The interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity in South Africa's early childhood development sector

SL Motaung

orcid.org/0009-0004-6843-3133

Mini-dissertation accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree *Master of Business Administration* at the North-West University

Supervisor: Dr HA Saurombe

Graduation: June 2026

DECLARATION

I, Sediane Motaung, declare that this mini-dissertation that I am submitting to the North West University represents my own work which is not plagiarized. I also declare that all relevant sources have been correctly and fully acknowledged, and this work has never been submitted to any institution to obtain a similar qualification/degree.

……. ……

Signature Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, it is a great privilege for me to write this acknowledgement for the submission of my Mini dissertation as part of my MBA. For me, this is not merely another degree to add to my collection of past and future qualifications. Rather, it is a direct testament to my unwavering faith in my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. This journey has been at the very heart of my faith, a process of testing and trusting in God. Through the completion of this degree, my relationship with him has been strengthened once again.

Most importantly, this degree comes at a time when I have recently married my one and only sweetheart, Sibusiso Victoria Motaung. She has become my confidante and the driving force behind the greatness I strive for. Her unwavering support throughout this journey starting from the application process, through the interview, and during the many cold nights when I left our warm bed to focus on my studies has been invaluable. I cannot thank her enough, but I want her to know that she is at the very heart of this achievement.

To my son, my friend, my beloved, my first fruit, and obviously my firstborn, I am smiling as I write this acknowledgement. You were born on 4 September 2024 at 11:37 pm, at the height of a demanding MBA schedule. At that time, you gave me even more reason to study hard and persevere, even when you cried for my attention. Surprisingly, you became my greatest companion during the nights. I recall countless moments when I fed you in the middle of the night, using that time as a welcome break from my studies. When the challenges felt overwhelming, I would look at you in your crib, kiss you, and find renewed strength. I even crept into our bedroom to “steal” a kiss from your mother while she was asleep, and that simple act instantly re-energised me. So, to you, my son, Reaotlotla Motaung, thank you for keeping me awake and constantly reminding me why I needed to complete my MBA. To my supervisor, Dr Saurombe, thank you for your unwavering support. From the moment I met you, I recognised a true academic someone who could guide me and show me the path to completing this significant degree. I believe God will use this accomplishment to open many doors, and for your role in this journey, I am truly grateful.

ABSTRACT

The interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity is well established in research; however, limited studies have examined this relationship within South Africa's Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector. This gap is important given the persistent leadership challenges, low staff morale, and uneven productivity reported across many ECD centres. Accordingly, this study sought to explore the two constructs through the lens of the ECD sector, with the aim of influencing and improving leadership practices. The literature review further indicated that strengthening leadership within the sector is essential for enhancing organisational effectiveness.

The study aimed to explore how ethical leadership influences employee productivity within ECD centres in South Africa. It used qualitative methodology and intentionally used purposive sampling to select 12 participants who participated in semi-structured interviews which enabled them to express their lived experienced. The thematic analysis conducted through ATLAS.ti revealed several interconnected themes, including trust, fairness, role modelling, motivation, and organisational climate. Collectively, these themes demonstrated a clear link between ethical leadership and enhanced employee productivity.

These insights highlight ethical leadership as a strategic tool for strengthening performance and professional culture in ECD centres. The study concludes that ethical leadership should not be viewed solely as a moral attribute but as a strategic leadership tool capable of improving staff commitment, performance, and overall centre effectiveness. These findings contribute to the body of knowledge on ECD management and provide practical insights that may inform leadership development, sectoral policies, and managerial practices aimed at strengthening the quality of early childhood services in South Africa.

Keywords: Ethical leadership; Employee productivity; Early Childhood Development (ECD); Qualitative research; Thematic analysis; Organisational climate; Leadership development; South Africa

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS (TOC_HEADING)

AGSA: Auditor General of South Africa
DBE: Department of Basic Education
ECD: Early Childhood Development
ECE: Early Childhood Education
EL: Ethical Leadership
NDP: National Development Plan
OT: Organisational Transparency
PFMA: Public Finance Management Act
POPIA: Protection of personal Information Act
SDG: Sustainable Development Goals
SLA: Service Level Agreement
SLT: Social Learning Theory

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

“Ethical leadership is defined as a distinct leadership style rooted in moral principles that promote the well-being of followers, organisations, and society” (Khan, 2025:1). Furthermore “Ethical leadership is essential in cultivating a responsible and positive organisational culture. At its heart, ethics involves the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, and leaders who embrace ethical principles steer their organisations with integrity” (Pravin et al, 2025:19). Furthermore, with regards to an interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity, Pravin et al, (2025:23) states that “a strong ethical culture fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty among employees, which translates into improved job performance, higher productivity, and a positive organisational climate.” From available literature, there seems to be a relationship that exists between ethical leadership and employee productivity

Although the concept of ethical leadership in relation to employee productivity is not entirely new, the quest for this study is to seek to examine the interplay between these two constructs with the primary aim of improving leadership within the Early Childhood Development sector (ECD). Such improvements could, in turn, have a ripple effect on various elements within ECD centres that stand to benefit from ethical leadership. The uniqueness and importance of this study lies in its potential to address systemic challenges affecting leadership in ECD centres, more importantly, contributing towards leadership theories or models that aim to improve employee productivity, ultimately strengthening the sustainability and credibility of ECD centres.

The background of this study is set against the premise provided above; drawing attention to the ECD centres, which are the focal point of this study. This study investigates the influence of ethical leadership on employee productivity within ECD centres. Grounded in existing literature and best practices, it seeks to explore the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the early childhood development sector.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Research into ethical leadership within the public sector, including Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres remains of critical importance, particularly given that some ECDs are funded with public funds. These centres are expected to utilise such funds in accordance with the two important documents. Firstly, they are required to utilise those funds in accordance with principles that are outlined in the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA). Secondly, they should align their spending with the Service Level Agreement (SLA), which is a formal agreement entered into between ECDs and the government. Nonetheless, numerous findings from the office of the Auditor General of South Africa (AGSA) regarding the financial management practices within the ECDs have not been favourable for ECD's.

The Auditor General's audit "revealed that 9 out of 10 ECD centres (90%) had neither compiled nor submitted annual financial statements for the 2024/2025 financial year. Additionally, there was no record of financial statements for the 2023/2024 period. Proper financial reporting and record-keeping are essential for ensuring transparency, accountability, and compliance with funding requirements. The absence of such documentation undermines effective oversight and paves the way for poor financial governance" (Auditor-General South Africa, 2025:3).

The SLA and PFMA documents demand a rigorous application of ethical leadership principles, specifically financial transparency and accountability, as echoed by the AGSA. In support of this, Pravin et al. (2025:19) emphasise that, "In today's rapidly evolving world of business, ethical leadership has become a cornerstone of responsible management. Grounded in self-awareness, moral integrity, and fairness, ethical leadership enables leaders to shape organisational cultures where trust, motivation, and collaboration thrive. Leaders who prioritise ethical practices emphasise the collective success of their organisation over individual gain, leading to higher productivity, greater employee engagement, and long-term sustainability." As Sebola et al. (2024:405) contend, "Government officials are therefore required to uphold a high degree of professional ethics in discharging their responsibilities.", further necessitating the need to cultivate ethical leadership within the chosen sector.

1.3 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance, relevance, and value of this research is grounded in a threefold perspective. The first is an international perspective, which focuses on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and relates them to the research topic. This study is particularly aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16), which promotes “peace, justice, and strong institutions” (United Nations, 2025:23). SDG 16 encourages sound governance and ethical practices across sectors, including within Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres. In this context, ethical leadership is recognised as a cornerstone for cultivating accountable and trustworthy institutions, thereby reinforcing the relevance of this goal to the study.

The second viewpoint zooms-in on the National Development Plan 2030 (NDP 2030). At the national level, Chapter 13 of the NDP 2030 strongly advocates for the development of a capable, ethical, and developmental state (NDP, 2011:363). This vision resonates with the priorities of the current Government of National Unity. In his 2024 opening address to Parliament, President Cyril Ramaphosa stated: “The third strategic priority of the Government of National Unity is to build a capable, ethical, and developmental state.” (Parliament, 2024:3). This national aspiration directly aligns with the rationale and significance of the present study.

Lastly, this research considers a personal perspective, underscoring the importance of ethical leadership as a strategic asset that could influence employee productivity. Ethical leadership should no longer be regarded merely as a moral obligation, but rather as a strategic resource and asset that contributes to the long-term success of organisations. This is especially pertinent considering the government’s efforts to professionalise the public sector, including the ECD sector.

1.4 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

“Aims emphasize what needs to be achieved within the scope of the research, by the end of the research process. Achievement of research aim provides answer to the research question” (Fusch, 2015:3).

In this research, the aim of this study is to explore how ethical leadership is perceived and enacted in ECD centres and how these leadership practices relate to employee productivity.

According to Uys & Bason (1999:28), objectives are more specific, measurable expectations of the aims and include the action to be taken and specify the targets which have to be achieved. Coupled with that definition, De vos et al (2011:108) are of the view that ‘‘objectives of the study should be clearly stated and specific in nature. Each objective should delineate only one issue.”

- To examine how ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices such as fairness, accountability, transparency, and role modelling.
- To explore in what ways these leadership practices are experienced in daily work.
- To understand how employees perceive the relationship between ethical leadership and their productivity.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices in their centres?
- In what ways do employees experience these leadership practices in their work?
- How do employees perceive the relationship between ethical leadership and their productivity?

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature review is an informative evaluation of primary research at one or more stages of the research process. Therefore, it provides a comprehensive understanding of the knowledge on a topic and the context of the study (Onwuegbuzie & Frels 2016:9). This literature review is used to provide insightful information on the topic on hand but also to showcase the gap in the literature proving the need for this research.

1.6.1 Literature review sources

Google Scholar, an academic database facility provided by Google was used to search for information. Sources used in the literature review include website articles, textbooks, peer-reviewed journal articles, news articles, dissertations, and other research papers on the subject.

1.6.2 Topics of literature review

The topics discussed in the literature review chapter are the following:

- Definition and scope ethical leadership and employee productivity
- Ethical leadership: employee productivity
- Contrasting Views and Contextual factors
- Ethical leadership: Job satisfaction and organisational transparency
- Ethical leadership: Productivity and mediating mechanisms
- Ethical leadership and the ECD sector
- Leadership Challenges within ECD sector
- Ethical leadership compared with related leadership styles
- Operationalising employee productivity in ECD sector
- Conceptual Framework
- Theoretical Framework

1.7 DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

1.7.1. Ethical Leadership:

“Ethical leadership is the moral character, behaviour, and decision-making that a leader demonstrates by means of role modelling, communication, and reinforcement to motivate others to make ethical decisions and behave in accordance with the relevant moral values, norms, and rules.” (Jackson et al. 2023:1)

1.7.2. Employee Productivity:

Employee productivity can be defined as the efficiency and effectiveness with which employees perform their assigned duties, contributing to the overall objectives of the organisation. It involves not only the quantity of output produced but also the quality of work, consistency, and alignment with organisational goals.

1.7.3. Early Childhood Development:

According to the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (2015:11), “A partial care facility that provides an early childhood programme with an early learning and development focus for children from birth until the year before they enter Grade R/formal school.”

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Atmore (2019:73) suggest that a qualitative approach assists in understanding how experiences acquire meaning. Qualitative research methods are “planful, systematic and empirical. Empirical refer to a reliance on practical experience and observation as a source of knowledge verification.” Qualitative methods are most suitable when there has been a relatively low level of previous conceptualisation, theory building, and research findings in a given area of inquiry. The research will be located within a qualitative research methodology, as it seeks to explore an interplay between Ethical leadership and Employee productivity within the Early Childhood Development Sector.

1.9 RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study is rooted in the interpretivism paradigm, as the researcher intends to understand the phenomena from the participant’s perspective.

1.10 RESEARCH DESIGN

“The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible” (Atmore, 2019:73). Furthermore, De Vos et al (2011:316) states that “at the root of phenomenology is the intent to understand the phenomena under study on their own terms and therefore to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the subjects allowing the essence to emerge.” Noting the fact that the nature of this study is to seek to explore the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the ECD sector, a research design that is based on the elements on phenomenological research is deemed necessary and relevant.

A qualitative, deductive design is adopted, making use of semi-structured interviews. This approach will enable participants to describe their experiences freely, while ensuring that data collection covers the study's key constructs. The study is cross-sectional, with interviews conducted in a single phase. The design is appropriate for exploring subjective meanings and relationships between ethical leadership and productivity within a defined time frame.

1.11 TIME HORIZON

This study follows a cross-sectional time horizon**,** as data will be collected at a single point in time to assess the number of ECD centres in need and their specific challenges. Given the limited timeframe available to complete the MBA research project (within one academic year), and the practical consideration that ECD centres' operational environments are unlikely to undergo rapid short-term changes, a cross-sectional design provides an efficient and valid means to gather meaningful insights. Furthermore, the use of a semi-structed interview within ECDs aligns with this time horizon, allowing for systematic data collection without the resource and time demands of longitudinal tracking.

1.12 DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Delimitation "refers to the specific parameters and boundaries the researcher sets to define what the study will cover and what it will not. It outlines the extent of the exploration, including the subject matter, geographic area, time frame, and population to be studied." (EduBirdie, 2025:1) This study is delimited to registered Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres within the JB Marks Municipality. It focuses specifically on the perceptions and lived experiences of ECD practitioners and leaders in relation to ethical leadership and its influence on employee productivity.

The study adopts a qualitative research approach and therefore does not aim to measure productivity quantitatively or to establish causal relationships. Instead, it seeks to explore and interpret how ethical leadership is experienced and how it may shape employees' motivation, behaviour, and work ethic within the context of ECD centres.

