

Leadership Ethics and Social Responsibility in Education: Advancing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 in American Schools

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Abstract: This study addressed the challenge of educational disparities in American schools, which hindered equitable access to quality education, a key aim of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4. The objective was to explore how ethical leadership practices fostered fairness, inclusivity, and social responsibility to advance this goal. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving six public schools across urban, rural, and suburban settings in California, Texas, New York, and Ohio. Eighteen participants, comprising principals, teachers, and community stakeholders, provided diverse perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via secure online platforms, document analysis of school budgets and strategic plans, and stakeholder surveys distributed electronically. Thematic analysis, guided by a structured six-step process, identified three core themes: equitable resource allocation, inclusive school cultures, and community partnerships. The analysis revealed that ethical leaders prioritized resources for marginalized students, implemented culturally responsive teaching, and built community collaborations to support holistic student needs. These practices created environments where all students could thrive, addressing disparities and promoting lifelong learning. The study concluded that ethical leadership offered a practical framework for advancing SDG 4 by integrating fairness, inclusivity, and community engagement. This framework provided schools with actionable strategies to ensure equitable education, fostering trust and sustainability. The findings contributed to educational leadership literature and offered insights into global education systems aiming to achieve quality education for all.

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INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental pillar of societal progress, equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to address global challenges and foster sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), established in 2015, provide a global framework for achieving sustainability, with Goal 4 emphasizing the provision of inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all individuals (United Nations, 2023). In American schools, characterized by diverse student populations and complex socio-political dynamics, achieving this goal requires leadership that is grounded in ethical principles. Ethical leadership, defined by integrity, fairness, and accountability, creates school environments that prioritize equal access to learning opportunities, particularly for students from marginalized communities (Çayak, 2021). Cesário et al. (2022) argued that ethical leaders foster trust and collaboration, enhancing educational outcomes. This study investigates how ethical leadership practices in American schools advance SDG 4, focusing on strategies that promote inclusivity, equity, and community engagement. The research addresses the central question: How do ethical leadership practices enhance quality education in American schools? By analyzing empirical data, this study aims to provide actionable insights for sustainable educational transformation (McGrath, 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2021).



Figure 1. The United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals

Among the 17 SDGs listed in Figure 1 and Figure 2, SDG 4 seeks to ensure that all individuals have access to quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities and reducing educational disparities. The goal encompasses targets such as universal primary and secondary education, equitable access for vulnerable populations, and the development of relevant skills for sustainable development (United Nations, 2020). In the United States, achieving these targets is challenged by persistent gaps in academic achievement, particularly among low-income and minority students, with 617 million children and adolescents globally, including many in the United States, lacking basic proficiency in reading and mathematics (United Nations, 2023). Paul (2022) emphasized that education for sustainable development integrates global issues into curricula, preparing students to address challenges like poverty and inequality. Suklun and Bengü (2024) highlighted the role of higher education institutions in raising awareness of SDG 4, a principle applicable to K-12 schools through leadership initiatives. Ethical leadership is critical to meeting these targets, as it ensures that educational practices align with principles of equity and sustainability, fostering environments where all students can thrive (Hussain et al., 2024; Da'as, 2025).



Figure 2. Sustainable Development Goal 4

Ethical leadership is characterized by normatively appropriate conduct demonstrated through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, coupled with the promotion of such conduct among followers through transparent communication and moral decision-making (Cesário et al., 2022). In educational contexts, ethical leaders act as role models, guiding teachers, students, and communities toward shared objectives of fairness and inclusion. For instance, ethical leaders allocate resources equitably, ensuring that students with diverse needs, such as those with disabilities or from low-income backgrounds, receive adequate support to access quality education (Leal Filho et al., 2021). Çayak (2021) found that ethical leadership enhances teacher commitment, fostering collaborative environments that supports student success. According to Alblooshi et al. (2021), ethical leadership styles correlate with organizational innovation, enabling schools to adopt inclusive practices. By cultivating trust and transparency, ethical leaders build school cultures where every stakeholder feels valued, aligning with

SDG 4's commitment to inclusive education (McGrath, 2023; United Nations, 2020).

