



Exploring the foundations of effective decision-making and moral leadership in education

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the key skills leaders need for effective decision-making in schools, with a novel focus on the ethical dimension's direct influence on leadership outcomes. The purpose of the research was to record the views of teachers (permanent and substitute) in Kozani on the conditions that must be met for proper decision-making and what role ethics plays in making these decisions and the character of the leader. Previous research has examined leadership traits while our study uniquely captures the views of teachers (both permanent and substitute) in Kozani, Western Macedonia regarding the role of ethics in shaping leadership character. The research questions address ethical decision-making, how ethical leadership affects teachers' professional and personal lives and the criteria for evaluating teachers and school principals. A sample of 160 primary school teachers responded to eleven closed-ended questions. The findings highlight that key leadership qualities include decisiveness, legal knowledge, organizational skills, innovation and strong analytical thinking. Ethics is considered crucial depending on the leader's intellectual, cognitive, and emotional state. The sample was collected using systematic sampling, ensuring generalizable and representative results. This study provides strong evidence that ethical leadership is essential for effective decision-making in education with potential implications for leadership training programs. This study underscores the necessity of incorporating ethics-centered training into leadership development programs for school principals and educators, ensuring that ethical considerations are systematically integrated into decision-making in educational environments.

Contribution/Originality: This study fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the opinions of Kozani, and Western Macedonia teachers (both permanent and substitute) about the significance of ethics in developing leadership character although leadership qualities have been studied before. The purpose of this study is to investigate how teachers view the importance of moral principles in leadership and whether these views vary according to their job level. The study offers important insights into the moral aspects of leadership in the educational field by concentrating on this particular situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In education, the establishment of an atmosphere where the principal must evoke the feeling of responsibility and justice of the teachers and act ethically as a role model to the members of the group he or she leads is the primary objective of ethical leadership (Buchanan et al., 2022). In this study, we attempt to link the intellectual capacity of the recipient to the virtues and moral principles on which he or she relies to make the most appropriate

decisions not only rationally but also morally. Definitions are used by researchers based on their viewpoints as well as the characteristics and dimensions of leadership that they are addressing. One of the leadership models that emerge in the literature is ethical leadership which focuses on the leader's moral code by which he or she acts and decides (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Naeem et al., 2024). The goal of the ethical decision-maker is to make serious and responsible decisions that are subject to fairness, honesty and dignity and that resonate with the team based on informed opinions and decisions (Liu & Yin, 2023; Sam, 2021). The head teacher is the representative of the school unit and is called upon to play a complex role, he or she manages, organises and evaluates, educates, motivates and inspires. The decisions he/she takes on the various issues should lead the school to become an ethical organization (Kalkan, Altınay Aksal, Altınay Gazi, Atasoy, & Daglı, 2020).

Moral principles and values constitute people's fundamental beliefs about right or wrong and influence people's behaviour in their personal, social and professional lives. Man makes decisions based on his or her ideals and attitudes towards objects and circumstances in connection to his or her behaviour as it reveals regularly because of his or her ability for reason and intelligence.

Decision-making has been defined by old and modern researchers with one of the most influential being (Koumakhov & Daoud, 2021; Simon, 1960) in his work "The New Science of Management Decision" proposed that the process consists of three stages. The first stage is the identification of opportunities for decision-making, which he called "intelligence activity" as it involves searching for and gathering information and opportunities. Then, the second stage involves identifying and planning alternative actions which he called "planning activity". Finally, the third stage involves choosing between the available alternatives, i.e., the decision-making itself, which he called the "choice activity".

Decision-making is a process that follows a series of steps and is influenced by the ideas of Dewey (1974). First, the problem to be solved is defined and then the available alternatives are identified. Next, the criteria for evaluating these alternatives are identified so that an appropriate choice can be made. After the best alternative (decision) is selected, the decision is implemented and finally the result is evaluated to determine if it was the right decision (Holdo, 2023).

