



Ethics and Professional Conduct among Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century: Implications for National Development

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Abstract: *This study examined ethical principles, leadership ethics, and professional conduct among teaching professionals, and analysed their relationship with selected 21st century competencies and national development outcomes. Guided by Axiological Ethical Theory and Ethical Leadership Theory, the study adopted a mixed methods approach, integrating a descriptive-correlational design with a phenomenological qualitative design. Quantitative data were collected from 138 teaching professionals using questionnaires, while qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with 13 institutional leaders and experienced educators, complemented by document analysis. Quantitative data were analysed using percentages and charts, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The findings reveal that teaching professionals possess a strong understanding of ethical principles grounded in honesty, integrity, responsibility, accountability, and professionalism, which they perceive as internalised moral values rather than mere compliance with rules. Leadership ethics emerged as a critical determinant of institutional ethical culture, influencing trust, motivation, morale, and professional discipline. Ethical behaviour was shaped by the interaction of personal moral values and institutional factors such as transparent policies, accountability mechanisms, and peer culture. The study further established a strong relationship between ethical practices and 21st century competencies, including critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and soft skills. Conversely, unethical practices—such as corruption, sexual and gender-based violence, professional misconduct, and misuse of ICT—were found to undermine educational quality, human capital and national progress. The study concludes that ethics is a foundational professional competency and a national development imperative. Strengthening ethical leadership, institutional ethical culture, and values-based teacher preparation is essential for improving education and national development.*

Keywords: *Ethics, Professional conduct, Teaching Professionals, 21st Century, National development*

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1. Introduction

Philosophically, ethics is defined as the study of moral principles and attempts to establish rational grounds for good conduct. Ethics describes moral values and conduct. Ethics, together with aesthetics, emanates from axiology,

which is the philosophical study of value, where “value” originally meant the worth of something. Ethical inquiry raises fundamental questions such as: How should I behave? What is good and evil? Is it ever right to take something that does not belong to you? Ethical theories seek to provide the right values as the foundation for the right actions.

Ethics is a practice that applies to everyone employed in an organization or an entrepreneur, regardless of position, level of responsibility, or scope of engagement (Paliwal, 2006). Ethical behaviour relates to actions characterised by honesty, integrity, morality, and good management practices. Integrity implies behaving well and doing good even when no one is watching. However, there are instances where employees openly admit to immoral acts without fear, which calls for collective responsibility in condemning unethical behaviour.

Ethics does not merely influence organisational decision-making but also shapes the overall organisational culture. To achieve ethical effectiveness, there must be an alignment that integrates ethics with mission, vision, strategies, and goals (Brimmer, 2007). Ethical principles are rooted in social values, making such alignment essential in defining relationships and interpersonal expectations.

Unethical practices, on the other hand, promote egoistic personality traits and foster an “everyone for herself/himself” mentality. Research indicates that unethical choices and behaviours may result from both deliberate actions and impulsive automatic pathways, making them difficult to anticipate or premeditate (Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Treviño, 2010).

1.1 Research Objectives

- i. To examine teaching professionals’ understanding of ethical principles and moral values in the teaching profession.
- ii. To examine the role of leadership ethics in shaping ethical culture within educational institutions
- iii. To analyse factors influencing ethical behaviour among teaching professionals, institutional culture, and personal values.
- iv. To examine the relationship between ethical practices and selected 21st century professional competencies among teaching professionals.
- v. To explore the implications of unethical practices (such as corruption, sexual and gender-based violence, and professional misconduct) on the education system and national development.

1.2 Research Questions

1. What are ethical principles and moral values among teaching professionals?
2. How does leadership ethics influence ethical culture in educational institutions?
3. What factors influence ethical behaviour among teaching professionals?

- iv. What is the relationship between ethical practices and 21st century competencies (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and soft skills) among teaching professionals?
- v. How do unethical practices among teaching professionals affect learners, educational institutions, and national development?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Leadership Ethics and Professional Conduct

Ethical character is particularly essential for leaders, who are highly influential in shaping institutional culture. Leaders promote principles and values aligned with organisational objectives, mission, and vision (Senge, 2006). Mutual respect between leaders and subordinates is critical, as the presence of respect has a stronger positive impact on resolving conflict than merely the absence of disrespect (Hannum, 2019). Leadership development is continuous, as emphasised by former President Benjamin Mkapa, who noted that commitment to work and lifelong learning are vital attributes of effective leadership (Mkapa, 2019).

2.2 National Context and Ethical Challenges

Despite efforts and achievements by the Government of Tanzania, corruption remains a significant challenge. Practices such as bribery and gift-giving in the acquisition of public utilities and licenses persist (Lameck, 2018). These unethical acts deny access to services for citizens who cannot afford them. Efforts made by President Dr John P. J. Magufuli to strengthen anti-corruption institutions are acknowledged.

Unethical issues related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are also prevalent, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where political conditions and patriarchal governance structures exacerbate the problem. Higher learning institutions are not exempt from these challenges. Findings by the Tanzania Commission for Universities (TCU, 2020) indicate incidences of sexual harassment in universities. These realities raise critical concerns, especially since students are integral members of society. There is a need to eliminate SGBV in higher learning institutions and to remind graduates that their ethical conduct has a positive impact on society.

2.3 Ethics and 21st Century Skills

The concept of 21st century skills refer to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for individuals to contribute effectively to the knowledge society (Voogt & Roblin, 2010). The 4Cs model critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity captures the core competencies of 21st century teaching and learning.

Critical thinking involves assessing, analysing, and synthesising information and is fundamental across multiple domains, including education, business, religion, and social citizenship (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009; Redecker et al., 2011; Scott, 2015). Educational graduates are expected to address societal challenges that hinder national progress.

Communication skills enable individuals to express ideas clearly and persuasively, both orally and in writing. These skills remain crucial regardless of the language of instruction, as fluency enhances competitiveness in the labour market.

Collaboration requires individuals to work effectively with others, including in highly networked and geographically dispersed environments. In the classroom, this can be seen in group discussions/work, peer feedback and interacting with others. As a result, this will lead to productive use of social networks, enhance professional engagement and Creativity 2008; Sternberg, 2007, cited in Scott, 2015).

2.4 Soft Skills and Professional Behaviour

Soft skills, also known as life skills, socio-emotional skills, or transferable skills, encompass behaviours and personal qualities that enable individuals to navigate their environment, relate effectively with others, and achieve personal and professional goals (Scott, 2015). These include positive attitudes, responsibility, goal orientation, empathy, and social skills (Gates et al., 2016).

These skills are important in educational settings because: Responsibility involves understanding one's role and fulfilling associated tasks reliably, while goal orientation reflects the motivation and ability to plan and act toward desired educational outcomes. Empathy and social skills facilitate respectful interaction in a classroom, appreciation of learners and teachers' work, adherence to educational norms, and effective conflict resolution in educational settings.

2.5 Teaching Professionals and Ethical Practice

In the teaching profession, ethical conduct is particularly significant. Teachers serve as mirrors to their students, and their attitudes and behaviours directly influence learners (Dimkpa, 2015). Teachers are reflective practitioners who continuously build on prior knowledge and experience. Professional behaviour is demonstrated through performance, comportment, and deportment, as well as the organisation and execution of professional activities as a teacher.