1.13 INCLUSION-EXCLUSION CRITERIA

In this research, the inclusion and exclusion criteria was guided by the need to ensure relevance, credibility, and contextual alignment with the research topic: *Exploring the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector*.

Inclusion Criteria: In this study, participants were selected from registered Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres that are registered and in terms of the compliance requirements contained in chapter 5&6 of the Children' Act 38 of 2005 and are funded and formally recognised by the Department of Basic Education. These centres must have a formal management or leadership structure, and practitioners must have had at least six months of work experience within the same centre. This is essentially to ensure that the participants had adequate exposure to leadership dynamics and workplace practices.

Exclusion Criteria: ECD centres that are unregistered and do not meet the compliance requirements contained in chapter 5&6 of the Children' Act 38 of 2005 were excluded from the study. This was to ensure consistency in organisational governance structures and leadership practices, as unregistered centres may operate outside formal frameworks and lack standardised leadership roles, making them unsuitable for the purposes of this research. Temporary staff, interns, and employees with less than six months of service were also excluded to maintain the depth of experiential insight required for a phenomenological inquiry.

1.14 TARGET POPULATION

Alvi (2016:10) describes the target population as members who meet the particular criterion specified for a research investigation. The target population to be used in this research was based on ECD owners/principals and practitioners who are operating their ECD's within the study area. The target population for this study consists of 24 registered Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres within the designated study area.

1.15 SAMPLING

De Vos et al. (2011:391) state that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done with the available time and resources.” The sample size was incorporated in line with factors such as data saturation. According to Mwita, (2022:1) “data saturation refers to a point at which the researcher finds out that all the needed data have been collected and there is no any new relevant information or data that can be collected from the participants or subjects of the study.”

It seems as though there is a general consensus on the concept of data saturation. On the other hand, Fusch et al. (2015: 1408) add a somewhat different perspective on the concept of data saturation and adds that “the concept of data saturation is difficult to define. The reason is because what is data saturation for one is not nearly enough for another. There is no *one-size fits* all method to reach data saturation. Data saturation can be attained by as few as six interviews depending on the sample size.” In alignment with that definition, in this study, a sample of 12 participants out of 24 ECDs was selected. Simply put, 12 participants represents half of the target population within the study area.

1.15.1 Purposive Sampling

“Purposive sampling is a population sampling process in which a researcher selects research participants based on their presence in a population of interest, characteristics, experiences, or other criteria” (Straten, 2024:1). “It is a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria which may include in-depth knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research” (Rai & Thapa, 2015:5). For the purpose of this research, purposive sampling was determined to be in line with the definition that is provided above, that is, the prospective sample of this research have in-depth knowledge on matters of ECD.

In achieving this objective, prospective participants were selected from a database of registered and funded ECDs which consist of 24 ECD within the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the prospective participants.

1.16 ROLE OF RESEARCHER

In this study, the researcher seeks to explore an interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the early childhood development sector. Therefore, in achieving that objective, the researcher recruited the research participants by using the existing database of ECD's that are registered and funded within the study area. It is worth reporting that the researcher is a social worker working in the department of education under the directorate of ECD in JB Marks municipality. Permission was sought to make use of the database. In relation to the selection of participants, they were chosen from each section of the study area.

1.17 DATA COLLECTION

Parveen & Showkat (2017:2), add that "data can be collected using various techniques and the decision about which tool to use for data collection is guided by the research question". Atmore, (2019:76) states that, "Qualitative researchers depend on a variety of methods for gathering data. The use of multiple data-collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data." For the purpose of this study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews.

According to Saunders et al. (2009:437), "in semi-structured interviews, the conversation starts with a predetermined list of themes, preferably with critical questions related to the themes to guide the conduct of the interview". An interview guide was developed to align with the study objectives and research questions. Interviews began by providing participants with clear, neutral definitions of "ethical leadership" and "employee productivity" to reduce ambiguity. Each interview lasted approximately 50–60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at a venue convenient for the participant. Participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential and would not affect their professional relationships with the researcher in his capacity as a social worker. Further details will be discussed under section (18.1.1).

1.17.1. Positionality

In order to ascertain that the aspect of positionality above is considered and carefully adhered to, the researcher acknowledges their positionality as a social worker with existing professional relationships with Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in the study area. This insider position was expected to facilitate access to participants and foster trust, as the researcher is familiar with the operational context and challenges faced by ECD practitioners. However, it is also recognised that prior relationships might influence participants' responses, either through social desirability bias or perceptions of authority. To mitigate these risks, the researcher maintained a reflective stance, ensuring that data collection and analysis were conducted objectively. Informed consent, confidentiality measures, and neutral questioning techniques were employed to minimise power imbalances and encourage authentic responses. Transparency about the researcher's role and purpose was communicated to all participants to maintain ethical integrity.

1.17.2. Role of informants

An informant provides information about a topic based on their personal experience. Informants can be key individuals with specialised knowledge or individuals who can offer insights into a particular community or phenomenon. (Knowledge & science bulletin 2024:1) In this study, the owners/principal and practitioners served as the primary informants, as they will be the ones completing the questionnaires. Their role includes providing direct insights based on their knowledge on the research topic.

1.18 INSTRUMENTS

The following instruments were employed in this research. The selection of these instruments is based on the need to solicit data that can reach a threshold of reliability and validity.

1.18.1. Semi-structured interview

"A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that relies on asking questions within a predetermined thematic framework. In research, semi-structured interviews are often qualitative in nature.

They are generally used as an exploratory tool in marketing, social science, survey methodology, and other research fields" (George, 2022:1). Furthermore, "In the semi-structured interview, an interviewer generally has a framework of themes to be explored. Good interviews usually consist of a balance between main questions, follow-ups, and probes. However, a specific topic or topics that an interviewer wants to explore during the interview should be well prepared in advance." (Ruslin et al. 2022:24) In this research, the researcher made a predetermined thematic framework that was linked to the research topic in order to solicit in-depth lived experiences of the participants.

The semi-structured interview consist of the following sections: (*refer to annexture A*)

- **Section A: Background information** – basic demographic and role details.
- **Section B: Ethical leadership practices** – questions addressing RQ1.
- **Section C: Daily work experiences** – questions addressing RQ2.
- **Section D: Perceptions of productivity** – questions addressing RQ3.
- **Section E: Closing reflections** – open space for additional input.

1.19 POWER RELATIONSHIPS AND GATEKEEPER INTERVENTION

The researcher acknowledged that pre-existing professional relationships may introduce power dynamics into the research process, particularly because of his role as a social worker who regularly engages with the ECD centres targeted in this study. Such relationships may influence participants' perceptions, potentially leading to feelings of obligation to participate or reluctance to provide fully honest responses. To mitigate these risks, participation was entirely voluntary, and participants were assured that their choice to participate or not would bear no impact on their access to services or their relationship with the researcher. Informed consent was obtained, confidentiality was strictly maintained, and participants were encouraged to respond freely without fear of reprisal or favour.

Access to the field was gained through formal gatekeeper intervention. The researcher sought official permission from the owners, principals, or managers of the ECD centres, who act as gatekeepers, before approaching potential participants. A formal letter was written by the researcher requesting permission from each gatekeeper, explaining the purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations of the study.

Furthermore, the researcher ensured that the gatekeepers understood that their granting of access must not place any pressure on individuals to participate. Ethical approval was also obtained from the relevant research ethics committee prior to data collection *(see attached annexture D)*. These measures safeguarded the autonomy of participants and upheld the ethical integrity of the study.

1.20 DATA ANALYSIS

De Vos et al. (2011:391) state that "qualitative data analysis *transforms* data into findings. This involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting significance from trivia, identifying significant patterns and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal. Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data." Qualitative data analysis is a systematic process of examining non-numerical data to extract meaning, patterns, and insights. (QuestionPro, 2025:1)

In agreement with the previous definition, a similar perspective is provided, and it states that "Qualitative research is a non-numerical method of data collection and analysis that focuses on understanding phenomena from the perspective of participants. It prioritizes depth over breadth and aims to explore the "why" and "how" behind human behaviours and social phenomena" (Bless et al. 2006:139) In this study, the researcher made use of a similar method of data analysis of identifying significant patterns. To ensure that the patterns were correctly identified, the researcher made use of thematic analysis.

1.21 MEASURING INSTRUMENT: VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Heale & Twycross (2017:66), validity is defined as the extent to which a concept is accurately measured in a quantitative study. Validity is used to assess how well the results align with established theories and other measures of the same concept. For this research, the researcher intended to ensure validity by adhering to the following aspects:

- **Methodology:** The researcher chose a qualitative methodology to ensure that themes under study are accurately captured. More importantly, this approach enhances the validity of the research.

- **Theories:** It is essential to ensure that the selected theory align with the study's findings, thereby reinforcing the validity of the research in relation to theoretical frameworks.

Reliability refers to the consistency of measurements. An assessment of reliability can be achieved through various measures, ensuring that the instrument used consistently produces the same results. According to Heale (2015:66), reliability is established when the instrument consistently measures the intended variable, meaning that participants had to provide similar responses each time they completed the test.

Furthermore, Livingston (2018:6) defines reliability as the extent to which test scores remain unaffected by chance factors. To ensure reliability in this research, the threefold steps were practiced. Firstly, the questionnaire was designed with clear, simple, and structured questions to avoid confusion. Secondly, a pilot test was done with a few ECD centres to check for consistency and understanding before the actual data collection. Thirdly, the same instructions and procedures were used for all participants. In relation to trustworthiness, a similar threefold approach was practiced. Firstly, the data was collected and reported without bias. Secondly, the findings were based only on what is measured, with transparency in how results are presented. Thirdly, ethical approval and informed consent was followed to maintain honesty and respect for all participants.

Furthermore, in relation to the concept of trustworthiness. Shenton, (2004:64-72) provides a step-by-step approach of what researchers can incorporate in their pursuit of achieving trustworthiness.

- **“Credibility (in preference to internal validity):** “How congruent are the findings with reality?”
- **Transferability (in preference to external validity/generalisability):** is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations”
- **Dependability (in preference to reliability):** if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained.

- **Confirmability (in preference to objectivity):** steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher." (Shenton, 2004: 64-72)

In this research, to ensure credibility, the researcher intended to check the findings with participants to see if they agreed with them. It was also decided that if time allowed in relation to transferability, the researcher would share the findings with the Dr Kenneth Kaunda district in the hope that they might be applied to the entire district. The researcher will keep the records of the research so that the process can be repeated to ascertain its dependability. Lastly, as for confirmability, the researcher used quotes and notes from participants to show the findings are based on their views and not the view of the researcher.

1.22 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

According to Bless et al. (2006:374), limitations refer to factors that may hinder the research process or create obstacles for the researcher in carrying out the study. Supporting this perspective, De Vos et al. (2011:111) state that "limitations are often numerous, even in the most carefully planned research, and it is important that they are acknowledged in the proposal." The following limitations apply to this research:

1.22.1. Access to Participants

Securing participants may not necessarily pose a challenge, particularly as the researcher is conducting the study among individuals already known to him. It is important to note that out of the 24 registered ECDs, not all of them fall under the supervision of the researcher. Thus, it was accepted that access to the other ECDs may have to be achieved through the assistance of another social worker, if a bigger sample were to be required than the suggested number of 12 participants for sampling.

1.22.2. Time and Venue

The researcher ensured that data collection occurred at a time and venue that was convenient for participants. it was feared that failure to accommodate their availability could result in non-participation, potentially affecting the study's outcomes.

In this instance, the researcher ensured that the venue secured was in close proximity to the participants. Especially because the target group of the study might have to travel to office of the researcher, if a venue that was not in close proximity with the participants was not secured.

1.22.3. Language Barrier

Although English is widely accepted as the language of business and formal communication, it was realized that it might not be easily comprehended by all participants. Since the study relies on questionnaires, there was a distinct possibility that some participants might struggle to interpret the questions accurately. This could, in turn, impact the quality and reliability of the responses provided.

1.23 DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

Once data collection had been completed, the researcher undertook a process of data coding and analysis. Data coding involved organising responses with the aim of identifying themes or patterns into common themes. This process enabled the efficient entry and preparation of data for analysis. The method mentioned below was used.

1.23.1. Thematic Analysis

To arrive at a study that would enable ease of data analysis, the researcher made use of thematic analysis. “Thematic analysis is a method to analyse qualitative data. It involves the identification and reporting of patterns in a data set, which are then interpreted for their inherent meaning these patterns can be found on the basis of understanding the meaning of keywords used by participants” (Naeem et al, 2023:2)

A detailed method of what and how these steps were used is discussed below:

- **Step 1: Transcription, Familiarization with the Data, and Selection of Quotations:** This is the initial phase of the thematic analysis process. It involves the transcription of data and familiarising oneself with it.
- **Step 2: Selection of Keywords:** This phase involves close examination of the data, be it from interviews, focus groups, or visual content. Researchers identify recurring patterns, terms, or visual elements and designate them as keywords.

- **Step 3: Coding:** In the third step, coding, short phrases or words, known as codes, are assigned to segments of data that capture the data's core message, significance, or theme.
- **Step 4: Theme Development:** Theme development involves organising codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, thereby offering insights into the research question.
- **Step 5: Conceptualization Through Interpretation of Keywords, Codes, and Themes:** This step, conceptualization, involves understanding and defining concepts emerging from the data. Researchers identify social patterns and refine them into definitions that align with their research.

