

Original Article

Moral Foundations and Communicative Ethical Leadership of Public Elementary School Teachers

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between moral foundations and communicative ethical leadership among public elementary school teachers in the Mati Central District, Division of the City of Mati. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was used with 125 teachers selected through convenience sampling. Data were collected through adapted standardized survey questionnaires that measured moral foundations in terms of care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity, and communicative ethical leadership in terms of visible ethical actions, ethical openness, and ethical values. The data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, Pearson product-moment correlation, and multiple linear regression. Results showed that teachers reported a very high level of moral foundations overall ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.60$), with respect obtaining the highest domain mean ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 0.61$). Communicative ethical leadership was also rated very high overall ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.60$), with communicating ethics with openness recording the highest domain mean ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.59$). Moral foundations had a very high positive relationship with communicative ethical leadership ($r = 0.82$, $R^2 = 0.67$, $p = 0.000$). Regression analysis also showed that care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity all significantly predicted communicative ethical leadership, with fairness showing the strongest standardized effect ($Beta = 0.44$). The model accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in communicative ethical leadership ($R = 0.88$, $R^2 = 0.77$, $F = 96.45$, $p = 0.000$). The findings indicate that teachers who hold stronger moral foundations also report stronger

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ethical communication practices. The study supports the need for school-based professional development that links moral reflection, fair decision practices, ethical dialogue, and transparent communication.

Keywords: ethical leadership, moral foundations, public schools, teachers

1. Introduction

Ethical leadership in schools depends not only on the formal authority of administrators but also on the everyday moral conduct of teachers. In public elementary schools, teachers make frequent decisions that require fairness, compassion, loyalty to institutional goals, respect for norms, and integrity in professional boundaries. These decisions do not stay private because teachers communicate them through classroom routines, interactions with learners, dialogue with colleagues, responses to parents, and participation in school decisions. For this reason, teacher ethics and teacher communication are closely connected. A teacher who communicates with transparency, consistency, and moral care helps define the ethical climate of the classroom and contributes to the wider culture of the school.

The concept of ethical leadership has long emphasized the visible practice of appropriate conduct and the promotion of such conduct through communication, reinforcement, and decision practices. Brown et al. (2005) framed ethical leadership as a form of social influence in which leaders model normatively appropriate behavior and use two-way communication to strengthen ethical standards. More recent work has expanded this view by showing that ethical leadership is sustained through ethical climate, value internalization, and employee voice (Kuenzi et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2022). In education, this perspective is important because teachers are not only receivers of school policies. They are daily moral agents whose words and actions influence learners, peers, and stakeholders.

Communicative ethical leadership provides a useful lens for this study because it places ethical behavior and communication in the same frame. Abu Bakar and Connaughton (2026) described ethical leadership communication as the promotion of ethical behavior through communicative acts that make ethical action visible, support openness in ethical dialogue, and clarify ethical values. In schools, these three dimensions have direct relevance to teacher practice. Teachers communicate visible ethical actions when they model honesty, fairness, accountability, and respect in daily tasks. They communicate ethics with openness when they discuss ethical issues, admit mistakes, invite feedback, and consult others on moral concerns. They communicate ethical values when they articulate the standards that should guide classroom and professional conduct.

Moral foundations theory offers a complementary basis for examining why teachers may differ in their ethical communication practices. Graham et al. (2013)

proposed that moral judgment is plural and rests on several intuitive moral concerns, commonly represented by care, fairness, loyalty, authority or respect, and sanctity. These foundations provide different moral priorities. Care directs attention to harm and compassion. Fairness directs attention to justice and equal treatment. Loyalty concerns commitment to groups and shared missions. Respect concerns regard for authority, norms, and social order. Sanctity concerns purity, integrity, and moral discipline. In the teaching profession, these foundations can shape how educators judge situations, treat learners, support colleagues, and defend ethical standards.

