

The Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Strategic Planning Practices of School Heads in Public Elementary Schools in the Schools Division of Masbate Province

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices of school heads in public elementary schools in the Schools Division of Masbate Province. Anchored on Ethical Leadership Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Strategic Leadership Theory, the study investigated the level of ethical leadership in terms of fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling, as well as the level of strategic planning practices in terms of vision, mission and core values, school planning and implementation, policy implementation and review, research and innovation, program design and implementation, learner voice, and monitoring and evaluation. A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was employed. The respondents were 24 public elementary school heads from the District of San Fernando, Masbate Province, selected through cluster sampling and total enumeration. Data were gathered using a researcher-adapted and validated survey questionnaire and analyzed using weighted mean and Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson r). The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of ethical leadership, with integrity and transparency obtaining a very high rating. Strategic planning practices were likewise rated high across all dimensions, while monitoring and evaluation obtained a very high level. The study further established a significant and strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices, indicating that higher levels of ethical leadership are associated with stronger strategic planning practices. The results suggest that ethical leadership contributes to effective planning, implementation, monitoring, and decision-making processes in schools. The study concludes that strengthening ethical leadership competencies can enhance strategic planning effectiveness and support continuous school improvement. It recommends sustaining ethical leadership practices, strengthening collaborative decision-making, promoting stakeholder participation, and providing leadership development opportunities for school heads. This study supports Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: Quality Education by promoting effective school leadership and improved educational management. It also aligns with SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions through its emphasis on ethical governance, accountability, transparency, and stakeholder participation. The study contributes to educational and institutional sustainability by providing evidence that may strengthen leadership development, strategic planning processes, and continuous school improvement in public elementary schools.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Fairness and Justice, Integrity and Transparency, Role Modeling, School Heads, Strategic Planning Practices

1. Introduction

School leadership plays a critical role in promoting school effectiveness, improving educational outcomes, and sustaining institutional development. In the Philippine educational system, school heads are entrusted with both administrative and instructional leadership responsibilities as mandated by Republic Act No. 9155 or the Governance of Basic Education Act of 2001. Their responsibilities extend beyond school management to ensuring quality education through effective decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and continuous school improvement. The Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (PPSSH), articulated in DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020, further emphasizes strategic leadership, resource management, instructional leadership, professional development, and stakeholder engagement as essential competencies of school leaders. The increasing complexity of educational leadership has highlighted the importance of ethical leadership and strategic planning practices. Ethical leadership promotes fairness, integrity, transparency, accountability, and responsible decision-making, while strategic planning provides a systematic framework for achieving educational goals through vision development, policy implementation, innovation, learner participation, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. Existing literature suggests that ethical leadership influences organizational trust, professional relationships, and leadership effectiveness, while strategic planning facilitates school improvement and organizational sustainability. Despite extensive studies on both constructs, limited research has examined their direct relationship among school heads in public elementary schools, particularly within the Schools Division of Masbate Province. This study addresses this gap by investigating the relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices among school heads in public elementary schools.

1.1 Ethical Leadership and Strategic Planning Practices of School Heads

Ethical leadership has emerged as a critical component of educational leadership because it promotes fairness, accountability, transparency, and ethical decision-making. Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) describe ethical leadership as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct and the promotion of such conduct through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making. Ethical leaders foster trust, strengthen professional relationships, and establish ethical organizational cultures that support school effectiveness. In educational settings, ethical leadership is commonly reflected through fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling, all of which influence teacher collaboration, stakeholder trust, and organizational performance (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005; Northouse, 2021; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Strategic planning, on the other hand, serves as a systematic process that guides school direction, resource allocation, program implementation, innovation, and evaluation. Bryson (2018) emphasizes that strategic planning enables organizations to make informed decisions that shape long-term development and sustainability. Educational strategic planning encompasses vision, mission, and core values; school planning and implementation; policy implementation and review; research and innovation; program design and implementation; learner voice; and monitoring and evaluation. These practices enable school heads to translate educational goals into actionable programs and measurable outcomes (Bryson, 2018; Davies & Davies, 2006; Fullan, 2014).

