Ethical Leadership in the Field of Education in Europe: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore the characteristics of ethical leadership in in the field of education in Europe. In an era, when there are no transcendental principles and universally accepted values and, within organizations, a mainly "situational" and "procedural" ethics has been developed (Voyé, 1999), educational mission, goals and procedures are changing. Thus, it could be extremely challenging to explore aspects of educational leadership that are not considered necessarily self-evident, maintaining at the same time a critical and skeptical attitude regarding power relations and the promotion of moral values and democratic processes at school. The present research was carried out in Greece, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, France and Spain and, the sample consisted of 451 primary and secondary education teachers. The findings of this research demonstrated that, according to teachers' perceptions, principals at schools- in carrying out their duties- have to develop responsibility and moral values so as not to deviate from the main goals of education, which are system's eudaimonia through the all-round development of the future citizens of a democratic society (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). More specifically, teachers from all participating countries affirmed that educational leaders put the emphasis– to a great extend- on core values such as honesty, sincerity, integrity, altruism, trust, rewarding ethical contribution and moral responsibility.

Keywords: ethical leadership, moral values, educational leader's ethical characteristics

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Introduction

Litterature Review

Ethical Leadership Characteristics

The role of leadership could be described as the encouragement of cooperation (Greenberg &Baron, 2013) as well as the contribution to the greater common good of their organization, beyond narrowly understood self-interest (Tsoukas, 2004). Interestingly, behaviors and types of exercising leadership are considered to be vital for establishing ethical standards in modern organizations which have to respond to diverse and multi-level challenges. This requires from the part of the leader to have the willingness and the ability to fundamentally transform, on the one hand, the way organizational members perceive themselves and, on the other hand, the organization's interaction with the wider context, fostering significant changes at the level of organizational learning as well as at the level of collaboration and communication.

Research in the field shows that, during the decision-making process, leaders must have strong moral values (Collins, & Porras,1994). Values are the compass in one's life, guiding one's action, behavior and targets (Schwartz, 2007; Schwartz, 1992). Ethical leadership is defined as an ethically correct behavior that is promoted and reinforced through meaningful leader-subordinate communication (Brown, Trevino & Harrison, 2004), while it focuses on the concept of humanity and justice with the aim of organization's sustainability (Eissenbeiss, 2012). Scholars argue that, in the workplace, leader's ethics and integrity significantly affect employees' performance, prompting them to develop attitudes and behaviors beyond the typical requirements of their role (Nikolic & Halvorsen, 2017; Warr, 2007).

Undoubtedly, in all forms of leadership, there is always a tension between personal & collective goals (von Hippel, Ronay, & Maddux, 2016). In any case, leadership must balance countervailing forces and relationships, create conditions for organization members' development and, serve the "common good" by incorporating the ethical dimension into leaders' practices (Tsoukas, 2004).

Given that there may exist a "dark side" even in charismatic and transformational leaders (Brown & Mitchell, 2010), we assume that, a value-based leadership could serve as an "antidote" to the absence of ethical constructs which may lead to self-serving, toxic (Watt, Javidi, & Normore, 2015), unethical, immoral, narcissistic (Higgs, 2009; Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006), irresponsible, ineffective (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Trevino, Hartman & Brown, 2000), or catastrophic leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999).

According to ethical leadership models deriving from international research, it appears that, central to the topic of ethical leadership are fundamental traits such as the creation of ethical standards (Lee & Cheng, 2011) as well as integrity,

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responsibility and moral vigilance (Memiyanti, Putera, & Salleh, 2010). From their part, Spangenberg & Theron (2005), identify six important dimensions of ethical leadership: the creation of ethical vision, cultivation of a culture encouraging the creation of moral behavior, ethical guidance, encouragement of moral behavior, ethical motivation, rewarding, promotion of members' contribution to ethical issues within the organization. Ethical leaders possess integrity, values, set an ethical example and seek moral behavior from their subordinates, giving them opportunities for meaningful work (Nikolic & Halvorsen, 2017 · Brown & Trevino, 2014 · Eisenbeiss, 2012). Furthermore, recent research stresses that ethical leadership is bound to reduce workplace deviance and counterproductive behavior (Den Hartog; Belschak, 2012; Mayer et al., 2010; Moore et al., 2018) and promotes subordinates' moral engagement (Trevino, den Nieuwenboer, Kish-Gephart, 2014), while, it is positively related to followers' positive behavior at work, through prosocial motivation (Li & Bao, 2019).

