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Ethical Leadership and Caring School Leadership in Malaysian Secondary Schools: Teacher's Perspective from Hulu Langat

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ABSTRACT

The tension between maintaining rigid administrative accountability and practising relationship-centred care presents educational leaders with complex moral dilemmas, as they struggle to balance institutional rules with empathy. Addressing this issue, this study investigates the influence of ethical leadership on caring school leadership among secondary school principals in Selangor, Malaysia. A sample of 357 teachers from 11 secondary schools participated in the research. Four dimensions of ethical leadership, namely people orientation, fairness, power sharing, and role clarification, were examined, alongside three determinants of caring school leadership, which are psychological, organisational, and management factors, to determine if overall ethical leadership predicts caring school leadership. The regression model strongly predicted school leadership from ethical leadership ($F(1\ 355) = 295.81$, $p < .001$), with leadership explaining 45.5% of the change ($R^2 = .455$; adjusted $R^2 = .453$), which is a large effect for a single factor in educational leadership research. The standardised coefficient ($\beta = .67$, $p < .001$) and the unstandardised slope ($B = 1.70$, $SE = .10$) show that each one-point increase in leadership is linked to a 1.70- $p < .001$) and the unstandardised slope ($B = 1.70$ $SE = .10$) show that each one-point increase in leadership is linked to a 1.70 point increase in caring school leadership. The developed model identifies key ethical leadership dimensions that contribute to a caring school leadership environment. This paper is suggested to provide fresh perspectives on the empirical evidence that ethical leadership and caring school leadership can establish coherent policies and practices in educational society.

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1. Introduction

Ethical leadership has emerged as a cornerstone of effective educational administration, fundamentally shaping the working environment and organisational culture within academic institutions (Arar & Saiti, 2022; Torlak et al., 2022). School principals, as the foremost leaders in educational settings, bear the primary responsibility for fostering ethical behaviour and cultivating a caring school environment that promotes the well-being of both teachers and students (Ahmed, 2025). The concept of caring school leadership, developed by van der Vyver, van der Westhuizen, and Meyer (2014), emphasises three key determinants which are psychological, organisational, and management-related that collectively contribute to a compassionate and supportive school climate.

Internationally, frameworks such as the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards in the United States have long recognised the importance of ethical leadership practices, including fairness, integrity, and ethics, in ensuring academic and moral achievement (Willis et al., 2024). Similarly, Malaysia has implemented the Caring School Programme, which stresses acts of care, respect, compassion, and loving relationships within the school community (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012). Despite these efforts, prior research has predominantly focused on the impact of ethical leadership on student outcomes, not the teachers' well-being, leaving a significant gap in understanding how ethical leadership practices influence teachers and whether these practices effectively translate into caring school leadership as perceived by educators.

Based on the enquiries of "*Is there a significant influence of principals' ethical leadership on caring school leadership among secondary school principals in Hulu Langat?*" this study imposed the quantitative study to explore this uncertainty. Furthermore, while studies have confirmed that ethical leadership influences employee behaviours in various organisational contexts, the differential reactions of employees to specific ethical leadership dimensions, particularly people orientation, fairness, power sharing, and role clarification, remain underexplored (Blom & Mifsud, 2026). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the influence of the four dimensions of ethical leadership on the three determinants of caring school leadership among secondary school principals in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor Malaysia.

Specifically, this research seeks to determine which ethical leadership dimensions significantly predict caring school leadership practices and models between that can improved educational policy and practice. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform the development of targeted leadership training programmes and policy interventions that enhance principals' ethical leadership capabilities, ultimately improving teacher well-being, fostering a more supportive school environment, and contributing to the broader body of knowledge on educational leadership in the Malaysian context and beyond.

2. Literature Review

Teachers serve as primary evaluators of school principals' leadership, as they directly experience administrative decisions, communication styles, and relational approaches in their daily professional lives. Research has demonstrated that teacher surveys of principal leadership provide valid and reliable measures of leadership effectiveness, with teachers able to effectively distinguish different domains of principal leadership (Jones et al., 2024). Studies have confirmed the usefulness of teacher feedback surveys for evaluating principals, aligning well with nationally recognised professional standards (Jones et al., 2024).