Step 6: Development of Conceptual Model: The final step in the thematic analysis is the development of a conceptual model. This process involves creating a unique representation of the data and it is often guided by existing theories." (Naeem et al, 2023:2-5)

1.24 DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

Upon completion of the study, the researcher will disseminate the findings through multiple channels to ensure that both academic and community stakeholders are reached. A formal research report will be submitted to the university in fulfilment of academic requirements. Summarised findings will be presented to the ECD centres involved in the research, particularly those operating in Ikageng, through feedback sessions or written summaries. Where possible, presentations will be arranged with local social service departments, non-governmental organisations working with ECDs, and relevant municipal forums to share key insights.

The researcher will also seek opportunities to publish the findings in academic journals focused on early childhood development and community development, as well as to present at conferences or workshops where issues concerning ECD centres are discussed. Throughout the dissemination process, confidentiality and ethical obligations towards participants will be strictly maintained

1.25 RESEARCH PLAN

This study was conducted according to a structured research plan to ensure systematic progression and timely completion, such as shown in Table 2.

Figure 1: Research Plan Breakdown

No:	Activity	Time Frame	Duration
1	Finalise Proposal and Ethics Application	15 – 31 July 2025	3 weeks
2	Instrument Design and Pilot Testing	1 – 16 August 2025	2 weeks
3	Data Collection	18 August – 12 September 2025	4 weeks
4	Data cleaning and preparation	15 – 26 September 2025	2 weeks
5	Data analysis	29 September – 24 October 2025	4 weeks
6	Drafting of research report	27 October – 7 November 2025	2 weeks
7	Final editing, proofreading and formatting	10 – 17 November 2025	1 week
8	Final submission	18 – 22 November 2025	1 week

1.26 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

De Vos et al (2011:129) define ethics as a set of widely accepted moral principles that offer rules for, and behavioural expectations of, the most correct conduct towards experimental subjects and participants, employers, sponsors, other researchers, assistants and students. Furthermore, the ethical considerations were aligned to requirements of the Protection of personal Information Act (POPIA) which upholds right to privacy. Of great importance in this research was the permission letter that was issued by the department of education, approving the research to be conducted. *(refer to attached annexture C*)

To this definition, Parveen & Showkat (2017:2) add that “ethics are the moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour and may be referred to as doing what is morally and legally right in research.” It seems as though there is a general consensus about the definition of ethical consideration among authors. More importantly, Bless et al (2008:141-143) have gone a step further in explaining the concept of ethical consideration and have provided the following framework of ethical consideration. The following are considered to be imperative in ethical consideration:

- **Non-Maleficence**

According to Bless et al (2008:141) “The most basic principle of research is that participants should not be harmed in the research project”. The researcher made sure that the participants were not harmed in any way or shape.

- **Confidentiality**

The information that was gathered during the process of the research project will be treated with the outmost confidentiality. The researcher did not use the real names of the participants in the documents that will carry the information that was gathered during the research project. The researcher attached different numbers of the participants to their different documents.

- **Informed consent**

The research participants were informed of what the research entails, their rights, the benefits of participating and the risks that were involved during the research process. The participants were also informed that they may decline to participate in the research and that they would not be harmed should they decline to participate.

- **Discontinuance**

The research participants were informed of the fact that they may discontinue with their participation should they feel that they no longer want to participate. They were able to do so without having to provide an explanation for their decision. Bless et al (2008:141-143)

- **Partiality and fairness**

According to Lange, (2021:1) “Partiality is the special concern that we display for ourselves and other people with whom we stand in some special personal relationship”. Whereas “fairness is about equitable treatment that accounts for different circumstances and needs.” (Oxford review, 2025:1) As a social worker conducting research within ECD settings, the researcher achieved fairness by ensuring all participants were treated equitably, respecting their diverse backgrounds and needs. At the same time, the researcher acknowledged the potential impact of existing relationships with participants as some of them reported directly to the researcher, while other reported to a different social worker.

1.27 OUTLINE OF THE DISSERTATION

In relation to the overall structure of the dissertation, the researcher intends to categorize in chapters which will be the following manner:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction and background to the study**

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly provide an overview of the entire research study; this chapter explains the purpose of the study.

- **Chapter 2: Literature review**.

A literature review goes into deeper details in terms of the literature that is available in relation to the topic. It also provides the gap within the literature and how this research so to fill in that gap.

- **Chapter 3: Research methodology.**

The research methodology section will delve deeper into the methodology chosen and how it is to be used.

- **Chapter 4: Data presentation.**

A detailed breakdown of the results will be discussed, in this chapter, the researcher analyses all the findings and responses from the participants.

- **Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations**

This where all the findings that the researcher accumulated in the study are concluded. The second part of it will be in relation to the recommendations from the perspective of the researcher.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 DEFINITIONS AND SCOPE OF ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY

In the previous chapter, the study described the problem under study and provided a path which will be used in this research. In this chapter, in order to ascertain that conceptual clarity is achieved, this section of research defines the two core constructs that underpin the study: *ethical leadership* and *employee productivity* and explains how these two constructs will be understood and applied within Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings.

2.1.1 Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is broadly defined as the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the reinforcement of such behaviour via decision-making and organisational systems. Ethical leaders serve as moral role models who influence followers' values and behaviours by exemplifying integrity, fairness, accountability and concern for stakeholders (Brown & Treviño, 2006: 596). In the context of ECD, ethical leadership goes beyond compliance with rules as stipulated in Children Act 38 of 2005, chapter 5&6. It includes a moral commitment to child welfare, inclusion, equitable treatment of staff, and transparent engagement with parents of the children and their respective communities.

2.1.2 Employee productivity

Employee productivity in organisational research typically refers to the efficiency and effectiveness with which employees convert inputs (time, effort, skill) into valued outputs (work quality, service delivery, outcomes) (Singh et al., 2022:185). In early education and ECD specifically, productivity should be usefully operationalised as a combination of: (a) observable work behaviours for example, lesson preparation, punctuality, attendance, timeliness of administrative duties), (b) instructional quality and adherence to pedagogical standards, and (c) indirect outcomes such as parent satisfaction, child developmental progress and staff retention rates (Isham et al., 2021;2 Singh, et al., 2022:189).

Assessing productivity in ECD thus requires both process indicators (day-to-day practice) and outcome indicators (child and centre-level results).

2.1.3 Scope of these definitions for this research

For the purposes of this research, *ethical leadership* refers precisely to the leadership behaviours of ECD centre managers/principals/ (including owners where it is applicable) that demonstrate integrity, fairness, transparency, and care in decisions that affect staff, children and families. *Employee productivity* denotes practitioner-level behaviours and outputs pertinent to ECD quality (attendance, lesson preparation, responsive caregiving, compliance with curriculum standards) and proximal centre-level outcomes (staff turnover, parent feedback, basic child outcome measures). Firstly, these operational definitions guide data collection and analysis. Secondly, they align the conceptually broad literature on ethical leadership and productivity with the realities of the ECD sector.

2.2 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY AND ORGANISATION

Ethical leadership will be looked at in relation to employee productivity within ECDs as organisations. Firstly, Pravin *et al* (2025:19) make an argument that there is a relationship between ethical leadership and employee productivity in organisations. Their study examined the concept of ethical leadership against a few themes. Of great importance to this study, is the theme named “ethical leadership contributes to productivity” The graph below showcases these relationships.

Figure 2: Findings on ethical leadership in organisations



Source**:** Pravin *et al* (2025:20)

“The graph above denotes that while 75% of participants agree that ethical leadership enhances productivity, 25% expressed scepticism. This suggests that while ethical practices are recognized for their positive effects on productivity, some believe that other factors such as technology, skills, or market conditions” (Pravin et al, 2025:20)

On another hand, RSM Discovery, (2014:8) add that “research shows that acting ethically can have many positive outcomes for organisations. Employees are more willing to invest effort to work harder, for example, even in activities that are not part of their formal job descriptions. Acting ethically benefits an organisation’s reputation among customers and stakeholders”. Coupled with that sentiment, Pravin *et al* (2025:20) concur with this viewpoint and add that, “ethical leaders set an example by modelling responsible behaviour, which influences employee values and actions. This results in a culture centred around accountability, transparency, and responsibility, ultimately leading to improved organisational performance and success.” In those two separate extracts, a relationship between ethical leadership and employee productivity is made and it further solidifies the basis for the study, more importantly, showing a gap in literature that focuses on the ECD sector which is the focus area of the study.

2.3 CONTRASTING VIEWS AND CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

Although much of the literature support the notion that ethical leadership is as a positive driver of employee productivity. However, the influence of leadership often depends on organisational context, resource availability and broader institutional conditions. These contrary views will be discussed below.

2.3.1 Role of structural and resource constraints

In some environments, particularly within the resource limited sectors such as Early Childhood Development in South Africa, aspects such as poor infrastructure, inadequate funding and low remuneration may undermine leadership effects. Sebola, et al (2024:296) note that even where ethical leadership practices are evident, systemic weaknesses and limited resources may restrain their impact on employee performance.

2.3.2 Influence of working conditions

Isham et al. (2021:4) state that productivity is heavily shaped by worker's well-being and material conditions. In contexts where employees experience burnout, high and demanding workloads or job insecurity, the motivational influence of ethical leadership may be impeded. Productivity gains are therefore not guaranteed unless ethical leadership is accompanied by supportive structural conditions.

2.3.3 Dependence on policy and training

Pravin, et al (2025: 23) In the public sector and educational settings, productivity outcomes are also judged by the quality of policy frameworks and workforce training. If employees are deprived of adequate professional development and policy coherence, ethical leadership alone may not be sufficient to drive performance improvements. In this regard, ethical leadership alone cannot be solemnly responsible for employee productivity. With this in mind, all the contrary views that have been discussed above, prove that the importance of realising that ethical leadership thrives within a context of enabling conditions. For this study, the recognition emphasises that while ethical leadership can improve employee productivity, its effectiveness is influenced by the availability of systemic factors such as resources, training and policy support all of which are of central value in the ECD sector.

2.4 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: JOB SATISFACTION AND ORGANISATIONAL TRANSPARENCY

Another study conducted by Guo (2022) looked at the concept of ethical leadership in relation to two themes, namely, job satisfaction and organisational transparency. These concepts of job satisfaction and organisational commitment are closely related to the theme that is being explored in this research, which is, employee productivity.

2.4.1 Ethical leadership and Job satisfaction

According to a study undertaken by Guo, (2022: 2-3) “The research reveals that leaders exhibiting high ethical standards direct the employees’ work behaviours, subsequently raising their job satisfaction.

The study shows that EL guides employees’ behaviour actions, and attitudes, thereby increasing their work contentment. Ethical leadership actively accelerates employees’ productivity, thereby reporting greater satisfaction Ethical leadership improves organisational performance by integrating moral values into organisations’ practices. EL positively influences the employees’ behaviour, satisfaction and performance” In this study, the findings of that research are brought with the intention of bringing an understanding that of an interplay between ethical leadership and job satisfaction which can be associated with employee productivity.

2.4.2 Ethical leadership and Organisational Transparency

According to a study undertaken by Guo, (2022: 6-10) “The study shows that ethical leaders provide moral information to employees, thus making Organisational Transparency (OT) improve employees’ performance. The study shows that OT strengthens the employees’ engagement, thus fostering employee performance and satisfaction. Employees of highly ethical leaders reported greater organisational commitment in comparison to the employees of less ethical leader. Furthermore, highly ethical top executive leaders in this study were found to have employees who were more committed to their organisations than did less ethical leaders.”

In support of this, Makumbe (2025:64) suggest that “an employee chooses to remain with the organisation because of a sense of commitment and responsibility to the employing organisation. Ethical leaders are responsible for creating an environment that stimulates employees' commitment.” The basis of bringing those themes (job satisfaction and organisational transparency) was to show their influence on employee productivity. From the consulted literature sources, the preliminary literature review seems to suggest that there is no previous research conducted solely within the ECD sector, and more importantly, none looking at an interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within early childhood development sector.

This proves that the study undertaken was researchable and added to the existing knowledge, all in the effort of improving leadership within ECDs.

2.5 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP: PRODUCTIVITY AND MEDIATING MECHANISMS

While existing studies confirm a positive relationship between ethical leadership and productivity, it is also important to clarify *how* this interplay unfolds within the context of organisations. The following subsection will highlight numerous mediating mechanisms through which ethical leadership translates into higher employee productivity.

2.5.1 Trust and psychological safety:

Ethical leaders foster trust by modelling fairness, honesty and accountability. Such leaders enable psychologically safe workplace environments where employees feel safe in voicing concerns, taking initiative and joining forces openly. This sense of safety and trust reduces anxiety and fosters discretionary effort, which enhances overall productivity (Malik & Khan, 2025).

2.5.2 Job satisfaction and organisational commitment:

Ethical leadership is continuously linked to employee job satisfaction and commitment, both of which predict productivity. By treating staff with dignity and respect, ethical leaders foster loyalty and intrinsic motivation, reducing turnover and absenteeism while improving effort and performance (Guo, 2022:3; Makumbe, 2025:64).

2.5.3 Moral identity and self-regulation:

The positive effect of ethical leadership on employee performance may also depend on employees' personal characteristics. For instance, Al Halbusi et al. (2023:2) suggest that followers with strong moral identities and higher self-control are more likely to internalise and act upon their leader's ethical values. This moderated–mediation effect suggests that ethical leadership fosters productivity more strongly when staff members connect with these values.

2.5.4 Work engagement:

Ethical leaders also contribute to higher levels of work engagement vigour, commitment and absorption by ensuring that organisational practices align with moral standards. Engaged employees display greater focus and sustained energy, which directly enhances productivity indicators such as lesson preparation, classroom quality, and responsiveness to children and parents (Al Halbusi et al., 2023:5). All these aspects taken together, strengthen the argument that ethical leadership improves productivity not just through directive authority, but by shaping the relational and psychological environment of the workplace. In ECD centres, this is of great value, as practitioners work in limited resource environment and emotionally demanding workplace where trust, satisfaction and engagement are crucial for sustained performance.

