA, 1996). The significance of parrhesia can be found in the notion that policies can be directive in how principals should engage in truth-telling (to speak freely) to ensure that their leadership can be regarded as ethical.

5.3 Virtue 3: Homo virtus

Homo virtus is explained as how individuals become ethically aware of how to conduct themselves in a particular situation, which ultimately contributes to raising awareness of the self (Friedland & Cole 2019). The notion of homo virtus relates to individuals conduct (behaviour) and has been part of discussions in Ancient Greece, and, according to Aristotle, it holds reference to the development of moral conduct which is fundamental in attaining fulfilment (Parada-Contzen & Parada-Daza, 2023). The same authors (Parada-Contzen & Parada-Daza, 2023) explored the weighting of homo economicus and homo virtus. De Klerk (2014) explains that homo economicus makes it possible for teachers to control their behaviour. In their study (Parada-Contzen & Parada-Daza, 2023) found that the homo virtus makes it possible for individuals to consider issues such as integrity, morality, and justice for personal well-being. In this paper, homo virtus become visible in the use of *"an awareness of the responsibility to respect people's dignity"* (Heifetz, 1994, p. 2), *"be made aware of how to live a decent life"* (Aristotle 2014, p. 5), *"concern for others"* (Metz, 2014, p. 4), and *"inspire self-awareness"* (RSA, 2015). The significance of homo virtus can be found in the notion that principals are guided on how to critically evaluate and change their moral esteem.

5.4 Virtue 4: Self-critique

Self-critique as a virtue requires individuals (principals) to develop ethical practices so they live an ethically driven life (Batters, 2011). The origin of "self-critique" can be traced back to explanations of self-criticism which is explained by Kannan and Levitt (2013) as a mindful assessment of the self in terms of behaviour while critically examining their own actions, thoughts, and decisions, often with the intention of identifying areas for improvement or learning from mistakes. In this paper, self-critique as a virtue becomes visible in the use of *"behaviour of the self"* (Shakeel et al. 2018, p. 9), *"self-discipline"* (Aristotle, 2014, p. 4), *"improving the self"* (Metz, 2014, p. 4), *"take responsibility and accountability"* (RSA, 2015) and *"performance of their functions"* (RSA, 1996). Considering the aforementioned (Aristotle, 2014; Metz, 2014; RSA, 1996; RSA, 2015; Shakeel et al., 2018), self-critique in principals may lead to the application of a serious attitude to first engage in confronting their decisions and actions, and then engage in actual decision-making, whilst they are motivated to conduct themselves in an ethically accepted manner.

We, therefore, believe that the identified virtues will contribute to a positive change in the enactment of ethical leadership (Figure 2).