The study of ethical leadership in educational contexts has garnered substantial scholarly attention, with researchers examining its multifaceted dimensions and organizational implications. Research on ethical leadership has expanded to explore its influence across diverse cultural and organizational settings. Recent studies in Southeast Asia, for instance, have demonstrated significant positive associations between ethical leadership, organizational citizenship behaviours, and employee motivation across different national contexts (Trang et al., 2025). In the Malaysian educational landscape, Thien, Adams, Kho, and Yap (2023) have focused on understanding how school leaders navigate challenging situations through value-driven leadership practices, identifying key attributes such as

advocating positive discipline, tolerance to conflicts, humility, and gentleness, building trust, empowerment, fairness and responsibility, joint decision-making, and rational problem solving. Complementing these findings, Yusof and Cheah (2023) examined the practices, challenges, and strategies of ethical leadership among selected secondary school principals in Selangor, highlighting how principals' ethical leadership practices can be understood through cognitive and affective approaches, with challenges including environmental factors that shape student moral development. Collectively, this research underscores the importance of understanding ethical leadership within the Malaysian cultural context and its broader relevance to caring school environments.

Extending this line of inquiry, recent research has further elucidated the mechanisms through which ethical leadership fosters positive organizational outcomes. Trang et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between ethical leadership, public service motivation, and organizational citizenship behaviours in Vietnam, demonstrating that ethical leadership significantly influences employee motivation and citizenship behaviours through mediated pathways. Similarly, Thien et al. (2023) explored value-driven leadership from the perspectives of Malaysian school leaders, revealing contextualization of servant-, authentic-, and ethical leadership attributes such as building trust, empowerment, fairness and responsibility, and joint decision-making. These findings not only reinforce the applicability of ethical leadership frameworks across different cultural contexts but also highlight the importance of context-specific manifestations of ethical leadership behaviours.

Having established the foundations of ethical leadership research, the discussion now turns to the concept of caring school leadership. Developed by van der Vyver, van der Westhuizen, and Meyer (2014), this framework represents a significant contribution to understanding how school leaders can cultivate compassionate and supportive educational environments. The framework identifies three determinants of caring school leadership namely psychological, organizational, and management. This model has been applied internationally, most notably in the Chilean educational system, where Carrasco and Montoya (2024) found notable differences between how school principals perceive their caring practices and how teachers perceive them, particularly regarding psychological well-being. These findings suggest that perceptions of caring leadership may vary significantly among stakeholders, highlighting the importance of understanding caring leadership from multiple perspectives.

Supporting these findings, recent research has further confirmed the relevance of caring school leadership in promoting organizational commitment. Mariano and Solomon (2024) found that caring school leadership and empowerment significantly influence organizational commitment among public secondary school teachers, suggesting that caring leadership practices play a crucial role in fostering dedication to teaching and student development, building positive relationships, and promoting organizational excellence through collaboration. In the Malaysian context, Yusof and Cheah (2023) emphasized the importance of cognitive and affective approaches to ethical leadership, while Thien et al. (2023) identified key attributes of value-driven leadership including building trust, empowerment, fairness and responsibility, and joint decision-making. Despite these contributions, significant gaps remain in understanding the specific influence of individual ethical leadership dimensions such as people orientation, fairness, power sharing, and role clarification on caring school leadership determinants in the Malaysian educational context.

Due to the limited study in ethical leadership and caring school leadership (Gunzenhauser et al., 2024; Louis et al., 2016), in this study, the relationship of ethical leadership and caring school leadership view was proposed. In a separate study by Ryu et al. (2022), a study about caring culture which focuses on the role of principals in producing caring school cultures is implemented using a qualitative study. While this study implemented the quantitative study, it was employed in this study to find the relationship and regression towards both elements. Ryu et al. (2022) provided rich qualitative evidence that helped develop a caring school culture as a model for teachers to observe and replicate (p. 8). This framework may promote trust and fairness that limited students' interaction (pp. 11, 13). However, this framework did not quantify which ethical behaviours are determinant in quantifying ethical behaviours, creating a caring culture. From social learning theory to the regression model, this study tests whether ethical leadership statistically predicts caring leadership in the Malaysian educational context. This study might move beyond the comprehension of the bivariate analysis dimension in ethical leadership towards the average principal training practices in the modelling mechanism quantitatively in creating a caring leadership environment.