A school context makes the connection between moral foundations and communicative ethical leadership especially relevant. Teachers face moral situations that require both judgment and expression. They decide how to apply rules, how to respond to struggling learners, how to communicate with parents, how to raise concerns to school heads, and how to support colleagues without compromising fairness. Teacher caring has been linked to student well-being and school engagement (Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020; Sun, 2021), while positive interpersonal communication in instruction has been associated with stronger relational and motivational conditions for learning (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). These findings imply that teacher morality becomes educationally meaningful when it reaches learners and colleagues through communication.

The Philippine public elementary school setting adds further significance to this issue. Public school teachers work within institutional expectations, community values, and resource conditions that often demand prudence and ethical clarity. Teachers are expected to uphold professional standards while they also respond to varied learner needs, parental concerns, administrative directives, and peer relationships. In such conditions, moral foundations may help explain why some teachers are more consistent in ethical communication than others. Fairness may support transparent treatment of learners. Care may promote humane responses to student difficulties. Loyalty may reinforce commitment to school goals. Respect may sustain professional conduct and rule adherence. Sanctity may strengthen integrity, decency, and moral discipline.

Despite the importance of ethics in teaching, empirical work that links teachers moral foundations with communicative ethical leadership remains limited in localized Philippine public elementary school contexts. Research on ethical leadership in education has grown, yet Ahmed (2025) noted that the field still needs clearer attention to antecedents, mechanisms, and contextual conditions. The present study responds to this need by examining whether moral foundations are associated with, and significantly predict, communicative ethical leadership among public elementary school teachers in the Mati Central District, Division of the City of Mati. By focusing on teachers rather than only formal school leaders, the study recognizes that ethical leadership can occur through classroom practice, peer interaction, and values-based communication.

This study therefore sought to determine the level of moral foundations of public elementary school teachers in terms of care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity; the

level of their communicative ethical leadership in terms of communicating visible ethical actions, communicating ethics with openness, and communicating ethical values; the relationship between these two variables; and the moral foundation domains that significantly influence communicative ethical leadership. The study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by linking moral psychology and ethical communication in a public elementary school setting. It also offers evidence that may help school leaders design professional development activities that address ethics not merely as compliance, but as a communicative and relational practice rooted in teachers moral commitments.

2. Methodology

The study used a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design. This design was appropriate because the study sought to describe the level of moral foundations and communicative ethical leadership and to determine the relationship and predictive influence among the measured variables without manipulating the school environment or the participants responses. The approach was cross-sectional because data were gathered at one point during the school year 2025-2026. The study did not attempt to establish causality. Instead, it examined the degree to which teachers moral foundations were statistically associated with their communicative ethical leadership and the extent to which the moral foundation domains accounted for variation in communicative ethical leadership scores.

The participants were 125 public elementary school teachers from the Mati Central District, Division of the City of Mati. The study focused on active classroom teachers because the variables under investigation are embedded in daily instructional practice, collegial interaction, and teacher engagement with learners and stakeholders. Participants were included if they were currently assigned as public elementary classroom teachers during school year 2025-2026 and had at least three consecutive years of teaching experience. Teachers assigned to purely administrative or non-teaching roles, including principals, department heads, and coordinators, were excluded. Teachers with less than three years of experience, those on extended leave, and those involved in administrative proceedings during the conduct of the study were also excluded to maintain alignment between the sample and the intended teacher practice context.

Convenience sampling was used to identify participants who were available, accessible, and qualified based on the inclusion criteria. This sampling strategy was practical for school-based data collection because the researcher had to coordinate with school authorities, observe administrative protocols, and gather responses within the operational schedules of participating schools. Although convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings beyond the district, the sample was adequate for the descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses used in the study. The results are therefore interpreted within the context of public elementary teachers in the Mati

Central District and not as estimates for all public elementary teachers in the Philippines.

Data were collected through an adapted standardized survey questionnaire. The first part measured moral foundations through five domains: care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity. The second part measured communicative ethical leadership through three domains: communicating visible ethical actions, communicating ethics with openness, and communicating ethical values. Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale in which higher scores indicated stronger agreement with the statements. The descriptive interpretation used in the study classified mean scores from 4.20 to 5.00 as very high, 3.40 to 4.19 as high, 2.60 to 3.39 as moderate, 1.80 to 2.59 as low, and 1.00 to 1.79 as very low. This scale allowed the researcher to summarize teachers self-reported moral and communicative ethical leadership practices in a consistent and interpretable form.

