

## **ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY ADVOCACY IN SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION MANAGEMENT**

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### ***Abstract***

*While world societies contend with increasingly complicated issues such as climate change, economic imbalance and instability, the education systems become pressed into services that ensure sustainable development. Policy advocacy and ethical leadership form a central function for maintaining and making sustainable education achieve its desired functions of being inclusive, equitable, and future-directed. The role of this centerpiece is deliberated within this paper. Ethical leadership with moral values such as fairness, transparency and accountability is the impelling behavior and vision for change. Policy advocacy, meanwhile, is a driver of change at the systemic and institutional level. Combined, the two drivers of change have the capability to initiate far-reaching education reforms that align with global sustainability targets. Based on multi-disciplinary literature, the paper brings together seminal theories, outlines challenges and outlines strategic directions towards the future.*

**Keywords:** *Ethical Leadership, Sustainable Education, Policy Advocacy, Educational Management, Transformational Leadership*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

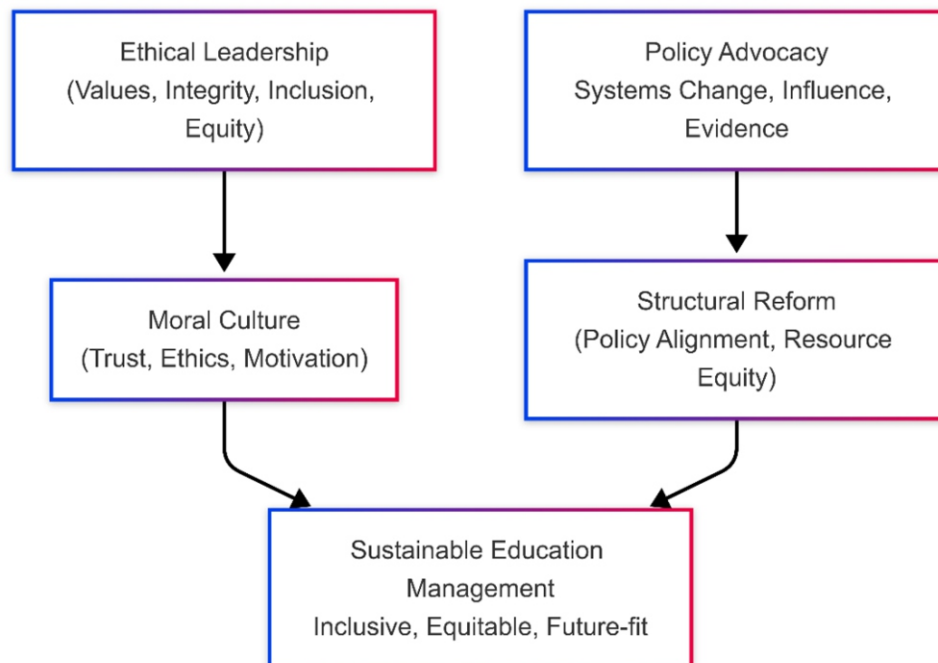
Over the last few decades, the idea of sustainability has reached almost every aspect, including education, as communities struggle with historic global challenges like environmental degradation, social injustice, and economic instability. Education is not merely viewed as a tool for economic prosperity or individual progress but as an agent of change that can shape sustainable societies. Sustainable management of education, then, is a strategic necessity for countries and institutions that seek to promote long-term societal welfare and planetary health.

But sustaining education is not just an administrative or technical undertaking. It requires leadership that is guided by ethical values—values that recognize equity, justice, integrity, and accountability to both existing and future generations. In an era of growing global uncertainty, marked by climate crises, social inequalities, and political unrest, education systems face mounting pressure not only to inform but to transform. Educational leadership based on ethics emphasizes moral thinking, ethical choice-making, and participative stakeholder involvement. It promotes student welfare, environmental awareness, and community empowerment, hence playing the role of the moral compass for schools (Northouse, 2019; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016).

Concurrently, policy advocacy has an important function of bringing these values to action in the form of structural change. Policy advocacy refers to influencing governmental, institutional, or community-level decisions in favor of educational agendas that serve sustainability and justice. Stakeholder mobilization, evidence-based campaigning, and policy dialogues are some of the advocacy strategies used to bridge the experience of grassroots with systemic change (Anderson, 2009; Cooper et al., 2015).