The empirical evidence demonstrating the positive impact of caring school leadership on organisational commitment warrants an examination of the theoretical foundations that explain this relationship. Several established frameworks provide conceptual grounding. Social Learning Theory unifies the ethical leadership and caring school leadership in this study. In Social Learning Theory, ethical conduct serves as a behavioural model, where ethics has been practised by the principals and serves as the behavioural model for their followers (King et al., 2025). This practice shows that principals navigate dilemmas or issues regarding educational institutions through empathy while ruling fairly, which creates a school-caring culture. At the same time, social learning theory also remains as an atheoretical foundation in ethical leadership, even though the research focuses on the other issues in educational institutions (Hsieh et al., 2023).

Complementing this perspective, Servant Leadership Theory pioneered by Greenleaf (McGee-Cooper & Trammell, 2025) emphasizes leaders' primary role as servants to others, focusing on caring, ethical behaviour, and employee growth. Madison, Fernando, Robberts, and Eva (2023) explored critical approaches to teaching servant leadership, moving beyond heroic notions to focus on leader development, leadership development, and community leadership development, highlighting the importance of caring and ethical leadership in contemporary organizational contexts. Taken together, the existing literature provides strong theoretical and empirical foundations for examining the relationship between ethical leadership and caring school leadership. However, there remains a limited understanding of the specific influence of individual ethical leadership dimensions on caring school leadership determinants, the applicability of these relationships in the Malaysian educational context, and the development of models that can guide policy and practice. To address these gaps, the present study investigates the influence of people orientation, fairness, power sharing, and role clarification on the psychological, organizational, and management determinants of caring school leadership among secondary school principals in Malaysia quantitatively.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted in the district of Hulu Langat, which accommodates the largest number of schoolteachers in the state of Selangor, Malaysia (Masuwai et al., 2025). The total population comprised 4,719 teachers from 41 national secondary schools. The two-stage cluster sampling technique is used to select the participants in this study. In the first stage, cluster sampling was used to select 11 random schools from the 41 secondary schools available. Then in the second stage, simple random sampling was used to select every participant from the listed 11 schools. These two samples yielded a final sample of 357 teachers, which adhere to the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for a finite population of 5000 samples. Respondents were selected from schools across five zones, namely Ampang, Bangi, Kajang, Cheras, and Semenyih. The distribution of respondents by zone was as follows, starting with Ampang (66 teachers, 18.5%), Bangi (106 teachers, 29.7%), Cheras (25 teachers, 7%), Kajang (93 teachers, 26.1%), and Semenyih (67 teachers, 18.7%).

Table 1

Sample Distribution from Total People Orientation Population

Zone	School Name	Respondent	Percentage
Ampang	SMK A	33	18.5%
	SMK B	33	
Bangi	SMK C	60	29.7%
	SMK D	16	
	SMK E	30	
Cheras	SMK F	25	7%
Kajang	SMK G	38	26.1%
	SMK H	32	
	SMK I	23	
Semenyih	SMK J	10	18.7%
	SMK K	57	
Total		357	100%

Two validated instruments were employed in this study. First, the Ethical Leadership at Work Questionnaire (ELW) developed by Kalshoven, Den Hartog, and De Hoogh (2011) was used to measure ethical leadership across four dimensions, namely people orientation, fairness, power sharing, and role clarification. The adapted ELW comprised 25 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The second instrument was the Caring School Leadership Questionnaire (CSLQ), developed by van der Vyver, van der Westhuizen, and Meyer (2014). This instrument was used to measure caring school leadership across three determinants, namely psychological, organisational, and management. The CSLQ comprised 59 items measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 4 (large extent). Both instruments were validated by experts in educational leadership and educational psychology. Reliability was established through a pilot study with 35 respondents, yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .88 for ELW and .98 for CSLQ, indicating high internal consistency (Kalkbrenner, 2024; Crawfor et al., 2024). Reliability for CSLQ was recorded through actual research as .87 for ELW and .98 for CSLQ involving 357 participants. The construct validity of ELW has been using the expert in psychological and CSLQ has been validated its construct validity by the panel information for instrument from the

Table 2

Reliability Statistic of ELW and CSLQ

Instruments	No of items	Cronbach's Alpha	
		Pilot Test (n=35)	Research (n=357)
Ethical Leadership at Work Questionnaire	25	.88	.87
Caring School Leadership Questionnaire	59	.98	.98

Data collection was conducted during regular school sessions, with 500 survey questionnaires distributed to teachers across the 11 selected secondary schools. This number was allocated due to the possibility of unreturned questionnaires, missing and unresponded rates. The questionnaires were administered directly by the researcher through school administrators. The respondents were allotted two to three days to complete the surveys. In this study participation was entirely voluntary, and all teachers provided their informed consent prior to responding. Of the 500 questionnaires distributed, 357 were returned, yielding a response rate of 71.4%, which exceeded the minimum acceptable threshold of 60% recommended for research in educational settings (Paniagua & Frass-Holmes, 2026).