Professional conduct reflects the extent to which education liberates individuals beyond mere attendance at university or teachers training college. Griola and Ruairs (2001) emphasize that professionals should uphold the reputation of their profession, ensure the safety and welfare of learners, comply with regulations and policies, and respect matters affecting clients' welfare.

2.6 Ethics, ICT, and Social Impact

Unethical ICT practices are also evident in teaching and other professions. Unethical use of ICT academically, theft through mobile banking and money transfer systems disrupts social peace. Society expects graduates to innovate solutions to address not only the few mentioned injustices in all areas including academics but also others that have not been mentioned and have negative impact to our schools and living societies.

The OECD framework on 21st century skills identifies three major dimensions: communication, information, and ethics and social impact (Chu, Tavares, & Wong, 2012). The framework emphasizes responsible use of technology and highlights the negative societal consequences of ICT abuse. Addressing ethical challenges associated with technological advancement requires informed and ethically grounded graduates.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theories: Axiological Ethical Theory (Value-Based Ethics Theory) and Ethical Leadership Theory. Together, these theories provide a philosophical and organizational foundation for understanding ethical values, professional conduct, and leadership influence among teaching professionals in the 21st century.

2.7.1 Axiological Ethical Theory (Value-Based Ethics Theory)

Axiological Ethical Theory is rooted in axiology, the philosophical study of values and worth. The theory emphasizes that ethical behaviour emanates from deeply held moral values that guide judgments about what is good, right, and desirable in human conduct. In this study,

axiology provides a philosophical lens for examining ethical principles such as honesty, integrity, morality, and responsibility within the teaching profession.

The relevance of this theory lies in its alignment with the study’s conceptualization of ethics as a foundation for professional conduct. Teaching professionals’ actions are viewed as reflections of internalized moral values, which influence how teachers and learners behave/will behave in educational and social contexts. The theory explains how ethical values shape professional identity, decision-making, and conduct, particularly in situations involving moral dilemmas.

Axiological Ethical Theory also supports the examination of ethical culture in educational institutions by highlighting the importance of aligning personal values with institutional mission, vision, goals, and professional standards. Through this lens, ethical conduct among teaching professionals is understood as a product of value orientation and moral responsibility, which ultimately influences educational quality and national development.

In this study, the theory guides the analysis of: Ethical values held by teaching professionals, The alignment between personal values and institutional ethics and the role of moral values in shaping professional conduct and ethical practice in the teaching and learning.

2.7.2 Ethical Leadership Theory

Ethical Leadership Theory focuses on the role of leaders in shaping ethical behaviour, organizational culture, and professional conduct through moral example, integrity, fairness, and respect. The theory posits that leaders significantly influence the ethical climate of institutions by modeling ethical behaviour and reinforcing ethical standards.

The relevance of this theory to the study is grounded in the recognition that teaching professionals often occupy leadership positions and function as moral role models for learners and society. Ethical leadership is therefore central to fostering a culture of accountability, professionalism, and integrity within educational institutions.

The theory explains how ethical or unethical leadership practices contribute to organizational culture, professional discipline, and ethical decision-making. It also provides a framework for understanding how leadership ethics can address challenges such as corruption, sexual and gender-based violence, and misuse of information and communication technologies within educational settings.

In this study, Ethical Leadership Theory guides the examination of: The influence of school and institutional leaders on ethical conduct, Ethical decision-making processes in educational institutions, Promotion of integrity, accountability, and respect among teaching professionals.

2.7.3 Integration of the Theories

The integration of Axiological Ethical Theory and Ethical Leadership Theory provides a comprehensive framework for the study. While Axiological Ethical Theory explains the value-based foundations of ethical behaviour, Ethical Leadership Theory explains how ethical values are reinforced, modeled, and sustained through leadership and institutional culture. Together, the theories enable an in-depth understanding of professional ethics among teaching professionals and their implications for national development refer to diagram 1.

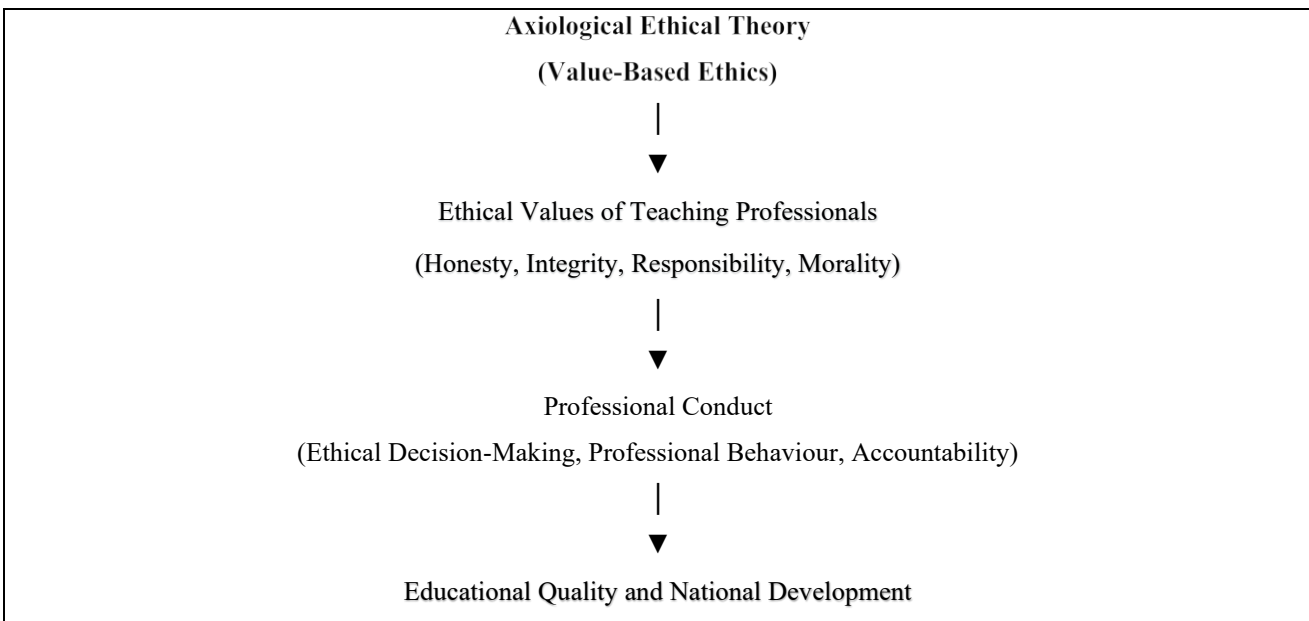




Diagram 1

2.7.4 Explanation of the Diagram

The diagram illustrates that axiological ethical values shape the ethical orientation of teaching professionals, which in turn influences their professional conduct. Ethical leadership reinforces these values by shaping institutional ethical culture, guiding ethical decision-making, and promoting accountability. The interaction between ethical values and ethical leadership ultimately contributes to improved educational quality and national development.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopted a mixed methods research approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The mixed methods approach was suitable because the study seeks to examine teachers' ethical values, professional conduct, leadership ethics, and 21st century competencies, which require both measurement of patterns and in-depth understanding of meanings, perceptions, and experiences among teaching professionals (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007; Creswell, 2014).