Under this prism, effectiveness (personal & organizational) depends significantly on fundamental principles that govern human relationships and human organizations. These principles are unchanging over time and interwoven with our society (Covey, 2001) and, act as a 'compass', pointing the way to achieving goals, ensuring that we are moving towards the right direction. More precisely, in the workplace, effectiveness presupposes, above all, the ability of the leader to create a vision and to transmit it, maintaining a kind of creative tension in his/her subordinates that motivates them to self-improvement and self-fulfillment. *Without the dream - the deeper meaning that guides our actions - there is no reason to mobilize in order to do more than our contractual obligations provide* (Tsoukas, 2004:79).

Ethical Leadership at School in Europe: Is It Possible?

Educational leadership practices can be understood as by-products of wider processes transforming knowledge, organisational functioning and learners' subjectivities in fundamental ways (Moore, Mayer, Chiang, Crossley, Karlesky, & Birth, 2018). Murphy (2010) argues that educational leadership practices deviate significantly from theoretical models of leadership, making it imperative to open the dialogue on educational leadership based on three fundamental dimensions of principal's role: as moral supervisor & coordinator of school life, as educator and, as creator of an open learning community, ensuring the conditions of safety, equality, justice and collective decision-making. According to Starratt (2017), principals should cultivate moral values and develop, firstly, responsibility as individuals and as education executives, then, responsibility towards teachers, higher administrative hierarchy and, society and, finally, responsibility for creating and maintaining authentic relationships and a healthy organizational climate. According to the researcher, principals should cultivate three core dimensions/virtues of ethical leadership: the virtue of authenticity, the virtue of presence, and the virtue of responsibility.

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Based on the above, we can assume the importance of developing traits and skills of ethical leadership in the field of education. These characteristics may encourage the awakening of moral consciousness and the development of a value system, allowing school members to gradually emancipate themselves, gain control over their life as well as to distance themselves from uncritical identification and passive acceptance of others' expectations. Moreover, these traits could foster one to chart one's own course of action with responsibility and self-awareness, contributing at the same time to system's eudaimonia (collective good) (Papaloi, 2020). Hence, a school leader should have the willingness for continuous development while he/ she has to break with old ways of thinking, with habits, patterns and examples that are outdated and ineffective and do not permit walk safely in a constantly changing environment. Undoubtedly, the key to personal success lies in "building" on solid foundations, attempting to change first from within and, investing in the establishment of harmony and maturity on a personal and interpersonal level (Covey, 2001). Ethical leadership requires commitment to ethical roles, ethical responsibility, adherence to ethical rules and standards, ethical strategy, awareness, altruism, honesty, empathy, authenticity, trust, motivation to co-produce, while involving all members in organizational processes.

Nevertheless, the question is, whether in the field of education, where uniformity and stability are promoted so that everyone complies with administrative directives (Papaloi, Dimopoulos, Koutsambelas, 2021), is possible for the school leader to invest on the ethical aspects of leadership, gain acceptance by the school community and achieve high levels of school's efficiency.

In our society, knowledge should happen among and between people as part of a social construction with a critical side and should be seen as something that includes complex perspectives, reduces insecurity, promotes pluralism, invests on both personal and organisational level and is sensitive to local values and culture (Samier, 2003). Moreover, school as an institution should be conceptualized as a "learning organization" adapting to a constantly changing environment rather than a bureaucratic body pursuing predefined goals set by a central administration (Papaloi, Dimopoulos, Koutsambelas, 2021). Thus, in order to depict educational leadership trends in Europe, one has to place oneself in a wider context of discussion regarding human existence, knowledge and school success and, explore leadership dimensions beyond traditional standards and styles.