According to Table 3, the profile shows the demographic profile of the 357 respondents. The majority of respondents were female (89.4%, n = 319), while males were only 10.6% (n = 38). Based on the age, the largest group was 45–59 years (44.0%, n = 157), followed by 35–44 years (33.6%, n = 120) and 21–34 years (22.4%, n = 80). According to years of service, most respondents had 11–20 years (40.9%, n = 146), followed by 1–10 years (29.1%, n = 104), 21–30 years (26.3%, n = 94), and 31–40 years (3.6%, n = 13). Overall, the sample was mostly female, aged 35 and above, and had more than 10 years of service as a teacher

Table 3

Demographic Profile of the respondents

Profile	Category	Frequency	Percent %
Sex	Male	38	10.6
	Female	319	89.4
Age	21–34	80	22.4
	35–44	120	33.6
	45–59	157	44.0
Year of Service	1–10	104	29.1
	11–20	146	40.9
	21–30	94	26.3
	31–40	13	3.6

Note. N = 357

All returned questionnaires were fully completed and deemed suitable for subsequent data analysis. Linear regression analysis was performed using SPSS version 30 to examine the influence of ethical leadership dimensions on caring school leadership determinants, following a systematic analytical procedure that included issue identification, method selection, and result interpretation.

Strict ethical protocols were adhered to throughout the research process. Permission to utilize the Ethical Leadership at Work (ELW) questionnaire was obtained from Karianne Kalshoven at Utrecht University Ethics Institute, Netherlands, while authorization to employ the Caring School Leadership Questionnaire (CSLQ) was secured from Dr. C.P. van der Vyver, Senior Lecturer at North-West University, South Africa. Institutional approval to conduct the study in Malaysian secondary schools was granted by the Department of Educational Planning and Research Division, Ministry of Education Malaysia, with additional consent obtained from the Selangor State Education Department and the Hulu Langat District Education Office.

4. Results

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for the two study variables which are ethical leadership and caring school leadership. A total of 357 respondents provided complete data on both variables, with no missing values (valid N = 357). Respondents reported a mean score of 86.26 (SD = 11.20) for ethical leadership, with observed scores ranging from 55.00 to 122.00. For caring school leadership, the mean score was 178.87 (SD = 28.30), with observed scores ranging from 81.00 to 237.00. The standard deviations indicate moderate variability in responses for both variables. Ethical leadership showed relatively consistent perceptions among respondents (SD = 11.20), while caring school leadership showed somewhat greater dispersion (SD = 28.30). The observed minimum and maximum values for both variables fell within the possible range of their respective scales, suggesting no floor or ceiling effects in the data Statistics.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Ethical Leadership and Caring School Leadership

Variable	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Ethical Leadership	357	55.00	122.00	86.26	11.20
Caring School Leadership	357	81.00	237.00	178.87	28.30

To find the significant relationship between ethical leadership and caring school leadership among secondary school principals in Hulu Langat, the findings are presented in Table 2. The correlation between total ethical leadership and caring school leadership was significant ($r = .67^{**}$, $p < .001$). This result was obtained from 357 secondary school teachers. This indicates that the correlation coefficient relationship between ethical leadership and caring school leadership is significant. The level of significance is high based on the value of Pearson's correlation (2-tailed). Therefore, there is a significant relationship between ethical leadership (EL) and caring school leadership (CSL) among secondary school principals in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor. Pearson correlation analysis reveals a significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and caring school leadership ($r = .67$, $p < .001$).

Table 5

Pearson's Correlation Ethical Leadership to Caring School Leadership

Variable	1	2
1. Ethical Leadership	—	
2. Caring School Leadership	.67**	—

Note. N = 357. **. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Table 6 presents the bivariate correlations between the four dimensions of ethical leadership (people orientation, fairness, power sharing, role clarification) and the three determinants of caring school leadership (psychological, organizational, management). The table shows the strength and direction of relationships between each pair of variables. Correlation coefficients range from -1.0 to +1.0, where values closer to +1.0 indicate stronger positive relationships. All correlations shown are significant at the 0.01 level ($p < .01$). The bivariate correlation analysis indicates that people's orientation dimension in EL is the strongest correlation with the psychological determinant in CSL (r=.69**). The weakest correlation is between power sharing in the EL dimension and the organisational determinant in CSL (r=.17**), which occurred in these results. This result means that a higher score of people's orientation shows they are highly supportive of the psychological climate in CSL.