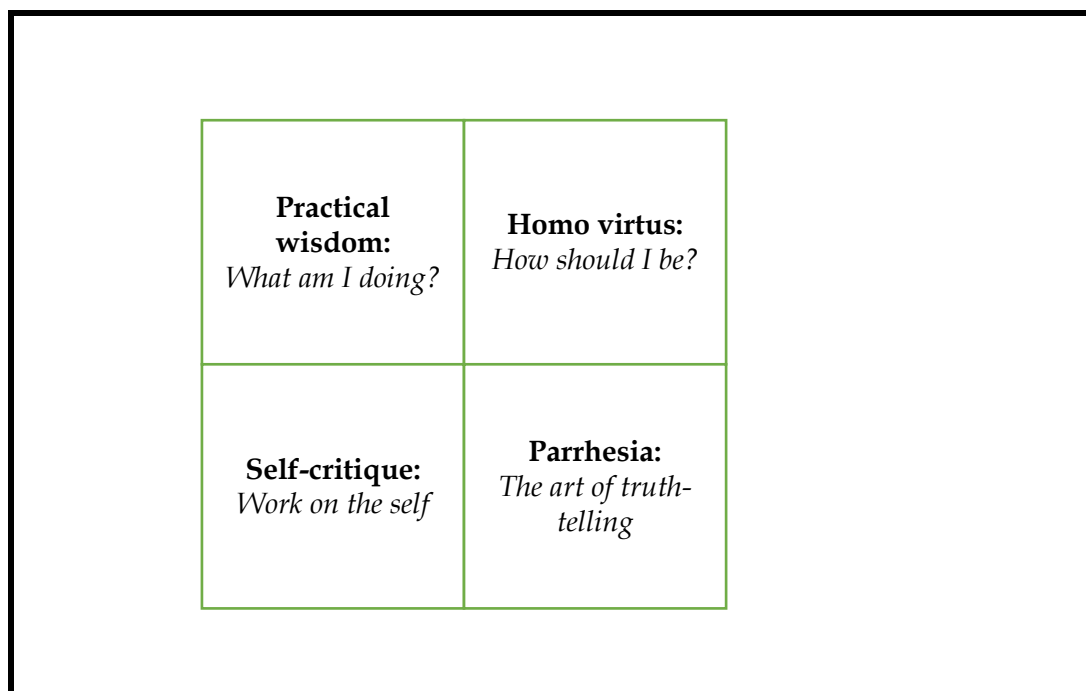


Figure 2: Virtues for principals to enact ethical leadership

6. Virtues for principals to enact ethical leadership

6.1 Virtue 1: Practical wisdom

Practical wisdom is also referred to as professional knowledge, and it involves a cognitive process of reflecting on practice. In this regard, South African education policies encourage principals to “establish a disciplined and purposeful school environment” (RSA, 1996, Section 8(2)), thus creating “an atmosphere of transparency” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.2(c)), where others will enjoy the freedom to “express their opinions” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.2(i)). Words like “disciplined” (RSA, 1996), “transparency” (RSA, 2015), and “opinions” (RSA, 2015) strongly align with practical wisdom as a virtue. Here, the South African policies (RSA, 1996; RSA, 2015) require principals to portray the capacity to act in a fair and just manner to ensure that they handle the businesses of the school consistently. In this way, the policies guide principals on how to empower others to gain a greater knowledge of what it means to act ethically (disciplined), to be open and honest (transparency), and to use reason to be rational about their actions (opinions). Thus, considering the guidance by the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996), and to answer the question “*What am I doing*”, principals should create “*spheres of what is noble*” (Aristotle 2014, p. 5), and “*improve the people’s way of living*” (Metz, 2014, p. 4). In illustrating practical wisdom, we extracted information from an online article by Roberts (2025) when she wrote:

Schools are where society looks after its young until they’re old enough to take on the mantle of adult citizenship. Every choice that a school leader makes, therefore, is doubly scrutinised – first, because of our public service duty to provide excellent learning for all, and second, because potentially every decision is made under the scrutiny of the sharp, interested, critical and malleable children whom we serve.

School leaders, however, are at the mercy of competing demands from different directions (n.p.)

In terms of this scenario, principals need to know how to use wisdom to respond to the competing demands within their work (*vide*: Roberts, 2025). When aligned to policy perspectives as outlined in this paper, an understanding of practical wisdom requires that principals recognize and understand ethical complexities when making decisions.

We contend that an understanding of policy, principals' knowledge and skills can be enriched so that they understand how to act ethically in schools.

6.2 Virtue 2: Parrhesia as a virtue

Foucault interprets parrhesia as “free spokenness” (2011, p. 2), “a profession of truth” (2010, p. 2), or a specific “modality of truth-telling” (2011, p. 15). This relates to the notion that individuals commit themselves to absolute truth-telling and actions to act ethically in each situation. Such individuals possess the intellectual capacity to be open and honest against unjust situations, thus portraying a willingness to move from shady situations and rather behave with honesty (Arendt, 1998). The act of stepping out to be truthful is not always an easy activity because individuals are often confronted with the fact that the truth is disputed, contested, and sometimes dismissed (Maxwell, 2019). Albeit this notion (Maxwell, 2019), the enactment of parrhesia as a virtue requires principals to act with ethical integrity. In this regard, South African education policies encourage the enactment of parrhesia by indicating that principals should “create an environment that is trusting and disciplined” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.2(d)), so that everyone related to the school “behave with integrity towards people of all cultures and instilling positive values and ethical perspectives in educators and learners” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.4(b)), thus, ensuring that they “take into account the rights and wishes of the parents” (RSA, 1996 Section 5(6)). The appearance of words like “trusting” (RSA, 2015), “integrity” (RSA, 2015), and “take into account” (RSA, 1996) constitute an action of truth-telling because it places principals in a parrhesiastic position, thus encouraging them to appraise their actions and choices while doing the right things even when they are not seen (Burch, 2009). In this way, the policies (RSA, 1996; RSA, 2015) guide principals to confront and oppose unethical conduct, whilst they are equally motivated to make truth-telling a habit because,

Truth then is primarily defined as a quality of mind: truth reveals and makes clear what is; but secondarily as a quality of things relating to the mind that originates them: each thing's truth is its possession of the being established for it (McDermott, 1989, p. 30).

