

CHALLENGES OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN LIGHT OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN PALESTINIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the challenges of ethical leadership in light of digital technology in Palestinian schools, the most important ethical principles that educational leaders must adhere to, the key dimensions of ethical leadership, the most prominent ethical challenges resulting from digital technology, and to propose educational procedures and recommendations to address these challenges. The researchers adopted the qualitative research approach through the analysis of literature and previous studies specialized in the topic, in addition to conducting interviews to answer the research questions and develop recommendations and proposals. The study population consisted of all educational supervisors (male and female), whose number reached (574), and all general directors of education directorates in the following governorates: Tubas, Qabatiya, Birzeit, Ramallah, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, North Hebron, and South Hebron, whose number reached (18). A purposive sample was selected consisting of (33) educational supervisors and (8) general directors. The results showed that Palestinian schools need educational leaders who possess a set of ethical principles such as justice, equality, and respect for individual ownership. The study also identified several dimensions of ethical leadership represented in the moral/value dimension, the educational dimension, the human dimension, and the security dimension. In addition, the results confirmed the presence of ethical challenges in light of digital technology, including unethical use of technology, inequality in access to technological resources, violations of privacy and data protection, and weak monitoring systems. The study recommended the necessity of establishing clear educational policies and philosophies to ensure the safe and responsible use of technology, strengthening partnerships with the local community, activating monitoring and follow-up systems in schools, designing curricula that address digital technology concepts and ethics, and organizing training courses and workshops for teachers and students on digital technology ethics.

KEYWORDS: Ethical Leadership; Digital Technology, Educational Ethics, Digital Citizenship, School Administration.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethics represent one of the fundamental pillars that contribute to the advancement and development of nations. They are not merely guiding principles; rather, they constitute the foundation upon which successful and prosperous societies are built. In recent years, increasing attention has been directed toward ethics in leadership due to its direct influence

on guiding human behavior. The ethical system serves as a compass that directs educational leaders within their institutions toward development, sustainability, and quality.

Leadership constitutes the core component of educational institutions. It no longer focuses solely on administrative tasks, but rather emphasizes the power of influence over employees within

institutions. This influence is exercised through a set of characteristics, competencies, and capabilities possessed by leaders and staff members in order to direct work appropriately and achieve the desired objectives (Al-Saud, 2013).

Islamic teachings have emphasized the system of values and ethics, considering it the fundamental basis of human societies. God Almighty sent the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to perfect noble morals. Nations and civilizations rise through high moral standards built on solid foundations. These morals produce righteous individuals who regulate their behaviors and strive to develop their societies through adherence to moral principles and values. The system of ethics and values has been one of the most prominent topics addressed by scholars and researchers throughout history (Al-Shetwi & Al-Habib, 2017).

Ethical leadership is considered one of the leadership styles that contributes to building positive relationships and successful administrative practices within institutions, whether among employees themselves or between the institution and other institutions. It strengthens relationships and supports decision-making within an ethical framework that emphasizes justice, credibility, and fairness in decision-making (Al-Ta'i et al., 2017).

Ethical leadership contributes to creating balance and activating monitoring within schools regarding individuals' behaviors and actions. It also contributes to establishing a strong organizational culture that deepens shared concepts and establishes an effective cultural framework. This enhances responsiveness to administrative and educational decisions, increases levels of belonging and loyalty to the school, and promotes teamwork and collaborative spirit (Hassanein, 2017).

The success and distinction of schools depend largely on the extent to which principals and teachers adhere to ethical principles. Ethical leadership serves as a safeguard through which the success or failure of schools in various aspects can be judged. School leaders represent role models for students, influencing their behaviors and attitudes on a daily basis. Education is a moral and social responsibility whose impact is reflected in society through students, whether positively or negatively (Al-Arayda & Al-Sharifi, 2012).

Digital technology has become one of the modern means of transferring knowledge and information. It enables individuals to access information and meet the needs of teachers and students through various modern programs, technologies, and educational platforms. It also contributes to achieving equality in the educational process, improving the quality of

education, and enhancing well-being (Saleh, 2024).

Digital technology has a clear impact on all elements of the educational process. It allows the transfer of knowledge through modern technological methods, provides access to information at any time and often free of charge, takes into account individual differences among students, saves time and effort, and reinforces the principle of lifelong learning (Amish & Al-Harthi, 2023).

