



The Pathology of Omission: Leadership's Role in Corruption Prevention in the Education Sector

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Received: 20 Aug 2026; Accepted: 22 Aug 2026; Published: 28 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This paper examines the role of leadership in corruption prevention in the education sector through the lenses of transformational and transactional leadership characteristics. It investigates whether school leadership matters in anti-corruption drives and explores the correlation between leadership style and levels of corruption.

Design/methodology/approach: The study employs a mixed-methods, single case-study design on one private high school in Mutoko District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe. Primary data included in the study were obtained from a teacher questionnaire ($n = 30$), four key informant interviews, two focus group discussions and triangulated by documentary analysis of relationship between leadership and corruption in five developing countries (Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and South Africa).

Findings: This study revealed a significant positive relationship between transformational leadership's attributes and perceived reduction of corruption ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$) and a relatively low correlation for transactional leadership only ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$). Leadership inaction, or the "pathology of omission" as it was described here, was shown to be a key factor that enabled corruption and ethical modelling a key factor that was shown to act as an antidote to it.

Originality/value: The paper introduces the Ethical Leadership- Accountability (ELA) Framework, a diagnostic and prescriptive approach that integrates ethical leadership behaviour with accountability frameworks and institutional context and its connection to educational governance corruption outcomes. The framework will be useful to school leaders, policy makers, teacher training institutions and anti-corruption practitioners in resource-constrained settings.

Keywords: Transformational leadership; transactional leadership; corruption prevention; education sector; ethical leadership; sustainable educational governance; pathology of omission

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is the fulcrum upon which anti-corruption initiatives in any given nation pivot. In particular, the education sector is at a greater risk from debilitating effects of corruption as it is the cradle of human capital development. Corruption thrives in the absence of leadership and it abates with the presence of good leadership. This is the basic premise of the current study on the pathophysiology of inaction – a lack of leadership action that is decisive when it comes to fighting corruption in educational institutions.

The role of leadership in corruption prevention has got an increasing recognition in the developing countries. Effective systems are needed to manage public projects and to ensure their proper use, a gesture of patriotism which also makes future leaders better equipped to shun corruption, as stated by one of the Tanzanian ministers (Daily News Tanzania, 2025). Likewise, in Nigeria, research has been conducted on how poor

leadership in the school system contributes to covetousness and corruption that negatively affects the quality of education and the country's development (Adeoye et al., 2023).

Despite the increased awareness, empirical scholarship that connects particular forms of leadership to actual corruption results in Basic-education institutions in Africa is limited and virtually non-existent in the context of Private-education institutions in the Southern African region. Existing literature largely confines itself to treating leadership and corruption as co-occurring phenomena, rather than as interacting phenomena and tests the association of the two phenomena separately - between leaders who lack leadership ability and corruption incidents and separately between leaders who are effective and corruption incidents - rather than within a single institutional context.

This paper addresses that gap by developing a measurable relationship between leadership and corruption from primary case-study data, compiling cross-national documentary evidence and proposing a framework capable of translating the association into actionable guidance for practice and policy. This paper delves into the significance of leadership in combating corruption in the education system by using the transformational and transactional leadership theories as a lens to analyse the subject. The study examines the significance of school leadership in anti-corruption efforts and the relationship between leadership style and the prevalence of corruption in one private high school in Mutoko District, Mashonaland East Province and five developing nations (Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and South Africa) based on a mixed methods case study and documentary analysis.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the research problem and questions; Sections 3, 4 and 5 present background, delimitations and theoretical framework; Section 6 presents conceptual model; Section 7 reviews comparative literature; Section 8 details methodology; Section 9, 10 and 11 present results, key findings and discussion; Section 12 introduces the Ethical Leadership–Accountability Framework; Section 13 concludes with recommendations.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Corruption in education is a serious infringement of the rights of learners and a major hindrance to sustainable development. Education systems in developing countries face significant challenges due to limited resources, inadequate infrastructure and institutional shortcomings, which further exacerbates the problem. Leadership in this context becomes a very important variable, not only as a force to resist corruption but also as a force to foster corruption.

The pathology of omission is expressed in various ways: irrelevance of ethical controls, lack of accountability systems as well as general acceptance of unethical practices and non-enforcement of proactive anti-corruption measures. Leadership lack of involvement creates the environment conducive to corruption, which results in the diversion of resources from educational purposes and negatively affects learning outcomes (Adeoye et al., 2023).