Based on the aforementioned assumptions, and, given that in Europe, there are two distinct poles along the centralization-decentralization continuum, analyzing different educational realities as far as ethical leadership is concerned, could shed light to educational leaders' priorities as well as to teachers' aspirations throughout Europe.

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Methodology

Scope- Research Questions- Methodological Choices

Studies to date have focused mostly on the composite constructs of ethical and transformational leadership without putting the emphasis on the individual moral leadership behaviors that are most dominant influencers of an effective leader. The scope of this research is to identify the individual ethical leadership attributes and behaviors that contribute to a greater understanding of educational leadership's effectiveness in Europe. More specifically, this study analyses the way teachers in Europe affirm that they perceive ethical leadership traits. In addition, it attempts to compare teachers' perception of ethical leadership behavior among different European countries. Therefore, our research questions are as following:

- What are the main ethical leadership traits perceived by teachers as the most dominant influencers of an effective school leader?
- To what extend school leaders' behavior is perceived as moral by teachers?
- Do teachers from different European countries affirm that they perceive ethical leadership in the same way?

We conducted quantitative research along 6 European countries (Greece, Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Spain). More specifically, our sample consisted of 451 teachers (243 from Greece and 208 from other European countries). Participants' age ranged from 23 years old to 58+, they worked at primary and secondary schools, in urban/semi-urban and rural regions and, their professional experience ranged from 1year to 30+years of service.

Our questionnaire was based on the model conceptualized by Mitropoulou, Tsaoussis, Xanthopoulou, Petridis (2014) on ethical leadership traits. The authors, after having systematically reviewed international bibliography concerning ethical leadership, concluded in a model comprising 27 traits/ dimensions of ethical leadership as following: Honesty, Sincerity, Integrity, Rewarding Ethical Contribution, Altruism, Ethical Strategy, Clarification of ethical roles, Model of Moral Behavior, Humility/ Lowiness, Green Policy Implementations, Ethical Self-Control, Ethical Vision, Moral responsibility, Ethical vigilance, Ethical Possibility, Development of Ethical Vision, Sharing authority, Development of Ethical Culture, Ethical encouragement, Promotion of ethical education, Ethical Determination/Decisiveness, Collaboration, Ethical Evaluation, Ethical influence of Stakeholders, Trust, Ethical Insight, Ethical Guidance.

In Greece, questionnaires in Greek language were distributed via Google Forms to several Education Offices throughout the country. Participants from the other European countries completed the questionnaire in English via PROLIFIC which is considered to be a very reliable platform among social researchers worldwide.

Data from the two questionnaires were analyzed with SPSS and our primordial concern was to proceed to the necessary reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha ,963 for the English questionnaire and ,984 for the Greek questionnaire respectively).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The sample

In total, 243 questionnaires were collected from Greece whereas, 208 questionnaires were completed (out of 303 questionnaires which were distributed via PROLIFIC) by teachers working in Great Britain, Spain, Italy, Germany and France as following:

		Greece		Other European Countries	
		Frequency	Valid Percent %	Frequency	Valid Percent %
Valid		Greece 243	100,0	Italy 23	11,1
				Spain 26	12,6
				France 8	3,9
				Germany 13	6,3
				Great Britain 137	66,2
	Total			207	100,0
Missing	System			1	
Total		243	100,0	208	

Gender

In the Greek sample, women represented the 67.5% (N=164), while men represented the 32.5% (N=79). Respectively, from our European sample, the 65,4% (N=136) consisted of women, while the 34.6% (N=72) of men. This proportion is explained by the fact that education is a professional field mostly preferred by women.

		Greece		Other European Countries	
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	male	146	61,1	72	34,6
	female	93	38,9	136	65,4

	Total	239	100,0	208	100,0
Missing	System	4			
Total		243		208	

Age

As far as the age is concerned, 45.9% of the Greek teachers (N=111) were 47-57 years old, 14.9% were 58 years old and above(N=36), 12% (N=30) were 23-35 years old, 27.3% (N=66) were 36-46 years old.

The majority (51.4%) of teachers from other European countries were 23-35 years old (N=107), 31.3% (N=65) were 36-46 years old, 13.5% (N=28) were 47-57 years old, while only the 3.8% of the sample (N=8) were 58 years old and above.