Digital technology has become a necessity in contemporary life. It contributes significantly to achieving competitiveness among institutions through optimal utilization of available human, material, and financial resources. It enhances performance levels, improves individuals' skills in a rapidly evolving digital and informational era, and increases institutional efficiency and job performance (Timotheou et al., 2023).

As a result of the technological transformations that have affected all aspects of life – particularly the educational field – education has come to rely on modern technological tools and networks. Traditional teaching methods are no longer sufficient in light of rapid technological and digital developments (Khalifati & Maghrani, 2019).

1.1. Problem Statement and Research Questions

School administration plays a significant role in maximizing the benefit from material, financial, and human resources within the school, given that the school represents a fundamental component of the educational system. The educational process serves as the primary driver for building and developing societies through the optimal utilization of available technological tools and resources for transferring knowledge and information, advancing education, and keeping pace with rapid developments and transformations (Atir, 2017).

Commitment to ethical standards in administrative work is among the most essential requirements that must be upheld. Individuals must perform their duties with full dedication and integrity, regardless of the nature or scope of the work they undertake (Al-Waishi, 2013).

The rapid technological developments in information systems and digitalization, the expansion of diverse technological tools and programs, and the swift access to information and knowledge – along with the misuse of digital platforms by unknown individuals in unethical or immoral ways that may contradict Islamic values and societal norms – have imposed on society the necessity of spreading awareness regarding digital technology and its proper use (Ma'jab, 2022).

The world is currently experiencing accelerated changes and extensive technological developments that require educational leaders to exert greater efforts to keep pace with such transformations while preserving ethical values within the educational system. Through their professional experience in the educational field and review of previous studies, the researchers observed certain ethical issues associated with the use of digital technology in schools. These include unequal access to technological resources among teachers and students, security breaches and illegal violations, obtaining information from unreliable or false sources, and the use of programs that replace human reasoning and thinking processes – such as artificial intelligence – which may negatively affect critical thinking and sound decision-making.

Numerous studies have addressed ethical leadership. For example, Yusuf (2024) examined obstacles facing principals of Arab Islamic schools in India in the field of ethical leadership and found the presence of ethical challenges encountered by school administrators. Studies addressing digital technology include Siyaj and Fatiha (2023), who investigated the effectiveness of employing digital technology in Jerusalem schools and highlighted challenges related to parental digital literacy.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to answer the following main question:

What are the challenges of ethical leadership in light of digital technology in Palestinian schools?

This main question is subdivided into the following sub-questions:

1. In light of rapid technological developments, what are the most important ethical principles that educational leaders must adhere to when using digital technology?

2. What are the key dimensions of ethical leadership in the context of digital technology in Palestinian schools that school principals should apply toward teachers, students, and the local community?

3. Are there ethical challenges facing educational leaders in Palestinian schools due to digital technology? If so, what are the most significant of these challenges?

4. Based on professional experience in the educational field, what educational procedures, solutions, and proposals can address these ethical challenges?

1.2. Significance of Study

First: Theoretical Significance

The importance of this study lies in examining and analyzing the most prominent challenges of ethical leadership in light of digital technology in Palestinian

schools, in order to derive findings and proposals that contribute to reducing their negative impact on the educational process and its outcomes. The study is based on analyzing relevant literature, reviewing previous studies related to ethical leadership and digital technology, and benefiting from practical experiences within the Palestinian educational environment.

The study also contributes to enriching the theoretical framework related to ethical leadership in digital contexts, clarifying key concepts associated with ethical challenges, and providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between leadership values and technological transformation in schools.

Second: Practical Significance

The practical significance of the study stems from its potential to benefit decision-makers and officials within the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Palestine by providing insights that may assist in developing educational policies and plans related to digital transformation within an ethical framework.

The study may also benefit school principals, supervisors, and teachers by highlighting the ethical dimensions that must accompany the use of digital technology in schools. Furthermore, researchers and graduate students may benefit from the findings of this study in conducting future research on ethical leadership and digital technology.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

To identify the most important ethical principles that educational leaders must adhere to in light of digital technology use.

To determine the key dimensions of ethical leadership within digital school environments.

To identify the ethical challenges facing educational leaders in Palestinian schools as a result of digital technology.

To propose educational procedures, solutions, and recommendations to address these challenges.

1.4. Delimitations of the Study

The study was limited to public schools in Palestine within the following education directorates: Tubas, Qabatiya, Birzeit, Ramallah, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, North Hebron, and South Hebron.