Aligning McDermott's (1989) view with the above extracts from the RSA (2015) and RSA (1996), principals are thus advised to cultivate a habit of parrhesia so that they develop ethically sound relationships with the self and others (Châteauvert-Gagnon, 2022). The development of ethically sound relationships is further described by South African policies (RSA, 2015; RSA, 1966) as a search for the moral, ethical, and spiritual conditions that entitle individuals (principals) to present themselves as truth-tellers in schools.

To illustrate parrhesia, we extracted information from a scenario by Henebery (2024) who wrote about how principals can handle ethical matters. Of significance was the following: *"If school leaders can make explicit the challenges their school community faces along with the ethical values and principles, they will use to address them, they will be more equipped to navigate them"* (n.p.). This use of "make explicit" resonates with parrhesia as truth-telling in that principals should practice different ways of telling stories about ethical, and even unethical experiences in schools.

Parrhesia may empower principals to work towards long-lasting social change, whilst they can become activists who are able to speak, who are heard, and who are open to challenges and accountability.

6.3 Virtue 3: Homo virtus

In ancient Greek culture, homo virtus is regarded as a virtue that describes the balance between deficiency and excess of personality traits (Parada-Contzen & Parada-Daza, 2023). This implies that individuals should not do less than what is expected from them or do too much in terms of what they should do, thus remaining within the guidance of policy. Drawing on Aristotle, homo virtus requires that individuals ask the question *"How should I be"* rather than *"What should I do"* (Dimmock & Fischer, 2017, p. 52). These questions imply that individuals get an opportunity to be involved in the cultivation of the good, which is critical for the achievement of ethical satisfaction.

For example, Dimmock and Fischer (2017) tell the story of how individuals might be aware that a brick must go into a particular place, yet individuals become good builders only when they know how to place that brick properly. The same thought can be attached to the meaning of enacting homo virtus as a virtue. In this instance, homo virtus holds a reference to the notion that individuals become ethically aware of how to conduct themselves in a particular situation, which ultimately contributes to raising awareness of the self (Friedland & Cole, 2019). With such ethical awareness, individuals can understand their lives and the values that shape them (Caldwell & Hayes, 2016). Notably, an ethical awareness of the self is a moral duty associated with the identities of leaders (principals) in understanding their moral position in the school environment. In this regard, South African policies advise that principals should *"inspire self-awareness and self-reflection"* (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.1(k)), because it is expected that they *"ascribe to educational ethics and social values"* (RSA, 2015, Section 4.2). Words like "self-awareness", and "educational ethics" have a strong connection with ethical awareness in that principals are guided on how to critically evaluate and change their moral esteems; and take note of the effects of their attitudes on the lives of others (Türegün, 2017).

The significance of homo virtus can be found in the notion that principals can use knowledge, skills, and ethical awareness habits to increase moral behaviour in school environments.

6.4 Virtue 4: Self-critique

After individuals have become self-aware, they must also know how to apply self-critique which is a vital virtue. Whilst the concept of “self” is grounded in moral philosophy, “self-critique” is a virtue that has existed since the time of Kant (Tobias, 2021), and, in this regard, it requires individuals to be aware of and question their actions to alter undesired or unethical conduct. Thus, self-critique in individuals leads to the birth of a critical attitude, which helps them to be conscious of the ethical implications of their conduct and decision-making. As such, this inevitably opens a space for self-transformation, implying that individuals are not morally passive, but they continually search for the truth in particular situations and contexts. This means that when principals exercise self-critique to act ethically, they should, according to South African education policies “create an atmosphere of transparency in working towards common goals” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.2(c), allowing for a critique of their conduct and ethical behaviour so that they “take responsibility and be accountable in all matters concerning the school” (RSA, 2015, Section 5.1.1.5(k)), and ensuring that they “render all necessary assistance to governing bodies in the performance of their functions in terms of this Act” (RSA, 1996, Section 19.2). Words like “transparency” (RSA, 2015), “responsibility and accountability” (RSA, 2015), and “necessary assistance” (RSA, 1996) require an investigation into how principals should question their ethical engagement with the affairs of the school. For the late philosopher Michel Foucault, such investigation (self-critique) is an essential component of individual freedom and a way of taking care of the self. Foucault (1997) elaborates on the importance of this mindset, that when people take care of themselves, they become free individuals who conduct themselves in a respectable, principled, notable, and worthy manner. With this view in mind, South African education policies (RSA, 2015; RSA, 1996) thus require principals to constantly critique their actions and not develop an attitude of being individuals who are always correct but admit to correcting their actions if need be.