The quantitative approach enabled the measurement of relationships between ethical practices, leadership ethics, and 21st century competencies, while the qualitative approach provided deeper insights into how ethical values and professional conduct are understood and practiced in real educational contexts (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

The study employed Convergent (Parallel) Mixed Methods Design support which allowed the collection of the quantitative and qualitative data at the same time

(Creswell, 2014; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The design helped to describe ethical values, leadership ethics, professional conduct, and ethical challenges among teaching professionals (Best & Kahn, 2006). Moreover, the design examined relationships between ethical practices and selected 21st century competencies (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2019). The lived experiences of teaching professionals regarding ethical practices, leadership influence, and institutional ethical culture were explored (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). This combination aligns with the study's objectives of both explanation and understanding (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

3.3 Area of the Study

The study was conducted in educational institutions (such as primary schools, secondary schools, teacher training colleges, and/or universities) within the selected study area (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). These institutions are appropriate because they are formal settings where ethical leadership, professional conduct, and institutional culture are directly observable and influential (Bush, 2011; Sergiovanni, 2007).

3.4 Population of the Study

The target population comprised: around two hundred Teaching professionals (teachers, tutors, lecturers), and twenty institutional leaders (heads of schools, principals, deans, department heads) and ten Education officers (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). This population was expected to be suitable because they are directly involved in ethical decision-making, professional conduct, and leadership within educational institutions (Bush, 2011; Northouse, 2019)

3.5 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

3.5.1 Sampling Techniques

The study employed a combination of sampling techniques to enhance representativeness, rigor, and depth of understanding. Stratified sampling was used to ensure proportional representation of teaching professionals across different educational levels (primary, secondary, teacher training colleges, and universities). This approach was appropriate because the population was heterogeneous and were divided into meaningful subgroups to improve precision and reduce sampling bias (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Etikan & Bala, 2017).

Simple random sampling was applied to select one-hundred thirty-eight respondents for the quantitative phase, ensuring that each teaching professional had an equal chance of being included in the study. This method enhances generalizability and minimizes selection bias in correlational studies (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2019; Taherdoost, 2020).

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling was employed to select thirteen key informants, including institutional leaders and experienced teaching professionals who possess rich knowledge of ethical leadership, professional conduct, and institutional ethical culture. Purposive sampling is particularly suitable for phenomenological studies where participants are selected based on their lived experiences and relevance to the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2015).

3.5.2 Sample Size

The sample size for the quantitative component was determined using appropriate statistical formulas and there were one hundred thirty-eight (138) respondents. Determining an adequate sample size was essential for achieving statistical power and ensuring the reliability of quantitative findings (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2021).

The qualitative sample size was thirteen (13) respondents. This depended on data saturation, where data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged. Qualitative studies typically involve a smaller number of participants to allow for in-depth exploration of experiences and meanings (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.6 Data Collection Methods

3.6.1 Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data from teaching professionals. This method is effective for gathering standardized data from a large number of respondents and allows for statistical examination of relationships among variables (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

The questionnaire measured key constructs including ethical values (honesty, integrity, responsibility, and morality), leadership ethics, professional conduct, and 21st century competencies such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and soft skills. These competencies are widely recognized as essential for effective teaching and ethical professionalism in contemporary education systems (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2023).

Likert-scale items were used to facilitate quantitative analysis and enable comparison of perceptions and practices across respondents. Likert scales are commonly used in educational and ethics research due to their reliability and ease of interpretation (Joshi et al., 2015; Boone & Boone, 2022).

3.6.2 Interviews

The interviews were conducted with selected institutional leaders and teaching professionals to gather qualitative data. Interviews provided deeper insights into ethical leadership practices, ethical challenges such as corruption and professional misconduct, institutional ethical culture, and ethical decision-making processes within educational institutions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1: Formation of themes, Codes, Categories and Interpretation

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>Understanding of Professional Ethics</i>	<i>Moral principles and values; Codes of conduct; Honesty, fairness, integrity; Role modelling; Accountability</i>	<i>Ethics as moral and professional standards; Rule-based conduct; Role modelling</i>	<i>Teachers view professional ethics as a combination of moral values, rules, and behaviours forming their professional identity.</i>
<i>Influence of Moral Values on Interactions</i>	<i>Respect; Empathy; Professional boundaries; Ethical decision-making; Social harmony</i>	<i>Respectful relationships; Ethical boundaries; Collaboration</i>	<i>Moral values guide interactions, foster trust, empathy, professionalism, and positive learning environments.</i>
<i>Ethical and Unethical Leadership Experiences</i>	<i>Fairness; Transparency; Favoritism; Abuse of power; Accountability</i>	<i>Role modelling; Rule enforcement; Professional development; Ethical climate</i>	<i>Leadership ethics strongly shape trust, morale, innovation, and institutional climate.</i>
<i>Leadership Influence on Ethical Behaviour</i>	<i>Recognition; Abusive language; Accountability; Motivation</i>	<i>Leaders as ethical models; Institutional mechanisms</i>	<i>Leaders influence ethics by modelling integrity and creating supportive ethical systems.</i>
<i>Leadership Ethics and Staff Morale</i>	<i>Codes of ethics; Transparent policies; Supportive leadership; Rewards; Psychological safety</i>	<i>Ethical leadership enhancing morale; Unethical leadership reducing morale</i>	<i>Ethical leadership boosts motivation and teamwork, while unethical practices lower morale and performance.</i>
<i>Institutional Factors Encouraging Ethics</i>	<i>Pressure to ignore rules; Collective silence; Positive peer influence</i>	<i>Formal frameworks; Ethical work environment</i>	<i>Strong institutional structures and supportive climates sustain ethical behaviour.</i>
<i>Peer Pressure and Ethical Conduct</i>	<i>Trust; Collaboration; Communication; Accountability</i>	<i>Negative peer pressure; Positive ethical reinforcement</i>	<i>Peer culture can either normalize unethical conduct or reinforce ethical integrity.</i>
<i>Ethics, Professional Skills and Competence</i>	<i>Corruption; Cheating; Sexual harassment; Absenteeism; Grade inflation</i>	<i>Ethics as foundation of skills; Ethics enhancing competence</i>	<i>Ethical behaviour strengthens collaboration, communication, and professional competence.</i>
<i>Unethical Practices and Consequences</i>		<i>Forms of unethical practice; Institutional impact</i>	<i>Unethical practices damage learning outcomes, morale, credibility, and national development.</i>
<i>Responding to Unethical Conduct</i>	<i>Rule enforcement; Ethics training; Sanctions; Counseling; Reporting systems</i>	<i>Preventive strategies; Corrective measures</i>	<i>Balanced responses combining prevention, accountability, and professional growth are preferred.</i>

3.7 Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

3.7.1 Validity

Content validity was ensured through expert review of the research instruments by specialists in education, ethics, and research methodology. Expert validation helped to confirm that the instruments adequately cover the intended constructs (Polit & Beck, 2021). On the other hand, construct validity was ensured by aligning

questionnaire items with the theoretical framework and research objectives. This alignment enhances the accuracy with which abstract concepts such as ethics and leadership are measured (Hair et al., 2021). While triangulation of data sources questionnaires and interviews was employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Denzin, 2017; Carter et al., 2019).