In the Mutoko District of Mashonaland East Province, there are issues of management of private schools. A recent case in which one of the traditional leaders attempted to interfere with parents and learners accessing a newly opened private boarding school, after he had been turned down by the school for his children to be enrolled free of charge, typifies how people abuse their authority when leaders are not held to account (NewsDay Zimbabwe, 2026). One commentator noted that a leader who is blocking the way for children attending school has given up the fundamental spirit of leadership (NewsDay Zimbabwe, 2026). The present study examines this vulnerability with a systematic approach, provocative of the localised episode here described, which may be a symptom of a more general governance problem: the lack of ethical boundaries at the top of an institution allows corrupt or exploitative practices to manifest and to root within.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:



1. Does the leadership of private and public schools matter in anti-corruption drives?
2. What correlation exists between leadership styles (transformational versus transactional) and corruption prevalence in educational institutions?
3. What factors enable or constrain effective anti-corruption leadership in schools?
4. What lessons can be drawn from documentary evidence across developing countries?
5. What framework can guide ethical leadership for corruption prevention in educational governance?

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Corruption in the Education Sector

Corruption in education comes in various forms such as embezzlement of school funds, irregularities during procurement, absenteeism of teachers, examination malpractices, nepotism in teacher recruitment and extortion of fees (Chibaya, 2025). Research in Zimbabwe has documented embezzlement in high schools, revealing that turbulence and multiple deprivation, characteristics of developing economies, fan corrupt practices even among personnel who understand their unethical nature (Chibaya, 2025). The persistence of corruption despite awareness of its immorality suggests that systemic factors, including leadership, play a determining role.

Leadership and Corruption in Developing Countries

The challenge of leadership in African educational contexts is distinctive. Many school leaders assume positions without prior training in ethical leadership or management (Bush and Oduro, 2006). Research reveals that in most African countries, the absence of school leadership training prior to taking up a leadership post carries serious ethical implications (Bush and Oduro, 2006). This creates a scenario of wholesale systemic decay in which under-prepared leaders are appointed to school leadership posts with no prior training and sometimes without having been effective teachers, yet are required to lead other teachers (Bush and Oduro, 2006, citing Lulat, 1988).

In this vacuum, unethical practices proliferate: neglect of teaching, extortion of school funds, sexual assault by teachers, absenteeism and late coming, phenomena that have flooded and often crippled the education system in countries such as Nigeria (Emu and Esu, 2011, cited in Bush and Oduro, 2006).

Transformational and Transactional Leadership

Transformational leadership is inclined towards inspiring and motivating followers to attain higher levels of performance by influencing their preconceived assumptions, values, emotions and beliefs (Ojeje et al., 2024). The four components of transformational leadership, idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration, create conditions conducive to ethical conduct and accountability (Bass, 1985).

Transactional leadership, on the other hand, is more about exchange between leader and followers and involves aspects such as supervision, organisation, and performance monitoring (Burns, 1978). Though transactional leadership can offer the necessary control and supervision, it can also be devoid of ethical principles and thus be ineffective in preventing corruption. This difference between the two styles is, therefore, not only a stylistic one but one that also has implications for governance outcomes.

Transformational leadership has a register of internalised values that makes it possible to build followers who behave ethically because they internalise the values and beliefs of the leader, including his or her vision of institutional integrity, transactional leadership has a register of external compliance, which deters misconduct only as long as monitoring is credible and present. If transactional oversight is not grounded in a "culture of ethics" that is established from the top, its deterrent effect is contingent and reversible, and the institution is



vulnerable, right when it is most lax and lax in precisely the areas whose oversight is most unclear, when an item is being purchased, when a staff member is being appointed, when fees are being collected. It is in these gaps that the pathology of omission sets in and it is the dynamics that the conceptual and empirical sections of this paper will attempt to test.

DELIMITATIONS AND SCOPE

This study is limited to one Private High School in Mutoko District, Mashonaland East Province in Zimbabwe as the study's main case study. A single case allows detailed analysis of the leadership dynamics and mechanisms of corruption prevention, which can lead to rich qualitative data collection using mixed methods. It deals with leadership practices and anti-corruption activities that span from 2020 to 2026, reflecting current issues and solutions.

The study is limited to the education sector and looks at leadership styles, prevalence of corruption, accountability systems. Documentary evidence was sourced from 5 countries of development (specifically Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and South Africa), which were purposively selected because of documented cases of linkage between leadership and corruption in education in these countries. Exclusion of Zimbabwe from Documentary Sources: To avoid the mixing of the primary Study with Zimbabwe, the study has excluded Zimbabwe documentary sources, but allowed for some comparative insights. The study is not statistically generalisable beyond the institution studied, but is an analytical generalisation of one case to test and refine the theoretical propositions developed about the relationship between leadership and corruption which may be investigated in larger-scale studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory, as articulated by Burns and developed by Bass, posits that leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for collective goals (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders exert influence through idealised influence (serving as role models), inspirational motivation (articulating compelling visions), intellectual stimulation (encouraging innovation and critical thinking) and individualised consideration (attending to followers' needs) (Bass, 1985).