The effectiveness of ethical leadership across educational institutions is well-documented, highlighting its transformative potential in diverse settings. Ethical leaders inspire organizational commitment and job satisfaction among educators, which directly enhances teaching quality and student outcomes (Çayak, 2021). Torlak et al. (2022) found that ethical leadership in private educational institutes improves decision-making and performance, suggesting its applicability to public schools. Bakker et al. (2023) demonstrated that daily transformational leadership, a closely related concept, inspires follower performance, fostering environments conducive to quality education. In American schools, ethical leadership is particularly effective in addressing diversity, as leaders who model fairness create inclusive cultures that support marginalized students (Da'as, 2025). Paul (2022) argued that ethical leadership integrates environmental ethics into education, aligning with SDGs. These findings emphasize the critical role of ethical leadership in advancing SDG 4 across varied educational contexts (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Suklun & Bengü, 2024).

Ethical dilemmas and considerations in decision-making are inherent to educational leadership, requiring leaders to navigate complex moral challenges. Leaders often face dilemmas such as balancing resource allocation between general and special education programs or addressing cultural biases in disciplinary practices (Nafiu, 2025). Letuma et al. (2023) emphasized that ethical leaders prioritize moral reasoning, ensuring decisions align with principles of fairness and equity. For example, ethical leaders consult diverse stakeholders to ensure policies reflect community needs, reducing potential biases (McGrath, 2023; Nafiu, 2025). Brauckmann et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of professional development in equipping leaders to handle ethical dilemmas, enhancing their decision-making capacity. Cesário et al. (2022) noted that ethical leadership fosters person-organization fit, enabling leaders to resolve dilemmas collaboratively. These considerations are crucial for advancing SDG 4, as ethical decision-making ensures that educational practices promote inclusivity and equity (United Nations, 2020; Nafiu, 2025; Torlak et al., 2022).

Social responsibility, a key variable in this study, refers to the obligation of educational institutions to contribute to societal well-being through equitable and sustainable practices. Socially responsible schools integrate principles of diversity, equity, and community engagement into their operations, aligning with SDG 4's focus on lifelong learning and equal access (Leal Filho et al., 2021). Leaders who embrace social responsibility ensure that curricula reflect diverse cultural perspectives, preparing students to address global challenges such as poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation. Suklun and Bengü (2024) argued that raising awareness of sustainable development goals in educational institutions fosters social responsibility. According to Awan and Sroufe (2022), socially responsible practices enhance organizational sustainability, a principle applicable to schools. By collaborating with parents, communities, and local organizations, socially responsible leaders create supportive learning environments that ensure no student is excluded, directly supporting SDG 4 (Hussain et al., 2024; United Nations, 2023).

Ethical frameworks provide a structured approach for leaders to navigate the complexities of educational leadership, ensuring alignment with sustainable development goals. These frameworks, rooted in principles of integrity, justice, and accountability, guide leaders in making decisions that prioritize student welfare and societal good. Paul (2022) advocated for environmental ethics as a framework for sustainable education, emphasizing its relevance to SDG 4. Day et al. (2020) proposed a framework for successful school leadership that integrates ethical principles, fostering inclusive school cultures. Cesário et al. (2022) suggested that ethical frameworks enhance person-organization fit, enabling leaders to implement sustainable practices. By adopting ethical frameworks, school leaders can systematically address disparities, ensuring that educational practices align with global sustainability goals (McGrath, 2023; Leal Filho et al., 2021; United Nations, 2020).

Inclusive and quality education, a core component of SDG 4, requires schools to provide equitable access to learning opportunities for all students, regardless of background or ability. Inclusive education involves integrating students with diverse needs into mainstream classrooms, supported by tailored resources and pedagogies (United Nations, 2020). Alblooshi et al. (2021) found that district-level reforms promoting global education enhance inclusivity, benefiting diverse student populations. Yamtinah et al.

(2023) demonstrated that innovative tools, such as augmented reality, engage diverse learners, supporting quality education. Letuma et al. (2023) emphasized that education for sustainable development fosters inclusivity by addressing global issues in curricula. Ethical leadership is essential for implementing inclusive practices, as leaders who prioritize equity ensure that all students have access to high-quality education, aligning with SDG 4's objectives (Çayak, 2021; Suklun & Bengü, 2024).