2.6 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AS A MEDIATOR WITHIN THE ECD SECTOR

Ethical leadership has a great impact on the quality of Early Childhood Development (ECD) provision and the implementation of education. At its centre, ECD leadership is innately value-driven, requiring decision-makers to uphold ethical principles such as fairness, inclusion, respect and accountability. Though much of the literature has strived to emphasise pedagogical or administrative dimensions of leadership, there is a mounting recognition that ethical leadership is equally important and relevant for fostering trust, motivating staff and enhancing organisational effectiveness.

In the international context, Van Krieken Robson & Martin (2019: 185) show how early childhood front-runners in England navigate complex ethical dilemmas in progressively commercialised environments.

Their study highlights ethical leadership as a relational and reflective practice grounded in care, justice and responsibility, depicting leaders not merely as managers but as moral figures balancing competing stakeholder needs. Similarly, Palaiologou & Male (2019: 873) conceptualise Early Childhood Education (ECE) leadership as *ethical praxis*, where leaders combine practical wisdom with theory-informed action, therefore inspiring and modelling morally and socially acceptable behaviour. These findings links with the principles of Social Learning Theory, which is at the centre this study.

Comparative insights from Finland demonstrate the institutionalisation of ethical leadership within national frameworks. Melasalmi et al. (2022: 872) display how justice, autonomy and community responsibility are embedded in leadership practices, fostering professional integrity and collaborative cultures. These international cases suggest that ethical leadership is both a personal and systemic responsibility in building quality ECD systems.

In South Africa, however, ethical leadership in ECD is less developed. Modise (2020: 119) argues that pedagogical leadership, often overlapping with ethical leadership, is undermined by a lack of formal training, negatively affecting staff morale and continuity of practice. Similarly, Edwards, et al (2023: 5) highlight that values such as integrity, justice, care and accountability are essential to effective educational leadership across South African schools and are well suited and equally relevant in ECD centres, where leaders operate under limited resource while at the same time, managing vulnerable populations.

In conclusion all of the factors taken together, suggest that ethical leadership is a foundational requirement for quality ECD provision. By creating environments of trust, transparency and professional commitment, ethical leaders improve staff motivation and morale. In turn, this directly contribute to employee productivity not only through directive practices but by cultivating a culture of care and a common purpose within ECD centres.

2.7 LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES WITHIN THE ECD SECTOR

In this section of the literature review, the researcher will focus on the leadership challenges within the ECD sector. Bringing this information forward will assist in better understanding the leadership challenges within the ECD sector, more so, as the topic of this research is centred around leadership.

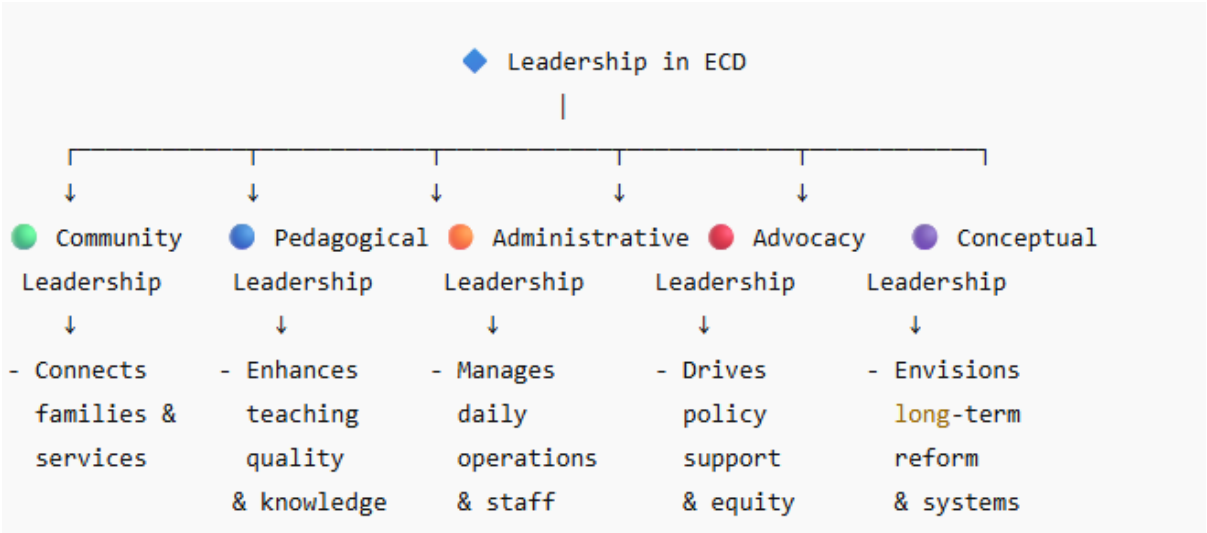
Blose et al. (2021:1) makes a point that “leadership is an essential factor in achieving quality in most educational institutions, research on leadership in ECD centers has been scanty and is dominated by studies conducted in developed countries.” Other researchers concur with this viewpoint and add that “Leadership in ECD has not been a well-researched subject, but currently considerable attention is being paid to the importance of leadership in early childhood.” (Modise, 2020:1) The two statements above further necessitates the significance of this research and points out there is a literature gap that exists in the study of leadership within ECDs.

In order to understand the leadership challenges within the ECD sector, Blose et al. (2021:1) believes that “leaders and staff in ECD centers are often seen as wearing multiple hats, including hats of a mother, teacher, doctor, advocate, and police in order to meet the needs of children.” This notion is supported by Kagan & Hallmark (2001), who strongly assert that leaders in ECDs are often charged with the responsibility of exerting leadership roles in five methods. “Namely, community leadership, pedagogical leadership, administrative leadership, advocacy leadership, and conceptual leadership. The perspective provided above, will be used to illuminate a better understanding of the leadership challenges within the ECD sector.” (Gibs, 2024:8)

- **Community Leadership: “**Community leadership in early care and education aims to consider early care and education according to the needs of particular communities. They go into the community to educate, inform, and construct links among families, available services and resources, and the public and private sectors.

- **Pedagogical Leadership:** They are disseminators of new information to other teachers, as well as to parents and the public. They help focus attention on the gaps of knowledge that need to be filled in order to provide the absolute best for young children.
- **Administrative Leadership:** Administrators have the immense task of dealing with a multitude of issues, such as budgets, personnel, hiring, staff development, community and family outreach, planning, pedagogy, and direct services to children and families. Manager's or director's role is critical to the daily activities of any early care and education program, and their work requires tremendous organizational and communication skills.
- **Advocacy Leadership:** Advocacy leadership is based on a vision, long-term planning, and forward thinking about where we can take the field of early care and education through business policy, public policy, and legislative initiatives.
- **Conceptual Leadership:** Conceptual leadership requires a vision of early care and education that transcends any single organization, program, funding stream, service or policy strategy. A conceptual leader considers early care and education reform within broader social change, as it is linked to other reform and social movements and fields." (Gibs, 2024: 8-9) The graph below denotes a synopsis of Kagan & Hallmark (2001), who strongly sugget that leaders in ECDs are often required to discharge mutlitple roles of leadership using five methods.

Figure 3: Leadership in ECD



Source: Author

Furthermore, according to Blose et al. (2021:2-3) there are three fundamental drawbacks of leadership within ECDs:

"Firstly, the level of educational qualifications for ECD personnel is not regulated. In South Africa there is no prerequisite qualification for teaching in and leading an ECD center. The ECD center principals' level of education may have a direct bearing on the success of centers. Secondly, the lack of training is a cause for concern. Many ECD center principals assume their roles without prior training. Some were moved by passion, while in some cases other people would have seen their leadership ability and then encouraged them to pursue the role. Thirdly, the low salary is another drawback for ECD leaders. The value of any occupation is measured through the salary; if it is sophisticated, the position will be respected.

Unfortunately, the opposite is true for ECD principals, who are the lowest paid when compared to leaders in other educational institutions. Finally, there is no career path in the ECD field." (Blose et al. 2021:2-3)

2.8 ETHICAL LEADERSHIP COMPARED WITH RELATED LEADERSHIP STYLES

Though ethical leadership principles overlaps with other leadership constructs such as transformational, authentic and servant leadership, it is conceptually distinct and unique in relation to both aspects which are emphasis and outcomes. Brown and Mitchell (2010:586) argue that ethical leadership is unique in its explicit moral orientation: while transformational leaders inspire through vision and charisma, authentic leaders emphasise self-awareness and consistency, and servant leaders prioritise serving others, ethical leaders are primarily defined by their role as moral managers who promote fairness, integrity, accountability and justice in organisational life.

Recent scholars (Jackson 2023; Smith 2023; Clark 2023:) support this distinction and highlight that ethical leadership differs by embedding ethics into decision-making systems, policies and everyday practices, rather than focusing solely on individual traits or leader–follower relationships. For ECD leaders, this simply means that ethical leadership is not just about motivating staff but also about modelling fairness in the allocation of uneven resources, showing transparency in parent–community engagement, and strengthening accountability in curriculum delivery and child welfare.

Thus, understanding these salient differences is at the heart of this study. While other leadership styles may also positively influence employee performance, ethical leadership is particularly and well positioned to the ECD sector where leaders are desperately needed to act as moral exemplars. This is done with the dual purpose of, firstly, to safeguard both the wellbeing of vulnerable children and secondly, to ensure the professional integrity of practitioners. This moral foundation enables and positions ethical leadership as a central construct for exploring its relationship with employee productivity in ECD centres.

2.9 OPERATIONALISING EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY IN ECD

Although employee productivity is broadly discussed in organisational research, measuring it within (ECD) sector needs context-sensitive indicators that will reflect both process and outcome dimensions. Generic measures such as output per employee or efficiency ratios may not be able to do justice in capturing the relational and pedagogical nature of early education work. Instead, productivity in ECD can be conceptualised across three levels: individual, organisational and outcomes based.

2.9.1 Individual-level indicators

At the practitioner level, productivity can be assessed through observable behaviours such as punctuality, attendance, lesson preparation, responsiveness to children, and effective classroom management. These behaviours are direct reflections of an employee's work ethic and alignment with pedagogical standards (Singh et al. 2022:190).

2.9.2 Organisational-level indicators

At the centre level, productivity may be seen in staff retention rates, low absenteeism, timely completion of administrative duties, and effective teamwork. Isham et al. (2021:6) strongly argue that organisational climates which foster employee wellbeing are positively correlated with these indicators, thereby strengthening the idea that ethical leadership indirectly sustains productivity through supportive culture.

2.9.3 Outcomes-based indicators

Productivity in ECD is also related to outcomes for children and families. While child developmental outcomes are moulded by multiple factors, such as consistent instructional quality, strong parent–teacher relationships and high levels of employee engagement serve as proxies for employee productivity. Parent satisfaction surveys and compliance with curriculum implementation requirements may thus, be incorporated as practical measures (Isham et al. 2021:6).

Operationalising productivity in these ways ensures that it is not treated as a narrow economic metric but as a multi-dimensional construct aligned with the broader goals of ECD. This approach is crucial to this study, as it positions productivity as both a behavioural and organisational outcome that can be influenced by ethical leadership practices.

2.10 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The reviewed literature suggests that ethical leadership influences employee productivity not in a direct linear manner, but through a set of psychological and organisational mechanisms. These mechanisms may include trust, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and work engagement, which mediate the relationship between leadership and productivity (Al Halbusi et al., 2023;4 Malik & Khan, 2025:6).In ECD settings, where practitioners are often faced with the reality of resource constraints, ethical leadership also contributes by fostering transparency, modelling fairness in resource allocation, and creating a climate of professional respect (Atmore, 2019; 18 Department of Basic Education, 2022:20).

The conceptual framework for this research therefore suggest that ethical leadership displayed by ECD centre principals or managers moulds employee attitudes and behaviours through role modelling, trust-building, and reinforcing moral standards. These attitudes expressed as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and engagement in turn enhance employee productivity, observed in both behavioural (attendance, lesson preparation, teamwork) and organisational outcomes (staff retention, parent satisfaction, compliance with curriculum standards).

However, and most importantly, this relationship also depends on contextual conditions, such as training opportunities, sufficient resources, and supportive policy frameworks (Sebola, et al. 2024:297).This conceptual model combines both the theoretical insights from Social Learning Theory and the practical realities of the South African ECD sector. It provides the analytical lens through which the empirical research will explore the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity.

2.11 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY)

The theoretical framework underpinning this study is based on Social Learning Theory (SLT) which helps to shape the understanding of the research. This theory will be explained within the context of the study and aligned to the research topic. A theoretical framework provides the foundation for understanding these factors by linking key concepts and previous research. The following subsections will discuss Social Learning Theory and align it to the topic.

2.11.1 Social Learning Theory

Mandal, (2023:265) provides a basic definition of the concept of SLT and writes that “Social Learning Theory posits that people learn not only through direct experiences but also by observing others and imitating their actions. It emphasizes the role of social interactions, modelling, and cognitive processes in shaping behaviour.” In relation to this study, this theory is important as briefly explained in the extract below.

Brown et al (2006:597) explain the concept of social learning theory and adds that:

> “Social Learning Theory helps to explain why and how ethical leaders influence their followers. It is based on the idea that individuals learn by paying attention to and emulating the attitudes, values and behaviours of attractive and credible models. Most individuals look outside themselves to other individuals for ethical guidance. Ethical leaders are likely sources of guidance because their attractiveness and credibility as role models draw attention to their modelled behaviour. Power and status are two characteristics of models that enhance their attractiveness, thus making it more likely that followers will pay attention to ethical leaders' modelled behaviour”.