In the anti-corruption context, transformational leadership creates conditions for ethical conduct by modelling integrity, fostering intrinsic motivation to act ethically and building trust. Research demonstrates that transformational leadership can produce an environment where followers exert their highest efforts to achieve success and that trust contributes to enriched performance and positive organisational citizenship behaviour (Ojeje et al., 2024, citing Boamah et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2017; Tabassi et al., 2017).

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory, as advanced by Bandura, suggests that leaders influence followers through modelling processes (Bandura, 1977). Followers observe leaders, learn what to do and what not to do and then act accordingly. Modelling by leaders can influence followers to be ethical or unethical, depending on the behaviours demonstrated (Bandura, 1977). The theory posits that, because of leaders' authority role and power to reward and punish, followers pay attention to and mimic leaders' behaviours, doing what is rewarded and avoiding what is punished within the organisation (Strathmore University, 2024).

Ethical Leadership Theory

Ethical leadership theory focuses on the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships and the promotion of such conduct to followers through communication, reinforcement and decision-making (Brown and Treviño, 2006). The theory emphasises that

ethical leaders are honest, caring and principled and that they make fair and balanced decisions (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Ethical leadership provides a counterpoint to corruption; the absence of ethical leadership has been shown to breed embezzlement, a critical concern for institutional governance (Chibaya, 2025).

Integration of the Theoretical Perspectives

While each theory illuminates a distinct facet of the leadership–corruption relationship, their explanatory power is strongest when read together. Transformational leadership theory explains why certain leadership behaviours orient an institution towards integrity; social learning theory explains the mechanism by which those behaviours propagate through the organisation via observation and imitation; and ethical leadership theory supplies the normative content, honesty, fairness, care, that determines whether what is modelled and imitated is, in fact, anti-corrupt. When considered in tandem, the three perspectives imply that fighting corruption in schools cannot be just about rules and penalties; it must be about a visible, consistently demonstrated ethical attitude at the top of the school that can be seen, internalised and emulated by others. The integrated reading supports both the conceptual model presented in Section 6 and the Ethical Leadership–Accountability Framework developed in Section 12. 6.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Overview of the Conceptual Model

Based on the integrated theoretical perspective presented in Section 5.4, this study conceptualises the independent variable namely leadership style as the main influencing factor on the outcome variables; corruption prevalence and accountability mechanisms, which are conceptualised as two interrelated variables. The relationship between these variables is not straightforward and direct, but is believed to occur through the mechanisms of ethical modelling and social learning outlined above, is confined by the institutional environment and environmental factors such as resource availability, community expectations, and regulatory oversight. Figure 1 depicts these variables and their hypothesised linkages and provided the analytical map that guided both the design of the data collection instruments and the interpretation of the results reported in Sections 9 to 11.

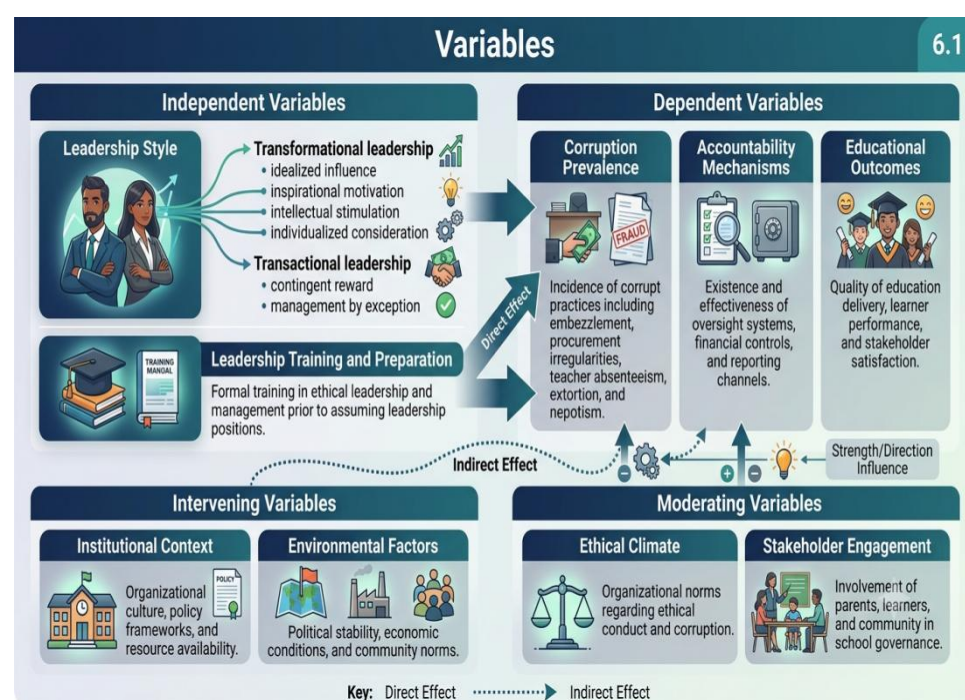


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the leadership–corruption relationship, showing leadership style as the primary explanatory variable acting on corruption prevalence and accountability mechanisms, moderated by institutional context.