The adapted questionnaire was subjected to content validation by three experts with backgrounds in educational leadership, educational ethics, and quantitative research. The validation process assessed the relevance, clarity, and alignment of the items with the intended constructs. Revisions were made to improve wording and contextual fit for public elementary school teachers while preserving the conceptual meaning of the source measures. A pilot test was then conducted with 30 public elementary school teachers who were not part of the final sample. The pilot reliability analysis showed high internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha values of 0.948 for the 30-item moral foundations scale and 0.973 for the 26-item communicative ethical leadership scale. These results indicated that the adapted instruments were reliable for the main data collection.

Before data collection, the researcher secured permission from the Graduate School and requested authorization from the Schools Division Superintendent. Coordination was also made with school heads to ensure orderly access to qualified participants. Teachers received information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures used to protect their responses. The questionnaires were distributed only after informed consent had been obtained. Completed questionnaires were checked for completeness, encoded, and reviewed prior to statistical analysis. No personally identifying data were included in the data file used for analysis.

Ethical safeguards followed the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and minimal risk. Participants were informed that they could refuse participation or withdraw without penalty. The study did not involve experimental treatment, deception, or collection of sensitive personal identifiers. Data were used only for research purposes, stored securely, and reported in aggregate form. The researcher also observed school protocols and ensured that the study did not disrupt teaching duties or school operations. The study secured ethics approval through the institutional research ethics process before data collection proceeded.

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to describe the level of each moral foundation domain

and each communicative ethical leadership domain. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine the relationship between overall moral foundations and overall communicative ethical leadership. Multiple linear regression was used to determine which moral foundation domains significantly influenced communicative ethical leadership. The regression model entered care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity as predictors and communicative ethical leadership as the criterion variable. Statistical decisions were based on the reported p-values, with values below 0.05 treated as statistically significant.

3. Results

The summary in Table 1 shows that the overall level of moral foundations was very high ($M = 4.30, SD = 0.60$). Among the five domains, respect recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.39, SD = 0.61$), followed by loyalty ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.61$), sanctity ($M = 4.28, SD = 0.60$), care ($M = 4.25, SD = 0.59$), and fairness ($M = 4.24, SD = 0.60$). All domains were rated very high.

Table 1. Summary of moral foundations among public elementary school teachers.

Domain	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Care	0.59	4.25	Very high
Fairness	0.60	4.24	Very high
Loyalty	0.61	4.33	Very high
Respect	0.61	4.39	Very high
Sanctity	0.60	4.28	Very high
Overall	0.60	4.30	Very high

The summary in Table 2 shows that the overall level of communicative ethical leadership was very high ($M = 4.33, SD = 0.60$). Among the three domains, communicating ethics with openness recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.37, SD = 0.59$), followed by communicating visible ethical actions ($M = 4.35, SD = 0.60$) and communicating ethical values ($M = 4.28, SD = 0.60$). All domains were rated very high.

Table 2. Summary of communicative ethical leadership among public elementary school teachers.

Domain	SD	Mean	Descriptive Level
Communicating Visible Ethical Actions	0.60	4.35	Very high
Communicating Ethics with Openness	0.59	4.37	Very high
Communicating Ethical Values	0.60	4.28	Very high
Overall	0.60	4.33	Very high

The correlation result in Table 3 shows a very high positive relationship between moral foundations and communicative ethical leadership ($r = 0.82$, $R^2 = 0.67$, $p = 0.000$). The decision was to reject the null hypothesis.

Table 3. Correlation results.

Variables	r	p-value
Communicative ethical leadership	0.82	0.000
Moral foundations		

The regression result in Table 4 shows that all five moral foundation domains significantly predicted communicative ethical leadership. Fairness had the highest standardized coefficient (Beta = 0.44, $p = 0.000$), followed by sanctity (Beta = 0.41, $p = 0.000$), care (Beta = 0.39, $p = 0.000$), respect (Beta = 0.32, $p = 0.003$), and loyalty (Beta = 0.27, $p = 0.009$). The regression model was significant ($R = 0.88$, $R^2 = 0.77$, $F = 96.45$, $p = 0.000$).