		Greece		Other European Countries	
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	23-35 ys	30	12%	107	51,4
	36-46 ys	66	27.3%	65	31,3
	47-57 ys	111	45.9%	28	13,5
	58+ ys	36	14.9%	8	3,8
	Total	243	100,0	208	100,0

Professional Experience

Regarding Greek sample's professional experience, 87 teachers (36%) had 11-20 years' professional experience, 80 (33.1%) had 21-30 years of total professional experience in education, 40 participants (16.5%) had a total professional experience of 1-10 years, while 35 (14.5%) had 31 years and above.

In comparison with data from other European countries, there exist some differences. Teachers with a total professional experience of 1-10 years, represented the 65,4% (N=134), 23.9% (N=49) had 11-20 years, 7.8% (N=16) had 21-30 years of total professional experience in education, while only 6 teachers (2.9%) had 31 years and above.

		Greece		Other European Countries	
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	1-10 ys	40	16,5	134	65,4
	11-20 ys	87	36,0	49	23,9
	21-30 ys	80	33,1	16	7,8
	31+ ys	35	14,5	6	2,9
	Total	242	100,0	205	100,0
Missing	System	1		3	
Total		243		208	

Type of educational Institution

The 50.2% of the Greek sample (N=122) worked at primary schools and 49.8% (N=121) worked at secondary schools (Gymnasium and Lyceum). On the other hand, the majority of the European participants (61.8%-N=128) worked at primary schools, while the 38.2% (N=79) at secondary schools.

		Greece		Other European Countries	
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid		Primary school-122	59,8	Primary school- 79	38,2
		Secondary school-Gymnasium-66	27,2%	Secondary school-128	61,8
		Secondary school-Lyceum-55	22,6%	207	100,0
	Total				
Missing	System			1	
Total		243	100,0	208	

School Location

As far as the school location is concerned, the 59.8% (N=144) of the Greek sample worked at schools in urban areas, 21.2% (N=51) in semi-urban areas, and, 19.1% (N=46) in rural areas or islands. Respectively, the (47,3%) of the participants from

other countries taught at schools in urban areas (N=98), 91 teachers (44%) in semi-urban areas and, 18 teachers (8.7%) in rural/island areas.

		Greece		Other European Countries	
		Frequency	Valid Percent	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Urban area	144	59,8	98	47,3
	Semi-urban area	51	21,2	91	44,0
	Rural area/ islands	46	19,1	18	8,7
	Total	241	100,0	207	100,0
Missing	System	2		1	
Total		243		208	

Ethical leadership characteristics

Teachers' points in both questionnaires (English & Greek) revealed the importance attached by the sample to almost all dimensions of ethical leadership. More specifically, in Greece the most highly scored traits were honesty (M=4,35), sincerity (M=4,30), integrity (M=4,30), altruism ((M=4,16), trust (M=4,09), rewarding ethical contribution (M=4,03) and moral responsibility (M=4,03), whereas, in almost all other ethical traits M ranged from 3,62 to 3,98. In this point, it seems that the less scored traits were ethical guidance (M=3,25), promotion of ethical education (M=3,32), green policy implementation (M=3,43), ethical vision (3,45) and ethical evaluation (M=3,48). On the other hand, the English questionnaire revealed also an interest of the sample on integrity (M=4,09), honesty (M=4,03), sincerity (M=4,03). All other statements are highly scored (M ranges from 3,51 to 3,93), with the exception of "green policy implementation" which was the less scored trait (M=3,43).

	Greece		Other European Countries	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
1. Honesty	4,35	,951	4,03	,947
2. Sincerity	4,30	1,005	4,03	,965