This research will use the explanations of SLT as provided above to clarify how ethical leaders influence employee productivity by modelling values and behaviours." While this view is widely maintained, it is acknowledged that individual cognition and contextual factors also shape ethical behaviour, as noted by scholars such as Bandura (1986) & Hofstede (2001). Contrary views of this theory suggest that people do not just simply emulate the leader, they assess, think and act for themselves." (Hofstede, 2001:387). Nonetheless, this study adopts the explanation offered by Brown et al. (2006) as a theoretical framework that underpins this study.

2.11.2 Relevance of Social Learning Theory to research topic

Social Learning Theory (SLT) was propounded by Bandura (1977), it offers a compelling lens through which to inspect how ethical leadership shapes employee behaviour within Early Childhood Development (ECD) settings. Of great importance to this theory is the premise that individuals acquire attitudes, values, and behaviours by simply observing credible and attractive role models. Ethical leaders, by virtue of their power and status, command attention and serve as behavioural exemplars whose conduct influences followers.

In ECD settings, where ethical challenges and interpersonal dynamics regularly arise, staff may look to their leaders for ethical guidance. Through processes such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, employees internalise and imitate the moral standards modelled by their leaders. This theoretical foundation not only shows the mechanisms through which leadership affects employee productivity but also strengthens the role of ethical modelling in fostering a positive organisational climate, enhancing retention, and cultivating professional integrity among ECD practitioners, which is a desirable outcome.

The basic alignment between social learning theory and ethical leadership in relation to employee productivity is captured diagrammatically through Figure 3

Figure 4: Ethical leadership and social learning theory in an organisation



Source: Author, 2025

Figure 3, illustrates a progressive flow of influence, beginning with the ethical leader, whose authority and credibility naturally attract attention. Their actions are closely observed and cognitively processed by followers, who internalise the values demonstrated. This process leads to imitation, whereby followers incorporate similar ethical behaviours into their own conduct.

As these individuals develop into role models themselves, the effect is amplified, gradually fostering a broader ethical culture within the organisation and employee productivity. Within the ECD sector, ethical leaders such as principals or owners serve as direct role models for practitioners, and their behaviour influences their junior colleagues. When they act ethically, this can have a positive effect that may extend to employee productivity.

2.12 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 has chronologically brought forward the recent and pertinent journals. Furthermore, the majority of journals and articles consulted for this study were published within the period 2020–2025, aligning with the requirements of research that must be timely. Approximately 90% of the sources fall within this timeframe, thereby demonstrating that the analysis is based on the most up-to-date literature on ethical leadership and employee productivity. This further provides credibility of the study and makes it relevant to the challenges of the modern society and likely to contribute to the ongoing ethical debate within the public sector. All the themes, the subtopics are all relevant to the topic of the study and are pertinent to discussion of the study. The next chapter will focus on methodology and advance reasons for selecting a particular methodology.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on outlining the methodological framework adopted to explore the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector. The selection of the appropriate methodology is significant, as it directly influences the outcomes of the research. As Atmore (2019:73) explains, “qualitative approaches assist in understanding how experiences acquire meaning through planful, systematic, and empirical inquiry.”

The structure of this chapter will include sections such as research paradigm, research approach and design, population and sampling, role of the researcher, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness of the study, ethical considerations, limitations of the methodology and summary of the chapter.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

According to Kivunja et al. (2023:5), a paradigm is essentially a theoretical framework. It provides the sum of a set of hypotheses, ontology, epistemology, and methods for scientific research and is generally accepted by researchers. The paradigm conforms to the understanding of people’s knowledge and reality and lays the foundation for all philosophically based scientific research. Furthermore, according to Antwi & Hamza (2015:217-226), the three primary paradigms are constructivism, positivism and interpretivism. In addition to selecting an appropriate research paradigm, Alharahsheh & Pius (2021:420) advise that researchers use different paradigms depending on the purposes of research and the positions they carry in their research. Based on the research paradigm, the research questions and objectives are explored, therefore understating the paradigm in conducting research is crucial.

Thus, for the purpose of this research, the researcher will make use of interpretivism. The reason for selecting this paradigm is that the researcher intends to understand the phenomena from the participant’s perspective.

Interpretivism is the interconnection between the research and the research subject, and it is more concerned with the meaning, voice, standpoint, experience, thoughts, and feelings expressed by the individual (Kivunja et al. 2023:5). This paradigm will enable the researcher to gain insightful understanding of participants perspective on the phenomena. More so as literature has shown a gap within the area of ethical leadership and employee productivity within the ECD sector. Thus, employing this paradigm could contribute to the priorities of government and the targets of the SDGs.

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

In this study, the research approach is located within a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research is a type of research that explores and provides deeper insights into real-world problems. Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behaviour. It answers the how's and whys instead of questions regarding how many or how much. (Pathak, 2025:1) Nwogu, et al. (2023:1) add that "qualitative research methods refer to techniques of investigation that rely on nonstatistical and nonnumerical methods of data collection, analysis, and evidence production. Qualitative research techniques provide a lens for learning about nonquantifiable phenomena such as people's experiences." Thus, a qualitative methodology is well positioned and suitable for uncovering how ethical leadership influences employee productivity within ECD contexts.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

In relation to the research design of this study, phenomenology will be used as a pathway to understand the lived experiences of the participants. Tavakol & Sandars, (2025:1) suggest that "Phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that seeks to deeply understand an individual's world of lived experience, which is often referred to as their lifeworld. The lived experience of an individual is the way that they encounter and engage with the world around them, through their actions, emotions, thoughts, and senses. In a phenomenological research study, the focus is on understanding the lived experience of study participants, especially how they perceive, experience and make sense of the phenomenon being studied. The purpose of phenomenological research is always to explore each individual's unique interpretation of an experience."

“The function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible” (Atmore, 2019:73). Furthermore, De Vos et al (2011:316) state that “at the root of phenomenology is the intent to understand the phenomena under study on their own terms and therefore to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the subjects allowing the essence to emerge.” This aligns directly with the study’s aim of exploring the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the ECD sector. Furthermore, phenomenology complements the interpretivist paradigm, both being rooted in understanding meaning from participants’ perspectives.

3.5 TARGET POPULATION AND SAMPLING STRATEGY

This subsection will focus on three related concepts under consideration, namely, target population, sampling size and saturation and lastly sampling technique.

3.5.1 Target population

Alvi (2016:10) describes the target population as members who meet the particular criterion specified for a research investigation. The target population comprises of owners/principals and practitioners who are operating their ECD’s within the study area. The target population for this study consists of 24 registered Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres within the designated study area.

3.5.2 Sampling size and saturation

De Vos et al. (2011:391) mentions that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility and what can be done with the available time and resources.” The sample size will be incorporated in line with factors such as data saturation. According to Mwita, (2022:1) “data saturation refers to a point at which the researcher finds out that all the needed data have been collected and there is no any new relevant information or data that can be collected from the respondents or subjects of the study.”

It seems as though there is a general consensus on the concept of data saturation. On the other hand, Fusch et al. (2015: 1408) add a somewhat different perspective on the concept of data saturation and adds that “the concept of data saturation is difficult to define. The reason is because what is data saturation for one is not nearly enough for another. There is no *one-size fits* all method to reach data saturation. Data saturation can be attained by as little as six interviews depending on the sample size.” In alignment with that definition, in this study, a sample of 12 participants out of 24 ECDs within the study area will be selected. Purposive sampling will be used in this regard.

3.5.3 Sampling Technique

“Purposive sampling is a population sampling process in which a researcher selects research participants based on their presence in a population of interest, characteristics, experiences, or other criteria” (Straten, 2024:1). “It is a form of non-probability sampling in which decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria which may include in-depth knowledge of the research issue, or capacity and willingness to participate in the research” (Rai & Thapa, 2015:5). For this purpose of this research, purposive sampling will be in line with the definition that is provided above, that is, the prospective sample of this research have in-depth knowledge on matters of ECD.

3.6 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

In this study, the researcher seeks to explore an interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the early childhood development sector. Therefore, in achieving that objective, the researcher recruited the research participants by using the existing database of ECD’s that are registered and funded. It is worth reporting that the researcher is a social worker working in the department of education under the directorate of ECD in JB Marks municipality. Permission was sought to make use of the database. In relation to the selection of participants, they were chosen from each section of the study area.

3.6.1 Positionality

In order to ascertain that the aspect of positionality is considered and carefully adhered to, the researcher acknowledges their positionality as a social worker with existing professional relationships with (ECD) centres in the study area. This insider position is expected to facilitate access to participants and foster trust, as the researcher is familiar with the operational context and challenges faced by ECD practitioners. However, it is also recognised that prior relationships may influence participants' responses, either through social desirability bias or perceptions of authority. To mitigate these risks, the researcher maintained a reflective stance, ensuring that data collection and analysis were conducted objectively. Informed consent, confidentiality measures, and neutral questioning techniques was employed to minimise power imbalances and encourage authentic responses. Transparency about the researcher's role and purpose was communicated to all participants to maintain ethical integrity.

3.6.2 Reflexivity

"Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome" (Berger, 2015:2). According to Darawsheh, (2014,561) "Reflexivity refers to the continuous process of self-reflection that researchers engage in to generate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions."

Bearing in mind the researcher's insider position as a social worker within the ECD sector, reflexivity was maintained throughout the data collection process. A reflexive journal was kept in order to record assumptions, decisions, and potential influences after each stage of the study. Professional and research roles were clearly distinguished during interactions to reduce power dynamics. Furthermore, the assistance of the social work supervisor was sought to ensure that this aspect is maintained. It should also be noted that the researcher was amenable to recommendations that may be deemed necessary from the ethics committee. These measures aimed to enhance the credibility and confirmability of the study while acknowledging the influence of the researcher's positionality.

3.7 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The following subsection will focus on the data collection methods and explain how the process unfolded.

3.7.1 Semi-structured interview

According to Magaldi & Berler, (2020:1) The semi-structured interview is an exploratory interview used most often in qualitative research purposes or to gather clinical data. While it generally follows a guide or protocol that is devised prior to the interview and is focused on a core topic to provide a general structure, the semi-structured interview also allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds.

Furthermore, Naz, et al. (2022:44-45) explain the concept of semi-structured interview and explain the three principles the researcher should be mindful of questions within a semi-structured interview. Semi-structured interviews balance structure and flexibility, using pre-determined open-ended questions that can change order depending on the discussion flow. This method ensures all key topics are covered while allowing deeper exploration of responses. It follows three principles: specification for focus, division for proper wording, and tacit assumption for interpreting underlying meanings (Naz, et al. 2022:44-45). For the purpose of this research, the researcher used semi-structured interview as a tool to understand the lived experience of research participants, especially how they perceive, experience and think about the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity.

The following is a structure of the semi-structured Interview Guide

- Section A: Background Information (Warm-up)
- Section B: Ethical Leadership Practices (RQ1 → Obj1)
- Section C: Daily Work Experiences (RQ2 → Obj2)
- Section D: Perceptions of Productivity (RQ3 → Obj3)
- Section E: Closing Reflections

3.7.2 Data collection procedure

Data was collected over a two-week period; a date will be communicated to the prospective participants. However, the process of data collection only unfolded after the approval of the study by the ethics committee. In relation to the venue, the researcher. ensured that the venue secured was in close proximity to the participants. Especially because the target group of the study sometimes had to travel to office of the researcher, if a venue that was in close proximity with the participants was not secured.

3.8 DATA ANALYSIS

Once data collection had been completed, the researcher undertook a process of data coding and analysis. Data coding involved organising responses with the aim of identifying themes or patterns of open-ended questions into common themes. This process. enabled the efficient entry and preparation of data for analysis. The method mentioned below was used.

3.8.1 Thematic Analysis

To arrive at a study that would enable ease of data analysis, the researcher used thematic analysis. “Thematic analysis is a method to analyse qualitative data. It involves the identification and reporting of patterns in a data set, which are then interpreted for their inherent meaning these patterns can be found on the basis of understanding the meaning of keywords used by participants” (Naeem et al, 2023:2)

A detailed method of what and how these steps were used is discussed below:

- **“Step 1: Transcription, Familiarization with the Data, and Selection of Quotations:** This is the initial phase of the thematic analysis process. It involves the transcription of data and familiarising oneself with it.
- **Step 2: Selection of Keywords:** This phase involves close examination of the data, be it from interviews, focus groups, or visual content. Researchers identify recurring patterns, terms, or visual elements and designate them as keywords.
- **Step 3: Coding:** In the third step, coding, short phrases or words, known as codes, are assigned to segments of data that capture the data’s core message, significance, or theme.

- **Step 4: Theme Development:** Theme development involves organising codes into meaningful groups to identify patterns and relationships, thereby offering insights into the research question.
- **Step 5: Conceptualization Through Interpretation of Keywords, Codes, and Themes:** This step, conceptualization, involves understanding and defining concepts emerging from the data. Researchers identify social patterns and refine them into definitions that align with their research.
- **Step 6: Development of Conceptual Model:** The final step in the thematic analysis is the development of a conceptual model. This process involves creating a unique representation of the data and it is often guided by existing theories." (Naeem et al, 2023:2-5)

3.9 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE STUDY

The study seeks to explore an interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within the ECDs. Thus, in pursuit of a trustworthy study, the researcher incorporated the concept of trustworthiness as explained by Shenton, (2004:64-72) who provides a step-by-step approach of what researchers can incorporate in their pursuit of achieving trustworthiness.

