



Ethics as a Transformational Strength in Education: An Ethical Leadership Perspective

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Abstract

Ethical intelligence is the strength of a transformational society. As a change agent, the school leader is expected to be a representative figure of ethical standards. Unfortunately, they are criticized for their unethical activities. Therefore, drawing on the concept of ethical leadership, this study aims to construct the meaning of ethics as they have lived with it, thereby exploring the transformational influences of ethical strengths. Adopting a narrative inquiry research design, lived narratives were generated from four principals of secondary level (Grades 9-12) selected purposively. The narrative data were analyzed and interpreted using Starratt's (2004) theoretical framework of ethical leadership of care, justice and critique. This study explored ethics as the mutual value of individual, institutional and social institutions. Human potentiality is the power of ethical intelligence that derives toward transformation. This finding shed light on the importance and execution of ethical abilities. It shares ethical knowledge, values and skills among individuals, schools and communities. It also portrays ethical sensitivities, which are the core foundation of a transformative society with rational personalities.

Keywords *Ethics, Ethical Leadership, School Principal, School Leadership and Transformation*

INTRODUCTION

Nepal is stepping toward a federal society with the hope that education will light on these steps. All Nepalese have faced many political, economic and social obstacles in recent days, which still stand as challenges for everyone and in every sector. One of the prime reasons for this is a moral and ethical deficiency in society. Now, the time has come to reinforce ethical sensitivities in hand and soul for the sake of sustainable development and prosperity in society. However, it would be possible if education could generate ethical empowered human recourses and harvest moral ground in society. It is obvious that many development forces are gearing up with their best for a better and sustainable future. However, as we experienced, without a strong moral foundation and ethical competency, transformation cannot exist for long. Bhattarai (2010) shares that ethics is a more responsible factor for generating hindrance in all areas of development, especially in the field of education. As we all assumed, education is a process of purification (Singh & Garg, 2011) of society. It is also considered a key means to transform a society (Carney & Bista, 2009). In this course of educational progress, the school principal as a leader plays the role of a change agent (Mullen, 2003) and carries a transformative praxis (Freire, 2000). In this regard, our concern is how principals live with ethical issues in their leadership.

Educational leaders are respected and expected to be exemplary icons of ethical standards. Their role modeling establishes ethical expectations and standards (Gini, 2004) and is the creator of moral human beings. They are powered by positions that are attractive for people to learn more about them and their leadership practices (Yukl, 2006). Leadership is about social influence (Manning & Curtis, 2014). Therefore, school leaders are buckled with various webs of society. Their characters, conduct and customs deliver knowledge at any time to any one and anywhere else. People learn from and follow them. Action, decision and behavior affect the climate of the school

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and the society. Leaders serve as role models. Therefore, ethical leadership models ethical behavior in the community (Ouma, 2017). We assume that school principals have enough capacity to diagnose right from wrong and perform accordingly. We seek to know why school leaders prepare them as ethical leaders.

Keeping the bird's eye quality of principal, we realized a big gap between expectation and performance. On the one hand, principals are honored as role models of the society. On the other hand, they are increasingly being criticized for their unethical activities. Previous studies highlight indigestible and unacceptable behaviors of institutional school principals (Lamichhane & Wagle, 2008). In the research, Bhattarai (2015) identified that head teachers did not demonstrate optimal care and justice to fully exercise their professional judgment. In this issue, the Government of Nepal also revealed the poor quality of professional development among teachers as a major challenge for the immediate future (MoE, 2016). In fact, principals are still in an immature and unstable stage of ethical potential. Ethical consciousness is yet to be practiced in the process of leadership.