This article attempts to theoretically engage with the relationship between ethical leadership and policy advocacy in spearheading sustainable management of education. Using an in-depth literature review and critical engagement with success determinants and challenges, this article posits that ethical leadership and effective advocacy need to be interlinked in order to steer educational institutions toward sustainable and inclusive futures. Thus, this paper aims to explore how ethical leadership and policy advocacy function as interdependent forces in steering educational institutions toward sustainability. It theorizes that ethical leadership serves as the moral compass, while policy advocacy provides the structural engine to institutionalize change.

The discussion is intended for education policymakers, school leaders, academic researchers, and sustainability advocates seeking to embed long-term, values-driven strategies into education systems.



**Figure 1: Proposed Framework**

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Ethical Leadership in Educational Contexts**

Ethical leadership in education has increasingly become the focus of school governance and school reform discourse. Ethical leadership describes the practice of leadership that is grounded in ethical principles, such as honesty, fairness, accountability, and respect for others (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Ethical leaders do not just impose rules; they promote trust and commitment by exemplifying ethical behavior and creating ethical climates in their institutions.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) brought forward the idea of the "multiple ethical paradigms" approach that consists of the ethics of justice, care, critique, and the profession. The educational leaders have to weigh these paradigms many times in making decisions. For instance, in a case of expelling a student, an ethical leader has to balance justice (school policy), care (the context of the student), critique (systemic injustices), and professional duty. In addition, Starratt (2005) emphasized that ethical leadership involves three dimensions: ethical self-leadership (personal values), ethical leadership of others (community and stakeholder relationships), and ethical leadership of the organization (culture and policies). Ethical leadership becomes particularly crucial in promoting equity, especially for marginalized groups, thereby contributing to a socially sustainable learning environment.

A notable example is Finland's education system, where school leaders are trained extensively in ethical and inclusive decision-making. Finnish principals emphasize trust, teacher autonomy, and equity, contributing to a high-performing and socially cohesive system (Sahlberg, 2011). These values have helped Finland consistently rank among the top in global education indexes while promoting student well-being and social equity.

### **2.2 Sustainable Education Management**

Sustainability in education has been defined by UNESCO (2017) as a process that empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability, and social equity. Sustainable education management extends this concept to the organizational and policy levels—embedding sustainability into the structure, curriculum, infrastructure, and governance of educational institutions.

Sterling (2010) and Tilbury (2011) highlight the need for systemic transformation to achieve sustainability in education. This transformation includes curriculum reform (integrating ESD principles), participatory governance, environmentally responsible operations (e.g., energy and waste management), and engagement with the broader community.

Sustainable management also includes intergenerational responsibility—ensuring that current educational practices do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their learning needs.

This requires a long-term vision, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and dynamic leadership capable of navigating ethical and political complexities.

### **2.3 The Role of Policy Advocacy**

Policy advocacy for education is a conscious effort to affect policy making, adoption, or enactment for the purpose of bringing about particular educational results. It becomes especially valuable in promoting sustainable education, since most changes for sustainability involve movement in priorities for funding, curriculum standards, systems of accreditation, and mechanisms for accountability (Anderson, 2009).

Cooper et al. (2015) differentiate between technical and transformational advocacy. Whereas the former involves incremental adjustments to current systems, transformational advocacy confronts system-level inequities and advances more profound reforms. For instance, calling for climate education or inclusive access within national curricula represents a transformational agenda. Educational administrators, community groups, NGOs, and university researchers can all advocate using different approaches: coalition-building, research dissemination, lobbying, and public awareness campaigns. By connecting ethical values to policy objectives, advocacy ensures that sustainability becomes integrated into institutional and national education agendas.

A powerful example of advocacy-driven reform is seen in the "Teach the Future" campaign in the UK, where students and educators successfully lobbied for climate change to be more prominently featured in the national curriculum. The campaign used petitions, parliamentary engagement, and youth mobilization to influence government policy, reflecting how values-driven advocacy can yield structural change (Teach the Future, 2020).

### **2.4 Intersections of Ethics, Advocacy, and Sustainability**

The relationship between ethical leadership and policy advocacy is deeply synergistic. Ethical leadership ensures that advocacy efforts are grounded in moral purpose and social justice, while policy advocacy provides the structural pathways for scaling ethical practices across systems. Together, they reinforce the institutional and societal commitment to sustainable development in education.

Furthermore, this intersection enables educational leaders to confront systemic barriers such as inequitable resource allocation, exclusionary policies, and short-term political agendas. It allows for a values-driven, participatory, and action-oriented approach to managing educational institutions sustainably (Bush, 2020; Sterling, 2010).