Conceptual Model

The conceptual model posits that leadership style directly influences corruption prevalence and accountability mechanisms. Transformational leadership, characterised by ethical modelling and inspirational motivation, reduces corruption and strengthens accountability. Transactional leadership, when focused solely on performance monitoring without ethical grounding, may be insufficient for corruption prevention. The relationship is moderated by institutional context and environmental factors. As elaborated in Section 6.1, this moderation is theorised to operate primarily through resource constraints and community and regulatory pressure, both of which can either reinforce or undermine a leader's capacity to translate ethical intent into consistent anti-corruption practice; this proposition is examined empirically in the discussion of contextual factors in Section 11.2.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nigeria: Leadership Failures and Educational Corruption

Research in Nigeria has documented how leadership failures fuel covetousness and corruption within the educational system (Adeoye et al., 2023). Ineffective leadership contributes to the prevalence of unethical practices including bribery, embezzlement and favouritism. The absence of formal leadership training for school heads compounds the problem: most heads of schools do not have basic management training prior to entry into headship (Bush and Oduro, 2006). Reports of unethical practices have engulfed the Nigerian education system, including a lackadaisical attitude to work, overcrowded public primary schools and extortion of cash and mismanagement of school funds (Adiele and Abraham, 2013).

Kenya: The Leadership–Corruption Nexus

In Kenya, the relationship between leadership and corruption has been extensively examined. Ethical leadership is considered essential for countering a sector-wide shortage of visible role models of virtues-based leadership practice (Strathmore University, 2024). The temporary closure of Uchumi Supermarkets and the collapse of several state corporations attest to the consequences of unethical leadership (Strathmore University, 2024). Research suggests that leadership in Kenya must rise to the occasion and embrace good, ethical leadership, defined as both morally sound and technically effective (Strathmore University, 2024).

Tanzania: Leadership and Accountability Culture

Tanzania's Minister for Education, Science and Technology has emphasised the importance of accountability in educational institutions (Daily News Tanzania, 2025). The minister urged that accountability clubs and systems allowing student governments to be audited would help ensure transparency in the use of funds (Daily News Tanzania, 2025). The Tanzanian approach highlights the role of leadership in inculcating an accountability culture from primary through tertiary education.

South Africa: Leadership Training Deficits

In South Africa, research reveals that most heads of schools do not have basic management training prior to entry into headship (Bush and Oduro, 2006). This creates leaders who must deal with important financial decisions without being financially literate and who are expected to make ethical decisions and influence subordinates to behave ethically despite inadequate training (Bush and Oduro, 2006). The Seychelles is cited as a regional exception, providing training at Master's level for school leaders (Bush and Oduro, 2006).

Ghana: Contextual Leadership Challenges

Ghana's educational leadership context is characterised by distinct challenges. Although teaching experience and qualifications are considered basic requirements for leadership positions, there remains no formal training for school heads (Bush and Oduro, 2006). The challenges faced by African school leaders, including learners'



inability to pay school fees, shortages of school equipment and shortages of facilities such as classrooms (Bush and Oduro, 2006), require leadership skills that formal training would help to cultivate.

Synthesis of Comparative Evidence

Read together, the country evidence converges on three consistent patterns. First, the near-universal absence of formal ethical leadership or management training prior to appointment is identified as a structural vulnerability across Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana and is implicit in Kenya's call for more visible ethical role models. Second, corruption in each context is enabled less by the absence of rules than by weak enforcement and inconsistent modelling of integrity by those in authority, a pattern consistent with the pathology of omission this study foregrounds. Third, where accountability mechanisms are actively cultivated by leadership, as in Tanzania's auditing of student governments, they are described as leadership-driven rather than merely rule-driven, reinforcing the proposition that accountability structures are only as effective as the leadership commitment that sustains them. These regional patterns provide the comparative backdrop against which the case-study findings presented in Sections 9 to 11 are interpreted.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Philosophy

This study adopts a pragmatist research philosophy, which posits that research questions should guide methodological choices and that multiple methods can be combined to address complex social phenomena (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). Pragmatism is appropriate for examining leadership–corruption linkages, which involve both measurable patterns and subjective interpretations.

Research Approach

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to capture both breadth and depth of understanding (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). The mixed-methods approach enables triangulation of findings from questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis.