Self-control over the consequences of decisions, utilitarianism, safeguarding human rights, applying justice and corporate social responsibility are the criteria of an ethical decision and behavioural ethics in decision-making (Mathes, 2021). We should not doubt that our emotional state affects our decision-making. Decision-making is a highly complex brain process (Joshi, 2023). Logical thinking is to a certain extent behind every choice we make, but emotions play a crucial role in making the right or wrong decision (Darnell, Gulliford, Kristjánsson, & Paris, 2019). The factors that lead us to incorrect decision-making are overconfidence, reliance on information or hooking, confirmation of previous choices, availability of information, decision persistence, unpredictable events, fantasies of predictability, cultural differences, impulse or stimulation, social, economic and religious factors, and moral codes (Trogaidou & Triantari, 2023).

This study fills a gap in the literature by focusing on the opinions of Kozani, Western Macedonia, teachers (both permanent and substitute) about the significance of ethics in developing leadership character although leadership qualities have been studied before. The purpose of this study is to investigate how teachers view the importance of moral principles in leadership and whether these views vary according to their job level. The study offers important insights into the moral aspects of leadership in the educational field by concentrating on this particular situation.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of the research was to record the views of teachers (permanent and substitute) in Kozani on the conditions that must be met for proper decision-making and what role ethics plays in making these decisions and the character of the leader. The research questions posed were "The ethical dimension in decision-making", "The

influence of ethical leadership on teachers' professional and personal lives" and "What are the criteria for evaluating teachers and school principal"? The population sample consists of 160 primary school teachers who answered eleven (11) closed-ended questions based on the above research questions.

This study employs a quantitative research approach implementing a systematic survey to gather data on teachers' perceptions regarding the role of ethics in leadership. The research demonstrates a descriptive design, seeking to examine and evaluate patterns in responses while maintaining the findings' applicability to a wider population of teachers. The population was determined through methodical sampling, a process that incorporates elements of probabilistic sampling with population parameters to establish a proportional representation of participants.

This approach was implemented to strengthen the generalizability of the findings while sustaining a well-organized method of data collection. Participants were recruited from elementary school institutions in Kozani, Western Macedonia, including both tenured and temporary teachers to obtain a comprehensive range of perspectives. Data gathering was implemented through a self-completed questionnaire, incorporating structured scale-based questions and several unrestricted responses to facilitate comprehensive insights. The investigation was disseminated in paper format and digital platforms, maximizing accessibility and improving response rates.

The research strategy followed for data collection involved quantitative research with sampling using a structured questionnaire as a research tool. The questionnaire was based on previous research with similar themes. The survey was conducted through the Google platform by forwarding a link to the e-mails of primary school teachers in Kozani.

The questionnaire was prepared by the researcher and supervised by competent teachers. It was then digitized through the Google Forms™ platform and distributed to the participants for completion. The questionnaire was pilot-tested to ensure that teachers understand all questions and there are no ambiguous words. The collection of responses took place between 12/22/2022 and 12/30/2022. After collecting the results, statistical processing was carried out through the Jamovi software.

The acquired data underwent evaluation using systematic and advanced statistical approaches. Statistical measurements (averages, deviations, and distribution patterns) were utilized to encapsulate the predominant response trends. The main statistical checks carried out in data analysis were descriptive analysis. Frequency tables were used to present the key demographic characteristics of the sample. Summary tables were used for every research question (11 in total) to capture the structure of the data and to create a concise and understandable portrait of the data. Pairwise comparison used for ranking people's preferences, informing strategic decisions and conducting voting at scale.

The sample collection process was carried out using systematic sampling, combining random sampling with restrictions on demographic distribution. A sample from Kozani was selected. A systematic sampling was deemed appropriate for the study as it allows for generalization of the results and makes the findings more representative of the population.

Teachers of all employment statuses (permanent and substitute) from primary schools in Kozani participated in the survey. In total, 160 teachers with an age range from 20 to more than 50 years old participated. The study also included principals, deputy principals and teachers who do not hold an executive position. This feature of the survey allows for the study of views from all levels and job positions in school units.

3. RESULTS

The revised presentation of the demographic characteristics of the sample is shown in Table 1. The majority of participants were male (65%) belonged to the solar group of age 41 to 50 (33.8%) held a master's degree (41.9%), had 11-20 years of service (32.5%) were permanently working in that position (82.5%) and they didn't hold an

executive position (60%). This profile suggests a predominantly experienced, well-educated, and stable workforce with limited representation in executive roles as shown in the demographic overview.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics.