## **3. DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 Key Success Factors**

Several key success factors have been identified that facilitate the effective integration of ethical

leadership and policy advocacy in sustainable education management:

### ***3.1.1 Visionary and Reflective Leadership***

A strong and clear ethical vision is a fundamental success factor. Leaders must not only articulate a compelling narrative about the future but must also reflect continuously on their decisions, actions, and institutional impact (Northouse, 2019). This reflective practice helps align daily management with long-term sustainability goals.

### ***3.1.2 Participatory Governance and Community Engagement***

Inclusive decision-making processes that involve teachers, students, parents, and community members enhance legitimacy and buy-in for sustainability initiatives. Participatory governance fosters shared responsibility, local ownership, and culturally relevant solutions, all of which are essential for long-term success (Starratt, 2005).

### ***3.1.3 Data-Driven Advocacy***

Successful policy advocacy relies on evidence. Leaders and advocates must use data on student outcomes, environmental impacts, equity indicators, and institutional performance to make compelling cases for reform. Evidence-based advocacy increases credibility and influences policymakers more effectively (Cooper et al., 2015).

### ***3.1.4 Policy Alignment and Institutional Support***

Sustainability efforts thrive in environments where institutional policies are coherent, supportive, and aligned across all levels. Internal alignment (within schools or universities) and external alignment (with national policies and international frameworks like the SDGs) provide structural support for ethical leadership and advocacy efforts (UNESCO, 2017).

### ***3.1.5 Continuous Professional Development***

Ongoing professional learning opportunities in ethics, sustainability, leadership, and advocacy are essential. Such programs should be context-sensitive and interdisciplinary, empowering leaders to respond to changing challenges while staying rooted in ethical principles.

## **3.2 Key Challenges**

### ***3.2.1 Political and Policy Instability***

One of the most significant challenges is the lack of policy continuity. Governments often change educational priorities with new administrations, disrupting long-term sustainability efforts.

Leaders who advocate for sustainable policies may find their efforts overturned due to political interference or shifting agendas (Lingard & Rizvi, 2010).

### ***3.2.2 Ethical Relativism and Cultural Diversity***

Ethical leadership is often complicated by cultural diversity. Values such as autonomy, justice, and respect may be interpreted differently across cultural contexts. Leaders must navigate this ethical

pluralism while maintaining universal sustainability principles (Starratt, 2005).

### ***3.2.3 Capacity and Training Deficits***

Many educational leaders lack formal training in both ethics and advocacy. Professional development programs often focus on administrative or instructional skills rather than preparing leaders for moral dilemmas or political engagement (Bush, 2020). This limits their ability to advocate effectively for sustainable reforms.

### ***3.2.4 Resource Inequities***

Sustainability often requires investment—in infrastructure, curriculum reform, teacher training, etc.—but many schools, especially in low-income regions, face severe resource constraints. Without adequate funding, ethical and sustainable initiatives may remain theoretical ideals rather than practical realities (UNESCO, 2017).

## **3.3 Future Prospects and Strategic Pathways**

### ***3.3.1 Ethical Leadership Development***

There is an urgent need to redesign leadership training programs to include ethics, social justice, and sustainability. Such programs should encourage reflective practice, scenario-based learning, and mentorship opportunities (Northouse, 2019).

### ***3.3.2 Policy Advocacy Platforms***

Educators should be trained and encouraged to participate in policy networks and platforms that influence education policy. Creating opportunities for collaborative policy dialogues among stakeholders can amplify ethical and sustainable agendas (Cooper et al., 2015).