Research Paradigm

The study is situated within a post-positivist paradigm, which acknowledges the complexity of social reality while maintaining that systematic empirical investigation yields meaningful insights (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Post-positivism accommodates both objective measurement and subjective interpretation.

Research Design

The research employs a single case-study design with embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2018). The case is one private high school in Mutoko District, Mashonaland East Province. Embedded units include school leadership (head, deputy head), teachers, parents and learners. The case-study design enables in-depth examination of leadership dynamics and corruption prevention mechanisms within a bounded system.

Population, Sampling and Data Collection Instruments

The study population comprised the full teaching staff of the case-study school (N = 32), together with the school head, deputy head and purposively selected parents and senior teachers. Table 1 summarises the data collection instruments, target populations and achieved samples.

Table 1. Data collection instruments, target populations and response rates

Instrument	Target population	Achieved sample	Response/completion rate
Teacher questionnaire	32	30	93.75%



Key informant interviews	4 (head, deputy head, 2 senior teachers)	4	100%
Focus group – teachers	6	6	100%
Focus group – parents	8	8	100%

Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was administered to all teachers at the school, gathering data on perceptions of leadership styles, corruption prevalence and accountability mechanisms. The questionnaire employed Likert scales and open-ended questions (DeVellis, 2017).

Key informant interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the school head, deputy head and two senior teachers (n = 4). Interviews explored leadership approaches, anti-corruption strategies, challenges encountered and perceptions of effectiveness (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).

Focus group discussions: Two focus group discussions were conducted, one with six teachers and one with eight parents. Focus groups enabled exploration of shared experiences and perspectives on leadership and corruption (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

Documentary analysis: Documentary evidence was analysed from five countries, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and South Africa, comprising legislation, policy documents, institutional reports and scholarly literature.

Data Analysis

Quantitative questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and bivariate correlation. Qualitative interview and focus group data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarisation, coding, theme generation, review, definition and writing (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Documentary data were analysed using content analysis. Findings were triangulated across methods and sources.

Justification

The mixed-methods design is justified by the complexity of the leadership–corruption nexus, which involves both measurable patterns and subjective experiences. The case-study approach enables contextualised understanding of leadership dynamics within a specific institutional setting. The inclusion of documentary evidence from multiple countries enables comparative insights and contextualisation of findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with standard institutional research ethics protocols. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the school authorities prior to data collection and all participants took part on the basis of informed consent, having been briefed on the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage and the voluntary nature of participation. Given the sensitivity of corruption-related disclosures, participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity; the school and all individual respondents are therefore not named in this paper and interview and focus group extracts are reported without identifying detail beyond role category. No incentives were offered for participation and no learners were involved as research subjects, in keeping with the study's focus on adult staff, parent and leadership perceptions.

RESULTS

Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire response rate was 93.75% (30 of 32 teachers), as shown in Table 1. Key findings are summarised below.



Leadership style perceptions: 83.3% of respondents characterised the school head's leadership as primarily transformational (mean score 4.2/5 on transformational leadership items). Table 2 presents the distribution of specific leadership attributes identified by respondents.

Table 2. Perceived leadership style attributes (teacher questionnaire, n = 30)

Leadership attribute	Proportion of respondents endorsing
Overall transformational orientation (mean 4.2/5)	83.3%
Ethical modelling	86.7%
Inspirational motivation	80.0%
Individualised consideration	76.7%
Transactional – performance monitoring	73.3%

Corruption perceptions: 53.3% of respondents perceived moderate corruption at the school level, primarily in procurement and financial management, while 20.0% perceived high corruption. Notably, 66.7% believed leadership commitment had reduced corruption over the preceding two years.

Correlation between leadership and corruption: A strong positive correlation was identified between transformational leadership attributes and perceived corruption reduction ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$). Transactional leadership attributes alone showed a markedly weaker correlation ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.05$), as summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation between leadership style and perceived corruption reduction

Leadership style	Pearson r	Significance
Transformational leadership	0.72	$p < 0.01$
Transactional leadership (alone)	0.34	$p < 0.05$

Key Informant Interview Findings

Interview 1 – School Head: “I believe that as a leader, my integrity is the foundation. If I am seen to be honest, teachers and learners will follow. I have refused requests for favours, including staff placements, even when it was politically uncomfortable. The fight against corruption starts with small decisions – whether you give a contract to a relative or whether you allow petty theft of stationery.”

Interview 2 – Deputy Head: “Leadership is about modelling. When I see the head making difficult ethical decisions, it gives me courage to do the same. But I worry that some leaders in our district lack this commitment. They are more interested in the perks of the position.”

Interview 3 – Senior Teacher A: “We have seen improvements in financial transparency. But the challenge is systemic. The culture outside the school – the broader community – does not always reinforce what we teach. Even parents sometimes expect special treatment. It is a war of attrition.”