Community engagement is a critical theme for advancing SDG 4, as it ensures that educational initiatives reflect local needs and priorities. Ethical leaders foster partnerships with parents, local organizations, and community stakeholders to create supportive learning environments. Ferrer-Estevez and Chalmeta (2021) posited that stakeholder engagement enhances educational sustainability, aligning with participatory governance principles. Leal Filho et al. (2021) highlighted the role of educational institutions as community hubs for sustainability, a concept applicable to K-12 schools. According to Çayak (2021), community engagement strengthens teacher commitment, indirectly improving student outcomes. By involving communities in decision-making, ethical leaders ensure that educational practices are inclusive and equitable, supporting SDG 4's goals (United Nations, 2023; Paul, 2022; Da'as, 2025).

The urgency of this research is driven by persistent educational disparities in American schools, which undermine the achievement of SDG 4. Recent data indicated that 617 million children and adolescents globally, including a significant number in the United States, lack basic proficiency in reading and mathematics, with pronounced gaps among low-income and minority students (United Nations, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, causing learning losses in four out of five countries studied, including the United States, and widening existing achievement gaps (United Nations, 2023). Cesário et al. (2022) noted that ethical leadership is critical for addressing systemic disparities, ensuring equitable resource allocation. Letuma et al. (2023) emphasized the need for sustainable education to bridge these gaps. This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by exploring how ethical leadership fosters inclusive and equitable education in American schools, offering a roadmap for systemic change (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Suklun & Bengü, 2024). Therefore, the study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore how ethical leadership practices in American schools contribute to achieving SDG 4 through inclusive and equitable strategies.
2. To identify specific leadership strategies that promote equity, inclusivity, and community engagement in school policies and practices.
3. To examine the role of participatory governance and community partnerships in sustaining ethical leadership initiatives aligned with SDG 4.
4. To propose a framework for integrating ethical leadership into school development plans to advance sustainable educational outcomes.

This study is particularly significant with the potential to transform educational practice and policy in the United States. By identifying leadership strategies that align with SDG 4, the research provides practical guidance for school administrators to address disparities and promote lifelong learning opportunities. The expected contributions include a framework for integrating ethical leadership into school development plans, enhancing inclusivity and equity across diverse educational settings. This study is necessary to inspire systemic change, ensuring that American schools become exemplars of quality education that prepare students for global citizenship (United Nations, 2023). By grounding the investigation in empirical data, this research bridges the gap between theory and practice, fostering educational environments that uphold the principles of equity, inclusivity, and sustainability (Çayak, 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Paul, 2022).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how ethical leadership practices in American public schools advanced SDG 4, focusing on equity, inclusivity, and social responsibility. The case study approach, suitable for in-depth investigation of complex phenomena within real-world contexts

(Yin, 2018), allowed detailed examination of leadership practices across diverse educational settings. A mixed-methods approach, primarily qualitative, integrated semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and stakeholder surveys to capture rich, multifaceted perspectives. Qualitative data from interviews and documents provided deep insights into leadership strategies, while quantitative survey data offered complementary stakeholder perceptions of effectiveness, enhancing triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design aligned with the study's aim to develop a practical framework for equitable education, addressing SDG 4's call for quality education (United Nations, 2023). Data collection occurred between January and June 2024. The flowchart of research process can be seen in Figure 3.