Category	Subcategory	Frequencies	Percentages
Gender	Female	56	35%
	Male	104	65%
Age	Up to 30	22	13.8 %
	31-40	34	21.3 %
	41-50	54	33.8 %
	51-60	38	23.8 %
	61 +	12	7.5 %
Level of study	Academy	22	13.8 %
	Pedagogical department	38	23.8 %
	Master's degree	67	41.9 %
	Ph.D	18	11.3 %
	Second university degree	14	8.8 %
Working relationship	Permanent	132	82.5 %
	Deputy	28	17.5 %
Years of service	Up to 5	20	12.5 %
	6-10	20	12.5 %
	11-20	52	32.5 %
	21-30	44	27.5 %
	31 +	24	15.0 %
Executive position	Director	32	20.0 %
	Deputy director	32	20.0 %
	I do not hold an executive position.	96	60.0 %

In the 1st research question, we asked 160 people to what extent the principal should encourage teachers in decision- making. Table 2 shows that none answered "not at all". Only 4 people answered "a little" (2.5%) and 18 people answered "medium" (11.3%). The predominant response was 72 people (45%), who answered "very". Sixty-six (66) responded "very much" (41.3%).

Table 2. The principal should encourage teachers in decision- making.

Q1	Frequencies	Percentages
A little	4	2.5 %
Medium	18	11.3 %
Very	72	45.0 %
Very much	66	41.3 %

In the 2nd research question, we asked whether the school principal during decision- making should have a decisiveness. Table 3 shows that out of the 160 respondents, none of them gave the answer "not at all" and "a little". Only 16 people answered "medium" (10%). Twenty-six people (52%) answered "very" (32.5%). The predominant response was 92 people (57.5%) who answered "very much".

Table 3. The school principal during decision- making should have decisiveness.

Q2a	Frequencies	Percentages
Moderately	16	10.0 %
A lot	52	32.5 %
Very much	92	57.5 %

b. Good knowledge of educational legislation: Table 4 shows that of the 160 respondents, none of them gave the answer "not at all" and "a little". Twenty two people (13.8%) answered 'moderately'. Forty six people (28.7%) gave the answer "a lot". The predominant response was 92 people (57.5%) who answered "very much".

Table 4. The school principal during decision-making should have good knowledge of educational legislation.

Q2b	Frequencies	Percentages
Moderately	22	13.8 %
A lot	46	28.7 %
Very much	92	57.5 %

c. Organizing and coordinating responsibilities: Table 5 shows that of the 160 respondents, none of them answered 'at all' and 'a little'. Ten people (6.3%) answered "moderately". Sixty people (37.5%) answered "a lot". The predominant response was 90 people (56.3%) who answered "very much".

Table 5. The school principal during decision-making should organize and coordinate responsibilities.

Q2c	Frequencies	Percentages
Moderately	10	6.3 %
A lot	60	37.5 %
Very much	90	56.3 %

d. Innovation: Table 6 shows that of the 160 respondents, none of them gave the answer "not at all". The answer "a little" was given by 6 persons (3.8%). Thirty- four persons (21.3%) answered "moderately". Fifty (50) people (31.3%) gave the response "very much". The predominant response was 70 people (43.8%) who response "a lot".

Table 6. The school principal during decision- making should act innovatively.

Q2d	Frequencies	Percentages
A little	6	3.8 %
Moderately	34	21.3 %
A lot	70	43.8 %
Very much	50	31.3 %

In the 3rd research question, we asked whether they think that the school principal should have developed analytical thinking in decision- making. Table 7 shows that eighteen people believe that the school principal should have developed analytical thinking in decision- making to a degree of "moderate" with relative frequency (11.3%). Eighty- eight people believe that the school principal should have developed analytical thinking in decision- making to a degree of "very" with relative frequency (55%). The response "very" is also the predominant response. Fifty- four respondents believe that the school principal should have developed analytical thinking in decision- making to a degree of "very much" with relative frequency (33.8%).