It was confined to examining the challenges of ethical leadership in light of digital technology and their impact within the specified geographical and institutional context.

The study is also limited by the research approach adopted, the tools used for data collection, and the time period during which the study was conducted.

1.5. Operational Definitions

Ethical Leadership: A set of behaviors and practices exercised by the leader toward teachers and staff members, using appropriate means to instill moral virtues in learners so that they become productive and responsible members of their society and nation (Al-Qarni, 2016).

Digital Technology: A collection of scientific advancements embodied in practical applications that transform traditional methods into digital forms. It includes computers, the internet, mobile phones, satellite communication, digital devices, and various technological tools used in the educational process (Nasef, 2014).

Previous Studies Related to Ethical Leadership

Yusuf (2024) aimed to identify the obstacles facing principals of Arab Islamic schools in India in the field of ethical leadership. The researcher used the descriptive survey method. The study population consisted of 270 teachers and principals, and a random sample was selected. A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The results indicated that the level of obstacles was moderate. The study recommended strengthening commitment to ethical leadership due to its positive impact on the school environment.

Al-Sahli (2023) conducted a study aimed at identifying the degree of ethical leadership practiced by secondary school principals in Kuwait to enhance students' social responsibility. The descriptive method was employed, and the study sample consisted of 170 students. The results revealed that the degree of ethical leadership practice was high across dimensions such as integrity, justice, role clarification, and ethical guidance. The study recommended providing training programs for principals to strengthen ethical leadership dimensions.

Bajaber et al. (2022) examined the dimensions and values of ethical leadership among female leaders of private schools in Jeddah from the perspective of educational leadership experts. The researchers used a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The results showed that justice, transparency, and integrity were among the most prominent ethical values. The study also identified obstacles, including inadequate leadership selection processes and insufficient training programs. It recommended integrating ethical values into leadership selection and preparation programs.

Göçen (2021) explored teachers' perceptions of ethical leadership across Western and Eastern cultures using a qualitative research methodology. The study sample consisted of 51 teachers. The findings revealed that teachers defined ethical

leadership through principles such as justice, respect, integrity, responsibility, and flexibility.

Al-Malahim (2020) investigated ethical leadership among public secondary school principals in Al-Shobak and its relationship to teachers' job performance. The descriptive correlational method was used. The results indicated that ethical leadership dimensions were practiced at a moderate level, with administrative behaviors ranked first, followed by human relations and personal traits.

1.6. Previous Studies Related to Digital Technology

Al-Munji and Al-Makki (2023) conducted a study aimed at identifying the role of educational leadership in supporting the use of digital technology and social media in school counseling practices in Muscat Governorate, Sultanate of Oman, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers adopted the phenomenological analytical approach. A purposive sample of 10 social workers was selected. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection tool. The results highlighted the importance of educational leadership in supporting social workers' use of digital technology. The study emphasized the need for educational leaders to keep pace with technological developments and to provide an educational environment that supports digital use. It recommended that the Ministry of Education provide training programs for social workers in delivering remote counseling services through digital technologies.

Amish and Al-Harhi (2023) conducted a study aimed at identifying the role of schools in developing ethical values to confront the challenges of the digital age among female secondary school students in Bish Governorate, Saudi Arabia. The descriptive method was used. The study population consisted of 2,600 female students in public secondary schools, and a random purposive sample of 335 students was selected. A questionnaire was used as the research instrument. The results revealed that the degree of schools' role in developing ethical values was moderate, while the obstacles facing schools in promoting ethical values were high. The study recommended strengthening transparency among students when dealing with digital programs and social media platforms.

Siyaj and Fatiha (2023) conducted a study aimed at identifying the effectiveness of employing digital technology in education in Jerusalem schools. The researchers used a qualitative research approach. The study sample consisted of 5 principals and 10 teachers. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection tool. The results indicated that

digital technology faces challenges related to parental digital illiteracy. The study recommended organizing training workshops to develop teachers' and students' digital learning skills and to reduce digital illiteracy among parents.

suwaidan (2022) conducted a study aimed at identifying the impact of digital technology use on educational and moral loss among Palestinian school students from the perspective of faculty members. The descriptive-analytical method was used. The study sample consisted of 256 faculty members selected randomly. The results indicated a high level of moral impact resulting from digital technology use. The study recommended conducting workshops and training programs to raise students' awareness about the risks of digital technology and its negative effects on ethical values.

