ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN CHINESE EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: INTEGRITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PUBLIC TRUST

Zhou HAO[1], Thada SITHTHADA[1] and Suttipong BOONPHADUNG[1]
1 Department of Educational Administration, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Thailand; zhou85460@gmail.com

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received: 7 September 2026 **Revised:** 20 September 2026 **Published:** 25 September 2026

ABSTRACT
Ethical leadership is central to educational administration because schools, vocational institutions, universities, and education authorities exercise public authority over opportunities, careers, resources, and the rights of students and staff. This conceptual review examines ethical leadership in China through three connected ideas: integrity, responsibility, and public trust. It integrates research on ethical and responsible leadership, organizational justice, social learning, public integrity, and trust with China's policy emphasis on professional ethics, high-quality teachers, educational fairness, and governance modernization. Integrity is defined as consistency among public values, commitments, decisions, and conduct. Responsibility extends beyond compliance to answerability, stakeholder engagement, stewardship, and correction of harm. Public trust is treated not as automatic approval but as a reasoned expectation of competent, fair, open, and public-interest administration. The article proposes a multilevel framework connecting normative foundations, leader judgment, ethical governance processes, stakeholder experience, and trust outcomes. It examines dilemmas in resource allocation, personnel, assessment, academic integrity, digital governance, external partnerships, and crisis communication. The central argument is that trustworthy administration cannot depend on individual virtue alone; it requires leaders who model moral conduct and systems that make decisions visible, challengeable, and correctable.
Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Educational Administration, Integrity, Responsibility, Public Trust, China

CITATION INFORMATION: Hao, Z., Siththada, T., & Boonphadung, S. (2026). Ethical Leadership in Chinese Educational Administration: Integrity, Responsibility, and Public Trust. *Procedia of Multidisciplinary Research, 4(9), 74.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Educational administration is inherently moral work. Administrators decide how public resources are distributed, who receives educational opportunities, how teachers and leaders are appointed and evaluated, what evidence counts in assessment, and how student rights are protected. These decisions affect life chances, professional identities, institutional reputation, and confidence in public services. Efficiency and compliance are therefore necessary but insufficient criteria for good administration. A decision may be technically legal and operationally efficient while remaining unfair, opaque, inattentive to vulnerable groups, or inconsistent with the educational mission.

Ethical leadership has particular importance in China because education carries political, public, and strategic functions and operates at exceptional scale. The Master Plan on Building China into a Leading Country in Education (2024-2035) seeks a high-quality system, stronger teacher capacity, improved public education services, fairness, social collaboration, and modernization by 2035 (Communist Party of China Central Committee & State Council, 2025). These objectives require administrators who can translate national direction into credible institutional practice while balancing performance, equity, professional expertise, student development, and public accountability.

Recent policy also places professional integrity at the center of the teaching workforce. National guidelines issued in 2024 call for stronger professional conduct and skills, protection of teachers' rights and interests, reduced unnecessary burdens, and zero tolerance for serious ethical violations (Communist Party of China Central Committee & State Council, 2024). Earlier ten-point codes differentiated expectations for kindergarten, primary and secondary, and higher education teachers; the higher education code explicitly addressed academic integrity and prohibited plagiarism (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2018). Ethical leadership is essential for applying these standards consistently and fairly.

However, codes alone do not create ethical organizations. Rules can be applied selectively, compliance can become symbolic, and employees may remain silent if they believe reporting will bring retaliation. Leaders shape what is noticed, rewarded, discussed, and corrected. Brown et al. (2005) define ethical leadership through normatively appropriate conduct and the active promotion of such conduct through communication, reinforcement, and decision making. This dual emphasis on the moral person and moral manager shows why personal honesty must be joined with organizational systems.

This article develops a conceptual account of ethical leadership in Chinese educational administration around integrity, responsibility, and public trust. It is a literature-based conceptual review and does not report original empirical findings. The analysis asks what these three ideas mean in educational governance, how they influence one another, which dilemmas administrators must navigate, and which institutional practices can make ethical commitments durable. The argument is that trust grows when stakeholders repeatedly experience competent, fair, transparent, and correctable administration, not when institutions merely request confidence.

2. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Ethical leadership includes both personal example and the governance of collective conduct. A leader demonstrates honesty, fairness, care, self-control, and concern for the public good, but also clarifies standards, communicates reasons, rewards responsible behavior, and responds proportionately to misconduct. Social learning theory explains why visible leader behavior matters: employees observe which actions bring approval, advancement, or silence. When senior administrators excuse favoritism or manipulate evidence, such conduct can travel downward through an organization. Conversely, consistent ethical signals can support an integrity climate across departments and levels (Mayer et al., 2009).

Social exchange theory explains a second mechanism. Teachers and staff interpret respectful treatment, truthful communication, voice, and fair decisions as evidence that the institution values them. They are then more willing to contribute beyond minimum requirements, share knowledge, and accept reciprocal obligations. Meta-analytic research associates ethical leadership with leader fairness, trust, satisfaction, commitment, ethical behavior, and citizenship behavior (Bedi et al., 2016). In schools, these outcomes matter because educational improvement relies heavily on discretionary cooperation rather than on formal control alone.

Organizational justice theory further distinguishes distributive, procedural, interpersonal, and informational justice. Distributive justice concerns the fairness of outcomes such as workload, rewards, admissions, and resource allocation. Procedural justice concerns how decisions are made and whether criteria are consistent, unbiased, accurate, and open to correction. Interpersonal justice concerns dignity and respect, while informational justice concerns timely and truthful explanations. Ethical educational leaders must attend to all four because a reasonable outcome can still damage trust when the process is secretive or disrespectful.

Responsible leadership extends ethical leadership from immediate supervisory conduct to wider stakeholders and longer time horizons. Voegtlin (2016) argues that responsibility includes critical evaluation of prevailing norms, perspective taking, dialogue, moral courage, shared problem solving, and concern for future consequences. This extension is well suited to education. Administrators have duties not only to current staff and students but also to families, communities, future learners, public finances, professional fields, and the long-term legitimacy of educational institutions.

Public integrity provides the institutional counterpart to individual ethics. The OECD Public Integrity Handbook emphasizes coherent standards, merit-based human resource management, open organizational culture, risk management, stakeholder participation, enforcement, and leadership that is ethical, responsive, and trustworthy (OECD, 2020). Applied to education, public integrity means that recruitment, procurement, assessment, research, funding, and discipline are organized to prevent undue influence and conflict of interest. Ethical intentions must be translated into auditable processes and meaningful accountability.

These theories also reveal a limitation of treating ethical leadership as one favorable style among many. Ethical questions involve conflicts among legitimate values, not merely the display of positive behavior. Eisenbeiss (2012) identifies humane orientation, justice, responsibility and sustainability, and moderation as important interdisciplinary principles. Administrators may have to balance individual need with consistent rules, local autonomy with national standards, transparency with privacy, innovation with safety, and rapid action with consultation. Ethical competence includes the capacity to reason through these tensions and explain a defensible choice.

3. INTEGRITY, RESPONSIBILITY, AND PUBLIC TRUST

Integrity is the alignment of values, words, decisions, and behavior. It includes truthfulness, consistency, impartiality, promise keeping, and resistance to improper influence. In educational administration, integrity becomes visible when admissions criteria are applied as announced, evaluation evidence is not manipulated, procurement avoids conflicts of interest, academic misconduct is handled regardless of status, and leaders disclose relevant interests. Integrity is therefore more demanding than personal incorruptibility; it requires reliable institutional conduct across routine and difficult cases.

Integrity also includes intellectual honesty. Educational leaders should distinguish evidence from advocacy, acknowledge uncertainty, correct inaccurate claims, and avoid using metrics beyond their valid purpose. Performance targets may help coordinate improvement, but they can also encourage gaming when leaders value appearance more than learning. An integrity-oriented

administrator asks whether reported results represent the underlying educational reality. Data are not ethically neutral when they determine access, recognition, sanctions, or institutional reputation. Responsibility begins with duty but extends to answerability. Leaders should be able to identify who decided, on what authority, using which evidence, for whose benefit, and with what consequences. They must monitor implementation rather than assuming that a formally correct policy produces a fair experience. When harm or error occurs, responsibility requires disclosure, correction, learning, and appropriate remedy. Blame avoidance and diffusion of accountability weaken trust because affected people cannot see whether the institution is capable of self-correction.