1.2 Themes and Insights from Ethical Leadership and Strategic Planning Literature

The literature consistently identifies fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling as central dimensions of ethical leadership. Leaders who demonstrate fairness strengthen teacher motivation, collaboration, and organizational commitment, while transparency and integrity enhance accountability, trust, and stakeholder confidence (Alwis & Henriani, 2024; Orunbon et al., 2022; Israel & Bass, 2018; Valley, 2024). Ethical role modeling further promotes ethical behavior, organizational trust, and positive school climate through observational learning and social influence (Bandura, 1986; Zainun et al., 2021; Siahaan et al., 2023). Similarly, strategic planning literature emphasizes leadership influence on organizational direction, resource allocation, innovation, policy implementation, and continuous improvement. Effective school leaders align vision and mission with instructional priorities, encourage stakeholder participation, support research and innovation, and utilize monitoring and evaluation systems to guide decision-making (Bryson, 2018; Mintzberg, 1994; Davies & Davies, 2006; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). These studies suggest that leadership behavior significantly influences planning effectiveness and school improvement outcomes.

1.3 Global, National, and Local Perspectives on Ethical Leadership and Strategic Planning

International literature demonstrates that ethical leadership contributes to organizational trust, employee engagement, ethical climate, and strategic effectiveness. Studies by Engelbrecht et al. (2017), Walumbwa et al. (2011), Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011), and Yukl et al. (2013) reveal that ethical leadership influences trust, organizational commitment, strategic decision-making, and performance outcomes. Educational leadership studies likewise indicate that ethical leadership strengthens teacher commitment, organizational effectiveness, and school improvement processes (Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Within the Philippine context, leadership research highlights the significant influence of ethical leadership on teacher commitment, collaboration, organizational trust, and school effectiveness. Studies by Alegado (2018), Gurra (2020), Cabigao (2019), and Basa (2021) demonstrate that ethical leadership contributes to school improvement initiatives, leadership effectiveness, and positive school climate. Philippine educational leadership literature also emphasizes the role of school heads in implementing School Improvement Plans, facilitating innovation, managing resources, and conducting monitoring and evaluation activities. However, most local studies examine ethical leadership and strategic planning independently, leaving limited empirical evidence regarding their relationship, particularly in public elementary schools.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of Ethical Leadership and Strategic Planning

This study is anchored on Ethical Leadership Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Strategic Leadership Theory. Ethical Leadership Theory developed by Brown, Treviño, and Harrison (2005) posits that leaders influence organizational behavior through fairness, integrity, accountability, and ethical decision-making. The theory explains how ethical leadership shapes organizational climate, stakeholder relationships, and leadership practices that influence planning and implementation processes. Social Learning Theory developed by Bandura (1977, 1986) explains that individuals learn behaviors through observation and imitation of authority figures. In educational settings, school heads serve as role models whose ethical behavior influences teachers' professional practices, collaboration, and participation in school processes. This theory supports the role-modeling dimension of ethical leadership and explains how ethical behavior may influence strategic planning participation and implementation. Strategic Leadership Theory emphasizes leaders' responsibility for guiding organizational direction, aligning resources, and sustaining long-term improvement. Strategic leaders facilitate vision development, innovation, decision-making, and implementation processes that contribute to organizational effectiveness and school improvement (Davies & Davies, 2006; Bryson, 2018). This theory supports the strategic planning dimensions examined in the present study.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale

The reviewed literature consistently establishes the importance of ethical leadership and strategic planning in promoting organizational effectiveness and school improvement. Ethical leadership has been linked to teacher commitment, trust, collaboration, professionalism, and organizational climate, while strategic planning has been associated with school effectiveness, innovation, policy implementation, and sustainable development. Despite these contributions, existing studies commonly examine ethical leadership and strategic planning as separate constructs. Most empirical investigations focus on leadership outcomes such as organizational commitment, school climate, teacher performance, and school effectiveness rather than exploring how ethical leadership directly influences strategic planning practices. This gap is particularly evident within the Philippine educational context and more pronounced in local divisions such as the Schools Division of Masbate Province. Limited empirical evidence exists regarding how ethical leadership dimensions—fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling—relate to strategic planning practices including vision development, policy implementation, innovation, learner participation, and monitoring and evaluation. Consequently, this study seeks to provide localized evidence by examining the relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices among school heads in public elementary schools in the Schools Division of Masbate Province.

