

ETHICAL REASONING AND PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT IN EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE AND LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA

Fredrick Awhen Opoh

fredrickopoh@gmail.com

&

Essien, Victor Edem

victorbodgee@gmail.com

*Department of Social Studies and Civic Education,
Faculty of Arts and Social Science Education,
University of Calabar*



ABSTRACT

The article analysed ethical thinking and professionalism in education and school leadership in Nigeria and highlighted their importance in the effective management of schools and nation building. Educational reform is perceived as a moral task which relies heavily upon the moral climate of teachers, administrators and policy makers. This study examines the ethical principles that support decision-making in education: utilitarian, deontological, virtue, and care ethics, and their influence on the behaviour of educational leaders and institutional practice in Nigerian educational context. There is a special focus on ethical reasoning and decision making in matters related to resource allocation, staff management, student discipline and institutional governance. It emphasizes the need for ethical considerations in decision-making and how prevalent and relevant they are in the digital era when emerging topics like data privacy, AI ethics, and cyber misconduct are becoming a concern. It concludes that the way to improve the quality of education and ensure sustainable national development in Nigeria is to strengthen the ethical reasoning and professional conduct of educators by imparting ethics education, making educational governance transparent, appointing educators on the basis of merit, effective supervision and providing adequate funding.

Keywords: Ethical reasoning, professional conduct, educational leadership, Nigeria, decision-making, ethics in education.

Introduction

Ethical thinking and professional practice are essential to education practice and leadership. Education is a moral business for it has to do with the development of human character, intellect, values, attitude, and responsible citizenship. Teacher, school leaders, school administration, and institutional leaders have an important role in the success or failure of any educational system because of their ethical orientation. Growing corruption, examination malpractice, indiscipline, abuse of office, favouritism and the lack of

moral values in educational institutions in Nigeria have created a scholarly interest in ethical leadership and professional conduct (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN] 2014).

Ethical reasoning is the process whereby educators and leaders make morally acceptable decisions based on justice, fairness, honesty, responsibility and societal values. Professional conduct is expected standards of behaviour, ethics and responsibilities related to the teaching profession. Ethical leadership in education is seen as a way of ensuring accountability, transparency, discipline, effective decision making and institutional integrity (Uzoigwe et al., 2022).

Nigerian scholars especially researchers of University of Calabar have widely researched the link between ethical leadership, institutional effectiveness, teacher commitment, educational management and sustainable development. The institution's studies showed that ethical leadership has a strong effect on the organizational climate, teachers' productivity, and educational outcomes in Nigeria (Ngene et al., 2025).

The role of education in Nigeria is to produce morally upright citizens who can make positive contributions towards Nigeria's development. If, however, unethical leadership and education professionals are not in place, schools can turn into places of corruption, exploitation, mediocrity and social decay. Ethical thinking and professional ethics have now become major issues in modern administration of learning.

Concept of Ethical Reasoning

Ethical reasoning is the intellectual and moral activity that allows people to assess situations, recognize ethical issues, and make choices that are in line with moral values and professional standards. In education, ethical principles are used to direct teachers, principals, lecturers, counsellors and administrators in their dealings and relationships with students, staff, resource persons and policies of the education system (Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria [TRCN], 2020).

Ethical reasoning is a tool that helps educational leaders to think critically and act morally in the management of higher education, (Uzoigwe et al., 2022). They stated that unethical educational administration can ultimately cause institutional failure, abuse of powers, and loss of trust of the public.

Ethical Reasoning Theories

It's common to find that educational practice is rooted in big ethical theories when considering ethical reasoning. These theories include some of the following:

Utilitarian Ethical Theory

Utilitarianism focuses on what is best for most people for the most people (Robbins & Trabichet, 2009). Educational leaders who adopt utilitarian ethics will focus on decisions that benefit students, staff and society the most (Henry & Jonathan, 2024). For instance, school leaders can invest in a limited number of programs that represent the interest of the majority of students, instead of the particular interests of individual students.

Deontological Ethical Theory

Deontological ethics is based on duty, obligation and rule-following. The professional code and institutional rules must be followed by teachers and educational leaders without being influenced by personal interest or pressure (TRCN, 2020).