3.7.2 Reliability

A pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the questionnaire. Reliability was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, which measures internal consistency of scale items the coefficient was 0.75. Since coefficients of 0.70 and above is considered acceptable for social science research (Taber, 2018; Field, 2018) then the data collection process continued.

3.8 Data Analysis

The data analysis is categorised into quantitative and qualitative, below is the presentation.

3.8.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using statistical software. Analysis included descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages and charts to summarize the findings from the respondents.

3.8.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding, categorization, and interpretation of data to identify recurring patterns and themes related to ethics, leadership, and professional conduct.

Thematic analysis is flexible and well-suited for phenomenological studies, allowing meaningful interpretation of participants' real experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Nowell et al., 2017).

4. Results and Discussion

The presentation of the findings is based on the research objectives as follows:

4.1 Understanding of ethical principles and moral values in the teaching profession

In the filled questionnaires 63.1% strongly agreed that they are familiar with ethical principles and moral values in the teaching profession while 20.8% agreed, 8.5%

were neutral, 2.3% disagreed and 5.4% strongly disagreed refer Figure 1. Participants demonstrated a broad and consistent understanding of ethical principles and moral values in the teaching profession by being aware of the ethics, and principles that guide the teaching practices in large percent (48.8% strongly agreed, 24% agreed, 14.7% neutral, 7% disagree and 5.4% strongly disagreed) and (53% strongly agreed, 25.4% agreed, 12.3% neutral, 3.8% disagree and 4.6% strongly disagree) refer figure 2 and figure 3 respectively. Respondents' ethics is commonly associated with honesty, integrity, accountability, fairness, transparency, hard work, respect, responsibility, and professionalism (Mwakalinga, 2025). Teachers perceived ethical principles not merely as written rules or codes of conduct, but as internalised moral values that guide behaviour both within and outside the school environment.

Respondents emphasized that ethical teachers are expected to act as role models, shaping learners' behaviour, attitudes, and future citizenship. Ethical conduct was viewed as foundational in producing disciplined, responsible, skilled, and morally upright individuals, who later contribute positively to society and national development. Several participants linked ethics to equal distribution of resources, conservation of natural resources, avoidance of bias, and responsible decision-making, indicating a strong awareness of ethics beyond classroom instruction. In the interview respondents postulated that ethical principles and moral values in the teaching profession are:

Refers to the norms and values that a professional teacher must have and practice. Performing duties with value (Interview 1 January 2026)

Professional ethics are moral, principles, values and standards guiding the conduct towards students, parents, colleagues, and the community focusing on promoting student well-being, upholding the professions integrity and fostering a fair, respectful learning environment through actions like fairness, honesty, confidentiality and responsibility (Interview 2 January 2026)

Professional ethics are not in the teaching field (Interview 5 January 2026)

I could describe it as a totality of attitudes, behaviour and practices that identify an ideal teacher (Interview 8 January 2026)

As a teacher, professional ethics means doing the right thing at the right time in the right place. It means being honest, fair, respectful, and caring to students, parents, and other teachers (Interview 4 January 2026)

Professional ethics means adhering to and respecting the rules and the laws of the profession (Interview 3 January 2026)

To me as a teacher, professional ethics refers to the application of moral principles which may guide my personal behaviors and use the same principles is shaping the behaviours of my students or learners to enable them to have integrity, respect and be responsible citizens (Interview 9 January 2026).

Professional ethics means acting in a moral way as a teacher. It includes being honest, fair, and respectful in every aspect of classroom instruction (Interview 11 January 2026).

These findings suggest that teaching professionals conceptualise ethics as a moral identity embedded in professional practice, rather than as compliance alone. The emphasis on role modelling confirms the socialisation function of teachers, where ethical behaviour directly influences learners' moral reasoning and societal values. Ethics, therefore, emerge as a core professional competency, shaping both personal character and institutional credibility. This deep moral framing strengthens the argument that ethics education is indispensable for sustainable human capital development.