Responsibility is also relational and prospective. Administrators should involve people who possess relevant knowledge or bear significant risk, especially when decisions affect learning pathways, employment, privacy, or safety. Participation does not mean that every decision requires consensus, but stakeholders should know what is open to influence and how their input was used. Leaders must also consider cumulative and future effects: a short-term improvement in performance may be irresponsible if it increases inequality, staff burnout, data risk, or dependence on an unsustainable system.

Public trust is a stakeholder's willingness to accept vulnerability based on expectations about institutional conduct. In education, parents entrust children to schools; students accept assessment and disciplinary authority; teachers rely on administrators for fair employment decisions; and society invests resources on the expectation of competent and impartial service. Trust should not be confused with unquestioning approval. Healthy trust permits scrutiny, complaint, and evidence-based criticism. The ethical aim is trustworthiness: conduct that deserves confidence and remains open to verification.

The OECD framework identifies reliability, responsiveness, integrity, openness, and fairness as major governance drivers of trust (OECD, 2024). These drivers translate directly into educational administration. Reliability means delivering promised services and applying rules consistently. Responsiveness means learning from students, families, teachers, and communities. Integrity means prioritizing the public interest and resisting improper influence. Openness means explaining decisions and sharing usable information. Fairness means treating comparable cases consistently while recognizing relevant differences and protecting equal dignity.

The three concepts form a reinforcing relationship. Integrity creates consistency between principle and action; responsibility makes power answerable for consequences; and public trust develops from repeated stakeholder experience of both. Trust then enables cooperation, information sharing, and acceptance of difficult reforms. Yet the relationship can also deteriorate. A concealed mistake damages integrity, refusal to correct it damages responsibility, and repeated experience of both produces distrust. Ethical administration should therefore strengthen each link rather than managing reputation after confidence has already declined.

4. ETHICAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

Chinese educational leadership is shaped by contemporary public governance, professional regulation, and long traditions of moral cultivation and relational obligation. Values associated with learning, exemplary conduct, collective welfare, respect for education, and responsibility toward others can provide a strong cultural foundation for ethical administration. At the same time, ethical leadership cannot be reduced to cultural harmony or personal benevolence. Administrators still need transparent procedures, protection of rights, accurate information, and mechanisms through which subordinates and stakeholders can question decisions.

National policy frames education as having political, public, and strategic attributes and calls for the construction of fair, high-quality systems (Communist Party of China Central Committee & State Council, 2025). This framing gives administrators substantial responsibility to align local

action with public purpose. Ethical leadership is required when broad goals must be interpreted for different regions, institution types, and learner populations. Uniform treatment may appear consistent while ignoring unequal starting conditions; excessive local discretion may create arbitrariness. Leaders must combine standards with context-sensitive justice.

The professional conduct framework creates an explicit ethical baseline for educators, but leaders influence whether it becomes developmental or merely punitive. Zero tolerance for serious violations must coexist with due process, evidence standards, proportionality, confidentiality, and protection against malicious accusation. Administrators should distinguish misconduct, poor judgment, performance deficiency, and good-faith error because each requires a different response. Ethical enforcement protects students and the profession only when procedures are impartial and can be reviewed.

Empirical research in China demonstrates the organizational importance of ethical and moral leadership. Liu and Yin (2023), drawing on 3,374 teachers, found that principal ethical leadership influenced professional learning communities directly and through teacher obligation; participation in decision making strengthened important relationships. Qu (2025) similarly found among 577 elementary teachers that trust in principals mediated the association between moral leadership and professional learning communities. These findings show that moral example becomes educational capacity through trust, participation, and reciprocal commitment.

Research on related leadership forms points in the same direction. Zhang et al. (2025) analyzed responses from 4,524 teachers in 16 mainland provinces and found that authentic leadership was associated with teacher knowledge sharing through reciprocity norms and organizational trust. Gu et al. (2025) reported that trust mediated relationships between several principal leadership practices and professional learning communities. Ethical leadership should therefore be viewed as infrastructure for collaborative professionalism: it affects whether staff believe that speaking, learning, and sharing are safe and worthwhile.

Chinese institutions also face rapid change in digital governance, demographic patterns, curriculum, assessment, research, and school-enterprise relationships. Change increases ethical uncertainty because policy, technology, and professional practice may evolve at different speeds. Administrators need a stable moral purpose and flexible deliberative processes. Integrity does not mean refusing change; it means ensuring that innovation remains consistent with educational value, legal responsibility, student welfare, academic standards, and fair access.