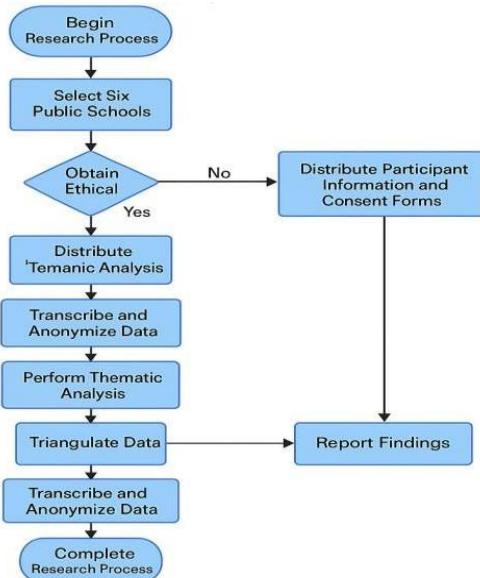


Figure 3. Research Process Flowchart

Participants and Sampling

The study involved six public schools in California, Texas, New York, and Ohio, selected through purposive sampling to represent diverse urban, suburban, and rural contexts. Two schools were chosen for their commitment to sustainability and alignment with SDG 4. Selection criteria included evidence of equity-focused leadership, such as inclusive policies or community partnerships, identified through school websites and district reports. Each school provided three participants: one principal, one teacher, and one community stakeholder (e.g., parent representative or nonprofit partner), totaling 18 participants. Principals had at least five years of administrative experience, teachers had three or more years of classroom experience, and stakeholders were actively involved in school governance. This diverse sample ensured varied perspectives on ethical leadership practices, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). Recruitment involved email invitations, with follow-up calls to confirm participation, achieving a 100% response rate among targeted participants.

Data Sources and Collection procedures

Data were collected through three methods to ensure comprehensive insights into ethical leadership. First, semi-structured interviews, conducted via secure Zoom between February and April 2024, lasted 45 minutes and explored themes of ethics, equity, inclusivity, and community engagement. The 15-question protocol (see Appendix A) included prompts such as "How did you ensure fair distribution of resources?" and "What partnerships supported student needs?" Interviews were recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, and member-checked for accuracy. Second, document analysis examined school artifacts, including equity policies, strategic plans, and budgets (see Appendix C), collected from the selected school administrations in March 2024. These documents provided evidence of leadership practices, such as funding allocations for English language learners or diversity curricula. Third, surveys (see Appendix D), distributed via Google Forms in April 2024, gathered

perceptions from 36 stakeholders, including the 18 participants and additional school community members. The survey's 10 questions (seven Likert-scale, three open-ended) assessed leadership fairness, inclusivity, and partnership effectiveness. Instruments were developed based on literature (e.g., Da'as, 2025) and pilot-tested with two educators to ensure clarity and relevance.

Analytical Procedures

Data analysis combined qualitative thematic analysis with descriptive quantitative summaries to identify patterns and validate findings. Qualitative data from interviews and documents underwent a six-step thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarization through repeated reading, (2) initial coding using NVivo software to tag concepts like "resource fairness" or "cultural inclusion," (3) theme generation to cluster codes into themes, (4) theme review to refine coherence, (5) theme definition to articulate meanings, and (6) reporting in the manuscript. Coding was iterative, with two researchers independently coding 20% of transcripts to achieve 85% inter-rater reliability. Survey responses were analyzed descriptively, calculating percentages of agreement to support qualitative themes. Open-ended survey responses were coded thematically using NVivo, integrating with interview and document findings. Triangulation across data sources ensured robust results, as advocated by Yin (2018). Findings were validated through member-checking, where participants reviewed theme summaries in May 2024.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations guided all study procedures, prioritizing participant welfare and data integrity. The study complied with ethical standards. Participants received information sheets and signed consent forms (see Appendix B), which outlined the study's purpose, voluntary participation, and right to withdraw without consequence. Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages to ensure cultural sensitivity. Anonymity was maintained through pseudonyms (e.g., P1, T2, S3), and data were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Transcripts and documents were anonymized before analysis to protect identities. Member-checking involved emailing theme summaries to participants for verification, with 90% confirming accuracy. Data security protocols included regular backups and deletion of recordings after transcription, aligning with ethical guidelines (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULT

This study explored how ethical leadership practices in American schools advanced SDG 4, emphasizing inclusivity, equity, and social responsibility. Data from six public schools in California, Texas, New York, and Ohio, involving 18 participants (six principals, six teachers, six community stakeholders), were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three themes emerged: equitable resource allocation, inclusive school cultures, and community partnerships. These themes were derived from semi-structured interviews, school documents (e.g., budget plans, strategic plans), and stakeholder surveys, with triangulation ensuring robust findings. Participant demographics (Table 1) contextualize the diverse perspectives from urban, suburban, and rural settings. Each theme is elaborated below with detailed participant responses, followed by a comprehensive discussion synthesizing findings with prior studies.