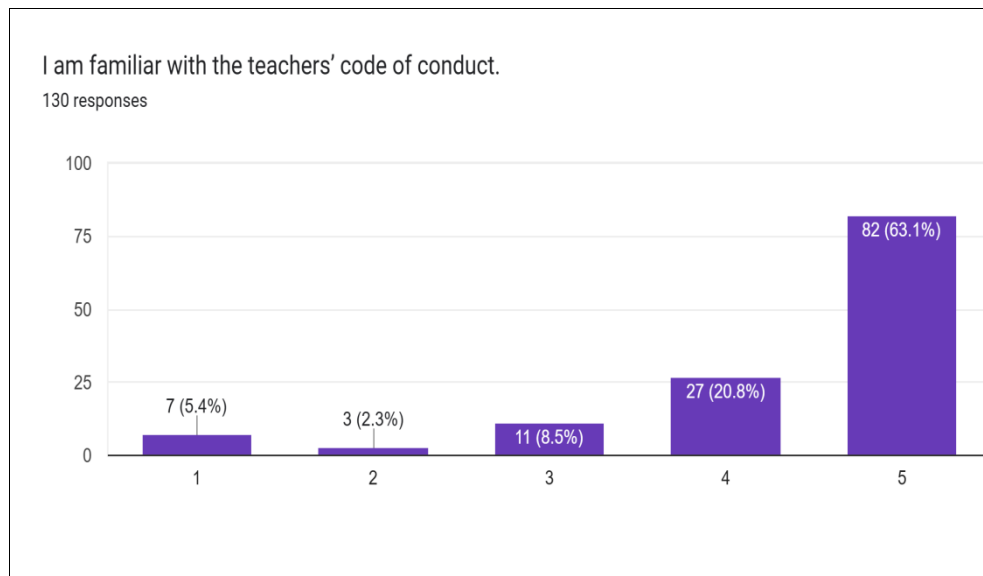


Figure 1: Understanding Code of conduct



Figure 2: Clear understanding of professional ethics

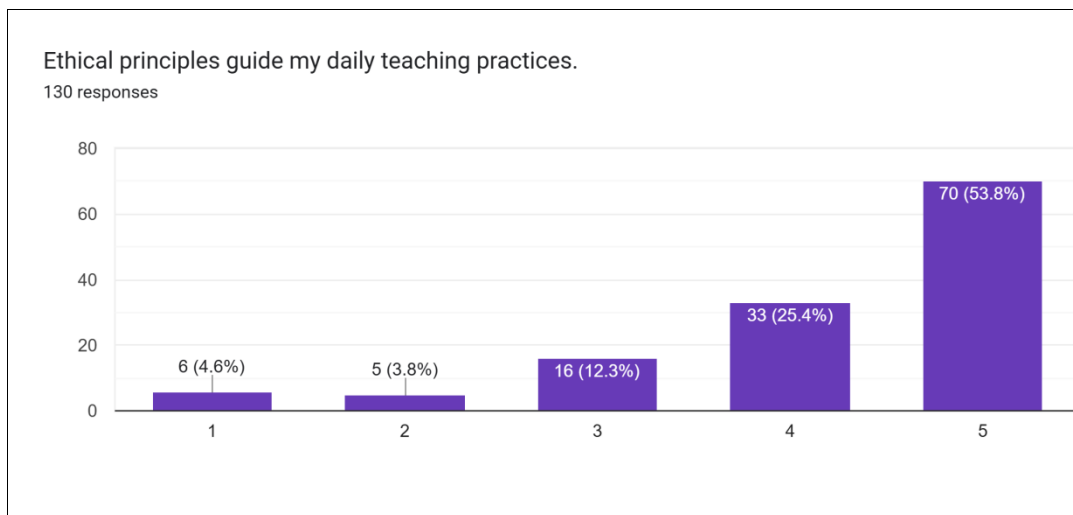


Figure 3: Ethical principles

4.2 Leadership, ethics and culture within educational institutions

Participants consistently highlighted leadership ethics as a critical determinant of ethical culture within educational institutions. In the filled questionnaires, 34.1% strongly agreed that leadership sets ethics in schools, while 31% agreed, 21.7% were neutral, 6.2% disagreed and 7% strongly disagreed refer figure 4. In the context of schools, ethical leadership was described in terms of involvement in decision making, moral values, transparency, accountability, fairness, integrity, trustworthiness, equal treatment, and respect for human rights. Leaders who upheld ethical standards were perceived to foster trust, cooperation, teamwork, motivation, innovation, and peace within institutions.

From figure 5, it can be noted that involvement in decision making was advocated as among the ethical practice by 34.4% being strongly agreed, 28.8% agreed, 26% neutral 3.8% disagreed and 6.1% strongly disagreed. While surprisingly moral values in teaching and learning were strongly agreed by: 6by%, 18.5% agreed, 5.4% neutral, 2.3% disagreed and 6.2% strongly disagreed refer figure 6. This shows the essence of having good and acceptable morals in the teaching and learning process.

Int the qualitative findings respondents tried to show the relationships between dealership, ethics and culture, the following were the responses:

Ethical Leadership shapes a culture of transparency and accountability, fairness and open decision making. While unethical Leadership leads with self-interest, lack of accountability, bullying and manipulating resources (Interview 4 January 2026)

School leaders influence teachers by setting a good example. If they are fair, honest, and respectful,

teachers will follow their lead. If they are unfair, it can cause problems (Interview 9 January 2026).

The school leaders do influence ethical behaviour among teachers by establishing and encouraging a positive and friendly ethics climate to teachers through the means of promoting fairness, transparency, trust and by encouraging them to work and live their lives in accordance to their professionalism (Interview 13 January 2026).

Institutional factors encourage ethical behaviour are formal codes of professional conduct, Structured accountability and policies, Ethical leadership (Interview 12 January 2026)

Institutions encourage ethical behavior through rules training supervision and rewards (Interview 11 January 2026).

The institutional factors which encourage ethical behaviour among teachers include: 1. The presence of good and ethical leadership. 2. The presence of codes of ethics and conduct to guide the teachers and 3. The presence of good and supportive institutional policies which will set various procedures and job descriptions to all the employees (Interview 7 January 2026)

From the findings it can be noted that unethical leadership manifested through favoritism, corruption, abuse of power, bias, sexual misconduct, and lack of accountability was reported to undermine morale, weaken discipline, and erode institutional trust. Respondents emphasized that leaders who model ethical behaviour encourage teachers to adhere to professional standards, while unethical leaders normalize misconduct and discourage professionalism.

The findings indicate that leadership ethics functions as a cultural anchor within educational institutions. Ethical leaders set behavioural expectations, shape decision-making processes, and influence how rules are

interpreted and enforced. The strong linkage between leadership ethics and trust underscores that ethical leadership is not optional, but central to institutional effectiveness, good governance, and educational quality.

Ethical leadership also contributes to democratic values, social cohesion, and public confidence in the education system.

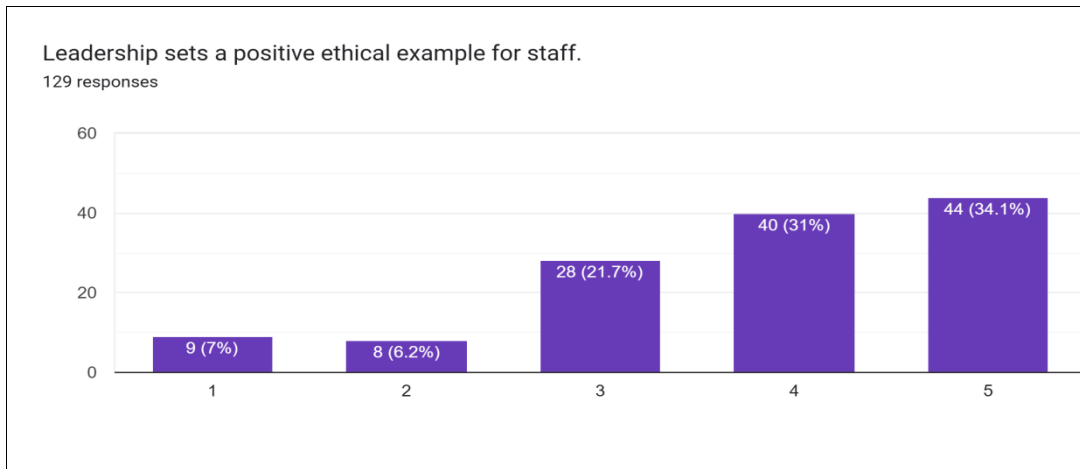


Figure 4: Leadership sets



Figure 5: School leaders

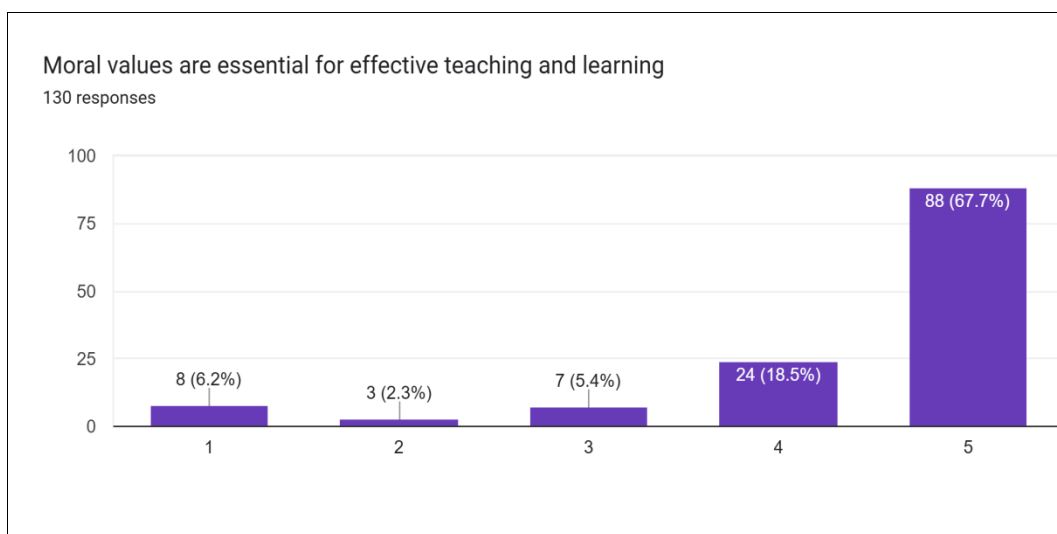


Figure 6: Moral Values

4.3 Factors influencing ethical behaviour among teaching professionals

Transparent and accountability in schools are among the factors influencing ethical behavior. In the filled questionnaires it was observed that 71.3% strongly agreed, 14% agreed, 7.8% were neutral, 0.8% disagreed and 6.2% strongly disagreed with figure 7. This can be argued that transparency and accountability are greatly influencing ethical behaviour among professional teachers. The small percentage of 0.8% and 6.2% of the participants who content not accept that might have strong reasons which are not supported by the majority which present individual differences.

