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**Author (s):** Qzai Waqas Ahmed and Sohail Kamran ,Dr.Syed Naeem

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## Ethics and sustainable leadership in Finnish schools

\* Qazi Waqas Ahmed  
\*\* Sohail Kamran  
\*\*\* Dr.Syed Naeem

### Abstract

This study analyzed the concept of ethics as a key component of sustainability in Finnish educational leadership. The qualitative data were gathered from Finnish school principals having various leadership roles in different regions of Finland. The Findings of the study reveals that ethical considerations and sustainable leadership practices are given utmost importance by the Finnish educationists. Likewise, trust, reciprocal cooperation, and a sense of responsibility are vital aspects of Finnish schools' progress and positive outcomes. The research unpacks the significance of ethics, practicability, and the role of teamwork in the success of Finnish school leadership. In addition, the findings can also help international educationalists in transforming and enhancing their respective educational institutes.

**Keywords:** Leadership, Education, Schools, Trust, Cooperation, Ethics, Sustainability.

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\* Ph.D. Student at the Department of Education, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

\*\* Ph.D. graduate, from the School of Business and Economics, University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

\*\*\* Post doc Scholar, The University of California Loss Angles, USA

## **Introduction**

Finland is a less populated country as compared to other European countries, but it possesses many distinctive characteristics such as the culture of good governance and an excellent education system, among others <sup>1</sup>(Kuusilehto-Awale & Lahtero, 2013). The country pulled the attention of the entire world because of the best performance in the measurement conducted by (PISA) program for international student assessment <sup>2</sup>(Aho, 2008). This was also surprising news for the Finns because Finnish teaching and learning are not done for testing. Their teaching has an objective: making every child a lifelong learner and valuable member of society <sup>3</sup>(Kuusilehto-Awale and Lahtero, 2014). This privilege of Finnish school education attracted researchers worldwide to think and explore the strategies of providing equitable access to education in schools and elements responsible for their success <sup>4</sup>(Sahlberg, 2011). Many research studies demonstrate that there are numbers of factors that contributed to the magnificent achievement of Finnish school education, such as equity, quality, teachers with highly prestigious pedagogy, parental involvement, and well-sustained and dynamic leadership, among others <sup>5</sup>(Kupiainen et al., 2009; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Quality in education is a multidimensional process that is unattainable through a straight line (Sahlberg, 2009); therefore, cooperation, trust, honesty, and mutual responsibility are critical elements to attaining sustainable education. The present study is an effort to investigate the role of ethics as a key element of sustainability in Finnish school leadership.

Leadership in school education has increasingly followed the idea of ethical leadership. Ethical sustainability in school leadership provides a creative and constructive environment for teachers and students to concentrate on developing teaching and learning <sup>6</sup>(Hargreaves and Fink, 2007). Hargreaves and Fink (2006), state that Finland has successfully implemented policies and practices, which constitute sustainable development in education. Sustainability in educational leadership helps to focus on all aspects of learning and creates a motivating environment to preserve and promote the true essence of education (Hargreaves and Fink, 2007). Sustainable leadership is very self-motivated, ethical, and logical, where the leader is highly trustable, responsible, and has tempting interaction with his team members. Research highlights that a good school with a failed leadership and failed school with a good leader cannot survive. Similarly, failed schools can be turned into successful and excellent schools can turn down because of the quality of the school leader. Leadership and management are the focal factors of the institution that play a vital role in its development. Finland is featured as having a top-level school education, but research related to their educational sustainability, leadership, and ethics remains somewhat scarce. This study aims to analyze the concept of ethics as a key component of sustainability in Finnish educational leadership. The findings of this study would not enhance our understanding of the Finnish educational system, but international educationalists may also utilize this study finding to transform their schooling systems. This paper addresses the following two Research Questions (a) what are the ethical dimensions and values aligned with sustainable educational leadership? (b) How to build trust and a sense of duty as organic through sustainable educational leadership?