The current research may have deep significant value in the academic and development sectors. We assume that the new generated meaning may add knowledge on the nature and gravity of ethics to individual development, professional development of principals, and ethical climate and culture in the school. And for sure, healthy atmospheres will purify the wave of society. As a result, society may move toward transformation. The findings of this research may contribute to academia, which could be useful for further study and minimize the gap of knowledge on the issue of ethical leadership. For the sake of this study, we attempted to explore the answers to these research questions:

1. How do school principals narrate their lived experiences in leadership?
2. What do they feel when dealing with ethical sensitivities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Context of Nepal

Because of the richness of multiple diversity in social and cultural structures, Nepal is blessed with a distinct identity in the global arena. The wellbeing of human beings, including all elements of the universe, is the main praxis of our culture. This identity may turn into "salami slicing" if it is ignored or suppressed in the name of development. Therefore, introducing development activities without harming the value and belief system of society is the moral responsibility of the entire educational system. Producing skillful and empowered human resources is only possible if education is based on and grows with the ground reality of society. Education is a transformation of a highly complex society (Ghanem, 2018), but it is impossible in real meaning until and unless moral and ethical awareness is ignored. In addition, the study of ethics is necessary if human beings are to survive in this pluralistic society (Freeman, 2000). Therefore, educational leaders are expected to live with moral and ethical competency.

The Nepal government (MoE, 2016) set the vision of education to contribute to the development of self-sustainable, innovative, and value-oriented citizens for the socioeconomic transformation of the nation. However, without effective leadership, vision will not meet the destination.

The Principal as a Transformational Icon

In our society, the social position of teachers secures prestigious positions since ancient times. They are honored as a representative of "God", the symbol of truth who does no wrong in Hindu philosophy. They are granted an exemplary icon of ethical intelligence. School principals hold the supreme and legitimized authority as educational leaders. Leadership is a process of influencing others to move together toward a common goal (Northouse, 2015). Inspirational motivation,

intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration are needed to transform others. This is possible if leaders are equipped with ethical awareness and confidence. [Sendjaya \(2005\)](#) suggests that ethics is a crucial component of leadership because its absence could turn transformational leadership into a disastrous outcome. Principals are not only expected to possess ethical character and practice ethical behavior, but they are also expected to build a culture of integrity.

The entire personality bears ethical responsibility to cultivate and enhance the betterment of the individual students. Therefore, they are expected to behave according to the principles of human beings. Legal provisions of the federal nation ([MoE, 2016](#)) set the objectives and strategies to maintain a high level of morality in teachers' professional development. They are not only the driver of the values, beliefs, and ethics of the school community but also as the actual designer ([Eyal et al., 2011](#)) of society. [Starratt \(2004\)](#) also argues that developing a mindset of ethical/moral capacity is vital for a sustainable future, which can be gained from effective leaders. Therefore, their ethical responsibility is to execute as a transformational icon of society.

Ethics: A Transformational Strength

Ethics is the study of what is right and wrong, and it comes under moral philosophy. It is a conscious reflection of the adequacy of moral beliefs. It is a concern of human character and conduct and is associated with mental and social phenomena ([Baker, 2017](#)). Ethics is a set of rules and principles, a set of people, and a set of societal behavior and ethical principles that are accepted as societies ([Ghanem, 2018](#)). It can also be perceived as the integrity of humanity, as [Starratt \(2004\)](#) stressed. It deals with standardized abilities to distinguish right from wrong ([Bhattarai, 2010](#)). Ethical theory provides a system of rules or principles that guide us to distinguish what is right or wrong and good and bad ([Northouse, 2015](#)). Ethical consciousness nurtures the human intelligence of individuals and harvests the moral ground of society. It also integrates relationships among people ([Ouma, 2017](#)). Therefore, it is considered a transformational strength. As such, it is very urgent to study ethical intelligence to pursue the success of all development activities in the current social context.

Ethical leadership as a theoretical referent

Concerning the meaning of ethical leadership, the concern relating to the ethics of leaders is termed ethical leadership ([Langlois, 2011](#)). Ethics has to do with what leaders do and who they are. According to [Starratt \(2004\)](#), ethical leadership is an attempt to act according to the principles, assumptions, beliefs, and values of the leader's espoused system of ethics. [Heifetz \(1994\)](#) also enforces values of identity and states that ethical leadership deals with the values of followers, institutions, and societies where they belong (as cited in [Northouse, 2013](#)). The principles to be followed in ethical leadership are justice, equality, honesty, truth, impartiality, responsibility, human rights, humanism, love, tolerance, secularism, respect, democracy, positive human relations, openness, and rights and freedoms ([Mackenzie & Mackenzie, 2010](#); [Shapiro & Gross, 2008](#)).