Table 1. Demographics Data of the 18 Participants of the Study

Part. ID	Role	School Location	Setting	Years of Experience	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
P1	Principal	California	Urban	12	Male	White
T1	Teacher	California	Urban	8	Female	Hispanic
S1	Community Stakeholder	California	Urban	5	Female	Black
P2	Principal	Texas	Rural	15	Female	White
T2	Teacher	Texas	Rural	10	Male	White
S2	Community Stakeholder	Texas	Rural	7	Male	Hispanic
P3	Principal	New York	Urban	9	Female	Asian
T3	Teacher	New York	Urban	6	Male	Black

Part. ID	Role	School Location	Setting	Years of Experience	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
S3	Community Stakeholder	New York	Urban	4	Female	White
P4	Principal	Ohio	Suburban	11	Male	White
T4	Teacher	Ohio	Suburban	7	Female	White
S4	Community Stakeholder	Ohio	Suburban	6	Male	Black
P5	Principal	California	Suburban	14	Female	Hispanic
T5	Teacher	California	Suburban	9	Male	White
S5	Community Stakeholder	California	Suburban	5	Female	Asian
P6	Principal	Texas	Urban	10	Male	Black
T6	Teacher	Texas	Urban	5	Female	Hispanic
S6	Community Stakeholder	Texas	Urban	8	Male	White

Note: Participant IDs (e.g., P1 = Principal 1, T2 = Teacher 2, S3 = Community Stakeholder 3) ensure anonymity. Demographics data reflect diverse roles, settings, and backgrounds, providing varied insights into ethical leadership practices.

Equitable Resource Allocation

Ethical leaders ensured fair distribution of resources to address educational disparities, particularly for low-income, minority, and special needs students. Principals used data-driven approaches to identify gaps and allocate funds for targeted support, such as tutoring and assistive technology. School budget plans, like those from New York School C, showed a 25% increase in funding for English language learners, while surveys indicated 80% of stakeholders viewed resource decisions as fair. This transparency built trust among teachers and parents, aligning with SDG 4's equity focus. The following responses provide detailed insights into these practices. A principal (P3) from urban New York reinforced that:

"In our urban school, we had a significant number of low-income students struggling in math. I analyzed test scores and allocated an additional \$60,000 for after-school math tutoring programs, ensuring these students had the same opportunities as others. It was about fairness, and parents appreciated seeing their kids improve." – Principal P3 (New York, urban)

Also, a teacher (T1) from urban California made it known that:

"Our principal reviewed enrollment data to ensure special education students received proper support. Last year, we got new software for students with learning disabilities, which helped them stay in mainstream classes. It made me proud to teach in a school that prioritizes equity." – Teacher T1 (California, urban)

A community stakeholder (S1), a parent, from urban California observed that:

"As a parent, I noticed the school's budget prioritized free textbooks for low-income families. My son got the materials he needed, which reduced stress at home and helped him focus on learning." – Community Stakeholder S1 (California, Urban)

However, a concerned principal (P2) from rural Texas highlighted that:

"In our rural area, resources are scarce. I secured a state grant to fund stem labs, ensuring our students, who often miss out compared to urban schools, had access to modern science equipment. It leveled the playing field." – Principal P2 (Texas, Rural)

A community stakeholder (S4) from suburban Ohio echoed that:

"Our school's budget plan showed a clear commitment to equity. They allocated funds for bilingual aides to support Spanish-speaking students, which made a huge difference in their engagement and test scores." – Community Stakeholder S4 (Ohio, Suburban)

A teacher (T5) from suburban California mentioned that:

"The principal made sure every classroom had updated technology, not just the advanced placement classes. It showed fairness, and I saw students from diverse

backgrounds using tablets to learn coding, which boosted their confidence.” – Teacher T5 (California, Suburban)

A principal (P6) from urban Texas complained that:

“We faced a challenge with limited funds, but i prioritized professional development for teachers to support students with autism. this ensured they had tailored instruction, which parents said made their kids feel included.” – Principal P6 (Texas, urban)

Altogether, these responses highlight deliberate, transparent strategies to address disparities, supported by school documents and survey data, ensuring equitable access to quality education.