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns primarily with SDG 4: Quality Education by supporting effective school leadership practices that contribute to improved educational management, school improvement, and quality learning environments. Ethical leadership and strategic planning are essential mechanisms for strengthening educational institutions and ensuring effective delivery of educational services. The study also supports SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, as ethical leadership promotes fairness, accountability, transparency, responsible governance, and stakeholder participation within educational institutions. Strengthening ethical leadership practices among school heads contributes to building trustworthy, effective, and accountable educational systems.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to educational sustainability by providing evidence that may strengthen leadership development initiatives and improve strategic planning processes in public elementary schools. Enhanced leadership competencies can support continuous school improvement, effective policy implementation, and sustainable educational outcomes. It also contributes to institutional sustainability by promoting ethical governance, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making within schools. Furthermore, the study supports community sustainability by encouraging leadership practices that foster stakeholder engagement, collaboration, and learner participation in school improvement initiatives. Through these contributions, the study provides valuable insights for educational leaders, policymakers, and future researchers seeking to strengthen school leadership and organizational effectiveness in basic education.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to determine the level of ethical leadership and strategic planning practices of school heads and to examine the relationship between these variables. Quantitative research is appropriate for measuring variables and analyzing relationships through numerical data and statistical procedures (Creswell, 2014). The descriptive component was used to assess the existing levels of ethical leadership in terms of fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling, as well as strategic planning practices in terms of vision, mission and core values; school planning and implementation; policy implementation and review; research and innovation; program design and implementation; learner voice; and monitoring and evaluation. Descriptive research is suitable for describing existing conditions without manipulating variables (McCombes, 2019). The correlational component was utilized to determine whether a significant relationship exists between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices. Correlational research is appropriate for examining the degree of association between naturally occurring variables without experimental intervention (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). Data were collected using survey questionnaires, which are commonly used in descriptive-correlational studies because they allow efficient and standardized data collection from a defined population (Creswell, 2014).

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the District of San Fernando under the Schools Division of Masbate Province. The district was selected because it provided an appropriate setting for examining ethical leadership and strategic planning practices among public elementary school heads. Its accessibility to the researcher also facilitated the conduct of the study and the collection of reliable data from respondents.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents consisted of 24 school heads from public elementary schools in the District of San Fernando, Schools Division of Masbate Province. These school heads were actively serving during the conduct of the study and were selected

because they are directly responsible for leadership functions, decision-making, school planning, policy implementation, research and innovation, program management, learner participation initiatives, and monitoring and evaluation activities within their respective schools.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study utilized cluster sampling, with school districts serving as natural clusters. Cluster sampling is appropriate when populations are geographically grouped and when selecting entire groups is more practical than selecting individuals from a large population (Creswell, 2014). The District of San Fernando was purposively selected as the cluster because it was accessible to the researcher and provided a suitable context for the investigation. Following the selection of the district, total enumeration was employed, allowing all 24 school heads within the selected cluster to participate in the study. This approach ensured comprehensive representation of school heads in the district while maintaining feasibility in terms of time, access, and data collection.