- **"Credibility (in preference to internal validity):** "How congruent are the findings with reality?"
- **Transferability (in preference to external validity/generalisability):** is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations"
- **Dependability (in preference to reliability):** if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained.
- **Confirmability (in preference to objectivity):** steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher." (Shenton, 2004: 64-72)

In this research, to ensure credibility, the researcher intended to check the findings with participants to see if they agree. In relation to transferability, the researcher will share the findings with the Dr Kenneth Kaunda district within the office of the ECD district coordinator, in the hope that the findings may be applied to the entire district. However, that will be depended upon timely planning in relation to the availability of the ECD directorate officials. The researcher will keep the records of the research so that the process can be repeated to ascertain its dependability. Lastly, as for confirmability, the researcher used quotes and notes from participants to show the findings are based on their views and not the view of the researcher. Furthermore, to ensure trustworthiness of the research, the researcher consulted the services of a registered language editor, (refer to annexture B)

3.10 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

De Vos et al (2011:129) define ethics as a set of widely accepted moral principles that offer rules for, and behavioural expectations of, the most correct conduct towards experimental subjects and participants, employers, sponsors, other researchers, assistants and students. Furthermore, the ethical consideration were aligned to requirements of the Protection of personal Information Act (POPIA) which upholds right to privacy.

To this definition, Parveen & Showkat (2017:2) add that “ethics are the moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour and may be referred to as doing what is morally and legally right in research.” It seems as though there is a general consensus about the definition of ethical consideration among authors. More importantly, Bless et al (2008:141) have gone a step further in explaining the concept of ethical consideration and have provided the following framework of ethical consideration. The following are considered to be imperative in ethical consideration:

- **Non-Maleficence**

According to Bless et al (2008:141) “The most basic principle of research is that participants should not be harmed in the research project”. The researcher ascertained that the participants were not harmed in any way.

- **Confidentiality**

The information that was gathered during the process of the research project will be treated with the outmost confidentiality. The researcher will not use the real names of the participants in the documents that will be having the information that was gathered during the research project. The researcher attached different numbers of the participants to their different documents.

- **Informed consent**

The research participants were informed of what the research entails, their rights, the benefits of participating and the risks that were involved during the research process. The participants were also informed that they may decline to participate in the research and that they would not be harmed should they decline to participate.

- **Discontinuance**

The research participants were informed of the fact that they may discontinue with their participation should they feel that they no longer want to participate. They could do so without having to provide an explanation for their decision, as per Bless et al (2008:142)

- **Partiality and fairness**

According to Lange, (2021:1) “Partiality is the special concern that we display for ourselves and other people with whom we stand in some special personal relationship”. Whereas “fairness is about equitable treatment that accounts for different circumstances and needs.” (Oxford review, 2025:1) As a social worker conducting research within ECD settings, the researcher intended to achieve fairness by ensuring all participants were treated equitably, respecting their diverse backgrounds and needs. At the same time, the researcher acknowledged the potential impact of existing relationships with participants as some of them reported directly to the researcher, while others reported to a different social worker.

3.11 SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 outlined the methodological framework adopted to explore an interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within (ECD) centres. Anchored in an interpretivist paradigm, the study embraces a qualitative, phenomenological approach to uncover participants lived experiences and perceptions. The research design is guided by purposive sampling, targeting 12 participants from the registered and funded ECD centres, selected for their relevance and in-depth knowledge into ethical leadership practices. Data was collected using semi-structured interview, structured into thematic sections and most importantly, aligned with the study's objectives.

To guarantee analytical rigour of the research, thematic analysis was employed, involving transcription, coding, and theme development, culminating in a conceptual model. The study's trustworthiness was upheld and guided by the steps provided by Shenton's (2004) framework. The chapter concludes by acknowledging ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and compliance with POPIA.

CHAPTER 4 DATA PRESENTATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher provides a comprehensive discussion of the data collection process, which, in this study, was conducted through semi-structured interviews with twelve participants. These participants are professionals working within the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector in the JB Marks Municipality. The chapter primarily focuses on the procedures followed during data collection and the benefits of choosing semi-structured interviews as the preferred method, given their flexibility in allowing participants to express their views in depth.

In addition, the use of ATLAS.ti facilitated advanced data management and analysis through functions such as *Intentional Coding*. Intentional Coding is an artificial intelligence-assisted function within ATLAS.ti that allows researchers to automate aspects of the coding process by applying a specific analytical lens aligned with the research objectives Intentional AI Coding is particularly useful for enhancing accuracy and consistency in data interpretation. (Sybing, 2024:1). For the purposes of this study, the researcher employed this function by insetting the research objectives into the software to ensure that the automatically generated codes were closely aligned with the research focus and relevant to the study context.

Furthermore, the chapter elaborates on how the collected data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method enabled the researcher to identify, analyse, and interpret key themes emerging from the data systematically. Of particular significance in this chapter is the researcher's utilisation of ATLAS.ti software to ensure that the findings are credible, trustworthy, and grounded in the data. The table below denotes the process and approach of how data was analysed as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Table 5: Process of the thematic analysis

Step	Description
Data collection	The responses were collected from ECD Practitioners working in different ECDs' within the study area, JB Marks municipality. The responses that were sought was in relation to their understanding of ethical leadership and its link to employee productivity.
Familiarisation with data	In this research, the researcher undertook this process by initially transcribing the raw data from semi-structed interviews. The second part was for the researcher to read and read actively in the effort of searching for meanings. This process was done repeatedly to ensure accuracy.
Generating initial Codes	The researcher made use of ATLAS.ti software. More pertinently, used the Intentional Code within the ATLAS.ti which allowed the researcher to match the codes against objectives of the research, to ensure alignment.
Searching for themes	The researcher made use of the function of the ATLAS.ti which is called Group coding. This is helpful in that it organises codes into thematic or conceptual categories (Sybing (2024:1). The words that were predominantly used by participants in their responses such as: *leader, teacher, honesty, work, teamwork, role, fairness,* etc., were used as basis of forming a theme.
Reviewing Themes	In this regard the "candidate themes" were all reviewed with the intention of ensuring that they capture the essence of the participants perceptions and the objectives of the study. Three main themes were reviewed.
Defining and naming themes	For this study, the themes were identified are Ethical leadership practices, Daily work experiences and leadership-productivity link.
Writing the report	The final report is to be given better expression in chapter 5, it will be written alongside themes and findings.

Source: Author

Lastly, this chapter also presents the demographic profile of participants, followed by an in-depth discussion of the key themes and findings that emerged from the analysis. The chapter then explores how ethical leadership links to employee productivity. Thus, the key questions that are central in this chapter include:

- How do ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices in their centres?
- In what ways do employees experience these leadership practices in their work?
- How do employees perceive the relationship between ethical leadership and their productivity?

4.2 PARTICIPANT PROFILE

This section provides an overview of the demographic and professional characteristics of the twelve participants who voluntarily took part in the study. The participants were all practitioners although some juggled two roles, they were all working in Early ECD centres within the study area. Presenting their profiles helps to contextualise the findings by illustrating the range of experience, qualifications, and work environments represented in the study. Understanding these characteristics provides deeper insight into how different practitioners may perceive ethical leadership and its influence on their productivity.

Table 6: Participants profile

Participant	Experience	Qualification	Position
Participant No:1	4 years	Bachelor of Arts in Psychology Sociology and Sociology	Practitioner/Administrator
Participant No:2	5 years	Certificate for Child line and Bafenyi	Practitioner
Participant No:3	19 years	Level 5	Practitioner
Participant No:4	2 years	Level 5	Practitioner
Participant No:5	3 years	Level 4	Practitioner
Participant No:6	7 years	Level 5	Practitioner
Participant No:7	2 years	Grade 12	Practitioner

Participant No:8	2 years	Level 4	Practitioner
Participant No:9	2 years	Level 4	Practitioner
Participant No:10	9 years	Level 5	Practitioner
Participant No:11	18 years	Level 4	Practitioner/Administrator
Participant No:12	10 years	Grade 12	Practitioner

Source: Author

In order to ensure that the study used the right participants, the researcher used the criteria below was used as a guiding structure:

Inclusion criteria: In this study, participants were selected from registered Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres that are registered and in terms of the compliance requirements contained in chapter 5&6 of the Children' Act 38 of 2005 and are funded and formally recognised by the Department of Basic Education. These centres had a formal management or leadership structure, and practitioners had at least six months of work experience within the same centre. This is essentially to ensure that the participants have adequate exposure to leadership dynamics and workplace practices.

Exclusion criteria: ECD centres that are unregistered and do not meet the compliance requirements contained in chapter 5&6 of the Children' Act 38 of 2005 were excluded from the study. This was to ensure consistency in organisational governance structures and leadership practices, as unregistered centres may operate outside formal frameworks and lack standardised leadership roles, making them unsuitable for the purposes of this research. Temporary staff, interns, and employees with less than six months of service were also excluded to maintain the depth of experiential insight required for a phenomenological inquiry.

4.3 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Table 7: thematic analysis

Theme	Code	Description
1. Ethical Leadership Practices	Perceptions of ethical leadership	Participants identified integrity, fairness, and transparency as core features of what they perceive to be ethical leadership. Leaders who demonstrated honesty and treated all staff equally were seen as trustworthy and respectable
2. Daily Work Experiences	Perceptions of daily work experiences	Practitioners highlighted that ethical leadership involves work-relational support, empathy, and open communication. Leaders who listen, offer guidance, and encourage teamwork contribute to a positive and emotionally healthy work environment.
3. Leadership-Productivity Link	Perception of leadership-productivity link	Practitioners' perceptions of the connection between ethical leadership and their productivity. Participants expressed that fair and supportive leadership practices enhanced their motivation and work commitment.

Source: Author

The thematic analysis mentioned above examines the perceptions of practitioners who are from the study area of JB Mark municipality from different ECDs. In this subsection, the researcher will explore the three main themes namely, ethical leadership practices, daily work experiences and leadership-productivity link. More importantly, this sub-section will be discussed by incorporating the research objectives and questions. The researcher will use some of the actual questions that were asked in the semi-structed interview to elucidate an understanding of the findings.

4.3.1 Theme 1: Ethical leadership practices

This section of the interview guide focused on ethical leadership practices. Importantly, this section was aligned to the following research objective and question:

Research objective 1:

- To examine how ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices such as fairness, accountability, transparency, and role modelling.

Research question 1:

- How do ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices in their centres?

Participants were asked: *"When you hear the term ethical leadership, what does it mean to you in the context of this centre?"*

Participant 1 answered:

> *"According to my understanding when I get to hear about ethical leader, I'm considering it as someone who is open, fair and transparent and honest leader who knows that, not that they disregard themselves, but they must know that my people come first. I know that leaders also have needs, they are more concerned about the people they are leading. More especially in this context we are looking into ECD crèche, in this instance it's someone who will always put the children in the forefront. The practitioners, the stuff members, someone that is honest and shows respect to their stuff members, someone that creates a safe and nurturing environment for these kids".*

Participants 4 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"When I arrived here, I was a volunteer and she was honest with me and told me that we don't have money in this ECD but if your work is satisfactory, I will see what I can do about it. We can work and take it from there. And then after three months she indeed hired me on a permanent basis that proved honesty to me."*

Participants 3 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"'I remember in 2007 in the ECD, I didn't have qualification at the time, I was assisting in the kitchen. After an opportunity was provided to people like us who didn't have qualifications at the time, our leader shown an interest in me getting a qualification. That's when I saw that my leader has vision that is inclusive of us and gave us that opportunity and that is when fairness."*

Participants 9 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"What I can say is, transparency is, I mean, like my manager is open about everything that involves the staff. She is always open about it. For instance, when there's a delay with our stipends or money. And you know that money is a big problem, so we want to know, so when it comes to money, we want to know what's happening and stuff. She's very open about it, she keeps us updated, every step taken so far."*

Participants 8 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"To me it means someone who takes accountability, who is honest, who has integrity and treats everyone fairly."*

These key responses indicate that ethical leadership is directly linked to employee morale and job satisfaction. The participants associated fairness, open communication, and respect with increased motivation. From an analytical perspective, this finding supports the idea that ethical leadership enhances intrinsic motivation, as suggested by Brown and Treviño (2006), who argue that moral leaders promote ethical climates that inspire employee commitment.

Ethical leaders serve as moral role models who influence followers' values and behaviours by exemplifying integrity, fairness, accountability and concern for stakeholders (Brown & Treviño, 2006: 596). Supported by Pravin *et al* (2025:20) who add that, "ethical leaders set an example by modelling responsible behaviour, which influences employee values and actions. This results in a culture centred around accountability, transparency, and responsibility, ultimately leading to improved organisational performance and success."

It seems as though there is a general consensus to this viewpoint from literature, as a point of departure, Malik & Khan (2025:376) believe that ethical leaders foster trust by modelling fairness, honesty and accountability. Such leaders enable psychologically safe workplace environments where employees feel safe in voicing concerns, taking initiative and joining forces openly. This sense of safety and trust reduces anxiety and fosters discretionary effort, which enhances overall productivity.

Furthermore, the results align with the thematic analysis conducted using ATLAS.ti, where codes such as *"fair treatment," "trust,"* and *"supportive management"* were clustered under the broader theme of *Ethical Leadership Practices.* The most frequently applied codes such as *Leadership Impact: Productivity* and *Ethical Leadership: openness* indicate dominant areas of discussion across the data. Furthermore, the co-occurrence of codes such as *motivation* and *productivity* further revealed strong conceptual linkages between leadership behaviour and employee outcomes. The coding frequency per document (with Participant 1 and Participant 3 contributing the most coded segments) reflects the depth and richness of data across participants. This pattern suggests that employees perceive ethical and supportive leadership as central to fostering trust, fairness, and inclusivity in the organisational context.