## **Literature Review**

### ***Ethical Leadership in Education***

Ethics are behaviours that are morally acceptable and are considered righteous, contrary to wrongful and harmful behaviours. Ethics behaviours are generally appreciated by people in a variety of life settings. In educational institutes, ethics are viewed as the practices of values that are considered imperative to the stakeholder of

that institution. So, ethics is a code of values and principles. These values and principles generally guide individuals and group behaviours in relation to right and wrong (Trevino, 1986). Schools' role is not to merely enable the pupil to read and write, and it does not signal the quality of education. The educational institution leaders have an utmost responsibility for preparing each person as a trustworthy individual, which will help develop societies <sup>7</sup>(Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2003). It is the responsibility of school leaders to ensure that their students are raised with care to learn to care for others in society. The aspect of care in school leadership promotes confidence, trust, and learning ethics in educational institutes <sup>8</sup>(Kuusilehto-Awale, 2014, p. 234). Research suggests that ethical leadership can undoubtedly enhance the performance of employees and other stakeholders. Freedom of choice, character, conscious intention, and individual values are factors for evaluating ethical leadership. An honest, and fair person is a real depiction of ethical leadership <sup>9</sup>(e.g Ciulla, 2005; Hitt, 1990).

An ethical leader clearly communicates to his/her subordinate regarding the tasks and activities to accomplish goals. This could allow them to remove perceived ambiguity and perceived discriminatory treatment from subordinates' minds (Darcy, 2010). Duffield and Mccuen <sup>10</sup>(2000) underscore that ethical maturity in educational institutes' leaders is vital. Their maturity helps them to tackle a problem in a better manner that deals with values and morals. Ethical consistency makes a leader's personality more trustworthy and reliable. It develops and increases trust among leaders and their followers (i.e., subordinates) and helps the leaders deal with problematic situations with patience and tactfulness, ensuring the safety of all concerned. Heifetz <sup>11</sup>(2006) maintains that an ethical leader's primary responsibilities are tackling clashes and conflicts between her/his subordinates and teaching them about the right manners of doing things. He urges leaders to remain careful in relation to her/his subordinates as carelessness can invite a host of problems at the workplace, such as among subordinates. <sup>12</sup>(Ravitch, 2010) mentions that the essential point is to comprehend the objective of education, ethics, and leadership and ethics, as "doubts and skepticism are signs of rationality". The success of any educational institute may be found back by the school leader as leaders are examples of the ethical character of an institute. A moral leader would always start from him. Therefore, an ethical code of conduct and rules are essential to govern an effective educational organization. Research highlights that leadership becomes ethical when leaders develop a work environment based on trust. The whole team members openly agree that the upcoming changes reflect their cooperation <sup>13</sup>(Ciulla, 2005). Therefore, ethical leaders make their team pledged to excellent performance through reflection and trust. <sup>14</sup>Darcy (2010) maintains that ethical leadership is about strengthening others (i.e., subordinates) in an organization, e.g., school. Ethics offer and lens to see things from a moral perspective, and leaders lacking trust would also lack legitimate power and negatively affect their respect and integrity. Hence the primary goal of an ethical leader is to treat her/his subordinates by keeping in mind the element of trust.

### ***Sustainable Leadership in Education***

Sustainable leadership focuses on education and learning uniquely and unconventionally. It has depth in itself, and it matters. It is helpful not only for learning and learners but also contributes to the social formation <sup>15</sup>(Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). Sustainable leadership in schools is critical as this helps to develop knowledge-sharing schools, communities, and trust-building societies. So sustainable leadership is regarding fostering positive and sustainable learning by creating an environment in which teachers learn to identify the effectiveness of their current values and work practices which facilitate them to improve their students in learning

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endeavors. Sustainable leadership practices lead to positive consequences for all the important stakeholders of the educational institution, e.g., students and teachers<sup>16</sup>(Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). So a leader ought to possess an ability to share his support and knowledge with continuing learning processes, and it is considered the most important feature of sustainable leadership<sup>17</sup>(Schein, 2010). The school leaders working according to the needs of the environment (i.e., time) are generally able to sustain their educational institutions (Razik and Swanson, 2001). Therefore, sustainable leadership helps the whole team to work collectively and effectively<sup>18</sup>(Fullan, 2001). Sustainable leadership would try their utmost to prevent harm to others. Sustainable leadership emphasizes cooperation, cohesion and circumvents those factors that could weaken the learning environment. They introduce ways to enhance learning and research that are practical to adopt for students and teachers. Their aim is also to improve people's talents at their early career stage rather than late in their careers<sup>19</sup>(Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). Sustainability in leadership regards shared beliefs that the leader creates a culture based on inclusiveness (e.g., consultation with all affected by the decisions), commonly held beliefs, rules, values, vision, and professional, ethical practices. The leader introduces ways to determine and encourage the actual conditions of institutional that persuade others to contribute to making professional learning communities<sup>20</sup>(Mitchell and Sackney, 2009).