2.5 Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-adapted survey questionnaire as the primary data-gathering instrument. The questionnaire consisted of two major parts. The first part measured ethical leadership using indicators of fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling. The items were adapted from the Ethical Leadership framework of Langlois (2007) and supported by Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown et al., 2005). A five-point Likert scale was used, where 5 represented Strongly Agree, 4 Often Agree, 3 Agree, 2 Disagree, and 1 Strongly Disagree. The second part measured strategic planning practices based on Domain 1: Leading Strategically of the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020). The items were adapted from the study of Chinky (2022) and covered vision, mission and core values; school planning and implementation; policy implementation and review; research and innovation; program design and implementation; learner voice; and monitoring and evaluation. A five-point Likert scale was likewise used, where 5 indicated Highly Performed, 4 Often Performed, 3 Performed, 2 Less Performed, and 1 Not Performed. Prior to administration, the instrument underwent expert validation to assess content relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study variables. Recommendations from experts in educational leadership and research were incorporated to improve the validity, clarity, and appropriateness of the questionnaire.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The study began with a comprehensive review of related literature and studies to establish the research problem, objectives, theoretical framework, conceptual framework, and research instrument. The research proposal was submitted for review and approval, after which the survey questionnaire was adapted from established frameworks, including Langlois (2007), Brown et al. (2005), and the Philippine Professional Standards for School Heads (DepEd Order No. 24, s. 2020). The instrument was then validated by experts and revised based on their recommendations. During the preparation of the manuscript and research instrument, digital writing support tools were utilized to improve clarity, coherence, grammatical accuracy, and originality. Artificial intelligence–assisted tools such as ChatGPT provided language support, while Turnitin and grammar-checking applications were used to enhance writing quality. All research decisions, including data gathering, analysis, and interpretation, remained under the responsibility of the researcher. A formal request was submitted to the Schools Division Office and district authorities to secure permission to conduct the study. Upon approval, the researcher implemented the sampling procedure and identified all school heads within the selected district as respondents. The validated questionnaires were personally distributed, and respondents were provided with clear instructions and sufficient time to complete the instrument. After collection, the data were organized, encoded, and prepared for statistical analysis. Throughout the entire process, ethical standards were strictly observed. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and all data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using appropriate statistical tools based on the objectives of the study. Weighted mean was used to determine the level of ethical leadership in terms of fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling, as well as the level of strategic planning practices in terms of vision, mission and core values; school planning and implementation; policy implementation and review; research and innovation; program design and implementation; learner voice; and monitoring and evaluation. Weighted mean is appropriate for describing average responses obtained from Likert-scale data and determining the level of a variable based on respondents' perceptions (Creswell, 2014; Boone & Boone, 2012). To determine the relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices, the Pearson Product–Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) was utilized. Pearson r is appropriate for measuring the strength and direction of the relationship between continuous variables (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Creswell, 2014). This statistical technique was used to determine whether a significant relationship existed between the two variables under investigation. The interpretation of ethical leadership and strategic planning practices was based on a five-point scale. Mean scores ranging from 4.21 to 5.00 were interpreted as Very High Level, 3.41 to 4.20 as High Level, 2.61 to 3.40 as Moderate Level, 1.81 to 2.60 as Low Level, and 1.00 to 1.80 as Very Low Level.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents before data collection. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Anonymity and privacy were protected, and all information gathered was treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic and research purposes. These measures ensured the integrity, credibility, and ethical conduct of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Ethical Leadership of School Heads

3.1.1 Fairness and Justice

The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of ethical leadership in terms of fairness and justice, with an overall mean of 4.02. Respondents indicated that school heads consistently practiced fairness, conducted investigations before making decisions, and considered humanitarian factors when addressing concerns. The highest ratings were observed in being fair, conducting investigations before decision-making, and exercising humanitarian considerations, while decisions based on statutory and legal frameworks received the lowest rating, although still interpreted as high. These findings suggest that school heads prioritize equitable treatment, evidence-based decision-making, and concern for the welfare of stakeholders. Ethical leadership emphasizes fairness, careful judgment, and people-centered decision-making, which foster trust and strengthen professional relationships within the school community (Orunbon et al., 2022; Brown et al., 2005). The results also indicate that while legal and policy considerations are observed, school heads often balance formal requirements with contextual and ethical judgment when resolving school concerns (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). Furthermore, fairness and justice remain essential leadership dimensions that contribute to organizational trust and school effectiveness (Starratt, 2005; Israel & Bass, 2018).

3.1.2 Integrity and Transparency

The results showed that school heads demonstrated a very high level of ethical leadership in terms of integrity and transparency, with a composite mean of 4.23. The highest-rated indicator was ensuring that decisions reflect organizational values, followed by checking legal and regulatory requirements and being willing to review previously agreed decisions. Informing stakeholders about ethical policies and maintaining the dignity of others were also positively rated, although at a slightly lower level. The findings indicate that school heads strongly practice value-driven leadership, policy compliance, accountability, and openness in decision-making. Leaders whose decisions reflect organizational values reinforce trust, consistency, and ethical behavior within organizations (Brown et al., 2005). Likewise, integrity and value alignment strengthen organizational effectiveness and credibility (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). The results further suggest that school heads exhibit reflective leadership by remaining open to revisiting previous decisions, a characteristic associated with ethical and responsive leadership (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2022). Although respect for individual dignity and communication of ethical policies received relatively lower ratings, these practices remain important components of ethical leadership that support collaboration and healthy professional relationships (Siahaan et al., 2023; Cabigao, 2019; Basa, 2021; Starratt, 2005).