5. CORE PRACTICES OF ETHICAL EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The first practice is ethical self-governance. Leaders should examine personal interests, biases, emotional reactions, and pressures before exercising authority. They need routines for declaring conflicts, seeking independent advice, recording reasons, and recusing themselves when impartiality cannot reasonably be assured. Self-discipline is especially important where hierarchy may discourage direct challenge. A leader's confidence in personal virtue is not an adequate safeguard against unconscious bias or the appearance of favoritism.

The second practice is principled and evidence-informed decision making. Administrators should identify affected values, applicable rules, reliable evidence, alternative actions, foreseeable consequences, and groups that may be disadvantaged. A written decision record helps separate reasons from retrospective justification. Significant decisions should be tested against consistency, necessity, proportionality, feasibility, privacy, and educational benefit. Where values conflict, leaders should explain the trade-off rather than claiming that only one interest exists.

The third practice is fair process. Criteria should be known in advance, comparable cases treated consistently, relevant voices heard, and decisions open to correction. This applies to recruitment, promotion, workload, awards, admissions, discipline, funding, and evaluation. Procedural fairness does not guarantee that every stakeholder will agree with an outcome, but it demonstrates respect

and reduces suspicion of hidden influence. Appeals should be independent enough to identify error rather than simply repeat the original decision.

The fourth practice is transparent and respectful communication. Transparency should provide information that is accurate, timely, understandable, and useful for accountability. Publishing large amounts of inaccessible data is not meaningful openness. Leaders must also protect legitimate confidentiality involving students, personnel, research, and security. The ethical task is to disclose the rationale, criteria, evidence, and consequences of decisions while limiting personal information to what is necessary and authorized.

The fifth practice is ethical role modeling and reinforcement. Leaders influence culture through everyday choices: whom they consult, how they treat junior staff, whether they admit mistakes, how they respond to inconvenient evidence, and whether high performers are excused for misconduct. Standards become credible when recognition, promotion, resource allocation, and discipline align with them. Kalshoven et al. (2011) identify fairness, integrity, ethical guidance, people orientation, power sharing, role clarification, and concern for sustainability as observable ethical leadership behaviors.

The sixth practice is protection of voice and responsible dissent. Teachers, students, families, and staff often see risks before senior leaders do. Institutions need confidential advice, complaint, safeguarding, and whistleblowing channels with clear non-retaliation protections. Leaders should distinguish disruptive personal attack from evidence-based dissent and should report what action followed. Silence may look like agreement, but in high-power-distance settings it may reflect fear, futility, or uncertainty about acceptable communication.

The seventh practice is stewardship of people and resources. Ethical administrators must protect public funds, facilities, information, time, and environmental resources while also respecting staff workload and student well-being. Cost reduction is not responsible if it transfers hidden burdens to teachers or excludes disadvantaged learners. Resource stewardship requires transparent priorities, competitive and conflict-free procurement, monitoring of implementation, and evaluation of whether spending produces equitable educational value.

The eighth practice is moral courage and corrective action. Leaders may face pressure to conceal weak performance, protect influential individuals, or prioritize reputation over truth. Moral courage involves raising concerns through appropriate channels, preserving evidence, accepting personal risk, and taking proportionate action. Correction should address both the immediate case and the system that allowed it. An organization that punishes an individual but leaves incentives, supervision, or conflicts unchanged has not learned ethically.

6. RECURRING ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

Resource allocation creates a recurring tension between equality, equity, excellence, and efficiency. Equal distribution may ignore differences in need, while targeted investment can appear unfair to those who receive less. Administrators should publish allocation principles, use verifiable evidence, include affected units, and monitor distributional consequences. The ethical question is not only whether resources were spent lawfully but whether the decision advances educational opportunity without imposing avoidable disadvantage on less powerful groups.

Personnel decisions involve merit, relationships, confidentiality, institutional need, and career consequences. Recruitment and promotion are particularly vulnerable to informal influence, unclear criteria, and conflicts of interest. Ethical leadership requires diverse and trained panels, documented evidence, declared relationships, consistent scoring, and a review process. Leaders should also examine whether nominally neutral criteria disadvantage particular groups or reward visibility, compliance, and personal loyalty more than educational contribution and professional competence.