Three Paradigms of Ethical Leadership

With the demand of a progressive society, many paradigms have been developed in ethical leadership. Among them, we have discussed three dimensions: i) ethics of care, ii) ethics of justice, and iii) ethics of critique, as presented by [Starratt \(2004\)](#).

Ethics of Care

The word 'care' carries the meaning of love, respect, compassion, trust, transparency, and welfare. The proponent of ethics of care [Gilligan \(1982\)](#) viewed that ethics of care includes being

there, listening, understanding and sharing responsibilities for another's welfare, strengthening and maintaining the relationship, attachment and abandonment of the relationship. While considering the views of [Starratt \(1991\)](#), he articulates that ethics of care is related to the fundamentals of interpersonal relations, not from a legal standpoint but in terms of absolute respect. It is also the natural basis of human life. Therefore, all people want to be cared for ([Noddings, 2002](#)). [Langlois \(2011\)](#) shares that human relationships and welfare are the major components of ethics of care. It is a paradigm of mutual respect, compassion, and attention to others in an organization ([Bhattarai, 2019](#)). Drawing the meaning of ethics as understood, it is an interpersonal relationship governed by love, respect, compassion, welfare, sharing, attention, and responsibility.

Ethics of Justice

The Ethics of Justice mostly focuses on rightness and wrongness. It has faith in the legal system and hopes for progress ([Delgado, 1995](#)). [Starratt \(1991\)](#) shares that it strives to protect the rights of all people through a logical system of laws, rules, and regulations. It also demands that leaders place issues of fairness at the center of their decision making ([Northouse, 2013](#)). This perspective focuses on individual rights and stems from the values of fairness or equity that every individual has the right to equal treatment ([Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2005](#)). This legal treatment advocates for equity, freedom, transparency, and fairness to distinguish right from wrong.

Ethics of Critique

The ethics of critique is rooted in critical theory. It seeks to challenge the status and gives voice to the marginalized section of society. Under the ethics of critique, many theorists ask us not only to rethink laws and justice but also to consider other concepts such as privilege, power, culture, and language ([Robinson & Garratt, 2004](#)). The ethics of critique is close to the ethics of justice ([Starratt, 1991](#)), as the use of critical lenses sheds light on injustices to attain greater social justice.

RESEARCH METHOD

Based on the constructivism research paradigm, this study is weaved with a narrative inquiry approach. At the beginning, six school head teachers were purposefully selected ([van Manen, 1997](#)) from institutional schools in the Kathmandu Valley as participants. However, it was later limited to only four participants because in-depth and insightful information from participants is more important than numbers by statics ([Thanh & Thanh, 2015](#)). In-depth interviews were employed to gather data by exploring participants' experiences, attitudes and beliefs ([Cohen et al., 2011](#)). We organized and reflected on their experiences via informal conversation and provoking questions as per the need ([Marshall & Rossman, 2011](#)). The lived experiences of our participants were presented in the form of a story as our information. Most narrative inquiries begin with storytelling ([Clandinin & Huber, 2014](#)). By adopting the procedure of recording, transcription, and translation of the information, four stories were selected from various stories. We unfolded the packs of stories under three themes that were generated according to the gist of the stories. One story from each participant comes under one theme. Then, we went through the analysis, interpretation, and meaning-making process to construct our understanding of each theme.

On the basis of this understanding, our different perspectives on ethical leadership were explored. For us, our knowledge is characterized as justified, true believer of our participant we kept in center how our participants think and deal with their value. We believe that knowledge is conceived by human experiences ([Saldana, 2015](#)); therefore, during the meaning-making process, we were consistent in information from their stories and ourselves while writing their experiences along with our reflection. In doing so, we will never forget to connect the dots around the center of

participants and their educational leadership. The conclusion is based on our reflection of our participants as narrative researchers. We were sincere about the three-dimensional narrative inquiry temporality, sociality, and place of each story to maintain the quality of our exploration. Then, we weaved the epistemological beliefs on the meaning of ethics and transformational influences from ethical strengths from narrated experiences. Moving forward, in the process of theoretical discussion, our meanings were discussed in the literature and developed with ethical leadership theory. Only then did we complete our study with our insights on the meaning of ethics and its transformational influences. We paid sincerity to ethics as the central essence of academic research (Bowen et al., 2005). We employed informed consent, confidentiality, and honesty as our ethical considerations.