3.1.3 Role Modeling

The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of role modeling, with a composite mean of 3.99. The highest-rated indicator involved providing time and support for mentoring teachers' professional growth. Other highly rated practices included spirituality in professional conduct, adherence to protocols, conflict resolution, and maintaining high moral standards. Consultation with colleagues regarding sensitive decisions received the lowest rating, although it remained within the high-level category. The results suggest that school heads serve as positive role models through mentoring, ethical conduct, and professional behavior. Mentoring contributes significantly to teacher development and organizational commitment, making it a critical component of effective leadership (Chalikias et al., 2020). Supportive leadership behaviors also influence professional learning and teacher growth (Day & Sammons, 2016; Bantilan et al., 2024). The findings further indicate that values-based conduct and moral leadership help establish an ethical school climate (Bhatt & Kapar, 2023). While collaborative consultation was less emphasized, participative leadership remains important because it enhances trust, shared responsibility, and organizational effectiveness (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020; Basa, 2021). Overall, role modeling continues to be a vital aspect of ethical leadership that shapes teacher behavior, school culture, and leadership effectiveness (Hallinger, 2018; Cabigao, 2019; Siahaan et al., 2023).

3.2 Strategic Planning Practices of School Heads

3.2.1 Vision, Mission, and Core Values

The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of strategic planning practices in terms of vision, mission, and core values, with a composite mean of 4.01. The highest ratings were obtained in working with stakeholders to create shared values and a positive school culture and ensuring that strategic plans promote inclusion and diversity among

learners. Other indicators related to strategic planning knowledge, communication, accountability, and school effectiveness were likewise rated highly. The lowest rating, although still interpreted as high, was associated with ensuring that decision-making and implementation strategies are consistently based on a shared vision and understanding of school culture. These findings indicate that school heads actively promote collaborative and inclusive leadership practices in developing school direction and improvement initiatives. Stakeholder participation and shared vision are recognized as essential components of sustainable school improvement and effective leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Leithwood et al., 2020). The results also suggest that school heads align planning processes with long-term school goals, supporting the view that strategic planning strengthens organizational direction and performance (Bryson, 2018). However, consistently translating shared vision into daily decisions remains a challenge that may require stronger leadership capacity and organizational alignment (Davies & Davies, 2005; Williams, 2015). Effective communication, accountability, and leadership competence continue to be important factors in sustaining strategic leadership practices (Day & Sammons, 2016; Bantilan et al., 2024).

3.2.2 School Planning and Implementation

The results showed that school heads demonstrated a high level of strategic planning practices in school planning and implementation, with a composite mean of 4.00. The highest rating was observed in synthesizing complex and diverse data and creating systems that engage stakeholders in data discussions. Indicators related to data availability, problem-solving, risk assessment, and information analysis also received high ratings. The lowest-rated indicator involved identifying and gathering useful sources of information, although it remained within the high-level category. These findings suggest that school heads effectively utilize data to guide planning and implementation processes. School improvement efforts are strengthened when leaders use evidence-based practices and involve stakeholders in interpreting data and planning interventions (Datnow & Park, 2018; Fullan, 2016). The results further indicate that school heads support informed decision-making by ensuring that relevant data are available to school personnel (Coburn & Turner, 2012). Although information gathering obtained the lowest rating, systematic data collection remains an essential component of strategic planning and school improvement (Schildkamp, 2019; Alegado, 2018). Effective planning and implementation therefore depend on strong data utilization, stakeholder engagement, and proactive leadership practices (Bryson, 2018; Day & Sammons, 2016).