Assessment and accountability create pressure to demonstrate results. Targets can focus attention, but narrow indicators may distort curriculum, encourage exclusion, or motivate manipulation. Leaders should use multiple forms of evidence, investigate unexpected patterns, and avoid attaching extreme consequences to measures that were not designed for that purpose. Integrity requires reporting limitations as well as achievements. Responsibility requires asking what behaviors an accountability system is likely to produce before it is implemented.

Academic and research integrity require protection of authorship, originality, data accuracy, peer review, and responsible supervision. Senior status should not shield misconduct, while accusation should not replace investigation. Higher education leaders must address pressures that reward publication quantity or prestige without sufficient attention to research quality. Ethical governance includes education, mentoring, similarity checking used with judgment, data management, conflict disclosure, confidential inquiry, proportionate sanction, and restoration of the scholarly record when necessary.

Digital and AI systems introduce dilemmas concerning privacy, bias, surveillance, explainability, intellectual property, and human accountability. A system may improve administrative speed while making decisions harder to contest. Leaders should classify applications by risk, minimize data collection, require human review for consequential decisions, test disparate effects, and preserve an appeal route. Procurement contracts should address data ownership, security, model change, audit access, exit conditions, and responsibility for harm rather than focusing only on functionality.

School-enterprise cooperation and external partnerships can improve relevance and resources but create risks of vendor influence, unequal benefit, commercialization, and misuse of student data or labor. Administrators should make partner selection transparent, disclose financial or personal interests, define educational ownership, protect voluntary participation, and evaluate whether agreements serve learners and the public mission. A prestigious partnership is not ethically successful if its benefits are private while educational risks are borne by students.

Crisis communication tests all three dimensions of the framework. Leaders must act quickly, protect safety, verify uncertain information, coordinate authorities, and communicate without violating privacy. Delay or concealment may appear to protect reputation but can magnify harm and destroy confidence. Ethical crisis leadership explains what is known, unknown, being done, and when the next update will occur. Afterward, an independent review should identify lessons, assign responsibility fairly, and report corrective measures.

7. A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR TRUSTWORTHY EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The proposed Integrity-Responsibility-Trust framework begins with normative foundations. These include law, national education policy, professional codes, educational purpose, public-interest obligations, and respect for human dignity. Foundations establish both aspirations and boundaries. They should be translated into institution-specific standards without weakening their intent. Ethical leadership begins by clarifying which values govern decisions and how conflicts among them will be resolved, documented, and reviewed.

The second layer is leader capacity. It includes personal integrity, ethical sensitivity, perspective taking, evidence literacy, self-regulation, courage, and the ability to reason about competing obligations. Capacity also includes knowing when to seek legal, professional, technical, or community expertise. No administrator can personally understand every ethical implication of finance, data, research, student welfare, and employment. Humility and consultation are therefore components of ethical competence rather than signs of weakness.

The third layer consists of ethical governance processes: clear decision rights, conflict-of-interest controls, fair procedures, stakeholder voice, transparent reasons, protected reporting, proportional enforcement, privacy safeguards, risk management, audit, and remedy. These processes convert

personal values into reliable organizational practice. They also reduce dependence on the moral quality of one leader. If ethics disappears when a principal, dean, or director leaves, the institution has not yet built integrity.

The fourth layer is stakeholder experience. Students, teachers, families, partners, and the wider public judge institutions through encounters with admissions, teaching, assessment, complaints, communication, and service delivery. Their perceptions are influenced by whether promises are kept, decisions are understandable, people are treated with dignity, errors are corrected, and data are used legitimately. This layer matters because formal compliance can coexist with an experience of arbitrariness or exclusion.

The fifth layer comprises trust and educational outcomes. Trustworthy administration supports teacher voice, knowledge sharing, collaboration, willingness to accept difficult change, and confidence in qualifications and institutional decisions. It can also strengthen public cooperation and reduce the monitoring costs associated with suspicion. Yet trust should be evaluated together with performance, equity, rights, and learning. High approval cannot justify unethical conduct, and low trust may sometimes represent legitimate scrutiny that reveals a need for reform.

A feedback loop connects experience and outcomes to standards, leadership development, and governance. Complaint patterns, appeals, audit findings, staff surveys, student experiences, public questions, and incident reviews provide evidence about integrity risk. Administrators should publish what they can learn from these sources and track corrective action. The framework therefore treats public trust as an outcome of continuous institutional learning, not as a communication campaign separated from administrative behavior.

8. ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES FOR INSTITUTIONALIZING ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

The first strategy is to convert principles into a coherent integrity system. Institutions should map legal duties, professional standards, internal policies, decision points, risk owners, and reporting channels. Gaps and contradictions should be resolved, and responsibilities made visible. Codes should include realistic scenarios and decision guidance, not only abstract values, and connect integrity, responsibility, and trust to admissions, assessment, human resources, research, procurement, and digital administration.

The second strategy is ethical recruitment, selection, and evaluation of leaders. Appointment criteria should include fair decision making, responsible use of authority, conflict handling, and capacity to build trust. Structured scenarios can reveal reasoning under pressure. Evaluation should consider stakeholder evidence, commitments, complaint handling, team climate, and integrity controls, without allowing popularity to replace ethical judgment.

The third strategy is continuing ethical learning. One-time compliance lectures have limited value for complex dilemmas. Leaders and staff should analyze authentic cases, map stakeholders, examine conflicts, test communication, and compare consequences. Cross-level learning matters because ethical leadership can trickle downward through hierarchies (Mayer et al., 2009). Senior leaders should participate visibly and discuss lessons from difficult decisions and error.

The fourth strategy is to embed reason giving and participation into major decisions. Templates should record purpose, evidence, alternatives, affected groups, equity implications, conflicts, data risks, consultation, and review date. Participation should occur early enough to influence design. Leaders should explain which proposals were accepted, modified, or rejected and why, strengthening both decision quality and legitimacy.

The fifth strategy is safe reporting and credible response. Institutions need multiple channels, confidentiality, non-retaliation, triage, timelines, independent investigation when necessary, and lawful feedback. Complaint data should be reviewed for recurring issues and delays. Leaders must

prevent both suppression and misuse, but concern about malicious allegations should not discourage good-faith reporting.

The sixth strategy is integrity risk management. Administrators should assess high-risk processes such as recruitment, examinations, procurement, research funding, partnerships, data access, and discipline. Controls should match risk and be tested. Rotation of duties, separated approvals, audit trails, independent review, and disclosure can reduce misconduct opportunities. Because excessive control creates bureaucracy and distrust, leaders should evaluate burden as well as protection.

The seventh strategy is transparent performance and trust monitoring. Indicators should cover reliability, responsiveness, fairness, openness, integrity, and educational outcomes. Evidence may include service timeliness, appeal reversals, complaint resolution, participation, disclosures, audit findings, stakeholder experience, and corrective action. Disaggregated results can reveal unequal treatment. Measures should support diagnosis and learning, not appearance management.

The final strategy is institutional renewal. Policies and controls should be reviewed after incidents, legal or technological change, leadership transition, and at scheduled intervals. Ethical culture requires continuity and the ability to revise rules that cause unintended harm. Governing bodies should report progress, protect independent review, and provide implementation resources. Integrity without capacity becomes aspiration; capacity without ethical direction can make harmful administration more efficient.

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

Ethical leadership standards should apply to administrators as well as teachers and connect personal conduct with governance. National and provincial frameworks can clarify expectations for conflicts of interest, procedural fairness, transparency, data use, complaint protection, and accountability. Institutions also need trained investigators, legal and ethical advice, secure systems, and leadership development so responsibilities remain feasible.

Leadership development should integrate Chinese cultural and policy foundations with research on justice, public integrity, responsible leadership, and trust. Ethics should not be taught as obvious answers. Administrators need practice in dilemmas involving conflicting values, uncertain facts, and unequal power. Case analysis, supervised application, peer consultation, and review of actual decisions can build judgment.

Future research should examine ethical leadership across educational sectors and Chinese regions. Longitudinal, multilevel studies could test how national standards, senior leadership, department climate, and frontline experience interact. Surveys should be combined with decision records, observations, interviews, complaint patterns, and outcomes. Ahmed's (2025) review of 151 studies confirms growth in the field and the need to connect ethical practices, dilemmas, leader development, and organizational effects.