On the other hand, ethical behaviour among teaching professionals is influenced by a combination of personal moral values and institutional factors. Personal values such as honesty, responsibility, discipline, hard work, and self-awareness were repeatedly identified as drivers of ethical conduct, even in the absence of close supervision. In the questionnaires filled moral values were identified by 46.5% strongly agreed, 32.6% agreed, 10.9% neutral, 2.3% disagreed and 7.8% strongly disagreed refer figure 8.

In Interview answers were not far from the questionnaires, see the following anchor examples:

Clear rules, good leadership, teamwork, and regular training help teachers behave ethically. When teachers feel supported and respected, they do the right thing.

Teaching students about honesty, integrity, empathy, and compassion contributes to the development of a well-rounded and principled individual. Also, Moral values contribute to the development of resilience and perseverance. Students who understand the importance of values like patience, perseverance, and resilience are better equipped to face challenges and setbacks with a positive mindset (Interview 7 January 2026).

Moral values help me treat others with kindness and respect. I listen to my students, help them learn, and work well with other teachers by being honest and cooperative (Interview 8 January 2026).

Moral values do influence my interactions with students and colleagues by enabling me to make ethical decisions which enable me to distinguish right from wrong by prompting social harmony with them

and hence I manage to build strong relationships with them (Interview 6 January 2026).

Moral values influence my interactions by guiding me to always treat students and colleagues with respect for fairness, honesty and responsibility (Interview 9 January 2026).

My moral values influence me to regard my students as my own born children (Interview 11 January 2026)

School authorities could foster ethical behaviour through being attentive to their needs, organizing seminars and workshops on common moral challenges. Where possible they could set a department responsible for morality and welfare (Interview 12 January 2026).

Acting contrary to leadership ethics could have an effect of lowering working discipline and morale. It happened in my personal experience that school authorities blindly accused teachers of conspiring and inciting students to undertake an industrial action (strike). Teachers' morale dropped and the effect was dropping performance on part of students in national exams (Interview 5 January 2026)

School leaders influence ethical behaviour among teachers by living as live examples of ethics (Interview 4 January 2026)

By admitting mistakes in public, a head of school shows teachers' ethical permission to admit mistakes about their own classroom failures without fear of a negative response (Interview 13 January 2026).

Institutional factors included codes of conduct and punishments, transparent policies, accountability mechanisms, fair supervision, professional development opportunities, supportive leadership, peer influence, and psychological safety. Participants noted that positive peer culture reinforced ethical behaviour, while negative peer pressure could normalize unethical practices such as silence in the face of misconduct.

The interaction between personal values and institutional culture suggests that ethics is both an individual and systemic phenomenon. While personal morality is crucial, ethical behaviour is sustained when institutions provide supportive structures and consistent enforcement. This dual influence highlights the importance of creating ethical ecosystems where values, policies, leadership practices, and peer norms align to reinforce professionalism and integrity.

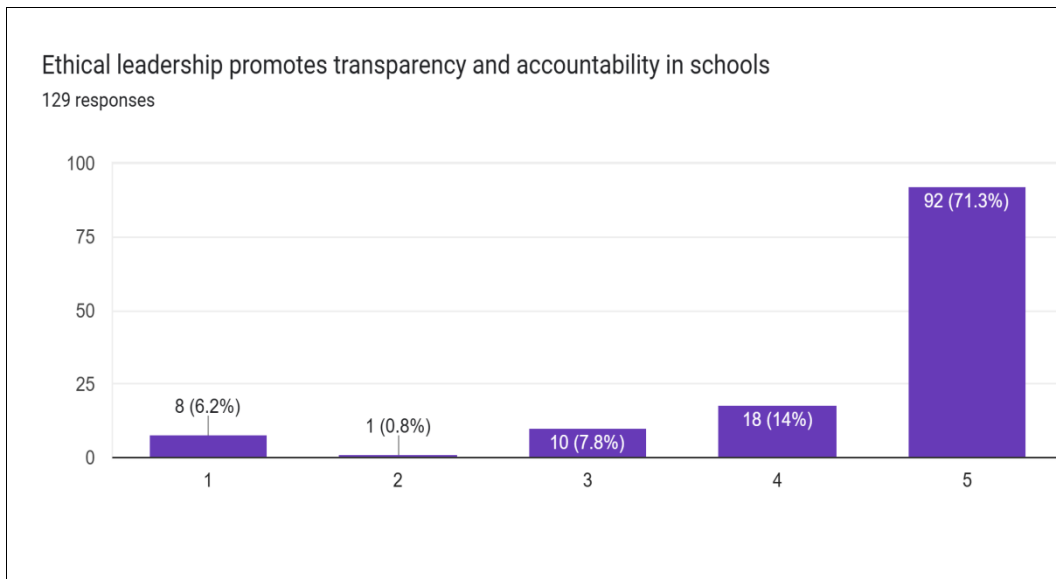


Figure 7: Ethical leadership

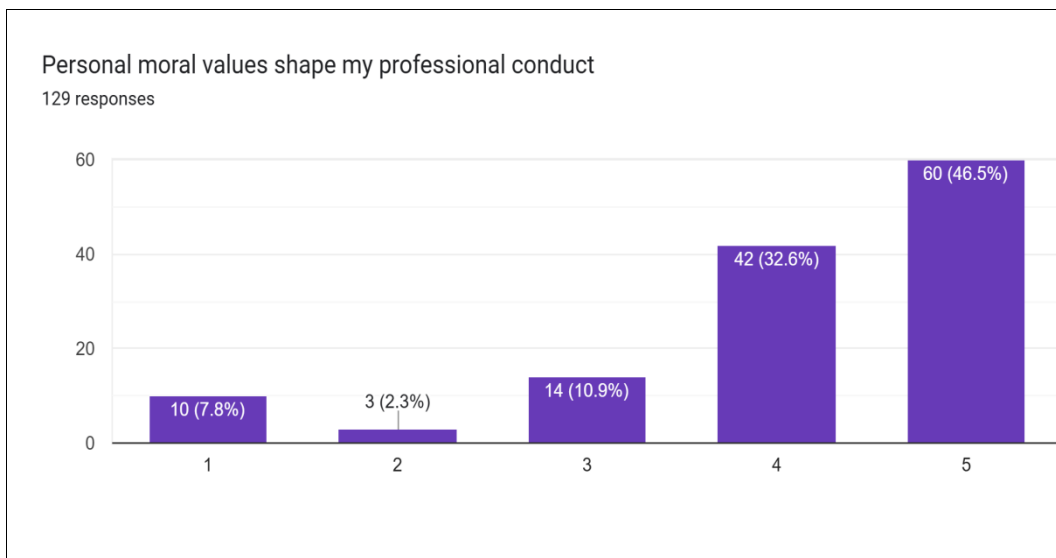


Figure 8: Personal moral values

4.4 Ethical practices and 21st century teaching professional competencies

The 21st Century was also declared by the respondent in the questionnaires whereby 56.2% strongly agreed that ethical conduct enhances collaboration among teachers, while 33.1% agreed, 4.6% were neutral and 2.3% disagreed and 3.8% strongly disagreed refer figure 9. This kind of response creates awareness on the implementation of collaborative teaching among the 21st century development skills.