Interview 4 – Senior Teacher B: “Transactional leadership – where the head is just watching for mistakes – does not work. It creates fear but not commitment. We need leaders who are present, who care, who inspire. That is what reduces corruption.”

Focus Group Findings

Focus Group A – Teachers: Teachers expressed frustration with what they termed “the small corruption” at school level; procurement irregularities, favouritism in duty allocation and teacher absenteeism. One teacher observed that the school's leadership is ethical but the wider system is not, questioning how one fights a



system that rewards corruption outside the school gate and noting that good teachers are being lost to frustration. Another noted that school leadership does the right thing, but the head cannot be everywhere.

Focus Group B – Parents: Parents expressed appreciation for the school head's transparency but reported concerns about other schools in the district. One parent recounted hearing of schools where fees disappear and teachers demand bribes for good grades, attributing this directly to leadership: if the head is not honest, the whole school becomes corrupt. Another parent noted that the school's head attends meetings, explains the finances and shows receipts, which is precisely what parents need to see.

Synthesis of Results

Across all four data sources, questionnaire, interviews, focus groups and documentary evidence, a consistent pattern emerges: transformational, ethically modelled leadership is associated with lower perceived corruption and stronger accountability, while purely transactional oversight is perceived as necessary but insufficient. Respondents across roles (head, deputy, teachers, parents) independently converged on personal integrity and visible ethical modelling as the decisive leadership attribute, lending the finding cross-source credibility rather than resting on any single data stream.

KEY FINDINGS

- Strong correlation between leadership style and corruption prevalence: Transformational leadership attributes are associated with lower corruption levels ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), confirming that leadership significantly matters in anti-corruption drives.
- Ethical modelling as the foundation of anti-corruption leadership: Teachers and parents consistently identified the school head's personal integrity and ethical conduct as the most important factor in reducing corruption.
- Transactional leadership insufficient for corruption prevention: While performance monitoring is necessary, it is insufficient without the inspirational and ethical components of transformational leadership.
- The pathology of omission is a critical enabler of corruption: Leadership failure to act, neglect, passivity and tolerance of unethical conduct, was identified as a significant enabling factor.
- Leadership training deficits in developing countries: Documentary evidence confirms that most African school leaders lack formal ethical leadership training, creating conditions conducive to corruption.
- Systemic challenges beyond individual leadership: Even ethical leaders face systemic constraints, community norms, political interference and resource scarcity, that limit their effectiveness.
- Accountability culture requires leadership: Establishing accountability mechanisms depends on leadership commitment. Tanzania's emphasis on auditing student governments exemplifies this.
- Corruption undermines educational quality: Documentary evidence from Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana confirms that leadership failures fuel corruption that degrades educational outcomes.
- Contextual factors moderate leadership effectiveness: Resource constraints, multiple deprivation and political instability create conditions that challenge even ethical leaders.
- Stakeholder engagement strengthens anti-corruption efforts: Parental involvement and community engagement, as observed in the case study, reinforce ethical leadership and accountability.



DISCUSSION

Interpretation Through Theoretical Lenses

Transformational leadership theory: The findings confirm transformational leadership theory's core propositions. School heads exhibiting idealised influence (ethical modelling), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration achieved stronger anti-corruption outcomes. The correlation between transformational leadership and corruption reduction ($r = 0.72$) supports the theory's relevance to corruption prevention. As one teacher stated, what is needed are leaders who are present, who care and who inspire and that is what reduces corruption. This aligns with research demonstrating that transformational leadership creates environments where followers exert their highest efforts to achieve success (Ojeje et al., 2024).

Social learning theory: The findings strongly support social learning theory's emphasis on modelling. The school head's ethical conduct served as a model for teachers and learners. Social learning theory suggests that, because of leaders' authority role and power to reward and punish, followers pay attention to and mimic leaders' behaviours (Strathmore University, 2024). This was evident in teachers' reports of following the head's example in financial transparency and ethical decision-making.

Ethical leadership theory: The findings confirm that ethical leadership, demonstrating normatively appropriate conduct and promoting it to followers, is essential for corruption prevention. The absence of ethical leadership breeds embezzlement, as documented in Zimbabwean schools (Chibaya, 2025). The pathology of omission identified in this study, leadership failure to act against corruption, is consistent with ethical leadership theory's emphasis on proactive ethical conduct.

Comparative Documentary Insights

Documentary evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and South Africa reveals consistent patterns.

Nigeria: The absence of ethical leadership training for school heads creates conditions for corruption. Research confirms that leadership failures fuel covetousness and corruption within the educational system (Adeoye et al., 2023).

Kenya: The emphasis on ethical modelling is mirrored in Kenyan research, where leaders who are politically well-connected have been accused of promoting corrupt practices, nepotism and abuse of office (Strathmore University, 2024).