Public trust measurement requires conceptual care. Trust in a principal, trust among teachers, institutional confidence, and system-level public trust are related but different. Instruments should distinguish competence, benevolence, integrity, fairness, openness, and responsiveness. Researchers should identify when skepticism improves accountability and when distrust obstructs cooperation. The objective is evidence-based trustworthiness, not approval as an end in itself.

10. CONCLUSION

Ethical leadership is not an optional quality added after administrative efficiency. It determines how authority, evidence, resources, and relationships serve educational purposes. China's commitments to high-quality development, professional ethics, fairness, and governance modernization require administrators who connect national direction with responsible, transparent, and humane practice.

Integrity, responsibility, and public trust form a coherent foundation. Integrity aligns values with action; responsibility makes decisions answerable for process, consequences, and correction; and trust emerges from repeated experience of reliability, fairness, openness, competence, and public purpose. None can be replaced by reputation management, formal compliance, or one leader's virtue.

Educational leaders must build institutions in which ethical conduct is expected, supported, visible, challengeable, and correctable. Fair procedures, reasoned decisions, protected voice, responsible data use, proportionate accountability, and continuous review turn ethical leadership into an organizational capacity to deserve public trust while improving education.

REFERENCES

Ahmed, E. I. (2025). A systematic review of ethical leadership studies in educational research from 1990 to 2022. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 53(4), 769-788. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231193251

Bedi, A., Alpaslan, C. M., & Green, S. (2016). A meta-analytic review of ethical leadership outcomes and moderators. Journal of Business Ethics, 139, 517-536. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2625-1

Brown, M. E., Treviño, L. K., & Harrison, D. A. (2005). Ethical leadership: A social learning perspective for construct development and testing. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 97(2), 117-134. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2005.03.002

Communist Party of China Central Committee, & State Council. (2024, August 26). Guidelines on strengthening the teaching workforce in the new era. The State Council of the People's Republic of China. https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202408/27/content_WS66cd0c7cc6d0868f4e8ea43f.html

Communist Party of China Central Committee, & State Council. (2025). Master plan on building China into a leading country in education (2024-2035). The State Council of the People's Republic of China. https://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202501/20/content_WS678d85c6c6d0868f4e8eef83.html

Eisenbeiss, S. A. (2012). Re-thinking ethical leadership: An interdisciplinary integrative approach. The Leadership Quarterly, 23(5), 791-808. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.03.001

Gu, X., Liu, Z., & Hang, Z. (2025). How do various leadership practices affect professional learning communities? The mediating role of principals' perceived trust by teachers. PLOS ONE, 20(5), Article e0323055. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0323055

Kalshoven, K., Den Hartog, D. N., & De Hoogh, A. H. B. (2011). Ethical leadership at work questionnaire (ELW): Development and validation of a multidimensional measure. The Leadership Quarterly, 22(1), 51-69. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2010.12.007

Liu, S., & Yin, H. (2023). How ethical leadership influences professional learning communities via teacher obligation and participation in decision making: A moderated-mediation analysis. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 51(2), 345-364. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220975766

Mayer, D. M., Kuenzi, M., Greenbaum, R., Bardes, M., & Salvador, R. B. (2009). How low does ethical leadership flow? Test of a trickle-down model. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 108(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2008.04.002

Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2018, November 19). China issues new codes of conduct for teachers. https://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201811/t20181119_355127.html

OECD. (2020). OECD public integrity handbook. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/ac8ed8e8-en

OECD. (2024). OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions - 2024 results: Building trust in a complex policy environment. OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/9a20554b-en

Qu, Y. (2025). Moral leadership and professional learning communities: The mediating role of teachers' trust in principals and the moderating role of principals' controlling behavior. Psychology in the Schools. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.23398

Voegtlin, C. (2016). What does it mean to be responsible? Addressing the missing responsibility dimension in ethical leadership research. Leadership, 12(5), 581-608. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715015578936

Zhang, S., Bowers, A. J., & Mao, Y. (2021). Authentic leadership and teachers' voice behaviour: The mediating role of psychological empowerment and moderating role of interpersonal trust. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 49(5), 768-785. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220915925

Zhang, W., Bowers, A. J., & Pang, S. (2025). Promoting teacher knowledge sharing in China: The fostering roles of authentic leadership, reciprocity norms, and organizational trust. Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 53(4), 857-878. https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432231199573

Data Availability Statement: The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim that may be made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. This is a fully open-access article distributed under the terms of the Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).