Hargreaves and Fink<sup>21</sup>(2003) described seven principles of sustainable leadership in educational institutes which include, sustainable leadership (a) builds and preserves continued learning (b) Secures success over time (c) Sustain and support the leadership of others (d) tackles the problems related to social justice (e) attempt to develop leadership and human resources within institute (f) develops and encourages diversity for increasing learning environment (g) assumes a role of an activist for engaging with the environment. Research highlights that ethical and sustainable leadership are intertwined. Both are essential to accomplish success in educational institutions. Although developing an ethical and sustainable work environment through ethical and sustainable leadership is the primary responsibility of school principals or academic managers, however, all the important stakeholders (e.g., Leaders/ Principals, students, parents, and teachers, etc.) have a role to play in developing a sustainable school culture<sup>22</sup>(Owens and Valesky, 2011). The above literature suggests that ethics and sustainable leadership are essential in educational institutions, but little research is carried out to investigate these concepts. Therefore, this study analyzes the concept of ethics as a key component of sustainability in educational leadership in the Finnish education system.

### **Methodology**

The Finnish school leaders and educationists talk enthusiastically regarding the advantages of collaboration, mutual help, resource sharing, and trust. These elements facilitate them in their smooth functioning at schools. Therefore, this study investigated the factors, such as reciprocal cooperation, ethics, trust, and aspects of sustainable leadership, which are the key pillars of Finnish school education. We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews that helped us understand the participant's (i.e., educational leaders in Finland) viewpoints in detail and make sense of their lived experiences<sup>23</sup>(Bogdan and Biklen, 2003).

The first author conducted interviews in various cities of Finland with educational leaders. As a non- Finnish speaker, he faced multiple challenges to collect data, but those challenges were overcome through different strategies. We took the help of a couple of native Finnish professors and teachers who facilitated in booking appointments with Finnish school principals. Second, given the inability of the researchers to speak the Finnish language, all the interviews were conducted in the

English language. The participants were asked in advance about their knowledge of the English language and their willingness to give an interview in English (before the interviews/ at the time of booking appointments). In total, six in-depth interviews were completed with school principals. The participants had extensive educational administrative experience. All the participants were proficient in spoken English which facilitated interview completions in a befitting manner. Prior permissions were sought, and interview appointments were booked via emails and phone calls before conducting face-to-face interviews. The interviewees were provided detailed information about the study to understand before the interviews. We used the code-named of participants to safeguard their identities and keep our promise of anonymity and confidentiality.

The interviews took place in the participant's offices in a relaxed and noise-free environment. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained the basic objectives of the study and sought the consent of study participants to start and audio record the interview. The questions in the interview hovered around the idea of leadership, and its critical components, such as reciprocal cooperation, trust, sustainability, and ethics in Finnish school education. Each interview took around 30-60 minutes to complete. The recorded interviews were transcribed word-by-word, and the transcribed interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We utilized all the steps proposed by Braun and Clarke<sup>24</sup>(2006) for conducting thematic analysis, i.e., transcription of qualitative data, coding of data, finding initial themes, finalizing and defining themes, supporting proof from the qualitative data to support our claims, and reporting of qualitative data in the paper.

### **Findings**

The following themes emerged as a result of data analysis (a) Collaborative leadership, (b) Sustainability in Educational Leadership (c) Ethical Leadership and Education. The themes are discussed in the section below:

#### ***Collaborative Leadership***

According to the study participants, the fundamental element in leadership is receiving and giving feedback to stay in contact with teachers and children's parents. The interviewed principals consider the importance of fellow workers, subordinates, and other stakeholder's (e.g., parents) input in the decision-making process, enhancing team spirit and cooperation. This implies that Finnish school leaders seek greater legitimacy and approval of their decisions from all important stakeholders. The informant's further highlight that leadership in Finnish schools frequently follows the idea of shared leadership, because they believe in collaboration and working-together. Most of the interviewees were of the view that we work as a family unit where everyone cooperates. One of the study participants expressed his thoughts below.