Table 7. The school principal during decision- making should have developed analytical thinking.

Q3	Frequencies	Percentages
Medium	18	11.3 %
Very	88	55.0 %
Very much	54	33.8 %

Research question 4 explores the degree of ethics in the decision- making of the school principal. Table 8 shows that none of the 160 respondents gave the answer "at all" and "a little". Thirty six respondents answered

"moderately" (22.5%). Forty- four respondents (27.5%) gave the answer "a lot". The predominant response was 80 people (50%) who gave the response "very much".

Table 8. The degree of ethics in the decision-making of the school principal.

Q4	Frequencies	Percentages
Moderately	36	22.5 %
Very	44	27.5 %
Very much	80	50.0 %

Research question 5 asked the respondents to indicate the degree of agreement that a person's ethics in making a decision is influenced by a combination of their mental, cognitive and emotional state. Table 9 shows that fifty-six out of one hundred and sixty respondents consider to a degree of "medium" influenced with relative frequency (35%). Sixty respondents consider to a degree of "very" influenced with relative frequency (37.5%). "Very" is also the predominant response. Thirty-eight people consider it to a degree of "very much" with relative frequency (23.8%).

Table 9. The degree of agreement that a person's ethics in making a decision is influenced by a combination of their mental, cognitive and emotional state.

Q5	Frequencies	Percentages
Not at all	2	1.3 %
A little	4	2.5 %
Moderately	56	35.0 %
Very	60	37.5 %
Very much	38	23.8 %

In the 6th research question, the 160 respondents were asked to choose, among 5 suggestions which is the first criterion for them that constitute the ethical framework for decision-making. Table 10 shows that 30% believe that "corporate social responsibility is about respect for human life and dignity" is the first criterion that ethically frames decision- making (48 respondents).

Forty-six of the respondents believe that the first criterion is "the application of justice is about applying and enforcing the rule of law" (28.7%). A 21.3%, i.e., 34 people chose the sentence "self-control over the consequences of decisions is about decisions made with the long-term good in mind". Twenty-eight participants chose "ensuring human rights" (17.5%). Finally, four people chose the answer "beneficence, it is about decisions made on the basis of outcome" (2.5%).

Table 10. The first criterion that constitutes the ethical framework for decision-making.

Q6	Frequencies	Percentages
Self-control over the consequences of decisions is about decisions made with the long-term good in mind.	34	21.3 %
Beneficence is about decisions made on the basis of outcome.	4	2.5 %
Ensuring human rights is about respecting human rights.	28	17.5 %
The application of justice is about applying and enforcing the rule of law.	46	28.7 %
Corporate social responsibility is about respect for human life and dignity.	48	30.0 %

In the 7th question, we asked whether the implementation of the principles and ethics contributes in their opinion to the good cooperative climate of the school. Table 11 shows that 80%, i.e., 128 people out of 160 respondents answered positively to the question. Twenty-six people answered "maybe" (16.3%), four people (4) answered "no" (2.5%) while only two people chose "don't know or no answer".

Table 11. The implementation of the principles and ethics contributes to the good cooperative climate of the school.

Q7	Frequencies	Percentages
No	4	2.5 %
Yes	128	80.0 %
Maybe	26	16.3 %
Don't know or no answer	2	1.3 %

In question 8, we investigated whether ethics is the basis and norm in the workplace of the 160 respondents. Table 12 shows that half (80) people, i.e., 50% answered "yes". Sixty-eight respondents (42.5%) answered "maybe". Six respondents with a percentage (3.8%) said "don't know or no answer" and another 6 respondents said "no".

Table 12. Ethics is the basis and norm in the workplace.

Q8	Frequencies	Percentages
No	6	3.8 %
Yes	80	50.0 %
Maybe	68	42.5 %
Don't know or no answer	6	3.8 %

In question 9, we asked if the application of ethical standards in the workplace can significantly influence employees to adopt similar behaviour in their personal lives. Table 13 shows that the answer "not at all" was not selected by anybody while fourteen people answered "a little" (8.8%). That ethics rules contribute "moderately" to similar behavior in their personal lives was answered by seventy-eight people (48.8%) and is the predominant answer. Fifty-two respondents said "very much" (32.5%) and "very much" 16 out of 160 respondents (10%).