3.2.3 Policy Implementation and Review

The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of strategic planning practices in policy implementation and review, with a composite mean of 3.97. The highest rating was obtained in assessing local, national, and global educational trends and their implications for schools. Leading schools in uncertain and changing environments also received high ratings. The lowest-rated indicator involved facilitating change and innovation aligned with current and future school community needs, although it remained at a high level. The results suggest that school heads are aware of broader educational developments and incorporate these trends into school policies and practices. Strategic leadership requires continuous environmental scanning to ensure that policies remain relevant and responsive to emerging educational needs (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2009; Hopkins, 2013). The findings further indicate that school heads demonstrate adaptive leadership by responding effectively to changing and uncertain situations (Fullan, 2016; Bantilan et al., 2024). However, facilitating innovation remains a complex process that often depends on stakeholder support, leadership capacity, and resource availability (OECD, 2019; Schildkamp, 2019). Collaborative implementation and empowerment of staff remain important factors in sustaining successful policy reforms (Leithwood et al., 2020; Alegado, 2018).

3.2.4 Research and Innovation

The results showed that school heads demonstrated a high level of strategic planning practices in research and innovation, with a composite mean of 4.01. The highest rating was recorded for willingness to challenge traditional practices when they hinder improvement and innovation. Maintaining openness to new ideas also received a very high rating. The lowest-rated indicator, though still interpreted as high, involved facilitating change and innovation that respond to present and future school community needs. These findings indicate that school heads support innovation by encouraging creative thinking and challenging practices that may limit school improvement. Leadership plays a significant role in establishing research-oriented and innovation-driven school cultures (Blannin et al., 2020; Godfrey, 2016). The willingness to move beyond traditional approaches reflects adaptive leadership and a commitment to continuous improvement (Fullan, 2016; OECD, 2019). Openness to new ideas likewise supports transformational leadership practices that promote organizational learning and innovation (Harris, 2020). Although innovation facilitation may vary across schools, leadership support, institutional readiness, and stakeholder engagement remain critical factors in sustaining innovative practices (Schildkamp, 2019; Bantilan et al., 2024). Evaluation and institutionalization of innovations further contribute to long-term improvement and organizational sustainability (Bryson, 2018; Day & Sammons, 2016).

3.2.5 Program Design and Implementation

The findings revealed that school heads demonstrated a high level of strategic planning practices in program design and implementation, with a composite mean of 4.08. The highest rating was observed in assessing the urgency, importance, and risks associated with school plans and taking timely action. Indicators related to gathering and analyzing data for

implementation also received high ratings. The lowest-rated indicator involved resolving problems during the early stages of implementation and developing alternative solutions. These results suggest that school heads effectively prioritize actions and manage risks during program implementation. Strategic leadership literature emphasizes that successful implementation requires leaders to align priorities, anticipate challenges, and respond promptly to emerging issues (Bryson, 2018; Fullan, 2016). The strong ratings for data gathering and analysis indicate the use of evidence-based approaches to monitor progress and guide implementation decisions (Datnow & Park, 2018; Coburn & Turner, 2012). While problem-solving during early implementation stages received the lowest rating, implementation challenges are common and often require adaptive leadership, collaboration, and continuous monitoring (Kotter, 1996; Fullan, 2016). Overall, effective program implementation relies on sound decision-making, data utilization, and strategic leadership.

3.2.6 Learners' Voice

The findings showed that school heads demonstrated a high level of strategic planning practices regarding learners' voice, with a composite mean of 4.11. The highest rating was obtained in involving learners in planning and crafting school activities for school improvement. Utilization of learners' views in policy development and decision-making also received high ratings. The lowest-rated indicator involved collaboration with teachers in analyzing student work to address learning needs, although it remained within the high-level category. These findings indicate that school heads recognize learners as important stakeholders in school planning and decision-making. Learner participation promotes ownership, engagement, and accountability in school improvement initiatives (Alison Cook-Sather, 2020). Incorporating student perspectives into policy development further strengthens school responsiveness and relevance (Michael Fielding, 2019; Del Mundo, 2023). The findings also demonstrate that school heads are responsive to learner needs, which contributes to stronger trust and positive learner engagement (Andy Hargreaves, 2021). Although collaboration in analyzing student work received a relatively lower rating, deeper collaboration among school leaders, teachers, and learners remains essential for improving instructional practices and addressing learner needs effectively (Louise Stoll, 2020).