Tanzania: The emphasis on accountability culture and student government auditing represents an innovative leadership approach to corruption prevention (Daily News Tanzania, 2025).

South Africa: The leadership training deficit is acknowledged as a systemic problem, with most school heads lacking basic management training prior to entry into headship (Bush and Oduro, 2006).

Ghana: Contextual challenges, resource constraints, cultural expectations and political pressures, create conditions that test even ethical leaders (Bush and Oduro, 2006).

Taken together with the case-study findings, this comparative evidence indicates that the leadership–corruption relationship observed in Mutoko District is not a localised anomaly but an instance of a wider regional pattern, strengthening the case for the cross-context applicability of the ELA Framework developed in Section 12.

The Pathology of Omission

The pathology of omission identified in this study, leadership failure to act against corruption, emerges as a critical concept. It encompasses:

- Neglect of ethical oversight



- Failure to enforce accountability mechanisms
- Tolerance of unethical conduct
- Absence of proactive anti-corruption measures
- Passive acceptance of corrupt norms

This is not just a lack of transformational leadership - it's an active facilitation of corrupt action through the power of omission. One teacher said that although school leadership does what is right, the head is not always there. The idea that systemic mechanisms with leadership are needed to transcend individual limitations is directly connected to the accountability-mechanisms dimension of the ELA Framework, found in Section 12.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Several limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting these findings. First, the single-case design, while enabling depth, limits the statistical generalisability of the quantitative correlations to other institutions; the r-values reported should be read as indicative of a relationship within this case rather than as population parameters. Second, the questionnaire and interview data are self-reported perceptions of leadership and corruption rather than independently audited financial records and are therefore susceptible to social desirability bias, particularly given the sensitivity of corruption as a topic. Third, the cross-sectional nature of the data collection captures leadership and corruption perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish causal direction with certainty; it remains possible that lower corruption levels create conditions in which transformational leadership is more likely to be perceived and reported, rather than the reverse. Fourth, the documentary evidence, while valuable for comparative contextualisation, relies on secondary and, in some instances, media sources whose methodological rigour could not be independently verified by the present study. These limitations do not undermine the study's core contribution but do suggest caution in extrapolating the specific correlation coefficients beyond the case examined and they point directly to the future research priorities set out in Section 13.2.

THE ETHICAL LEADERSHIP–ACCOUNTABILITY (ELA) FRAMEWORK

Rationale for the Framework

The findings reported in Sections 9 to 11 point to a consistent conclusion: corruption prevention in schools depends less on the presence of rules and monitoring systems in isolation than on the ethical character of leadership that animates and sustains those systems. Existing anti-corruption guidance for the education sector tends either to prescribe compliance mechanisms without addressing the leadership behaviours needed to make them function, or to extol ethical leadership in general terms without specifying how it connects to concrete accountability practice. The Ethical Leadership–Accountability (ELA) Framework, proposed in this section, is designed to close that gap by making explicit the pathway from leadership character, through accountability structures and institutional context, to corruption-prevention outcomes.

Components of the Framework

The ELA Framework, depicted in Figure 2, comprises four interlocking components derived directly from the study's theoretical integration (Section 5.4) and empirical findings (Sections 9 to 11):

- Ethical foundation; the leader's personal integrity, idealised influence and consistent ethical modelling, identified by respondents as the single most decisive factor in corruption reduction.
- Accountability structures; transparent financial management, clear reporting channels and mechanisms such as auditing and stakeholder reporting that translate ethical intent into verifiable practice.

- Institutional enablers and constraints; the resourcing, training and community/regulatory context that moderate a leader's capacity to act, addressing the systemic limits highlighted in Sections 7.6 and 11.4.
- Outcomes; reduced corruption prevalence and sustainable educational governance, understood as the joint product of the preceding three components rather than of any one in isolation.

The framework is deliberately cyclical rather than linear: sustained positive outcomes reinforce the ethical foundation and strengthen institutional enablers over time, while unaddressed institutional constraints can erode even a strong ethical foundation, reproducing the pathology of omission described in Section 11.3.