Virtue Ethics

According to Aristotle (trans. Virtue ethics is the moral focus that places an emphasis on character development and the development of moral virtues (2009). Hursthouse and Pettigrove (2022) also argue that moral character is necessary for ethical leadership in institutions, with the traits of stable moral character – honesty, courage, justice – as the foundation for virtuous actions.

Ethics of Care

Ethics of care focuses on caring, relationships and concern for others in moral decision making (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013). Educational leadership is concerned with the care of student welfare, staff development and community wellbeing (Noddings, 2013). The ethics of care provides teachers with supportive learning environments where emotional security and academic learning growth is promoted (Tronto, 1993).

Professional Conduct in Educational Practice

Professional conduct is the ethical behaviour, values, attitudes and acceptable behaviours that are expected of educational practitioners. Teaching is considered as a noble profession because teachers have an impact in the moral and intellectual development of the coming generations (FRN, 2014). The responsibilities of professionals in the field of education encompass:

1. Honesty and integrity
2. Respect for learners
3. Confidentiality
4. Accountability
5. Punctuality
6. Fairness in assessment
7. Commitment to duty
8. Respect institutional policies
9. Professional appearance
10. Continuous professional development

The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria is a body which sets professional standards in Nigeria for teachers. Ethical guidelines and rules of professionalism are expected to be followed by teachers in and out of school (TRCN, 2020). Professional conduct promotes:

1. Public trust
2. Effective teaching
3. Institutional discipline

4. Teacher credibility
5. Positive school climate

Agba and Ushie (2015) have noted that good work ethics has a great impact on service delivery in Nigerian public universities. Their research highlighted the importance of professionalism, accountability and ethical responsibility in improving the performance of institutions and the efficiency of organizational activities.

Ethical Leadership in Educational Administration

Ethical leadership is based on ethical values, equity, honesty, justice, transparency and accountability. Ethical school leaders set tone and standards by their example and good decision making. Ethical educational leaders:

1. Promote fairness
2. Encourage participation
3. Ensure accountability
4. Respect human dignity
5. Protect institutional integrity
6. Demonstrate transparency
7. Uphold professional standards

A study carried out among the non-teaching staff of the University of Calabar showed that ethical leadership is significantly associated with the increase of job commitment and organizational effectiveness. Ethical leaders provide positive working cultures that foster commitment and performance (Ngene et al., 2025). In the same vein, Obona et al. (2025) noted that ethical school leadership has a significant contribution on teachers' job commitment and goal achievement in public secondary schools in Nigeria. Ethical leadership fosters trust, collaboration, and institutional harmony. Educational administrators should exercise balance, care and fairness in making decisions. Ethical leadership in education is about:

1. The exercise of authority in a responsible manner.
2. Fair disciplinary procedures
3. Transparent financial management
4. Merit-based appointments
5. Respect for diversity
6. Effective communication

Ethical Problems Facing Educational Institutions in Nigeria

While ethics is a very important aspect of education, education institutions in Nigeria still have a lot of ethical challenges. Some of the ethical issues are:

Corruption and Financial Mismanagement: Corruption is one of the major issues in Nigeria's educational system today. Misappropriation of educational funds, bribery, embezzlement and contract inflation are a hindrance to educational development (FRN, 2014). Some administrators redirect funds from district resources that should be used for infrastructure, instructional materials, and staff wellbeing for their own use.

Examination Malpractice: Examination malpractice is serious threat to academic integrity in Nigeria. Common forms include:

1. Leakage of examination questions
2. Impersonation
3. Copying during examinations
4. Alteration of results
5. Bribery of invigilators

Examination malpractice is an obstacle to the educational standards, and it yields incompetent students. As such, it should not be tolerated by any right-thinking leader or well-meaning individuals.

Sexual Harassment: Sexual harassment incidents between lecturers, teacher and students remain a blot on the educational institutions. This unprofessional conduct is unethical and against the dignity of humankind.

Political Interference: When education administration is affected by political interference, the merit and professionalism are affected. Political connections may be given more consideration than skills and experience when making appointments and promotions.

Cultism and Violence: Cultism, intimidation and violence in tertiary institutions pose threats to peaceful learning and hampers the creation of ethically conducive learning environment (Uche & Odey, 2017).