Table 6

Bivariate Correlation of Dimension EL and CSL Determinant

Variable	*Mean*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. People Orientation	28.57	6.07	—						
2. Fairness	20.11	2.98	.22**	—					
3. Power Sharing	18.86	3.38	.32**	.05	—				
4. Role Clarification	18.71	3.19	.60**	.17**	.47**	—			
5. Psychological	72.88	13.53	.69**	.23**	.28**	.51**	—		
6. Organizational	44.64	6.99	.56**	.22**	.17**	.54**	.73**	—	
7. Management	61.34	9.76	.62**	.23**	.24**	.57**	.83**	.86**	—

N = [357], Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Notes

Ethical Leadership Dimension	Caring School Leadership Determinant
People Orientation	Psychological
Fairness	Organisational
Power Sharing	Management
Role Clarification	

The Influence of Ethical Leadership on Caring School Leadership

The major question focuses on the heart of the study, which questioned, "Is there a significant influence of principals' ethical leadership on caring school leadership among secondary school principals in Hulu Langat?" Started with the correlations, the findings of this research are reported in Table 5 as follows. The result establishes the baseline picture of the sample before regression. The average caring school leadership (CSL) score was 178.87 (SD = 28.30), and the average ethical leadership (EL) score was 86.26 (SD = 11.20), based on N = 357 respondents. The Pearson correlation of $r = .674$ ($p < .001$, 1-tailed) indicates a strong, positive, statistically significant association of higher ethical leadership goes with higher caring school leadership. This correlation is the foundation for the regression that follows.

Table 7

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlation Between Ethical Leadership and Caring School Leadership

Variable	M	SD	1	2
Caring School Leadership	178.87	28.30	—	
Ethical Leadership	86.26	11.20	.674**	—

Note. N = 357. **p < .001 (1-tailed).

Table 8 provides the core regression evidence in this study. The unstandardized slope (B), its standard error, the standardized coefficient (β), the t-test, and significance for both the intercept and the predictor. The constant (B =

31.97) is the predicted CSL when EL = 0 which reported for equation completeness, but not substantively interpreted because EL = 0 is far outside the observed range. The slope for EL (B = 1.70, SE = .10) is positive and highly significant (t = 17.20, p < .001). This shows that each one-point increase in ethical leadership is associated with a 1.70-point increase in caring school leadership. The standardized coefficient (β = .67) confirms a large effect. These values produce the prediction equation in this result. The equation comes to Predicted CSL = 31.97 + 1.70 (EL).

Table 8

Simple Linear Regression Predicting Caring School Leadership from Ethical Leadership

Predictor	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**t**	**p**
(Constant)	31.97	8.61	—	3.71	< .001
Ethical Leadership	1.70	.10	.67	17.20	< .001

Note. N = 357; R^2 = .455 adjusted R^2 = .453; F (1, 355) = 295.81, p < .001.

A simple linear regression was conducted to determine whether ethical leadership significantly predicted caring school leadership. The regression model was statistically significant, F(1, 355) = 295.81, p < .001, indicating that ethical leadership explained a significant proportion of the variance in caring school leadership. The model accounted for approximately 45% of the variance in the outcome (R^2 = .45).

Table 9 shows that in the ANOVA table, CSL is the dependent variable and EL is the predictor (independent variable). This note is shown in the footnotes where a state-dependent variable is "CSL", and footnote b states "Predictors: (Constant)" refers to EL. Therefore, the results show whether EL significantly predicts CSL. In the table, the regression row has shown the result (Sum of Squares = 129617.33, df = 1), which represents the variance in CSL explained by EL. On the other row, the residual row represents the unexplained variance (sum of squares = 155552.22, df = 355). This analysis shows that the main focused is F = 295.81 and Sig. = .000 (p < .001). This result indicated that the model is statistically significant, meaning EL is a significant predictor of CSL.