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3. Integrity	4,30	1,004	4,09	1,001
4. Rewarding Ethical Contribution	4,03	1,109	3,73	1,107
5. Altruism	4,16	1,057	3,93	1,077
6. Ethical Strategy	3,91	1,164	3,86	1,016
7. Clarification of ethical roles	3,98	1,155	3,55	1,098
8. Model of Moral Behavior	3,96	1,234	3,75	1,087
9. Humility/lowiness	3,95	1,249	3,73	1,142
10. Green Policy Implementations	3,40	1,239	3,43	1,118
11. Ethical Self-Control	3,71	1,168	3,87	1,028
12. Ethical Vision	3,45	1,288	3,66	1,094
13. Moral responsibility	4,03	1,163	3,90	1,086
14. Ethical vigilance	3,79	1,198	3,86	1,039
15. Ethical Possibility	3,83	1,129	3,78	,978
16. Development of Ethical Vision	3,62	1,189	3,72	1,050
17. Sharing authority	3,73	1,220	3,62	1,142
18. Development of Ethical Culture	3,64	1,278	3,52	1,194
19. Ethical encouragement	3,78	1,262	3,66	1,131
20. Promotion of ethical education	3,32	1,350	3,50	1,200
21. Ethical Determination/Decisiveness	3,77	1,257	3,93	1,049
22. Collaboration	3,77	1,270	3,64	1,070
23. Ethical Evaluation	3,48	1,305	3,57	1,047
24. Ethical influence of Stakeholders	3,66	1,217	3,68	1,034
25. Trust	4,09	1,194	3,89	1,076
26. Ethical Insight	3,86	1,217	3,78	1,028
27. Ethical Guidance	3,25	1,334	3,51	1,138

Ethical leadership characteristics and demographic data: correlations

With the view to explore whether demographic data affected teachers' perceptions of ethical leadership dimensions, we conducted tests of independent samples (t-test) for correlations between gender and ethical traits as well as analysis of variance (ANOVA) for correlations between age/ professional experience/ type of educational institution and ethical traits.

The tests of independent samples (t-test) and technique of analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a great interdependence between all demographic data and ethical traits, as far as the English questionnaire is concerned. Data analysis of the Greek questionnaire, allowed us to conclude that, the variables of age, years of service, and school location did not reveal any statistically significant difference as far as perceptions of ethical leadership in Greek schools are concerned. However, tests of independent samples (t-test) and technique of analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed statistically significant differences with reference to the variables of participants' gender and educational institution. In more details, there existed a statistically significant difference in male teachers' perceptions compared to female teachers' perceptions. This difference was statistically significant (t=2.806, df=241, p=0.001<0.05). Moreover, ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in teachers' perceptions according to their educational institution (F2.240=3.266, p=0.040<0.05). Specifically, LSD post hoc test showed that teachers of primary school perceived to a great extend their principal's ethical traits, compared to those working at a secondary school-Lyceum, or those working at a secondary school- gymnasium.

Individual and school demographic characteristics	Greece	Other European Countries
	ethical leadership test/F-test	ethical leadership test/F-test
Gender	t=2.806, df=241, p=0.001<0.05*	t=-1.022, df=206, p=0.977>0.05
Age	F3.238=0.881, p=0.451>0.05	F3.204=1.135, p=0.336>0.05
Years of service	F3.238=0.635, p=0.593>0.05	F3.201=0.278, p=0.841>0.05
Educational institution	F2.240=3.266, p=0.040<0.05*	t=0.266, df=205, p=0.577>0.05
School location	F2.238=0.428, p=0.652>0.05	F2.204=1.073, p=0.344>0.05
	*p=<0.05	

Discussion/ Conclusion

Ethics has been one of the most favorite topics of discussion by philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus while, with a view to define effective leadership, many contemporary scholars focus on identifying ethical aspects of different leadership styles (Van Wart, 2014).

The findings of this research regarding ethical leadership characteristics at school in Europe, in which participated 451 teachers from Greece, Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy and Spain demonstrated that educational leaders in Europe have developed to a great extend the ethical dimension at the execution of their duties, putting the emphasis on fundamental ethical characteristics such as integrity, honesty and sincerity.