3.2.7 Monitoring and Evaluation Processes and Tools

The results revealed that school heads demonstrated a very high level of strategic planning practices in monitoring and evaluation processes and tools, with a composite mean of 4.27. The highest rating was recorded in analyzing multiple forms of data and utilizing findings for strategic planning. Identifying useful information sources and ensuring the availability of relevant data also received very high ratings. The lowest-rated indicator, though still interpreted as high, involved synthesizing diverse data and engaging stakeholders in data discussions. These findings suggest that school heads possess strong competencies in data analysis and evidence-based decision-making. Effective school leaders rely on multiple sources of information to guide planning and improve educational outcomes (Viviane Robinson, 2020). The results further indicate that school heads establish systems for collecting and utilizing relevant data to support teacher improvement and accountability (Kenneth Leithwood, 2021; Santos, 2023). Although stakeholder engagement in data discussions received the lowest rating, collaborative data analysis remains an important strategy for building shared understanding and collective responsibility for school improvement (Helen Timperley, 2020). Overall, the findings demonstrate that monitoring and evaluation practices are a major strength of school heads and contribute significantly to strategic planning effectiveness.

3.3 Relationship Between Ethical Leadership and Strategic Planning Practices

The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices among school heads. The computed Pearson r value of 0.67 exceeded the critical value of 0.404 at the 0.05 level of significance, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis. This indicates that higher levels of ethical leadership are associated with stronger strategic planning practices among school heads in public elementary schools. The results suggest that ethical leadership contributes significantly to the effectiveness of strategic planning processes. Leadership values influence organizational behavior, decision-making, and the successful implementation of plans and programs (Brown, Treviño, and Harrison, 2005). Strategic planning is strengthened when leaders demonstrate ethical behavior, transparency, accountability, and value-based decision-making (Bryson, 2018). Ethical leadership also promotes trust and collaboration, which are essential for successful implementation of organizational strategies (Engelbrecht et al., 2017). In educational settings, leadership plays a central role in building shared vision, fostering collaboration, managing change, and sustaining school improvement efforts (Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins, 2020; Fullan, 2016). Local studies likewise affirm that ethical and supportive leadership practices positively influence school performance, planning effectiveness, and organizational culture (Alegado, 2018; Gurrea, 2020; Bantilan et al., 2024). These findings confirm that strengthening ethical leadership competencies can enhance strategic planning practices and support sustainable school improvement.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that school heads in public elementary schools in the Schools Division of Masbate Province demonstrate high levels of ethical leadership and strategic planning practices. Ethical leadership was evident in fairness and justice, integrity and transparency, and role modeling, with integrity and transparency emerging as the strongest dimension. Strategic planning practices were likewise rated high across all areas, including vision, mission and core values, school

planning and implementation, policy implementation and review, research and innovation, program design and implementation, learner voice, and monitoring and evaluation. Furthermore, the findings established a significant and strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices, indicating that ethical leadership contributes to more effective planning, implementation, and evaluation of school programs and initiatives.

School heads should continue strengthening ethical leadership practices by maintaining fairness, transparency, integrity, and accountability in school management. Greater collaboration with teachers and staff in decision-making processes should be encouraged to promote shared responsibility and trust. Teachers and school personnel should actively participate in strategic planning activities to support effective program implementation and school improvement. The Department of Education and school administrators may further enhance leadership competencies through training, mentoring, and support programs focused on ethical leadership and strategic planning. Future studies may be conducted in other locations and with larger groups of respondents to further examine the relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices.

The study was limited to 24 school heads from public elementary schools in the District of San Fernando, Schools Division of Masbate Province. The findings were based on respondents' perceptions gathered through a survey questionnaire and focused only on the relationship between ethical leadership and strategic planning practices. As such, the results may not fully represent school heads in other districts or divisions and did not examine other factors that may influence strategic planning practices.

Compliance with ethical standards

The author declares no conflict of interest and received no external funding for this study. The researchers acknowledge the participation of the 24 school heads from public elementary schools in the District of San Fernando, Schools Division of Masbate Province, whose voluntary involvement made this study possible. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, which was conducted through a non-invasive survey questionnaire. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and no identifying information was disclosed; all data were used solely for research purposes.

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