Our participants are leading their respective schools as school principals in secondary schools in the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. They have experience in various leading positions such as vice-principal and coordinator. They are rich with a series of lived experiences. As we acknowledge, lived experience is not about reflection on an experience while living through, but it is recollective where experience is reflected on after it has passed or lived through. Therefore, we construct the meaning from the phenomena under the study through our perception of the perception of the participant. Then, we (our participant and ourselves) negotiate to construct new knowledge.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

As we have shared earlier, this study explores the meaning of ethics encountered by school principals in their principalship. We sketched our understating from their reflected narratives. Consequently, the narratives are sound and clear enough to draw the three meanings of the paradigms of ethical leadership. Here, one narrative from each principal is presented with a brief introduction of the participants.

Ethics of Care: Valuing Identity

Standing at the foundation of ethics of care, we assume that fulfillment of basic human requirements is the core root of the healthy germination of ethics of care. The requirement may include the emotional, psychological, physical, financial, and social needs of all team members. As per our query, we walked with Ms. Naina Rai (pseudonym), aged 32. She is very humble, caring, soft, and a clear speaker. Her pleasing personality and transparent appearance might be strengths of her 11 years of leadership experience as a coordinator, vice-principal, and principal. To elaborate on the understanding of being a caring leader, she narrates:

"It was a miracle, I never imagined. The innocent face with the shining smile of that boy makes me refreshed even today. It was the day of autumn. All of us were preparing for long Dashain-Tihar holidays. I was also pressed by the layers of tasks and responsibility. Twenty-four hours in a day was not enough for me. The school accountant reported that the guardian of that boy did not want to clear the due because the boy was a victim of political conflict held in the country. The guardian also came together with a louder voice advocating for rights, consideration, and many more... I was terribly upset with their arrogant behavior... I did not do anything but just listen to them. At that time, the boy (aged 7) also came near me and started to play without noticing anything. He welcomed me and his guardian as team members. Our eyes were full of love, affection, gratitude, and joy toward the boy. Dramatically, the irritating moment turned into a calm and friendly environment." - Ms. Naina Rai

Now, our understanding is that the term care covers a sense of loving, nurturing, respecting, and trusting. Accepting the background, caring for every movement, listening to the voices, sharing the feelings, and being honest about the emotions of students are the ways to create the ethics of care. A trustworthy relationship is a strong foundation to encourage people in the right direction.

In addition, we studied the narrative of our second participant, Mr. Ram Pun (pseudonym), aged 43. He has been leading the school for more than eighteen years. We were influenced by his soft and clear communicative skills, respectful and compassionate attitude, and charitable and inspiring personality. He narrates,

"It was a case of 2069 B.S. I made a quick and sole decision to use certain amounts of money from the school fund to help a student who was diagnosed with kidney problems. Considering his poor family background, I did so without following any institutional procedure. I was immediately questioned by the school management committee. Obviously, that was a very tortured and stressful period. But I experienced a different beautiful moment that never happened before. I don't know what a good sound arose in our soul. I was breathing with calm and blessed air. I felt even more energized. I was relaxed even on those terrible days. I asked ourselves "is it because of our compassion toward that boy"? Unfortunately, he is no longer, but that event is and will be remembered as a source of inspiration for ever. Now his parents are volunteering in charitable organizations with sincerity as their social responsibility." – Mr. Ram Pun

From this perspective, we understand that only rules and policies cannot carry and transfer the motive of education. Humanity comes first than any other relationship for doing well. Listening, sharing, loving, and respecting people strengthen the capacities of the doer (principal) and the receiver (parents). The charitable quality and decision power of the principal cultivate a trustworthy relationship between the principal and the community.