Table 4. Regression results.

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	t	p-value
Constant	1.48	0.43		3.44	0.001
Care	0.45	0.41	0.39	3.78	0.000
Fairness	0.52	0.46	0.44	4.12	0.000
Loyalty	0.31	0.39	0.27	2.64	0.009
Respect	0.37	0.42	0.32	3.03	0.003
Sanctity	0.49	0.45	0.41	4.01	0.000

4. Discussion

The findings show that public elementary school teachers in the study reported very high moral foundations. This pattern suggests that the participants perceived care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity as strong moral guides in their professional life. Graham et al. (2013) argued that moral judgment is plural rather than limited to one moral principle, and the current results reflect that plurality because all five foundations received very high ratings. The highest mean was found in respect, which indicates strong regard for authority, traditions, order, and professional norms. In a public school setting, respect may help teachers sustain classroom discipline, follow institutional expectations, and maintain the dignity of their relationships with learners, parents, and colleagues.

Fairness had the lowest domain mean among the moral foundations, but it remained at the very high level. This result is important because fairness is closely tied to impartial treatment, rule consistency, equitable access, and trust in school decisions. Brown et al. (2005) identified fairness as a central part of ethical leadership because followers evaluate moral authority through both conduct and decision processes. In

the present study, fairness may function as a practical moral foundation that helps teachers handle grading, discipline, participation, and parent concerns with consistency. The very high fairness rating also supports the view that teachers ethical commitments include justice-oriented values, not only care-based values.

The very high level of communicative ethical leadership indicates that teachers perceived themselves as active communicators of ethical behavior and values. This finding aligns with Abu Bakar and Connaughton (2026), who emphasized that ethical leadership communication includes visible ethical action, openness about ethics, and explicit value communication. The highest mean was found in communicating ethics with openness. This result suggests that teachers saw ethical dialogue, consultation, feedback, and admission of mistakes as important features of their professional conduct. Such openness matters because ethical leadership is not limited to silent moral example. It also requires words, explanations, listening, and constructive exchange.

The strong positive relationship between moral foundations and communicative ethical leadership supports the idea that ethical communication rests on underlying moral commitments. Teachers who reported stronger moral foundations also reported stronger ethical communication practices. This relationship is consistent with the social influence view of ethical leadership, where moral conduct becomes influential when it is visible and communicatively reinforced (Brown et al., 2005). It also corresponds with work by Zheng et al. (2022), which linked ethical leadership with value internalization and integrity identity. In the school context, teachers moral foundations may supply the internal content of ethical leadership, while communication turns those moral values into observable practice.

The regression findings add a more precise understanding of this relationship. All five moral foundation domains significantly predicted communicative ethical leadership, which means that no single foundation alone explained the teachers ethical communication. This result supports the plural logic of moral foundations theory (Graham et al., 2013). Care, fairness, loyalty, respect, and sanctity each contributed to communicative ethical leadership, although the magnitude of their effects differed. For school leaders, this implies that professional ethics programs should avoid a narrow focus on compliance rules. Instead, they should address multiple moral concerns, including compassion, justice, institutional commitment, respect for norms, and integrity.

Fairness showed the strongest standardized influence on communicative ethical leadership. This result is theoretically meaningful because communicative ethical leadership depends heavily on the credibility of the communicator. A teacher who is perceived as fair is more likely to communicate ethical standards with legitimacy. Kuenzi et al. (2020) emphasized that ethical leadership contributes to ethical organizational climates, and fairness likely strengthens that climate because it gives stakeholders confidence that rules and decisions are applied without bias. In classrooms, fairness supports transparent grading, consistent discipline, equal

participation, and respectful treatment of learners. In collegial work, fairness supports equitable voice and trust in shared decisions.