### ***3.3.3 Institutionalizing Sustainability***

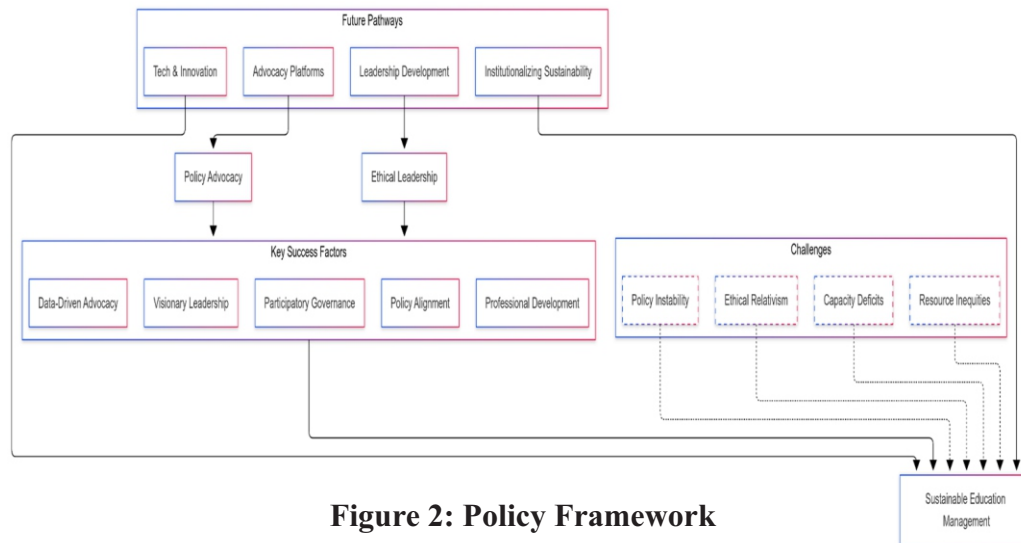
Institutions must embed sustainability in their core missions. This includes establishing sustainability offices, green campus initiatives, inclusive governance frameworks, and sustainability indicators in performance evaluations (Sterling, 2010).

### ***3.3.4 Leveraging Technology and Innovation***

Digital platforms can play a powerful role in advancing both ethical leadership and advocacy. Leaders can use social media, webinars, and open-access platforms to share knowledge, mobilize communities, and influence public opinion on sustainable education.

In Kerala, India, the state government collaborated with school leaders to implement the "Haritha Vidyalayam" (Green Schools) program. This initiative, combining ethical commitments to environmental stewardship with formal policy mandates, led to over 10,000 schools adopting sustainability practices such as rainwater harvesting, organic gardens, and waste segregation (Kerala Education Dept., 2019). It demonstrates how the synergy of ethical leadership and advocacy leads to institutionalized sustainability.





**Figure 2: Policy Framework**

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The demand for sustainable education management is more urgent than ever in today's rapidly changing world. Schools are not merely institutions that transfer intellectual knowledge; they are key drivers of social transformation, environmental stewardship, and economic justice. In the midst of this intricate web, moral leadership and policy advocacy become drivers of change. Ethical leadership generates a culture of integrity, inclusion, and responsibility. It is essential to trust building, the development of moral courage, and leading institutions in periods of uncertainty. Policy advocacy, on the other hand, is an active means for spreading these values institution wide—developing support, influencing legislation, and incorporating sustainability principles into policy frameworks.

The review and discussion highlight that sustainability cannot be produced through personal initiative. Instead, it requires a collective, systematic action that combines ethical vision with strategic action. While formidable obstacles exist—ranging from political resistance to resource constraints—the presence of critical success factors such as visionary leadership, participatory government, and evidence-based advocacy can create the conditions for real transformation. Ultimately, ethical leadership and policy advocacy are not different tracks but a set of reinforcing forces. As such, combined they offer an influential model of schools as driving engines of sustainability—ethic-oriented, meaning-directed, and committed to well-being of human and planet.

#### 5. FUTURE SCOPE

The convergence of ethical leadership and policy advocacy in sustainable education management opens numerous avenues for further research, innovation, and implementation. Future work can expand upon the following areas:

### **5.1 Empirical Validation of Conceptual Models**

While this paper presents a conceptual framework, future studies could conduct empirical research to test the effectiveness of ethical leadership and advocacy interventions in diverse educational contexts. Longitudinal and comparative case studies could provide insights into best practices and scalable models.

### **5.2 Development of Ethics-Based Leadership Training Modules**

There is a growing need for professional development programs that integrate ethics, sustainability, and policy advocacy. Future initiatives should focus on designing, piloting, and evaluating such training modules for educational leaders at all levels.

### **5.3 Policy Monitoring and Impact Assessment**

Further research could explore how policies advocated by ethical leaders are implemented on the ground. Investigating the alignment (or misalignment) between policy intent and practice can help refine advocacy strategies and inform more responsive policymaking.

### **5.4 Cross-Cultural and Global Perspectives**

Given the cultural diversity in ethical interpretations and policy processes, cross-cultural research can deepen our understanding of how ethical leadership and advocacy are practiced in various educational systems. Such studies can support the development of globally informed yet locally sensitive frameworks.

### **5.5 Technological Innovation in Advocacy and Leadership**

Digital platforms, data analytics, and AI tools offer promising opportunities for ethical leadership development and policy engagement. Exploring how technology can enhance transparency, participation, and advocacy effectiveness is a critical area for future exploration.

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