Moreover, participants strongly linked ethical practices with the development of key 21st century professional competencies, including critical thinking (57.7% strongly agreed, 24.6% agreed, 10% neutral, 2.3% disagreed, and 5.4% strongly disagreed refer figure 10.

Communication (44.6% strongly agreed, 32.3% agreed, 13.8 neutral, 4.6% disagreed and 4.6% strongly disagreed) refer figure 11. Collaboration, creativity, digital competence, problem-solving, confidence, and teamwork. Ethical behaviour was perceived to enhance trust and openness, which in turn promoted effective collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Teachers reported that transparency and accountability improved communication, reduced bias in decision-making, and encouraged innovation. Ethical environments were also said to strengthen teachers' confidence, creativity in lesson preparation, effective mentoring, and ability to transfer knowledge to real-life contexts.

These findings demonstrate that ethics is not separate from professional competence, but rather a foundational

enabler of 21st century skills. Ethical practices create conditions for critical inquiry, collaborative problem-solving, and innovation. Thus, ethics should be

understood as a functional professional skill that directly enhances teaching effectiveness and prepares learners for complex societal and labour market demands.

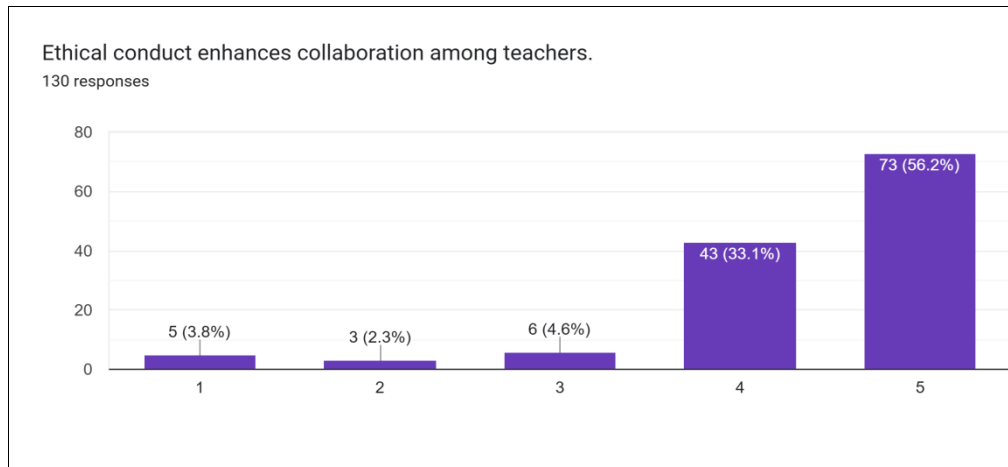


Figure 9: Collaboration among teachers



Figure 10: Critical thinking

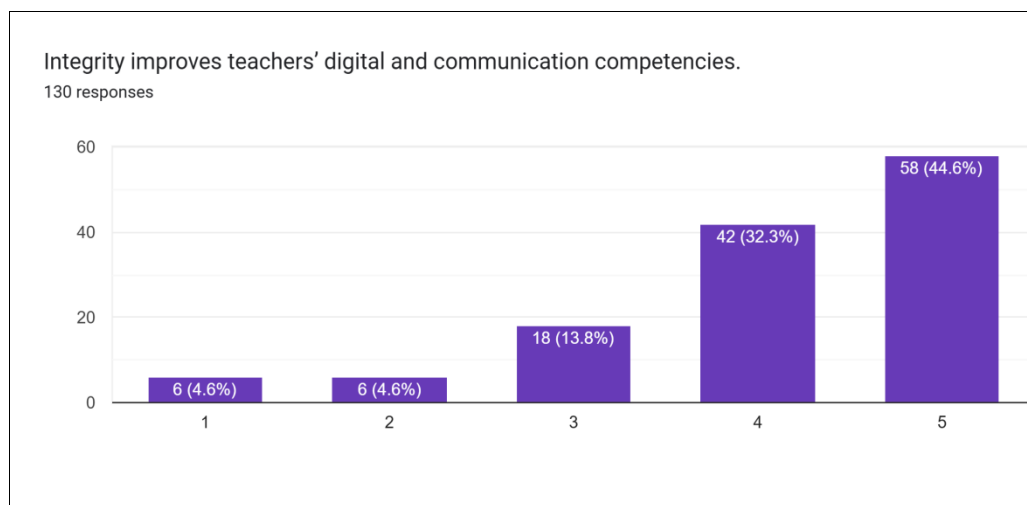


Figure 11: Digital and communication skills

4.5 Implications of unethical practices on national development

Participants identified unethical practices such as corruption (67.7% strongly agreed that it affects the quality of education and national development at large, 17.7% agreed, 4.6% were neutral, 3.8% disagreed and 6.2% strongly disagreed) refer figure 12. Also sexual and gender-based violence affects education and students outcomes (62.8% strongly agreed, 20.2% agreed, 7% were neutral, 5.4% disagreed and 4.7% strongly disagreed refer figure 13. In the interviews participants argued that: examination malpractice, nepotism, absenteeism, abuse of learners, and misuse of resources as serious threats to the education system. All together these practices were reported to undermine educational quality, weaken discipline, erode trust, and produce graduates lacking integrity and competence.

At the national level, respondents linked unethical practices in education to poor human capital development, increased social problems, weakened governance, reduced productivity, and slowed economic growth resulting to hindering national development (62.2% strongly agreed, 21.3% agreed, 7.9% were neutral, 2.4% disagreed and 6.3% strongly disagreed) refer figure 14. Unethical education systems were seen as breeding grounds for corrupt leadership and societal instability.

The findings underscore that unethical practices in education have far-reaching consequences beyond schools. They compromise national values, weaken public institutions, and hinder sustainable development. Education, as a foundation for all professions, plays a decisive role in shaping ethical citizenship. Therefore, addressing unethical practices in education is not merely an institutional concern, but a national development imperative.