Sanctity had the second strongest standardized influence. In this study, sanctity refers to decency, purity, moral discipline, and alignment with spiritual or moral values. Its predictive role suggests that communicative ethical leadership is also supported by teachers sense of professional integrity and moral boundaries. Ethical communication becomes more credible when teachers uphold standards even in situations where external monitoring is limited. This finding fits the broader ethical leadership literature, where integrity and value consistency are central to leader credibility (Brown et al., 2005; Zheng et al., 2022). In elementary schools, sanctity may help teachers communicate ethical values through disciplined conduct, appropriate language, and careful judgment in sensitive situations.

Care also had a significant positive influence. This finding is expected because education is a relational profession in which teachers routinely respond to learners needs, emotions, and vulnerabilities. Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim (2020) connected teacher caring with meaning at work and student outcomes, while Sun (2021) emphasized teacher care as a positive interpersonal behavior linked to student engagement. In the present study, care likely strengthens communicative ethical leadership by making teachers more attentive to the human effect of their words and decisions. A care-oriented teacher is more likely to communicate ethics with empathy, respond to mistakes with dignity, and frame discipline as guidance rather than humiliation.

Respect and loyalty also significantly predicted communicative ethical leadership, although their standardized effects were lower than those of fairness, sanctity, and care. Respect may support ethical communication by encouraging teachers to observe professional norms, listen to authority, and uphold social order. Loyalty may support commitment to school goals, cooperation with colleagues, and protection of institutional integrity. However, these foundations must be balanced with openness. Abu Bakar and Connaughton (2026) emphasized two-way ethical communication, and Zheng et al. (2022) showed the value of ethical voice. Thus, loyalty and respect become most constructive when they do not silence ethical concerns, but instead help teachers raise concerns in a responsible and professional way.

The results have practical value for public elementary school leadership. School-based professional development can strengthen communicative ethical leadership by linking ethics with concrete teacher communication practices. Sessions may include reflective cases on fairness in assessment, care in student discipline, integrity in professional boundaries, respectful dialogue with parents, and ethical voice among colleagues. Ahmed (2025) noted that educational ethical leadership research needs stronger attention to mechanisms and context. The present findings suggest one such mechanism: teachers moral foundations are linked to how they communicate ethics in daily school life. Strengthening these foundations may therefore improve ethical dialogue, teacher credibility, and school climate.

The findings should be interpreted with caution because the study used self-reported data, convenience sampling, and a cross-sectional design. Self-reports may be affected by social desirability, especially because the topic concerns morality and ethics. The sample was also limited to public elementary school teachers in one district, so the results may not represent other divisions, private schools, secondary schools, or other regions. The design does not establish causal effects, even though the regression model identified significant predictors. Future research may use multi-source data, classroom observation, interviews, or longitudinal designs to examine how moral foundations develop over time and how they appear in actual ethical communication practices.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that public elementary school teachers in the Mati Central District reported very high moral foundations and very high communicative ethical leadership. Respect, loyalty, sanctity, care, and fairness were all strongly present among the teachers, while ethical openness, visible ethical action, and ethical value communication were likewise rated very high. These results indicate that the teachers perceived themselves as morally grounded professionals who express ethical standards through both conduct and communication.

Moral foundations had a very high positive relationship with communicative ethical leadership. Teachers who reported stronger moral foundations also reported stronger capacity to communicate ethical actions, discuss ethics openly, and articulate ethical values. The regression results further showed that all five moral foundation domains significantly influenced communicative ethical leadership, with fairness showing the strongest effect. The findings suggest that ethical communication in schools is supported by a broader moral base that includes justice, compassion, institutional commitment, respect for norms, and moral discipline.

The study contributes to educational leadership scholarship by connecting moral foundations theory with communicative ethical leadership in a public elementary school context. It also points to a practical direction for school development. Ethics programs for teachers should move beyond reminders about rules and should include moral reflection, fair decision practice, ethical dialogue, and transparent communication. Because the study was cross-sectional and based on self-reported data from one district, the findings should be treated as context-specific evidence rather than causal proof. Even with this limitation, the results support the view that ethically grounded teachers can help build school cultures marked by trust, accountability, and values-based communication.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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