Ethics of Justice: Right Alternatives

A principal cannot simply focus on the "rules" but should have the right and equity of individuality. It is necessary to exercise these rights and create an atmosphere where students can find themselves as equals. This may explore the conscience of students and enhance an integral part of institutional culture and reveal the system of ethical values. With this concern, we included the experiences of a towering personality in the school principalship of Mr. Dev Rai (pseudonym), aged 36. He has pleasing personality and is confident. He is also a good listener and has matured sufficiently in his early forties. He has been leading various schools in different positions for twelve years. According to him, a true ethical leader must have the courage to take personal risks and make alternative decisions for fairness and equity. To elaborate on this point, he shares,

"It was an even three years ago, which kept me in dilemma for 6 months. But now I am proud of what I did. There was no one with whom I could share our, even our wife. In the middle of the academic session 2073, our academic department decided to terminate one female teacher whom I knew very well personally. It was hard for me to agree on that. I knew she was the breadwinner of the struggling migrated family. I don't know what to do. I had to decide whether to stand with school quality or her reality. I used to see her face every day, and I found her jubilant and excited. So pity, she did not know what would change in her career. I stood in the middle of the two opposite sides. I scared. What might be our steps toward justice? Respecting her rights, I arranged another school where she could continue

with huge respect. She does not know the hidden realities, our dilemmas, and involvement till today. I wish it will not be disclosed in the coming days too. Our position forced me to decide as a principal, but our personal concise disagreed on that, so I had to set alternative strategies for fairness.” - Mr. Dev Rai

This narrative suggests that principals are equally responsible for the school, stakeholder, and society. Decision made by the principal affects the future people, school, and society of anyone. It shapes and saves the emotions and dignity of anyone. Balanced decisions can be justified in the diverse reality followers. There might be an alternative solution to maintain the rights of everyone.

Ethics of Critique: Courage to Step beyond the Boundary

The ethics of critique is “close to the ethic of justice” (Starratt, 1991), as the use of critical lenses sheds light on injustices to attain greater social justice. As per our understanding, our understanding has now time to come not only to follow, rethink laws and justice, but also to consider other concepts as privileged, power, culture and language’ (Robison & Garratt, 2004, p. 128). In this regard, we add the narrative of our fourth and last participant, Ms. Furba Sherpa (pseudoname), aged 45. She is bold and straightforward. She narrates,

“I was totally shocked; I was confused and felt incompetent toward ourselves as well. Last year, one student joined the science faculty. I noticed that she was not feeling comfortable with her choice. I observed her for 3 months, but she did not go accordingly. I was feeling pity but did not get a clear idea on the next alternatives. I was fighting with ourselves. However, 1 day while driving home, I heard a loud and clear voice from the bottom of our hearts. That inner voice compelled me to be alert and soothe her betterment. The next day, I talked with her about subject selection and further possibilities. But she said, she cannot change it because that was in the interest of her parents rather than her. I wonder with her voice, less of life. Then I decided to motivate and encourage her to stand with her own freedom of choice.” - Ms. Furba Sherpa

The principal is seeking opportunities so that students can build self-confidence to decide right and wrong for themselves. The desires, feelings, skills, and understanding level of every student differ from one to another, so the principal has taken courage to introduce different options to cope with silent voices for good and bad.

Discussion

After going through every component of reflections, we understand that the meaning of ethics is firm by multiple realities, but all are directed and regulated with the right and good motives. Looking at the reflection of the first participant, humanity attributes such as love, affection, respect, and compassion are the ethics of care. In addition, the second participant also lived with charitable qualities. Sharing, listening, servicing, and believing in people are found in his caring leadership. Now, all these qualities happen for the well-being of the individual. According to Eyal et al. (2011), the ethics of care is the empathy and responsibility for the wellbeing of the individual. Furthermore, Gilligan (1982) shares that the ethics of care includes the concept of being there, listening, understanding, sharing responsibilities for an individual’s welfare, and strengthening and maintaining relationships. While considering the view of Starratt (1991), we perceive that ethics of care is related to the fundamental to interpersonal relations, not from a legal standpoint but in terms of absolute respect. These caring attributes of the principal ensure the emotional wellbeing of students and regulate the student’s emotions in the right direction. Care is imperative to lessen