Table 13. The application of ethical standards in the workplace can significantly influence employees to adopt similar behaviour in their personal lives.

Q9	Frequencies	Percentages
A little	14	8.8 %
Moderately	78	48.8 %
Very	52	32.5 %
Very much	16	10.0 %

In question 10, we asked if they would perceive unethical behaviour in the workplace, what they would do. Table 14 shows that 53.8% chose that they would report it (86 people), 43.8%, i.e., 70 people answered that they would feel pressured and four (4) people answered "don't know or no answer". No one selected "I will conceal it".

Table 14. In case of unethical behaviour in the workplace.

Q10	Frequencies	Percentages
I will report it.	86	53.8 %
I will feel pressured.	70	43.8 %
I don't know or no answer.	4	2.5 %

In the last question of the survey (11th), "If you were involved in the evaluation process, what would be the predominant criterion for a positive evaluation of your colleague?" Table 15 shows that 63.7%, i.e., 102 people consider the dominant criterion to be the integrity of his/her character, 20% (32 people) consider the dominant criterion to be his or her innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs 8.8%, i.e., 14 people consider the dominant criterion to be the formal performance of his or her official duties and the remaining 7.5%, i.e. 12 persons consider the dominant criterion to be his or her scientific training.

Table 15. The predominant criterion for a positive evaluation of the colleague.

Q11	Frequencies	Percentages
a) Integrity of character (e.g., honesty, morality and responsibility)	102	63.7 %
b) His innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs.	32	20.0 %
c) The formal performance of his official duties.	14	8.8 %
d) His scientific training.	12	7.5 %

Table 16 shows that respondents who do not hold an executive position (which is the largest percentage of respondents), 72.9% consider the dominant criterion to be integrity of character, 18.8% consider the dominant criterion to be innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs, 4.2% consider the dominant criterion to be the formal performance of official duties and the remaining 4.2% consider the dominant criterion to be scientific training. Of the respondents who hold the position of director, 68.8% consider the dominant criterion to be integrity of character, 0% consider the dominant criterion to be his or her innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs, 18.8% consider the dominant criterion to be the formal performance of his/her official duties and the remaining 12.5% consider the dominant criterion to be his or her scientific training. Of the respondents holding the position of assistant principal, 31.3% consider the dominant criterion to be integrity of character. 43.8% consider the dominant criterion to be his or her innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs. 12.5% consider the dominant criterion to be the formal performance of his or her official duties and the remaining 12.5% consider the dominant criterion to be his or her scientific training. Among all the respondents, 63.7% consider the integrity of character to be the dominant criterion, 20% consider the innovative ideas and implementation of educational programmes to be the dominant criterion, 8.8% consider the formal performance of official duties to be the dominant criterion and the remaining 7.5% consider the scientific training to be the dominant criterion. Table 17 shows that in the last question (11th), there is a statistically significant dependence on the variable "holding an executive position" based on the correlation between the two variables.

Table 16. The school principal during decision- making should have good knowledge of educational legislation.

Executive position	Q11	Frequencies	Percentages
Director	Integrity of character (e.g. honesty, morality and responsibility)	22	13.8 %
	His or her innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs.	0	0.0 %
	His or her formal performance of official duties	6	3.8 %
	His or her scientific training	4	2.5 %
Deputy director	Integrity of character (e.g. honesty, morality, responsibility)	10	6.3 %
	His or her innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs.	14	8.8 %
	His or her formal performance of official duties	4	2.5 %
	His or her scientific training	4	2.5 %
I do not hold an executive position.	Integrity of character (e.g. honesty, morality, responsibility)	70	43.8 %
	His or her innovative ideas and implementation of educational programs	18	11.3 %
	His or her formal performance of official duties	4	2.5 %
	His or her scientific training	4	2.5 %

Table 17. Correlation: if you were involved in the evaluation process what would be the predominant criterion for a positive evaluation of your colleague? * Executive position.