On a first level, regarding our sample, it appears that it was well equilibrated between Greece and other European countries while, at the same time, the "north" and the "south" of Europe were equally represented. In both questionnaires, the sample appeared to have almost the same characteristics as far as gender, is concerned (women represented the majority). Undoubtedly, this similarity is explained by the fact that the field of education is mostly preferred by women. Moreover, there existed some similarities regarding school location: a great percentage of our sample (both in Greece and in other European countries) worked at urban areas. On the other hand, it appears that there existed as well some differences as far as age, professional experience and type of educational institution are concerned. In Greece, middle aged and experienced teachers were more motivated to answer the questionnaire whereas, the English questionnaire was mostly completed by young teachers with little professional experience. In addition, the majority of Greek teachers worked at primary schools while, the majority of the participants from other European countries worked at secondary schools.

As far as teachers' perceptions of ethical leadership characteristics are concerned, data comparative analysis revealed major similarities and slight differences among teachers, independently of their workplace and, this finding could be the base for further implications concerning the forms of knowledge which are utilized in the action field throughout Europe. More specifically, descriptive analysis demonstrated that, school leaders have developed ethical leadership dimensions such as honest, sincerity, integrity, altruism, trust, rewarding ethical contribution and moral responsibility. Respectively, in GB, Germany, Italy, France and Spain our sample affirmed that their principals possessed ethical traits such as integrity, honesty and sincerity. In both questionnaires are highly scored leaders' attributes such as ethical strategy, clarification of ethical roles, model of moral behavior, humility/ lowiness, ethical self-control, moral responsibility, ethical vigilance, ethical possibility, sharing authority, development of ethical culture, ethical encouragement, ethical determination/decisiveness, collaboration, ethical influence of stakeholders, and, ethical insight. The less scored item in both questionnaires was the "green policy

implementation" trait. Moreover, in Greek questionnaire, ethical guidance, promotion of ethical education, ethical vision and ethical evaluation were among the less assessed. In Greece, correlations between ethical traits and demographic data revealed a statistical significance between ethical traits with gender and type of educational establishment whereas, no statistically significant correlation was found in the other European countries.

Interestingly, in all participating European countries, school units are depicted by teachers as dynamic systems, focusing on organizational efficiency and well-being rather than bureaucratic bodies pursuing predefined goals set by a central administration. From their part, school leaders seem to act beyond the concrete standards of their institutional role and place themselves in a wider context of discussion regarding human existence, knowledge and school success, exploring leadership dimensions that are interwoven with ethical norms, values and an intense sense of moral responsibility. Hence, they appear to have both the managerial knowledge and the ethical characteristics to face emerging aspects of complexity that push both decision makers and practitioners to prioritize the ethical role school should play in a constantly changing environment. In our opinion, this is a rather optimistic finding since, according to Covey (2001), if we let economic systems to operate without any moral foundation and without continuous education, we will soon create an amoral if not immoral, society.

Overall, these results appear to be consistent with what has been found in previous researches. The research conducted by Mitropoulou, Tsaoussis, Xanthopoulou & Petridis (2014) highlighted three fundamental dimensions of ethical leadership: cooperation, rewarding of behavior and trust. Moreover, teachers' perception of ethical leadership's traits is broadly in accordance with other studies that underline the importance of leader's capacity to adopt new roles and create a strong frame of reference, focusing on fair practices (Vakola & Nicolaou, 2012), establishing trust with teachers (Dimitriou, 2015), re-defining teachers' role and promoting teachers' self-mastery (Matsaggouras, 2004).

The findings of this research suggest that we can be optimistic about the cultivation of ethical leadership practices in the field of education in Europe. The great importance attached by teachers on principal's moral attributes and values may further enlighten school reality and lead to a broader conceptualization of ethical leadership as a catalyst of school effectiveness and prosperity, preventing negative consequences from irresponsible and toxic behaviors.

Limitations

This research, exploring dimensions of ethical leadership in education in 6 European countries, is not without limitations nor does it provide a complete understanding of this social phenomenon. A further analysis of ethical leadership characteristics with ethical climate and teachers' moral engagement could enlighten different aspects of

school reality as well as enhance our awareness about school success and organisational well-being. Moreover, as social researchers, we have to admit that there always exist certain limitations related to the participants' personal way of interpreting the questions as well as participants' tendency to comply with socially accepted answers (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). Hence, qualitative methods such as interviews with teachers and principals in more European countries could enrich our understanding regarding the impact of ethical leadership practices both on leaders and teachers, throughout Europe.

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