anxiety and handle the complexities with students (Bhattarai, 2019). The principal as an ethical leader speaks to us about our identity, what we are, and what we can become (Freeman & Steward, 2006). Here, our insight is that valuing the identity of an individual is the germination of a trustworthy relationship between the principal and students. This trustworthy relationship is a motivational foundation to transfer the student.

Navigating toward the ethics of justice, as a lived third participant holding the environment for right alternative, balanced decision, and alternative are the ways to create fairness. We believe an effective educational leader thinks beyond a one-size-fits-all model and allows the individual to be guided to ethical decision-making (Gross & Shapiro, 2013). The documented legal system may not be authentic enough to address the complex realities of individuals as a narrated story. The personal challenge and courage of the principal are sound determining factors in the process of justice. Therefore, the principal has explored alternative solutions so that everyone can feel secure and grow with fairness. It is also noteworthy that there should be a balance between an ethic of justice and an ethic of care, as opined (Quick & Normore, 2004). Now our understanding is that there is no need to be declared as a yes or no pattern as we are doing. There might also be a middle path. Thus, justice can be created from balanced decisions and alternative opportunities. Now, we can assume that ethics of justice is the invention of alternative solutions for creating fairness with dignity in the school as well as in society.

Going through the ethics critique, courage, confidence and motivation form, principal is needed to bring the ethnic minority into the mainstream. Vision and challenge are seen as a flue to step beyond the boundary while going through the narrative of the fourth participant. Empowerment, equity, and self-confidence make the silent voice rise. The principal emphasizes the present scenario rather than long-term assumptions. That is how ethical leaders are known as social designers who are fully aware of what is in front of them (Starratt, 2004). Similarly, Sendjaya (2008) stated that ethical leaders put followers first. Now our understanding is that it concerns opportunities for self-development of the students so that they could empower and feel inclusive. The courageous commitment of principals is a force to change the school and social structure for betterment.

Nevertheless, for the success of the institutional system, there is a need for honest, trustworthy ethical leaders who respect ethical principles and values considering universal references (Katranci et al., 2015). Now, we need to assure that the meaning of ethics is that ethics is a mutual value of individual, institutional, and social dimensions. Valuing the identity of individual as a unique human being is an ethics. Human potentiality is the power of ethical intelligence that derives toward transformation.

CONCLUSION

Ethics is a subjective, institutional and social value that enhances human capacities and wellbeing. It embeds multiple realities. It may differ from the value of each person and society. Social and cultural upbringings of a person define, guide and control ethical awareness and responsibilities. Love, care, trustworthy relationships, clear communication, transparency, justice and equity are the motivational properties so that people can hold the power to identify right from wrong and bad from good. Treating the individual as a human being is the first step in ethical responsibilities. A clear and possible understanding of individual values, fairness, and empowerment perceived by the principal defines ethical leadership. The school principal as a change agent is alert with ethical responsibility toward the school and society. They have a strong intention to interlock the head, heart and hand to cherish the school and society through ethical standards in their leadership. Principals are rich with love, honesty, care, respect, trust, dedication, charitable contribution, transparency and personal courage to change and transform the school and

society. This study suggests that principals are competent in their ethical sensitivities but are yet to be stable in their activities. It signifies that there are some disturbing forces in between sensitivities and activities of the principal that need to be studied.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has some limitations. Only four participants were selected purposively, and the narrative inquiry method employing an in-depth interview was used for collecting data. The participants were only from the institutional schools of the Kathmandu Valley of Nepal. As this study is limited to only four participants from the institutional schools, further research can be conducted by selecting the participants from the public schools from the primary and/or basic levels. Moreover, teachers and students can be taken as participants in a similar kind of study. Furthermore, there can be a quantitative study employing survey research for wider representation of the participants.

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