Poor Accountability: Mistrust, inefficiency and institutional conflict are common outcomes of poor accountability, which is characterized as a lack of transparency and accountability in school management.

In the Calabar Education Zone, Anam (2025) pointed out some of the challenges of effective school supervision and educational management which include unethical leadership practices, political pressure, inadequate funding, and conflicts of interest.

Ethical Reasoning in Decision-Making

One of the most critical duties of an educational leader and a practitioner is to reason ethically when making decisions. School leaders are continually faced with a multitude of situations that demand moral judgment, fairness, accountability and professionalism. Ethical decision making is the ability to consider situations critically and to select actions that are morally correct, professionally acceptable and are good for the educational community (Green & Walker, 2009).

Value judgments are typically not neutral in educational settings, as they have the potential to impact students, educators, parents, and society. Educational leaders, therefore, need to be able to deal with complex matters like discipline, staff welfare, resource allocation, administration of examinations, conflict handling and management of institutions from an ethical perspective. The study by Uzoigwe et al. (2022) argues that ethical reasoning empowers educational leaders to think critically with moral awareness to tackle institutional issues and administrative difficulties in Nigeria's higher education sector. Values in Educational Leadership are intimately related to ethical thinking, which include:

1. Justice
2. Fairness
3. Honesty
4. Transparency

5. Responsibility
6. Accountability
7. Respect for human dignity
8. Equity

Institutional leaders who are not guided by ethical reasoning may make decisions that are biased, authoritarian, or corrupt and have a negative impact on institutional effectiveness and the public's trust in the institution.

Ethical Reasoning in the Digital Age

Digital technologies and AI are becoming an integral part of modern educational leadership. Ethical reasoning is thus needed to answer questions like:

1. Data privacy
2. Cybersecurity
3. Digital inequality
4. Online academic dishonesty
5. Artificial intelligence ethics

For the era of AI, the values of ethical leadership are characterized by transparency, fairness, accountability, and responsible technology governance, as Kandasamy (2024) noted. Educational leaders should therefore make sure that technological innovations are in use in a responsible and fair way.

Importance of Ethical Reasoning in Educational Leadership

In Educational Administration, ethical reasoning is always necessary as it:

1. Promotes justice and fairness
2. Enhances institutional credibility
3. Reduces corruption
4. Encourages accountability
5. Improves organizational climate
6. Strengthens teacher commitment
7. Protects students' rights
8. Supports national development

In a world of sustainable development, education institutions cannot grow without the presence of moral leadership and ethics in decision making.

Role of Teachers in Promoting Ethical Values

Moral Education and character development is a strategic role for teachers. They are supposed to not only pass knowledge on to learners, but also to influence their values and attitudes (FRN, 2014). Teachers foster ethical values in the following ways:

1. Role modelling

2. Moral instruction
3. Classroom discipline
4. Civic education
5. Encouraging honesty
6. Promoting tolerance
7. Discouraging cheating and corruption

The character formation of students is very much affected by teachers' behaviour. An unprincipled teacher can unwittingly accept dishonesty among students. Agba and Ushie 2015 state that ethics is a vital factor to the discipline, productivity and moral development of educational institutions.

Ethical Leadership and Institutional Effectiveness

Ethical leadership enhances institutional effectiveness by establishing conditions of trust, cooperation, discipline and accountability. An ethical institution's characteristics generally are:

1. Better teacher commitment
2. Improved student performance
3. Reduced conflicts
4. Greater transparency
5. Higher public confidence

The study by Nwi-ue and Akuegwu (2017) revealed that good Academic leadership has a positive influence on academic administration and academic quality in Universities of Cross River State. Schools with good moral administration are more likely to:

1. Achieve educational goals
2. Maintain discipline
3. Encourage innovation
4. Promote teamwork
5. Sustain academic excellence

Ethical Leadership and National Development

Education is one of the most important instruments of development of a nation. Ethical educational systems bring out disciplined, responsible and competent citizenship who can contribute in the service of the development of society (FRN, 2014). Ethical leadership is a factor that leads to:

1. Human capital development
2. Democratic values
3. Social justice
4. Economic productivity

5. Peaceful coexistence

On the other hand, immoral education systems give birth to immoral graduates who lack integrity, competence and social responsibility. The moral behaviour of Nigeria's educational leaders is a key factor in national development because, if they can produce character-builders and transform institutions into centres of excellence, they will have a significant impact on the national development agenda.