Pairwise comparisons: Q11			
Comparison		Test Statistic (W or Z)	P-value (P)
Director	Deputy director	20.58	0.161
Director	I do not hold an executive position.	-1.48	0.549
Deputy director	I do not hold an executive position.	-5.94	< 0.001

This study investigated the characteristics that define an effective educational leader with a focus on ethical decision-making. While previous studies have explored leadership traits such as innovation, analytical thinking, and knowledge of the law, there has been limited research explicitly examining how these traits relate to gender or the specific role of integrity in the evaluation of both school principals and non-executives (Allen & Fry, 2023; Gómez-Leal, Holzer, Bradley, Fernández-Berrocal, & Patti, 2022; Hartini, Sapinah, Natalia, Wardhana, & Rahmawati, 2023).

We found that respondents placed a high value on the integrity of a leader's character when making decisions, with non-executive staff rating this quality as more important than formal qualifications or scientific training. Conversely, educational executives valued both integrity and formal qualifications highly. Additionally, no significant correlation was found between gender and leadership qualities indicating that perceptions of leadership traits are independent of gender.

4. DISCUSSION

We found that respondents placed a high value on the integrity of a leader's character when making decisions, with a non-executive staff rating. This quality is more important than formal qualifications or scientific training. Conversely, educational executives valued both integrity and formal qualifications highly. Additionally, no significant relationship was found between gender and leadership qualities indicating that perceptions of leadership traits are independent of gender.

Our study suggests that integrity is a fundamental component of leadership supporting the findings of earlier studies that emphasize its importance in fostering trust and ethical behavior in organizations (Costa, Pádua, & Moreira, 2023; Fullan, Azorín, Harris, & Jones, 2024). However, unlike some prior research which focuses more on formal qualifications, this study reveals that integrity is rated more highly than scientific training by non-executives pointing to a potential discrepancy between the expectations of different groups within the educational sector (Stelmach, Smith, & O'Connor, 2024; Yulianti, Denessen, Droop, & Veerman, 2022).

This study assessed leadership characteristics across a diverse group of educational professionals, but it did not deeply examine how age or educational background (e.g., postgraduate or doctoral degrees) influences these perceptions. Further research is needed to determine whether these factors play a significant role in shaping views on leadership and ethics, especially across different educational contexts.

Our findings suggest that integrity plays a pivotal role in leadership, particularly among non-executive staff. Future studies should investigate the relationship between age, educational level, and leadership values in greater detail as these variables could provide insights into how ethical leadership is shaped. Additionally, exploring how different leadership traits evolve with experience and training could offer strategies for developing stronger leaders in education (Eden, Chisom, & Adeniyi, 2024; Jia et al., 2022).

Recent findings highlight the importance of integrity as a core trait for educational leaders, outweighing formal qualifications for non-executive staff (Da'as, 2023; Kilag et al., 2024; Mohammed, 2024; Rana et al., 2021). Our study provides strong evidence that ethical leadership is essential for effective decision-making in education with potential implications for leadership training programs.

5. CONCLUSION

Assessing a leader's character is challenging requiring the identification of key traits. The research confirms existing literature while highlighting new issues. Essential leadership qualities for decision-making in education include determination, legal knowledge, organizational skills, innovation, and analytical thinking. Ethics are crucial, with decisions needing to respect human life and dignity. Ethical leadership promotes similar behavior in personal life, and unethical actions are more likely to be exposed rather than hidden. Emotional and cognitive factors can complicate decision-making leading to biases.

The research found no significant link between leadership qualities and gender indicating gender-neutral perceptions of leadership traits. Among non-executives, integrity of character was valued more highly than scientific training when evaluating colleagues. However, education executives emphasized both integrity and formal qualifications, alongside a positive evaluation of innovative ideas.

Integrity is viewed as a reflection of a leader's value system and is vital for building trust. The findings suggest a need for training in ethics for school principals and teachers including clear ethical standards and consequences for violations. Future research should explore the relationship between values, age, and educational level, as education plays a key role in shaping leaders' ethical views. The research supports the assumption that effective leadership must be ethical.

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Transparency: The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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