*In decision-making, we are open-minded, like not making a decision alone but asking team members what they think? So by keeping my opinion anyway, openly listening to the teachers, parents, and children then make a decision based on their views as well (P, 1).*

Our informants expressed that the school principal is like other teachers in Finland because the principals also participate in classroom teaching. School teachers are given full autonomy to manage their work. They are given a free hand to develop classroom activities and make decisions about routine activities independently. However, in the event of difficulties faced by a teacher, others (e.g., principals) are happy to offer help, guidance, and cooperation, improving trust and teamwork culture within schools. All the participants stressed that good relationships, collaboration, and helping each other increase teachers' motivation and determination and build a positive working environment. The following interview excerpt explains how

principals and other colleagues are willing to help each other in work and enable each other to cope with potential issues at the workplace.

*I personally meet every teacher, and we discuss the issues they face. If they need my assistance, I am there to assist them. I also ask them about their activities and performances. If there are any challenges for them, we work together to meet those challenges. And we also discuss how we can manage things in better and better ways to get more positive results (P, 2).*

All the teachers are considered potential leaders by their principals. Our study informants reported that they believe every teacher is a leader because one person cannot be perfect all the time. The principals seem to empower their subordinates in Finnish schools, which give teachers a sense of responsibility and develop their leadership talents. Our informants explained that every teacher has different skills and expertise; therefore, discussions, coordination, sharing ideas are the essential factors to accomplish positive outcomes. One of the participants expressed her views in the following manner:

*It's not always the school principal who makes every decision. At some stage, others can make better decisions, so I try to figure out that one, e.g., in classrooms teachers are the best to make decisions because they know everything like class atmosphere, which material to use, and tasks to do, so they are free to make decisions. Whoever knows better about the task or some issue is preferred and encouraged to make a decision, and we appreciate it (P, 4).*

#### **Sustainability in Educational Leadership**

Talking about sustainable leadership, the school principals described that leaders should evidently know their values and be clear about the institution's vision. They expressed that in Finland, school principals always discuss and let their teachers know the direction leading towards success. They perceived that regular short face to face meetings builds relationships and trust among the team member. The Principals consider that meetings, helping, and supporting each other in their professional endeavors enhance confidence within the team members and the leader/ principal. The study participants also argued that a leader must keep in mind the main objectives and keep engaging the staff member because it helps to sustain a stimulating environment helpful for learning and teaching. The following interview passage explains this:

*First of all, we meet daily, like saying to each other, hi, hello, and a little chit-chat, etc. And then the door of my room remained open every now and then, so if someone needs me, I should be there to help them. I also tried to develop trust among each other because our goal is one, which is the better learning of children. Teachers trust me because I support them, and I trust them because they do their best job. This kind of situation helps to promote good relations (P, 2).*

Besides, the study participants explained that in order to maintain positive learning outcomes, we used to analyze all our school activities and plan to decide what should be done differently to achieve much better and positive results. The participants perceive that challenges and problems can be tackled by listening to each other and working. They consider everyone as an essential source of ideas to resolve work-related challenges and issues. Interviewees state that discussions with teachers and colleagues and sharing past experiences help us get more information about planning and advancing future learning activities. The following interview passage explains this:

*We face some challenges, but my way of dealing with those challenges is through talks and dialogue. I listen to them many times, and we together try to sort out the problem. We are very straightforward and use sources because ten to twelve brains*

*are more valuable than a single brain. Therefore, we value and respect the importance of others (P, 5).*

Moreover, the participants explained that they encourage open and frank working to utilize humor to enhance friendly relationships with others. They endeavor to strengthen trust and learning culture, and they are not shy to learn from each other, even from their students, reflecting a humble, open, and trustworthy work environment. Good relationships, trust, and mutual cooperation were obvious in the participants' stories. One of the participants explains his views in the following manner.

*We often use humor in developing a good relationship. We believe that equal opportunities should be given to everyone. The main task of the principal is to provide an open and accessible atmosphere in the school, which enhances teachers' and student's confidence and trust. When all the members at school trust each other, you don't have to do everything because others will do many things for you, and I think this is the real spirit of good quality leadership (P, 3).*

### **Ethical Leadership and Education**

According to the school principals' values, loyalty, principle position, and equality are the fundamental elements of our success. They consider ethical practices vital to the success of their school system. Interviewees expressed that in Finland, principals give autonomy to their teachers to work freely, and the only thing that satisfied them that they are performing well in classrooms is trust and shared values. Interviewees believed that ethics in Finnish schools is about building a relationship based on trust and seeing the child first. Study participants explain this in the following manner:

*When we think of the role of ethics, there is a strong link between ethics and our pupils. Basically, it's our values that are behind the decisions which keep us on track in making the right decision better for school and children. For example, when we share the resources, we consider how they will benefit the process of learning and teaching (P, 4).*

The participants further explained that leaders always face challenges and solving those challenges with honesty and without hurting anyone is the real essence of leadership. They said that schools in Finland are like home where everybody is a family member, and everyone owns the school by keeping in mind the element of respect, trust, honesty, and cooperation. They emphasized that good ethical values are fundamental in our schools. The necessity of faith, values, loyalty to work, and a sense of responsibility are the rations and critical elements to strengthen school leadership. A study participant explains this as follow:

*It is not a danger if someone makes a mistake. A loyal and honest person always fights to find a way out. However, a dishonest person hides mistakes and lies down. In such cases, we don't compromise on moral values and lack of trust, and we simply fired that person (P, 6).*

The Informants also described that all the major stakeholders like principals, teachers, and children are triangles where we continuously learn from each other. The participants' stories reveal that they share a common goal to obtain a higher level of child learning. They said that the features that connect us as a triangle in school education are our values and trust. Interviewees explained that trust and faithfulness are the backbones of our values in our schools, and our principals and teachers transmit the same practices to our children.

*There is no big difference in our values. We trust and care for each other in our schools. We have a common objective: children's education and we use different ideas to reach our aim. In Finland, especially in educational organizations, we have to work together. If someone shows a lack of trust or intentionally hides his/her wrongdoings, we say goodbye because we cannot conciliate on lack of trust (P, 1).*

To conclude, the stories of Finnish educational leaders revealed that they follow collaborative, ethical, and sustainable leadership practices, and they consider these

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practices imperative for the effectiveness of Finnish school education.

### **Conclusion**

The Finnish school education system is mainly ranked amongst the top school systems in the world. Ethical and sustainable leadership plays a vital role in their higher performance of the schooling system. However, research investigating ethical and sustainable leadership roles in educational institutes' remains limited in developed and developing countries. This study analyzed the concept of ethics as a key component of sustainability in educational leadership in the Finnish education system. The study findings reveal that ethical considerations and sustainable leadership practices are given utmost importance by Finnish educationists. Likewise, trust, reciprocal cooperation, and responsibility are vital aspects both for the progress and positive outcomes in the Finnish educational institutes. Ethics play an essential role in the sustainability of educational leadership in the Finnish educational system. This study unpacks the significance of ethics, sustainability, and the element of cooperation in the success of Finnish school leadership. In addition, the study findings can also help international educationalists in transforming their respective educational institutes and systems.

Although the empirical data for this research was gathered from a non-Muslim country, the ethical leadership qualities of Finnish educational leaders are relatively similar to the teachings of Islam. For instance, Islam emphasizes trust and loyalty between the leader and followers, and Finnish Principals portray a higher level of trust in their subordinates and colleagues. Similarly, according to Islamic teachings, a leader needs to be lenient with their companions. The study findings suggest that the school principals maintained friendly and tolerant relations with their employees, enhancing their work motivation and improving the working environment. Moreover, the Finnish school principals are very fair while communicating with their fellow workers and other stakeholders, and they are ready to help others in their difficult times. They encourage and feel happy to develop their subordinates as future leaders, and these kinds of activities are also encouraged in Islamic teachings. In short, collaborative, ethical, and sustainable leadership practices were evident in the Finnish school principals' stories. Their practices and working behaviors are somewhat similar to the teachings of Islam. Muslim countries' school principals can also learn from this research which could help them manage their schools more ethically and sustainably. Practicing ethical and sustainable leadership practices could enhance school working conditions, learning quality, and teachers' motivation.

No research is without limitations, and a few limitations were also identified in this research which offers avenues for future research. First, this research only addressed the Finnish educational context, and the findings of this study may not be applicable in other countries' contexts. Therefore, a similar study could be replicated in other countries' contexts having different cultural and educational systems. Second, in the future, a comparative study of a developed country (e.g., Finland) and a developing country could be conducted to analyze how ethical and sustainable leadership practices different in developed and developing countries' settings and how those impact school performance. Finally, this study only gathered data from educational leaders. Students are affected by ethics and leadership practices and perceive these things while studying in schools. Future research could unpack students' perceptions regarding ethical and sustainable leadership practices in their educational institutes.

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