4.3.2 Theme 2: Daily work practices

Research objective 2:

- To explore in what ways these leadership practices are experienced in daily work.

Research question 2:

- In what ways do employees experience these leadership practices in their work?

Participants were asked: *How does leadership behaviours influence you daily work practices?*

Participants 3 replied:

> "*If I remember well, she is person who is supportive and in areas where she lacks, she suggests that we do research. For example, she is able to assist us, with regards to our filing and for each class to have their own file according to their age group. In other instance, when she is not here, we are not the type of employees who don't work when she is at work. Even when she is not here and arrives, she knows that work will be done accordingly. She has trust in us."*

Participants 10 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"For me, mostly positively, we have a lot of fun together, not like every day, say once in a month, let's say you're feeling negative, she changes the environment."*

Participants 8 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"She would always come in and motivate us, so for me I go through a lot with my personal life, and I feel that she is a mentor to me. And whatever I'm dealing with at home, I can come here and listen to her positive motivation, and just as well give me guidance and on what else I can do and improve with regards to the interaction with learners. I learn something new every day just by having her as a mentor. So, she motivates me in areas that I lack and in areas in where I'm good at, she just houses me."*

Participants 3 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"She is person who is helpful, and she is a kind of a leader who doesn't put pressure on an employee. Even when you have forgotten to do a certain task in relation to teaching children, she will kindly remind you of it. For example, last week you taught them this theme, you can't repeat the same thing again. So the way she does things, she is able to able to remind me of my duties in way that is*

professional. More so, as she is a leader who is knowledgeable. So I'm able to do my work effectively."

Participants 2 responded in this manner to the same question:

"Very positive because of the work environment is ok."

Participants 6 responded in this manner to the same question:

"It influences positively because every time I want resources from her office, she makes sure that I have all my resources to do my daily work."

And lastly, participants 7 responded in this manner to the same question:

"Where I came from, where I worked before, I had to do everything. There wasn't a basic direction, so when I came here, I encountered that there's a leader who leads us, who shows us what to do. And in terms of salaries and all, we used to get half of the pay, but now with the new leader, we get full salary at the end of the month. End of the month is end of the month, she sticks to it, there's no problems. Like you're not going to get this, you're not going to get that, she communicates with us. In terms of when there's money coming in, she calls us all, she doesn't go corner to corner, she calls all of us. So, this is the thing, I'm doing this and this. She gives us all to share."

In the second round of analysis, the researcher's approach was to identify meaningful relationships between leadership behaviour and daily experience. Out of the twelve participants a snippet of participants' direct quotation as shown above, indicates that participants viewed support, communication, motivation collaboration, and leading by example as key elements of effective leadership. The co-occurrence of codes such as *teamwork* and *collaboration* demonstrates how participants linked leadership behaviour with collective performance and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the participants consistently discussed how ethical leadership, guidance, and mentorship influence daily work experiences. This pattern suggests that employees perceive ethical and supportive leadership as central to fostering trust and inclusivity in the organisational context.

In the literature, Guo, (2022: 2-3) asserts that: leaders exhibiting high ethical standards direct the employees' work behaviours, subsequently raising their job satisfaction. The study shows that EL guides employees' behaviour actions, and attitudes, thereby increasing their work contentment. Ethical leadership actively accelerates employees' productivity, thereby reporting greater satisfaction

Ethical leadership improves organisational performance by integrating moral values into organisations' practices. EL positively influences the employees' behaviour, satisfaction and performance. Furthermore, the aspect ethical leader and their direct influence on employee behaviour is better expressed by Pravin (2025) who emphasises that ethical leaders set an example by modelling responsible behaviour, which influences employee values and actions. This results in a culture centred around accountability, transparency, and responsibility, ultimately leading to improved organisational performance and success (Pravin *et al,* 2025:20).

As a point of emphasis, in relation to thematic analysis conducted using ATLAS.ti, this network captures the lived experiences of ECD employees as they navigate daily work under the influence of ethical leadership. Codes such as *professionalism*, *teamwork*, and *collaboration* suggest that ethical leadership fosters a culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility. The presence of the use of words such as *communication, motivation and support* indicates that leadership practices are not abstract ideals but are embedded in the practical rhythms of work planning, executing, and reflecting on tasks. Most importantly, these practices are not only technical but also interpersonal, shaped by leaders who positively change the work environment. They provide guidance and cultivate trust. This theme aligns with Objective 2, revealing that ethical leadership is experienced through tangible work processes and relational dynamics that shape employee engagement and productivity.

4.3.3 Theme 3: Leadership -productivity link

Research objective 3:

- To understand how employees perceive the relationship between ethical leadership and their productivity.

Research question 3:

- How do employees perceive the relationship between ethical leadership and their productivity?

Participants were asked: *In your view, what does employee productivity mean in an ECD centre?*

Participants 6 replied:

> *"If you have a leader that is always encouraging you and looking at something that is small in a bigger way, in a bigger light, encouraging you to become the person that God has created you to be. She's just taking that thing out of you that you are a teacher, you are a practitioner, look at it in that way, even if you start with small children, tomorrow you don't know where you'll end up. She will always push you and encourage you, that go and study, do your best, if there's open spaces at levels/qualifications, she will put your name in so that you can just go on."*

Participants 7 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"It means the planning and being able to do everything that was planned."*

Participants 2 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"I can say it means when you are a teacher, you must bring changes, and you must be a valuable person."*

Participants 8 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"For me it's about reaching your goals, if you have a task to teach children, you need make sure that your plan for your lesson plans for the week, and you need to make sure that you reach your goal, the lesson objectives and everything that needs to be reached by the end of the week for that lesson. So, whatever that you are given to do with an instruction, you need to ensure that you do all things necessary to ensure that task within the correct time frame."*

Participants 3 responded in this manner to the same question:

> *"To work very hard every day, especially with love because we are working with children."*

In the third and final analysis the emphasis was on the researcher to showcase how the participants systematically explored the relationship between leadership practices and workplace outcomes, in order words, productivity. The aim was to illustrate how ECD employees perceive the impact of ethical leadership on their productivity. Central to this theme are emotional and relational drivers such as *encouragement or motivation and planning* suggest that ethical leadership is experienced as a source of psychological safety and professional affirmation. These traits foster motivation and appreciation, which in turn contribute to productivity. The presence of those words highlights the importance of relational ethics in sustaining productivity. Employees feel more engaged and responsible when leadership displays those qualities. This theme aligns with Objective 3 showing that ethical leadership is not merely a moral framework but a practical enabler of productivity, growth, and workplace wellbeing.

As a point of emphasis, in literature, the same views are expressed in this manner: Ethical leadership is continuously linked to employee job satisfaction and commitment, both of which predict productivity. By treating staff with dignity and respect, ethical leaders foster loyalty and intrinsic motivation, reducing turnover and absenteeism while improving effort and performance (Guo, 2022:3; Makumbe, 2025:64). All these aspects taken together, strengthen the argument that ethical leadership improves productivity not just through directive authority, but by shaping the relational and psychological environment of the workplace. (Al Halbusi et al., 2023:5). In ECD centres, this is of great value, as practitioners work in limited resource environment and emotionally demanding workplace where trust, satisfaction and engagement are crucial for sustained performance.

4.4 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This chapter highlighted the findings of the study, which explored the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity within South Africa's Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector.

Data were collected by using semi-structured interviews with twelve ECD practitioners and the researcher analysed the data thematically using ATLAS.ti. Thematic analysis was used by incorporating the 6-phase strategy by Braun and Clark (2006) which yielded three main themes that describe how practitioners understand, experience, and respond to ethical leadership in their professional contexts. The following section summarises these findings in relation to the research questions. However, the detailed discussion about the findings will still be explored in greater detail in the succeeding chapter, chapter 5.

4.4.1 Theme 1: Ethical leadership practices

Participants identified integrity, fairness, and transparency as core features of what they perceive to be ethical leadership. Leaders who demonstrated honesty and treated all staff equally were seen as trustworthy and respectable. Practitioners believed that fair decision-making fostered a sense of belonging and reduced conflict within their centres. This finding reflects how ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices in their work settings

4.4.2 Theme 2: Daily work practices

Practitioners highlighted that ethical leadership involves work-relational support, empathy, and open communication. Leaders who listen, offer guidance, and encourage teamwork contribute to a positive and emotionally healthy work environment. This supportive leadership style enhanced collaboration, reduced workplace tension, and strengthened trust among colleagues, thereby contributing positively toward productivity.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Leadership -productivity link

The third theme revealed a direct connection between ethical leadership and practitioners' productivity. Participants associated fair and transparent leadership with increased motivation, commitment, and efficiency. Practitioners reported that when they feel respected and valued by their leaders, they are more likely to perform their duties diligently and maintain enthusiasm for their work.

Taken together, the findings indicate that ethical leadership in the ECD sector goes beyond administrative competence; it embodies fairness, accountability, empathy, and effective communication. These dimensions create a workplace culture where employees feel valued, trusted, and motivated to perform. The study thus demonstrates that ethical leadership does not merely influence moral behaviour but also enhances employee productivity through psychological empowerment, job satisfaction, and mutual respect. The next chapter discusses these findings in relation to existing literature.

4.5 SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 4

This chapter on presented and analysed the findings of the study on the interplay between ethical leadership and employee productivity in South Africa's Early Childhood Development Sector. The analysis drew on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews of 12 ECD practitioners. Their response were used to highlight key themes that emerged from their perspectives. This led to three main themes which are ethical leadership practices, daily work experiences and leadership-productivity link. In this chapter, the researcher used the software known as ATLAS.ti. The use of ATLAS.ti facilitated systematic coding and theme development, ensuring that the voices of participants were authentically represented. Overall, the chapter provided a detailed account of the realities faced by ECD centres, setting the foundation for the discussion and interpretation of findings in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The study sought to examine the interplay between Ethical Leadership and Employee Productivity in South Africa's Early Childhood Development Sector. This final chapter of the research will focus on conclusion and recommendation. At the centre of the study was the aim of exploring how ethical leadership is understood, perceived and experienced, and more importantly how it is linked to productivity among the twelve ECD practitioners. ECD practitioners being the twelve professionals who were interviewed. The previous chapter outlined three main themes derived from thematic analysis and by using ATLAS.ti software as a pathway of theme development. The three main themes identified were, ethical leadership practices, daily work experiences, and the leadership–productivity link. The last part of this chapter will end off with recommendation and conclusion.

5.2 KEY FINDINGS

This subsection will focus on the key findings of the three main themes ethical leadership practices, daily work experiences, and the leadership–productivity link.

5.2.1 Ethical leadership practices

The first theme as supported by, firstly, direct quotation of participants and secondly by the ATLAS.ti revealed that ECD practitioners perceive ethical leadership as being grounded in fairness, honesty, and transparency. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the words mentioned above were the direct words that participants used when they were asked about ethical leadership.

Participants described ethical leaders as those who make decisions fairly, communicate openly, and are the embodiment of integrity in their professional conduct. This understanding aligns closely with Stroupoulos et al. (2024:2229) who assert that ethical leaders value transparency as a mean of open and honest communication. They maintain an authentic communication channel as they understand that being transparent fosters trust.

Furthermore, ethical leaders are essential for organisations because they enable followers to show desired behaviours and act as role models within the organisation (Sadeghi et al. 2024:346). Especially within the ECD context, where staff the has been entrusted to interact with young children and parents daily, leaders' moral conduct does indeed set the tone for professionalism, teamwork, and trust. Thus, this finding supports research objective 1, which sought to examine how ECD employees describe ethical leadership practices such as fairness, accountability, transparency, and role modelling.

As a point of emphasis, the data and findings suggest that ECD practitioners interpret ethical leadership as an emotional and relational quality, not merely a managerial one. Giving credence to the point that EL should not be regarded merely as a moral obligation, but rather as a strategic resource and asset that contributes to the long-term success of organisations. Leaders who demonstrate moral integrity inspire followers to act in alignment with shared values, reinforcing the idea that ethics forms the moral backbone of leadership as supported by the underpinning of social learning theory Brown et al (2006:597). This theorical and literature aspects further strengthens this finding that ethical leadership is a relational and context-sensitive construct, shaped by everyday decisions and interpersonal fairness. Thereby, proving true of the first objective of the research.

5.2.2 Daily work practices

The second theme revealed that ethical leadership is experienced through supportive relationships, empathy, and open communication. All of these should lie within a leader's intrapersonal skills. Participants confirmed that indeed when leaders listen, show understanding, and foster teamwork, it enhances job satisfaction and emotional wellbeing. This finding corresponds and builds on the premise of Sadeghi et al. (2024) who argued that ethical leaders treat ethically and give respect to their followers, in turn, they reciprocate by showing positive work behaviours (Sadeghi et al. 2024:346).

For ECD practitioners, who often work under demanding, stressful and resource-limited conditions, supportive leadership becomes vital and is a tool for productivity. Intrapersonal and relational skills such as empathy and collaboration enable staff to share challenges and solutions, contributing to a sense of collective purpose and inclusivity.

This finding, therefore, aligns with Research Question 2, suggesting that ethical leadership is not only about moral conduct but also about creating a humane and inclusive work culture that promotes mutual respect and trust.