To establish an understanding of self-critique, we extracted the following from a newspaper article (Potterton, 2014):

I have only been a principal for a year and a half. I have discovered that being a principal is bit of a thankless job. You have to please the teachers, the unions, the board, the parents, the education department and the pupils. Don't get me wrong, I am not a know-it-all, but I have been around in the education system for a fair amount of time. [On a different note], transforming an education system that was so divided and so unequal has been a mammoth task, perhaps more mammoth than we ever imagined. Bringing about equity and improving school quality have been key imperatives of education policy in South Africa (n.p.).

Self-critique, as indicated in this newspaper extract, asks for an exploration into what is known, and what can be regarded as blind spots in terms of the work principals are doing. In this instance, principals should listen to the voices in their heads that guide their feelings and behaviour so that they can manage tensions and dilemmas in an ethical manner (Greany, 2024).

The significance of self-critique can be found in the notion that, through critical reflection, principals can continually reflect on their ethical conduct, critical opinion-sharing, and challenge group-think, whilst optimizing ethical work practices in the school.

7. Implications for the application of the identified virtues

The identified virtues in this paper hold implications for (a) principals' enactment of ethical leadership in schools.

The identified virtues require principals to become moral agents through the practice of the actions in which virtue finds its countenance (Hampson, 2017). This implies that principals should take time to get familiar with these virtues and practice them so that they can become comfortable of how to be ethical leaders. In the words of Burnyeat (1980),

I may be told and may believe, that such and such actions are just and noble, but I have not really learned for myself (taken to heart, made second nature to me) that they have this intrinsic value until I have learned to value (love) them for it, with the consequence that I take pleasure in doing them. To understand and appreciate the value that makes them enjoyable in themselves, I must learn to enjoy them, and that does take time and practice (p. 78).

Drawing on Burnyeat (1980), we propose the following activity that can assist principals to understand and practice virtues so that the application thereof can become an enjoyable activity.

Table 1: Activity that can assist principals to understand and practice virtues

Virtue	Practical wisdom: principals' actions should be grounded in moral considerations toward achieving the common good.
Habit	Principals should use instinctive knowledge of how to respond virtuously to various feelings, emotions, and situations. To do so, they must cultivate the habit of doing things ethically. Drawing on Aristotle (2014), "...men become builders by building" and "... we become just by doing just acts" (as cited in Dimmock & Fischer, 2017, p. 54). This implies that their actions must be grounded in moral considerations towards achieving the goals of the schools. In this regard, principals should constantly be mindful of how their ethical convictions manifest and influence their attempts to act wisely.
Virtue	Parrhesia: principals should commit themselves to absolute truth-telling and actions to act ethically in each situation.
Habit	Principals should foster a habit of thinking toward enacting justice in many ways, for example, what is being said and how decisions are made. In so doing, they may experience what it means to truthfully interact with themselves and others. They must, therefore, be able to unmask unethical conduct, let go of the veil of ignorance, and unblock the possibilities for moral change (<i>vide</i> : Price, 2020). In so doing, they might be able to become activists of the truth, use their

	voice as a form of resistance and speak out about what might be wasted and toxic in schools.
Virtue	Homo virtus: principals should be involved in the cultivation of the good, which is critical for the achievement of ethical satisfaction.
Habit	Principals should develop a character of truthfulness, which means being consistent, honest, and just in what they do and speak. Thus, when homo virtus becomes an ethical habit, principals may be able to make healthy decisions and portray characters that develop morality in the schools, whilst instilling an awareness of how to be ethical.
Virtue	Self-critique: principals should be aware of and question their actions to alter undesired or unethical conduct.
Habit	Principals should make it a habit to explore and expand their mindsets about what can be regarded as ethically correct and exercise such mindsets in terms of ethically acceptable conduct. In this regard, principals should cultivate an ethic of care, thus developing a willingness to listen to the self and others, appraise their own biases, foster a sense of accountability and frequently engage in learning opportunities about how to handle ethical challenges.