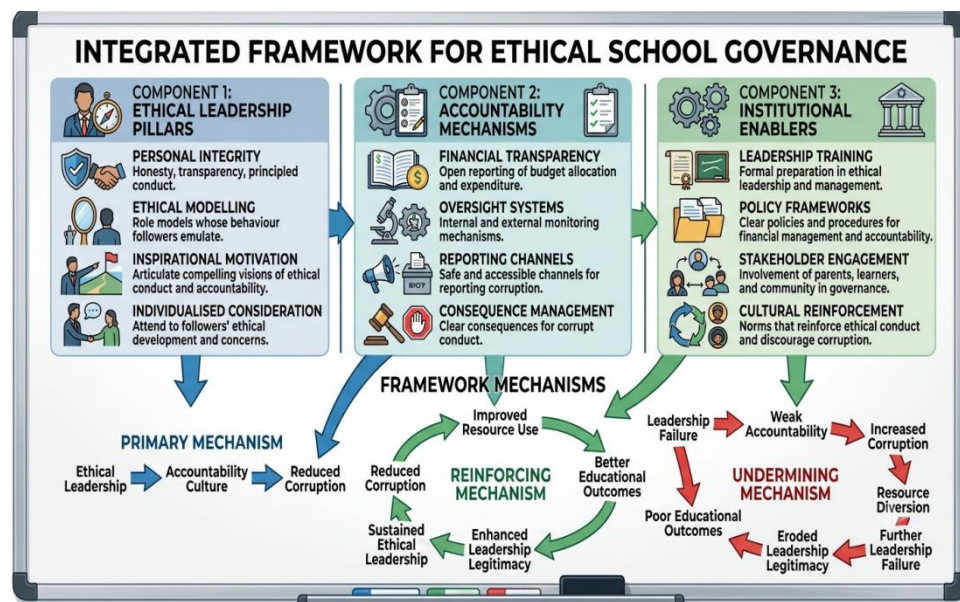


Figure 2. The Ethical Leadership–Accountability (ELA) Framework, showing the ethical foundation, accountability structures and institutional enablers acting jointly to shape corruption-prevention outcomes.

Application and Utility

The ELA Framework offers:

Diagnostic utility: Identifying gaps in leadership, accountability and institutional enablers.

Prescriptive utility: Guiding interventions to strengthen ethical leadership and accountability.

Monitoring utility: Assessing progress in corruption prevention over time.

Comparative utility: Enabling comparison across institutions and countries.

Policy Implications

For government and policymakers:

- Mandate leadership training for all school heads.
- Strengthen accountability frameworks and oversight mechanisms.
- Support stakeholder engagement in school governance.
- Address systemic constraints limiting leadership effectiveness.

For school leaders:



- Prioritise personal integrity and ethical modelling.
- Implement transparent financial management practices.
- Establish clear reporting channels for corruption.
- Engage stakeholders in governance and oversight.

For teacher training institutions:

- Integrate ethical leadership content into pre-service programmes.
- Provide ongoing professional development in ethical leadership.
- Develop resources and toolkits for school leaders.

For civil society and communities:

- Monitor school governance and resource use.
- Advocate for transparency and accountability.
- Support ethical leadership through engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study has examined the role of leadership in corruption prevention within the education sector, utilising the hallmarks of transformational and transactional leadership as analytical lenses. The research confirms that leadership significantly matters in anti-corruption drives, with transformational leadership attributes, ethical modelling, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration, associated with lower corruption levels.

The pathology of omission, leadership failure to act against corruption, emerges as a critical enabling factor. Where leaders are passive, neglectful or tolerant of unethical conduct, corruption flourishes. Conversely, where leaders demonstrate personal integrity, model ethical conduct and establish accountability mechanisms, corruption recedes.

Documentary evidence from Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana and South Africa reveals consistent patterns: leadership training deficits, systemic challenges and the importance of ethical modelling. The Ethical Leadership–Accountability (ELA) Framework proposed in this paper offers a conceptual and practical contribution for understanding and strengthening leadership’s role in corruption prevention in educational governance, of relevance not only to the case examined but, on the strength of the comparative evidence in Section 11.2, to school systems across similarly resourced developing-country contexts.

Recommendations

For school leaders:

- Prioritise personal integrity as the foundation of anti-corruption leadership.
- Model ethical conduct in all decision-making and interactions.
- Implement transparent financial management practices with stakeholder engagement.



- Establish clear policies and procedures for reporting and addressing corruption.
- Invest in professional development in ethical leadership and management.

For government and policymakers:

- Mandate ethical leadership training for all school heads prior to appointment.
- Strengthen accountability frameworks and oversight mechanisms.
- Address systemic constraints; resource scarcity, political interference and cultural norms.
- Support stakeholder engagement in school governance.
- Monitor and evaluate anti-corruption leadership effectiveness.

For teacher training institutions:

- Integrate ethical leadership content into pre-service programmes.
- Provide ongoing professional development in ethical leadership.
- Develop resources and toolkits for school leaders.
- Partner with schools for practical leadership development.

For future research:

- Conduct comparative studies across private and public schools.
- Examine the long-term impact of leadership training on corruption prevention.
- Investigate the relationship between leadership and specific corruption types.
- Explore innovative accountability mechanisms in resource-constrained contexts.
- Replicate the correlational analysis across a larger, multi-site sample to test the generalisability of the leadership–corruption association identified here.

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