Ethical Implications of Technology in Education

As technology and AI become more prominent in the field of education, they raise fresh ethical issues. Educational leaders must address issues such as:

1. Academic dishonesty
2. Data privacy
3. Digital inequality
4. Responsible AI use
5. Cyberbullying
6. Intellectual property rights

Digital ethics and responsible technology governance are essential for modern ethical educational leadership. There is a debate in the scholarly community that ethical leadership in education in the digital era should strike a balance between innovation, accountability, protecting privacy, and ensuring technology is used fairly (Uzoigwe et al., 2022).

Strategies for Promoting Ethical and Professional Conduct in Education

There are several ways to enhance ethical reasoning and professionalism in educational institutions in Nigeria. They include:

Ethics Education and Training

Ethics education and training is a process of ongoing professional education and training of teachers and school leaders with regard to moral values, codes of conduct and ethical decision making. It assists teachers to know acceptable standards of behaviour and what steps to take if they experience an ethical dilemma in the school. Frequent training enhances moral awareness and diminishes unethical procedures in education facilities. (Ogunyemi & Ojo, 2020).

Professional standards – enforcement

This approach involves adherence to professional codes of conduct in a very strict manner to guide teachers and administrators. It includes the supervision, penalty and punishment for any dishonest activities like cheating in examinations, absenteeism, corruption etc. Enforcement promotes accountability and helps to preserve the dignity of the profession of teaching (TRCN, 2020).

Transparent School Administration

Transparent administration refers to clear decision making, finance and resource allocation within schools. It increases accountability, decreases corruption, and fosters trust between stakeholders, including teachers, students, and parents. Transparency facilitates the fairness, traceability and justification of school operations (Akomolafe, 2019).

Value-Based Curriculum

Value-based curriculum incorporates moral education, civic responsibility and ethical thinking in education and learning. It is meant to build students' character while cultivating their education. The method is used to make the values of honesty, respect, discipline and responsibility (FRN, 2014) embedded in the learner's mind.

Merit-Based Appointments

Merit-based appointments guarantee that in education recruitment, promotion, and leadership selection is not based on favouritism or political influence but on competence, qualifications and performance. This approach ensures equity, efficiency and professionalism in the education system (Odey & Ekpenyog, 2018).

Effective Supervision

Overseeing the work of teachers through constant monitoring, evaluation and support to ensure adherence to ethical and professional standards. It contributes to the effectiveness of teaching, decreased misbehaviour, and greater school effectiveness. In addition, supervisors help teachers to improve teaching and ethical practices (Okon & Bassey, 2021).

Adequate Funding

Adequate funding refers to the provision of sufficient financial resources to support infrastructure, instructional materials, staff welfare, and ethical governance in education. Proper funding reduces corruption risks and improves the quality of education delivery (Adedeji, & Owoeye, 2020).

Conclusion

Ethical reasoning and professional conduct are essential foundations of educational practice and leadership in Nigeria. Ethical educational leaders promote justice, accountability, transparency, professionalism, and institutional effectiveness. Nigerian scholars, especially researchers associated with the University of Calabar, have demonstrated that ethical leadership positively influences teacher commitment, organizational climate, and educational outcomes (Ngene et al., 2025; Uzoigwe et al., 2022).

The numerous ethical challenges facing Nigerian educational institutions—including corruption, examination malpractice, sexual harassment, political interference, and poor accountability—underscore the urgent need for moral transformation in educational leadership. Promoting ethical reasoning requires

strong professional standards, effective leadership training, transparent administration, and value-based education. Ethical educational institutions are better positioned to produce responsible citizens, competent graduates, and sustainable national development. Ultimately, no educational system can rise above the ethical quality of its leaders and practitioners.