These virtues require a repetition thereof so that principals can become comfortable in enacting ethical leadership in schools.

8. Conclusion

This paper aimed to answer the question: *What virtues can be derived from an analysis of education policy texts to guide principals to enact ethical leadership in schools?*

In search of answers to the question, we first scrutinized the academic literature to familiarize ourselves with the meaning of ethical leadership. In this paper, we used the strongest meaning of ethical leadership in alignment with the work of principals. Principals, as ethical leaders, should integrate fairness, social justice, respect for people's dignity, and sensitivity to individuals' needs to create school environments of trust, honesty and empathy. The literature also informed us that there is an ongoing need that principals should be empowered on how to practice virtues so that their ethical behaviour in schools can be strengthened. We also took a philosophical glance at what ethical leadership denotes. A philosophical thought regarding principals' ability to enact ethical leadership requires that they (principals) should be aware of the ethical calling of the job they are doing and that they should engage in virtuous actions to effectively navigate ethical dilemmas in schools.

In our search for virtues, we analysed texts in the SASP (RSA, 2015) and SASA (RSA, 1996). From the analyses, four virtues were identified: practical wisdom, parrhesia, homo virtus and self-critique. The policies (RSA, 2015; RSA, 1996) advise that:

- **Practical wisdom:** principals should recognize and understand ethical complexities, whilst their actions are grounded in moral considerations

towards achieving the common good and schools become flourishing environments.

- **Parrhesia:** principals should constantly search for the moral and ethical conditions that will allow them to present themselves as truth-tellers in schools.
- **Homo virtus:** principals should develop characters for the advancement of morality, whilst instilling an awareness of how to be ethical.
- **Self-critique:** principals should constantly critique their actions and develop attitudes of acknowledging and correcting unethical behaviour.

These virtues imply that principals should engage in virtuous action, thus cultivating habits to become familiar with what the virtues entail and exercise the application of these virtues, so that their ethical leadership abilities can be strengthened. To assist principals, we suggest habits that principals can cultivate to apply practical wisdom, parrhesia, homo virtus, and self-critique.

We want to indicate that these are not the only virtues out there that can be applied to strengthen principals' ability to enact ethical leadership. We; therefore, invite other scholars to continue the debate on ethical leadership through more conceptual and empirical studies. As such, we hold the view that an analysis of principals' and teachers' narratives regarding transformative ethical leadership development in schools can be an interesting avenue for future research.

9. Recommendations

Considering the proposed virtues for principals' enactment of ethical leadership, we recommended:

- **Training and policy implementation:** The complex, ambiguous and uncertain school environments require principals to have capabilities that will assist them in making ethical decisions in school. As such, training on policy content may increase principals' ability to understanding ethical behaviour, and the application of ethical virtues so that they can become intelligent agents of ethical change in schools. Principals can rehearse their understanding of ethical leadership practices during cluster meetings for school leaders. This may include verbal reflection through dialogues.
- **Implementing an ethical leadership logbook:** An ethical leadership logbook may assist principals in keeping record of ethical matters in schools and find solutions for unethical behaviour so that ethical awareness can become a habit. During training programmes, principals should use lived scenarios to analyse ethical dilemmas, identify biases, suggest solutions to ethical matters and draft new ethics enactment strategies.
- **Establishing a learning space for ethical understanding:** Schools should have learning spaces where policies, and books with information regarding ethical conduct are displayed to foster an ethics of care in schools. During training workshops, principals can be involved in ethics appraisals, the recording of new ethics vocabulary, and gathering innovative ideas on how to be future-fit ethical leaders.

We contend that ethics is not confined in codes of conduct and cannot merely be practiced for the sake of compliance. Therefore, principals should not only know about ethics and how to enact ethical leadership, but they should regard it as a matter of daily professional, political, and personal practice. Our stance is that when principals would enact ethical leadership, the school environment can become a place in which all educational interest groups (teachers, learners, parents, and departmental officials) can enjoy a happy and healthy workplace. We suggest that future research could explore empirical validation of these virtues through case studies, interviews with principals, or comparative policy analysis.

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