5.2.3 Leadership-productivity link

The third theme established a clear link between ethical leadership and employee productivity. In their own words, as mentioned in the previous chapter, participants reported that when leaders act with fairness, accountability, and recognition, it enhances motivation and commitment. Increasing job satisfaction

This finding aligns with Walumbwa et al. (2011), who found that ethical leadership was positively related to self-efficacy, and organisational identification, which, in turn, were all positively related to employee performance (Walumbwa et al. (2011:347). In the ECD context, practitioners explained that feeling valued and respected increased their enthusiasm and work performance. The presence of ethical leadership thus indeed creates intrinsic motivation, in terms of which employees want to perform well, and not merely out of obligation, but because they believe in the integrity of their leaders. These findings answer Research Question 3, demonstrating that ethical leadership improves productivity through psychological empowerment and moral encouragement.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher has identified the following 6 recommendations as key instruments that could bring about changes within the ECD sector.

5.3.1 Ethical leadership training and professional development within the ECD sector

The researcher recommends that ethical leadership development and training be integrated into all levels of professional training for ECD managers, supervisors, and practitioners. This can be led by the directorate of training and development. This could be more beneficial to ECDs that are still relatively new within the system of registration of the department of education, aligned with the registration requirement of Children's Act 38 of 2005.

- Incorporate ethics modules into Early Childhood Development (ECD) and Education Management qualifications to ensure that emerging leaders are equipped with ethical decision-making skills. This aspect has not been done as far as the researcher is concerned. It will be useful in the efforts of government intention to cultivate ethical leaders.
- Continuous professional development (CPD) programmes should include workshops on fairness, accountability, transparency, and empathy as leadership competencies. This could be done for the registered and funded ECD's and be replicated across the board, more so, in the newly funded ECDs.

5.3.2 Embedding ethical leadership into organisational culture

Ethical leadership should not be perceived as a personal trait but as an integral component of organisational culture. As it has been proved by literature that this ethical leadership can be used as a tool of performance and influencing organisational culture

- This could be done in a simple manner such as each ECD centre can adopt and implement a Code of Ethical Conduct that holds them accountable to their clients who are the children and their parents. It must explicitly outline expectations around fairness, professionalism, and integrity within that ECD. To this degree, this initiative has not been done and it as indeed a gap within the sector.
- Leaders should be continuously encouraged to model ethical behaviour by being consistent with the principles of ethical leadership such as accountability, fairness and openness among others. This aspect should be adopted as a good governance stance.

5.3.3 ECD institutionalising accountability and transparency mechanisms

To ensure ethical consistency, accountability structures must be embedded at all levels of ECD governance. As we speak, there isn't any accountability structure for the sector. This leaves many ECD managers and practitioners not being held liable for misconduct. There is no accounting authority that they registered to.

- ECD centres should develop clear reporting and redress procedures for unethical conduct or conflict of interest. This could be done by peer-review mechanisms, where at least each ECD holds another accountable, that's in the case there is no formal mother body or accounting authority.
- On the side of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) it should have develop systems in place that ensure that strengthening and monitoring systems by introducing ethical leadership performance indicators in ECD assessments.

5.3.4 Linking ethical leadership to employee productivity indicators

Since it has been well established in this research that ethical leadership has a direct impact on motivation and performance, the next logical step is to embed it within employee productivity frameworks.

- Simply put, performance appraisals should not only assess technical competence of leaders and their tactical leadership, but it should strongly include ethical behaviour and interpersonal integrity as key criteria in shaping the performance and culture of ECDs.

5.3.5 Policy level intervention and support

In order to align the ECDs with the national priorities of government, more so in governments efforts of cultivating ethical leadership, these policy framework positions should be assumed by government:

- The Department of Basic Education (DBE) as a department responsible for registering, compliance assessment and funding of ECD's, should partner with the Department of Social Development (DSD), and should both develop a national Ethical Leadership Framework tailored specifically for the ECD.
- Internal ECD policies should mandate leadership ethics training as part of registration and accreditation processes for centres. This will further entrench the importance of ethical leadership as integral.

5.3.6 Further research recommendation

While it may factual that this study provided qualitative insights, further research is deemed necessary to expand understanding.

- Longitudinal research could track how leadership ethics evolve and influence productivity over time. This kind of study could contribute to a more comprehensive evidence base for policy and practice improvements, all as part of the effort needed for improving the sector.

5.4 CONCLUSION

The study titled “the interplay between Ethical Leadership and Employee Productivity in South Africa’s Early Childhood Development Sector”, concludes that ethical leadership plays a fundamental role in enhancing employee productivity within South Africa’s Early Childhood Development sector. Ethical leaders need to embody characteristics such as fairness, openness and accountability, all of which foster trust, collaboration, and commitment among employees. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that ethical leadership is not merely an abstract moral concept but a practical approach that drives positive organisational outcomes

By promoting and cultivating ethical leaders, the ECD sector can improve staff morale, reduce turnover, and ultimately enhance the quality of care and education provided to young children. The study therefore makes a salient call for leadership models that integrate moral integrity with supportive management to ensure workplaces are both ethical and productive.

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Appendix A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Introduction to Semi-structured interview

Dear Participants

You are invited to participate in this research study entitled

“The interplay between Ethical Leadership and Employee Productivity in South Africa’s Early Childhood Development Sector.”

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept strictly confidential. There are no right or wrong answers — we are simply interested in your honest views and experiences.

Thank you for your valuable time and contribution.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Section A: Background Information (Warm-up)

1. Please tell me about your role at this centre and how long you have been working here.
2. What are your main responsibilities in your daily work?

Section B: Ethical Leadership Practices (RQ1 → Obj1)

3. When you hear the term ethical leadership, what does it mean to you in the context of this centre?
4. Can you describe a time when leadership at this centre showed fairness, accountability, or transparency?
5. In what ways do leaders here act as role models for staff?

Section C: Daily Work Experiences (RQ2 → Obj2)

6. How do leadership behaviours influence your daily work practices?
7. Can you share an example of when leadership helped or hindered your ability to do your job effectively?
8. In what ways do leadership practices affect teamwork or collaboration among staff?

Section D: Perceptions of Productivity (RQ3 → Obj3)

9. In your view, what does employee productivity mean in an ECD centre?
10. How do leadership practices influence your motivation to work?
11. How do leadership practices influence your job satisfaction?
12. Are there particular leadership behaviours that help you be more productive or effective in your role? Please explain.]

Section E: Closing Reflections

13. Is there anything else you would like to add about leadership and productivity in this centre that we haven’t discussed?

Appendix B: LANGUAGE EDITOR CERTIFICATE

CERTIFICATE OF EDITING: Mini-Dissertation submitted for the degree **Master of Business Administration (MBA)** at the North-West University

12 November 2025

CANDIDATE: S.L MOTAUNG Student number: 21919615

Mini-dissertation title: The interplay between Ethical Leadership and Employee Productivity in South Africa's Early Childhood Development Sector

https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6843-3133

Promoter: Dr. Hazvineyi Saurombe

I have edited this document and would certify that all aspects of the linguistic expression (grammar, style, paragraphing, spelling, and vocabulary) are now of a standard that is to be expected from a document at this level and of this nature.

I am totally satisfied with all the language aspects of the document as it now stands.

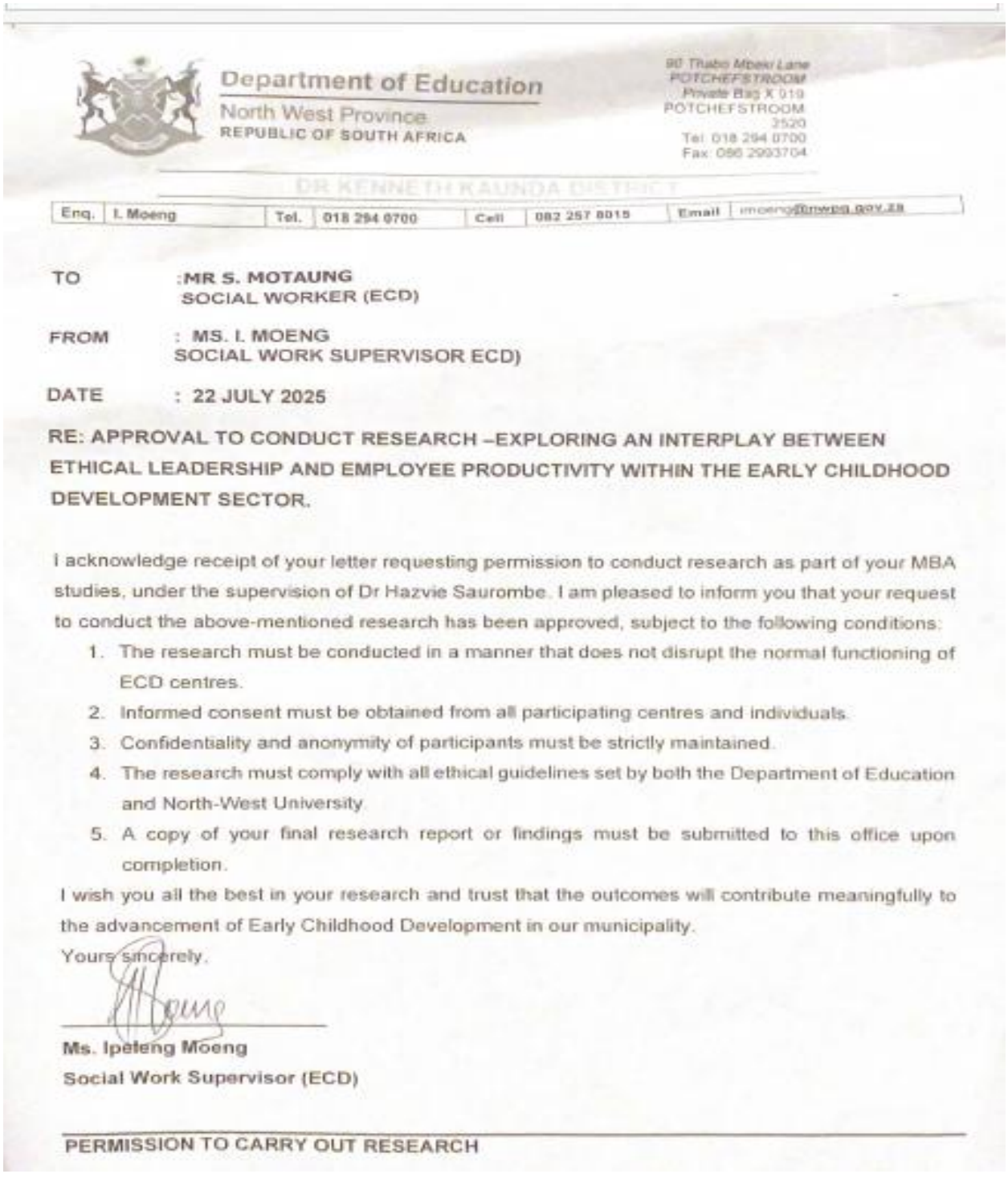
Professor Damian Garside
MA (Manchester) Ph D (Cape Town)
Associate Professor of Communication
NWU (Mahikeng Campus) (retired)
formerly: Senior Lecturer
Department of English
University of Durban-Westville
drdamiang@yahoo.com,

drdamiang2@gmail.com Phone: 0734241101 What'sApp 0836091688

Professor Damian John Garside

Digitally signed by Professor Damian John Garside
DN: cn=Professor Damian John Garside, o=NWU, ou=NWU, email=drdamiang@yahoo.com, c=US
Date: 2025.11.12 14:23:03 +02'00'

Appendix C: APROVAL LETTER TO CONDUCT RESEARCH BY EMPLOYER



Department of Education
North West Province
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

90 Thabo Mbeki Lane
POTCHEFSTROOM
Private Bag X 019
POTCHEFSTROOM
2520
Tel: 018 294 0700
Fax: 086 2993704

DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT

Enq.	I. Moeng	Tel.	018 294 0700	Cell	082 257 8015	Email	imoeng@nwpg.gov.za

TO :MR S. MOTAUNG
SOCIAL WORKER (ECD)

FROM : MS. I. MOENG
SOCIAL WORK SUPERVISOR ECD)

DATE : 22 JULY 2025

RE: APPROVAL TO CONDUCT RESEARCH –EXPLORING AN INTERPLAY BETWEEN ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY WITHIN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT SECTOR.

I acknowledge receipt of your letter requesting permission to conduct research as part of your MBA studies, under the supervision of Dr Hazvie Saurombe. I am pleased to inform you that your request to conduct the above-mentioned research has been approved, subject to the following conditions:

1. The research must be conducted in a manner that does not disrupt the normal functioning of ECD centres.
2. Informed consent must be obtained from all participating centres and individuals.
3. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants must be strictly maintained.
4. The research must comply with all ethical guidelines set by both the Department of Education and North-West University.
5. A copy of your final research report or findings must be submitted to this office upon completion.

I wish you all the best in your research and trust that the outcomes will contribute meaningfully to the advancement of Early Childhood Development in our municipality.

Yours sincerely,

Ms. Ipeleng Moeng
Social Work Supervisor (ECD)

PERMISSION TO CARRY OUT RESEARCH

Appendix D: ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: http://www.nwu.ac.za
Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 018 299-484
Fezlwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

8 September 2025

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **North-West University Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EMS-REC)** on 8 September 2025 , the Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your study as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-REC) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title:	Exploring an interplay between Ethical leadership and Employee productivity within the Early Childhood Development Sector		
Study leader/Supervisor (Principal investigator/Researcher:	Dr H.A. Saurombe	**University no.:**	24078093
Student:	Mr S.L. Motaung	**University no.:**	21919615
Ethics number:	N W U - 0 0 8 6 4 - 2 5 - A 4 Institution / Study number / Year / Status Status: S = Submission; R = Re-submission; P = Provisional authorisation; A = Authorisation		
Application type:	Single study - Postgraduate research	**Risk level:**	Low/minimal risk
Commencement date:	9/8/25		
Expiry date:	9/8/26		
Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.			

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):