1.7. Commentary on Previous Studies

Through reviewing and analyzing previous studies, it becomes evident that there is diversity in addressing ethical leadership and digital technology. Some studies focused on obstacles facing school principals in practicing ethical leadership, such as Yusuf (2024). Other studies examined ethical leadership dimensions and values, such as Bajaber et al. (2022), while Göçen (2021) addressed cross-cultural definitions of ethical leadership. Al-Malahim (2020) linked ethical leadership to teachers' job performance.

Regarding digital technology, studies such as Amish and Al-Harthi (2023) focused on the role of schools in promoting ethical values in the digital age, while Suwaidan (2022) examined the moral impact of digital technology use. Methodologies varied among studies, including descriptive, analytical, qualitative, correlational, and mixed methods. Research tools also varied, including questionnaires and interviews.

The present study differs from previous studies in that it specifically addresses the challenges of ethical leadership in light of digital technology in Palestinian schools using a qualitative research methodology and a sample consisting of general directors and educational supervisors.

2. METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

2.1. Research Approach

The study adopted the qualitative research approach to achieve its objectives. The researchers relied on analyzing the theoretical literature and previous studies related to ethical leadership and digital technology, in addition to conducting personal interviews to describe and analyze the phenomenon, extract conclusions, and answer the research questions.

The qualitative approach was selected because it

allows for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences regarding ethical leadership challenges in digital contexts, and provides rich descriptive data that contribute to interpreting the research problem comprehensively.

2.2. Study Population

The study population consisted of all educational supervisors (male and female) and all general directors in the Palestinian education directorates of Tubas, Qabatiya, Birzeit, Ramallah, Tulkarm, Qalqilya, North Hebron, and South Hebron.

The total number of educational supervisors reached (574), including both male and female supervisors. The number of general directors reached (18). The study was conducted during the academic year (2024/2025).

2.3. Study Sample

A purposive sampling method was used in selecting the study sample. The sample consisted of:

- (8) General Directors of Education
- (33) Educational Supervisors

The sample was distributed according to gender, academic qualification, years of service, and job title, to ensure diversity in perspectives and experiences related to the study topic.

2.4. Data Collection Sources

1. Literature Review: The researchers analyzed books, previous studies, and relevant literature related to ethical leadership challenges in light of digital technology in schools.

2. Personal Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with (8) general directors and (33) educational supervisors to answer the research questions and collect qualitative data.

2.5. Validity of the Instrument

The interview questions were developed based on the researchers' expertise and review of relevant literature and previous studies. The instrument consisted of four main questions corresponding to the research questions.

The instrument was presented to a panel of (8) experts in educational administration and leadership to ensure its validity and appropriateness. Based on their feedback, modifications were made to some items to enhance clarity and relevance.

2.6. Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure reliability, the researchers conducted pilot interviews with (4) educational supervisors from outside the study sample. The interviews were conducted twice with a time interval of seven days between the first and second administration.

The responses were analyzed in both instances, and the results were compared to ensure consistency. Reliability was calculated using Holsti's formula, and

the agreement percentage reached (89%), indicating a high level of reliability.

2.7. Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using grounded theory procedures. The process included:

- Transcribing the interviews.
- Reading the transcripts carefully.
- Coding the responses.
- Grouping similar codes into sub-themes.
- Categorizing sub-themes into major themes.
- Ensuring consistency in analysis.
- Calculating response frequencies and percentages.

This method enabled the researchers to identify the main themes related to ethical leadership challenges in digital school environments and to interpret participants' responses accurately.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. First: Results of the First Question and Their Discussion

The first question states:

In light of rapid technological developments and accelerating global changes, educational leaders are required to exert greater efforts to keep pace with these transformations while fully adhering to professional ethics. What are the most important ethical leadership principles that educational leaders must adhere to when using digital technology?

To answer this question, the researchers relied on interview data, relevant literature, and previous studies that addressed ethical principles necessary for educational leaders in the context of digital technology.

The school principal is considered the primary authority and role model within the educational institution. Therefore, the principal must embody values such as sincerity, integrity, honesty, and positive ethical conduct, especially in light of modern technological developments and the widespread use of digital programs and tools by principals, teachers, and students.

The principal plays a vital role in cultivating ethical principles in the processes of transferring, exchanging, and disseminating digital information. Moreover, the principal must encourage teachers and students to adhere to ethical standards when using digital platforms, particularly when preparing lessons, selecting reliable sources, publishing materials, and sharing information.