Table 9

ANOVA Summary for the Regression of Caring School Leadership on Ethical Leadership

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Regression	129,617.33	1	129,617.33	295.81	< .001
Residual	155,552.22	355	438.18		
Total	285,169.55	356			

Note. N = 357. Dependent variable: a -Caring School Leadership (CSL). Predictor: b- Ethical Leadership (EL). SS = sum of squares; MS = mean square.

5. Discussion

The regression model strongly predicted school leadership from ethical leadership F(1 355) = 295.81, p <.001 with leadership explaining 45.5% of the change (R^2 =.455; adjusted R^2 =.453) a large effect for a single factor in educational leadership research. The standardized coefficient (β =.67 p <.001) and the unstandardized slope (B = 1.70 SE =.10) show that each one-point increase in leadership is linked to a 1.70-point increase in caring school leadership showing that principals ethical actions are key in creating a positive school environment. These results match findings from Carrasco and Montoya (2024) which found differences in views between principals and teachers in Chile using the Caring School Leadership Questionnaire showing the importance of teacher views. Chibaya (2025) also found that ethical leadership directly affected responsibility and school climate in Zimbabwean high schools. Study by King, Chinaza and Naidoo (2025) Hussey (2025) and Saxena and Prasad (2025) also connected ethical and kind leadership to care, fairness and organizational gains.

Results from the study shows, people orientation was the strongest link to the psychological factor (r =.69 p <.01) and role clarification had strong links with the psychological (r =.51) organizational (r =.54) and management (r =.57)

factors while power sharing and fairness were not as strong, especially power sharing with the organizational factor ($r = .17$ $p < .01$). These trends show that people-oriented actions and clear role clarification are the leadership parts that teachers connect most with a caring school climate. Theoretically the results back up Social Learning Theory and Servant Leadership Theory in Western areas (King et al. 2025; McGee-Cooper & Trammell 2025) with Sindone, Kearney and Thai (2025) and Sona and Abdullah (2025) also supporting the building of servant leadership through hands-on and curriculum-based methods. In practice principals should focus on people-oriented leadership and clear role clarification and the Ministry of Education should include leadership principles in training and assessing principals. However, the study was in one district used only teacher views and used data that cannot show cause and effect while 55.3% of the change is still not explained. Future research should repeat the study in parts of Malaysia and different settings using long-term and mixed methods with views, from many people to improve the understanding of cause and effect between ethical leadership practices and effect on caring leadership environment.

6. Conclusion

This study examined whether principals' ethical leadership is associated with school leadership among secondary schools in Hulu Langat, Selangor. The regression model was statistically significant with ethical leadership explaining a share of the variance in caring school leadership showing a large effect for a single predictor. The positive standardized coefficient and slope indicate an association indicates teachers who rated their principals higher on ethical leadership also reported higher caring school leadership. At the level people orientation was most strongly correlated with the psychological determinant and role clarification was consistently associated with all three determinants whereas power sharing showed comparatively weak associations, notably with the organisational determinant. These patterns are consistent with Social Learning Theory and Servant Leadership Theory though the theories remain frames rather than tested explanations. The cross-sectional design, single-district sample and single-source teacher ratings preclude inference, and a considerable portion of variance remains unexplained.

The results therefore establish a statistical association, not evidence that changing ethical leadership would produce changes in caring leadership. Accordingly, the findings support the cautious interpretation that the people-orientated conduct and role-clarity deserve further study as possible correlates with caring school leadership. Looking ahead, these findings offer a direction for the future of education as schools across Malaysia and beyond continue to cultivate caring environments. Ethical leadership, particularly principals' people-oriented conduct and clear role clarification, may serve as a promising foundation for nurturing trust, well-being and supportive relationships within school communities. This limited study also suggests future research should replicate across states using multi-source and mixed-methods designs to test causal direction, reduce common-method bias and ultimately inform a more compassionate and ethically grounded education system for generations to come.

Declarations

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Ethical Statement
This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the Ministry of Education Malaysia and the State Education Department. Approval to conduct research in secondary schools within the Hulu Langat district was officially granted by the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) (Approval ID: KPMSP.600-3/2/3 Jld. 27 (51) and the Selangor State Education Department (JPNS.PNN 600-1/56 Jld.64 (50). Permission for using the ELW

questionnaire has been obtained from Dr. Karriane Kalshoven from Amsterdam Center for Integrity and Leadership and CSLQ from Dr. Corne P van der Vyver from North-West University South Africa.

Data Availability
None

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