References

- Adedeji, S. O., & Owoeye, J. S. (2020). Educational financing and quality assurance in Nigerian schools. *Journal of Educational Finance*, 45(2), 120–135.
- Agba, A. M. O., & Ushie, E. M. (2015). Good work ethics and service delivery in public universities in the South-south region of Nigeria. *Journal of Corporate Governance, Insurance, and Risk Management*, 2(3), 117–130. <https://doi.org/10.56578/jcgirm020308>
- Akomolafe, C. O. (2019). Transparency and accountability in school leadership in Nigeria. *African Journal of Educational Management*, 17(1), 22–34.
- Anam, N. G. (2025). Principals' professional ethics on educational management and supervision in secondary schools within the Calabar Education Zone of Cross River State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Education, Social and Management Sciences*, 1(3), 147–161.
- Aristotle. (2009). *Nicomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published ca. 4th century BCE)
- Basalla, M. A. (2022). *The influence of ethical leadership and the moral compass on decision making in higher education leadership* (Doctoral dissertation, Drexel University).
- Cohen, J., & Welch, M. (2011). School climate and moral education: Improving ethical leadership in schools. *Journal of Moral Education*, 40(4), 455–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2011.606857>
- Duignan, P. (2012). Vision-inspired leadership and ethical decision-making. In *Educational leadership: Together creating ethical learning environments* (pp. 91–116). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139197045.008>
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2014). *National Policy on Education* (6th ed.). Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council.
- Green, J., & Walker, K. (2009). A contingency model for ethical decision-making by educational leaders. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 4(4), 1–10.
- Henry, E., & Jonathan, H. (2024). *The concept of the greater good in utilitarianism and its relevance to leadership ethics*. EasyChair Preprint 13702. <https://easychair.org/publications/preprint/PLM2>
- Hursthouse, R., & Pettigrove, G. (2022). Virtue ethics. In *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>

- Kandasamy, U. C. (2024). *Ethical leadership in the age of AI: Challenges, opportunities and framework for ethical leadership*. arXiv. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2410.18095>
- Ngene, A. N., Ogban, D. E., Ojeka, J. A., Ogbudu, G. A., & Oweikpodor, V. G. (2025). Exploring the relationship between ethical leadership and job commitment of non-teaching staff in the University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation*, 6(3), 1071–1077.
- Nwi-ue, F. D., & Akuegwu, B. A. (2017). Providing academic leadership in universities in Cross River State, Nigeria: Assessment of departmental heads' effectiveness. *Asian Journal of Education and Training*, 3(1), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.20448/journal.522/2017.3.1/522.1.18.24>
- Oboh, C. S. (2018). *Do upbringing and formal education influence ethical decision making? A study of professional accountants in Nigeria*. Presented at the 15th International Conference on Economics and Social Science, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- Obona, E., Nwanneamaka, N. C., & Rachael, N. I. (2025). Assessing the impact of ethical school leadership on teachers' job commitment and goals attainment in public secondary schools. *Kashere Journal of Education*.
- Odey, J. O., & Ekpenyong, A. O. (2018). Merit system and human resource management in Nigerian educational institutions. *International Journal of Educational Administration*, 10(3), 89–102.
- Ogunyemi, B., & Ojo, A. (2020). Teacher professional development and ethical competence in Nigerian schools. *Journal of Educational Foundations*, 9(2), 45–58.
- Okon, F. I., & Bassey, U. U. (2021). Instructional supervision and quality assurance in secondary schools in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Supervision*, 6(1), 14–27.
- Robbins, S., & Trabichet, L. (2009). Ethical decision-making by educational leaders: Its foundations, culture and more recent perspectives. *Management in Education*, 23(2), 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020609104810>
- Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria (2020). *Code of conduct for teachers in Nigeria*. TRCN Publications.
- Uche, R. D., & Odey, E. O. (2017). Leadership conflicts among students on Nigerian university campuses: The experience of the University of Calabar, Calabar-Nigeria. *British Journal of Education*, 5(3), 1–10.
- Uchechukwu, P. N., & Iwuji, E. N. (2025). The relationship between ethical school administration and teachers' job commitment in secondary schools in Calabar South Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria. *Multi-Disciplinary Research and Development Journals Int'l*, 7(2), 228–243. <https://doi.org/10.59795/m.v7i2.162>

Uzoigwe, E. I. E., Chukwuma-Offor, A. M., & Ategwu, P. O. (2022). The indispensability of critical thinking and moral-leadership in management of higher education in Nigeria. *GPH-International Journal of Educational Research*, 5(06), 1–12.