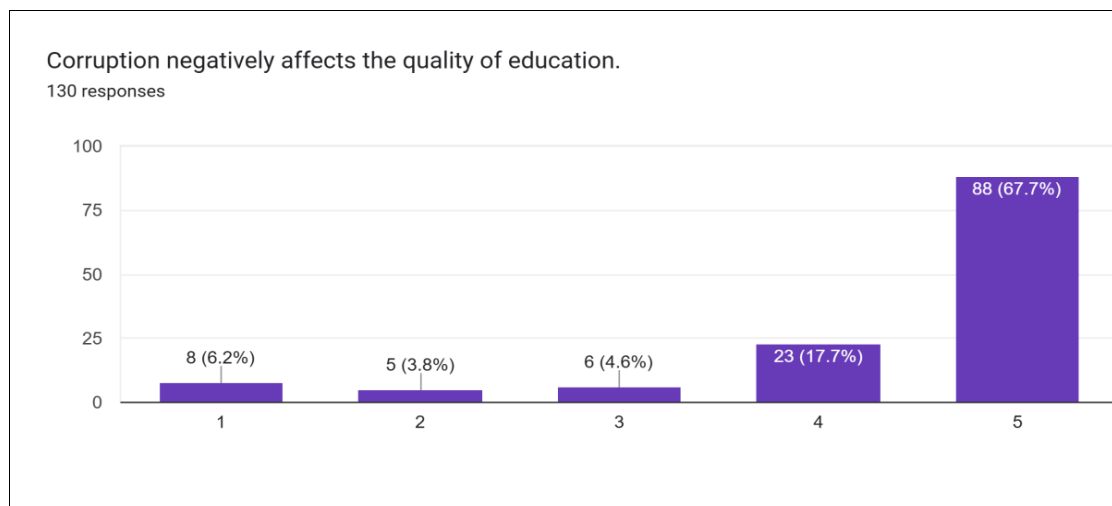


Figure 12: Corruption and education

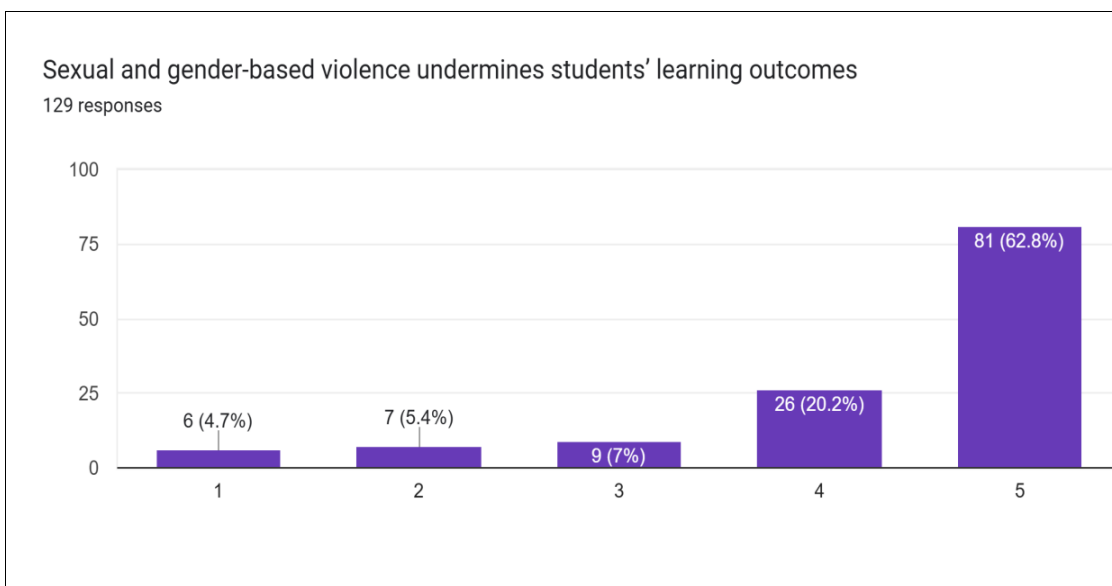


Figure 13: Sexual and gender based violence

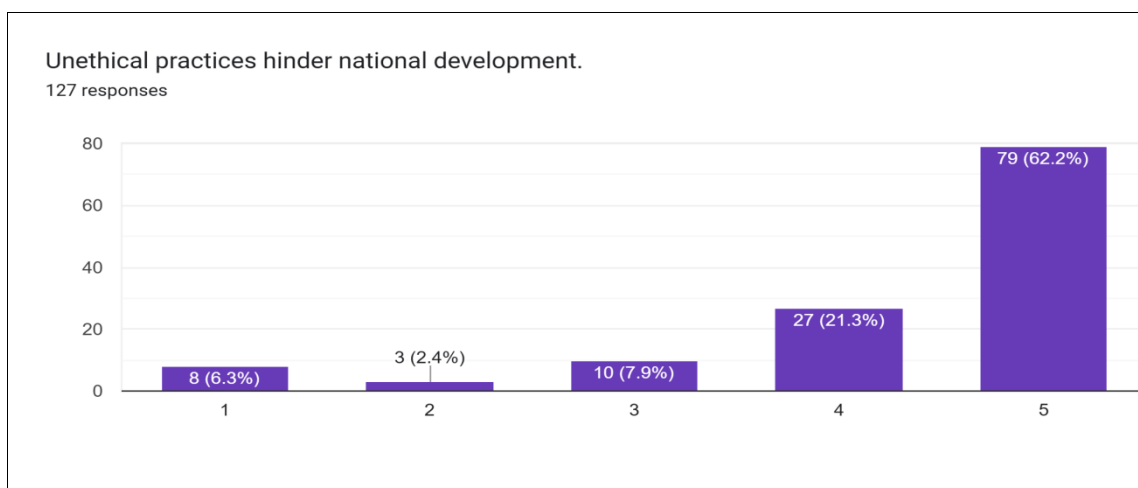


Figure 14: Unethical practice and National development

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored Ethics and Professional Conduct among Teaching Professionals in the 21st Century. The emphasis was on the crucial roles of leadership ethics in forming moral behaviour and institutional culture. The results show that teaching professionals see ethics as deeply rooted principles including responsibility, decency and integrity. Since educators act as role models to their students, these beliefs are crucial for moral identity and serve as a guide for decision-making. Nevertheless, leadership is important in shaping and molding institutional culture. While unethical behaviour can damage an institution's efficacy and credibility, ethical leadership creates favourable settings. Ethics in teaching professionals improve communication, teamwork, and creativity in learning environments and has a high correlation with the 21st -century competencies. The consequences of unethical behaviour, such as corruption and poor management, threaten the standard of education and impede the development of the country, underscoring the necessity of institutional and individual ethical frameworks that are in harmony.

5.2 Recommendations

The study recommends that in any institution, including educational institutions, a strong emphasis on the importance of establishing ethical cultures within institutions is of paramount importance for the success of a particular institution. Moreover, improving ethical leadership and accountability frameworks within educational authority, and institutionalising ethics education and ongoing professional development in teacher preparation programs and in-service training are crucial for teaching professionals as a tool for updating the changes of science and technology, as well as needs. The study also recommends that ethics be incorporated

into 21st century competencies, that measures against unethical behaviour be strengthened through private reporting and enforcement, that value-based national education policies emphasising civic duty and character be promoted, and that all parties involved in education be encouraged to collaborate on ethical responsibility. The purpose of these suggestions is to improve integrity and moral standards in the educational system.

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