The role of the school principal is no longer limited to traditional administrative responsibilities. Rather, the principal must act as a digital ethical leader who achieves balance between technological

advancement and educational values, ensuring a safe, advanced, and sustainable learning environment that meets the needs of students, teachers, and the local community.

Hamadi (2013) identified several ethical principles emphasized in Islamic teachings, including: good example (role modeling), justice, responsibility, and delegation.

Creating a positive and healthy school environment necessitates adherence to ethical characteristics such as honesty, integrity, teamwork, effective communication, performance enhancement, and institutional development.

Interview Results Related to the First Question:

A. Results from General Directors: Integrity and Transparency (100%); Privacy and Information Security (100%); Justice and Equality (90%); Sustainability and Continuous Improvement (85%); Digital Responsibility (80%).

B. Results from Educational Supervisors: Respect for Intellectual Property and Privacy (84%); Integrity and Credibility (80%); Justice and Equality (78%); Continuous Professional Development (75%); Technological Culture (60%); Respect and Positive Communication (50%).

3.2. Second: Results of the Second Question and Their Discussion

The second question states:

One of the characteristics of a distinguished ethical leader is the application of ethical leadership dimensions in creating a positive climate and a safe working environment. In your opinion, what are the most important dimensions of ethical leadership in light of digital technology in Palestinian schools that school principals should apply toward teachers, students, and the local community? Kalshoven et al. (2011) identified several dimensions of ethical leadership, including integrity, justice, role clarification, power sharing, concern for employees, and ethical guidance.

Interview Results Related to the Second Question:

A. Results from General Directors: Moral and Value Dimension (100%); Security Dimension (100%); Educational Dimension (95%); Leadership and Administrative Dimension (95%); Community and Participatory Dimension (85%); Human Dimension (78%).

B. Results from Educational Supervisors: Moral and Value Dimension (100%); Security Dimension (100%); Educational Dimension (95%); Leadership and Administrative Dimension (95%); Community Dimension (85%); Human Dimension (78%).

3.3. Third: Results of the Third Question and Their Discussion

The third question states:

Do you believe that there are ethical challenges facing educational leaders in schools in light of digital technology in Palestinian schools? If your answer is yes, what are the most significant ethical challenges facing educational leaders in this context?

Major challenges include privacy violations, inequality in access to digital resources, unethical use of technology, overreliance on digital tools, and weak monitoring systems.

Interview Results Related to the Third Question:

A. Results from General Directors: Privacy and Data Violations (100%); Inequality in Access to Technology (90%); Unethical Use of Digital Technology (87%); Weak Monitoring and Oversight Systems (62%).

B. Results from Educational Supervisors: Digital Divide and Inequitable Access (100%); Insufficient Training in Digital Ethics (100%); Privacy Violations and Cybersecurity Risks (90%); Weak Digital Monitoring Systems (70%).

3.4. Fourth: Results of the Fourth Question and Their Discussion

The fourth question states:

Based on your professional experience in the educational field, what educational procedures, solutions, and proposals can be implemented to address the ethical challenges facing Palestinian school leaders in light of digital technology?

Suggested procedures include developing clear policies for responsible digital use, strengthening monitoring systems, raising awareness among teachers, students, and parents, integrating digital ethics into curricula, continuous training, and strengthening community partnerships.

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3.5. Interview Results Related to the Fourth Question

A. Results from General Directors: Establishing Clear Educational Policies for Safe and Responsible Digital Use (100%); Strengthening Monitoring and Follow-up Systems (90%); Enhancing Community Partnerships and Communication (90%).

B. Results from Educational Supervisors: Establishing Clear Digital Ethics Policies (100%); Implementing Awareness and Educational Programs on Digital Ethics (100%); Strengthening Community Partnerships (78%); Enhancing Monitoring and Oversight Systems (70%).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening partnerships and communication with local community institutions to promote a safe digital culture in schools.

Directing the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to activate monitoring and evaluation systems for digital platforms and technologies used in schools.

Encouraging policymakers to design curricula that incorporate digital technology concepts and digital ethics principles.

Organizing continuous training courses and workshops for teachers and students regarding digital ethics and responsible technology use.

Providing adequate technological infrastructure to support safe and sustainable digital transformation in Palestinian schools.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Conducting further studies on ethical leadership challenges in light of digital technology due to the limited number of studies addressing this topic.

Conducting a future study entitled: "The Role of the Local Community in Improving Digital Technology Use within Ethical Standards and Regulations."

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