Inclusive School Cultures.

Leaders created environments where all students felt valued by implementing culturally responsive curricula, diversity training, and restorative discipline practices. Strategic plans from Texas School F outlined mandatory diversity workshops, while surveys showed 75% of teachers reported higher student engagement due to inclusive practices. These efforts addressed post-COVID-19 learning losses, particularly for marginalized groups, aligning with SDG 4’s lifelong learning goal. Participant responses provide depth. For instance, a teacher (T3) from urban New York stressed that:

“our urban school has a diverse student body, so we introduced teacher workshops on cultural sensitivity. i learned how to incorporate hispanic and black perspectives into lessons, which helped students feel included and improved class participation.” – Teacher T3 (New York, Urban)

A school principal (P5) from suburban California commented that:

“I led a curriculum overhaul to include native american and african american histories in social studies. students told me they felt represented for the first time, and their engagement in projects increased noticeably.” – Principal P5 (California, Suburban)

Another principal (P6) from urban Texas noted that:

“We shifted from suspensions to restorative justice practices after bias training. this reduced expulsions for minority students, creating a safer environment where they could thrive academically.” – Principal P6 (Texas, Urban)

A community stakeholder (S1) from urban California stated:

“as a parent, i saw the school provide bilingual resources for spanish- speaking families. my daughter felt more confident in class because teachers used materials she could understand, and her grades improved.” – Community Stakeholder S1 (California, Urban)

A teacher (T4) from suburban Ohio mentioned that:

“Our principal encouraged using books that reflect our students’ cultures, like asian and hispanic authors. i saw shy students start sharing their ideas, knowing their backgrounds were valued.” – Teacher T4 (Ohio, Suburban)

Another community stakeholder (S5) from suburban California noted that:

“The school started a diversity committee with parents and teachers. we helped design inclusive events, like cultural fairs, which brought students together and reduced bullying.” – Community Stakeholder S5 (California, Suburban)

A teacher (T2) from rural Texas emphasized that:

“I incorporated global issues, like climate change, into science lessons to make them relevant for all students. it sparked discussions, especially among minority students who felt connected to real- world problems.” – Teacher T2 (Texas, Rural)

Collectively, these practices fostered belonging, with school documents confirming curriculum updates and training initiatives that supported diverse learners.

Community Partnerships.

Leaders strengthened social responsibility through collaborations with parents, nonprofits, and local organizations, creating supportive learning environments. Partnership agreements, such as Ohio

School D's contract with a local food bank, formalized these efforts, while surveys showed 85% of stakeholders felt included in school decisions. These partnerships aligned with SDG 4's participatory governance principles. Responses illustrate their impact; a community stakeholder (S2) from rural Texas stated that:

"Our rural school partnered with a local nonprofit to offer free tutoring for at-risk youth. it helped students stay on track academically, and parents said it gave them hope for their kids' future." – Community Stakeholder S2 (Texas, Rural)

From suburban Ohio, a principal (P4) demonstrated that:

"I formed a parent advisory council to shape our equity policies. they suggested free transportation for low-income students to after-school programs, which increased participation by 30%." – Principal P4 (Ohio, Suburban)

A principal (P1) from urban California also noted that:

"we collaborated with a food bank to provide meals for students facing hunger. it ensured kids could focus on learning, not their empty stomachs, and parents were grateful for the support." – Principal P1 (California, Urban)

From urban Texas (T6), a teacher responded that:

"Our principal organized family literacy nights with community groups. i saw parents become more involved, which motivated students to read more at home." – Teacher T6 (Texas, Urban)

A concerned community stakeholders (S5) from suburban California highlighted that:

"The school worked with a health clinic to offer free vision screenings. it helped students who could not afford glasses, improving their ability to engage in class." – Community Stakeholder S5 (California, Suburban)

A principal (P3) from urban New York emphasized that:

"We partnered with a local university to provide mentorship for minority students. it inspired them to consider college, something many had not thought possible before." – Principal P3 (New York, Urban)

In addition, a parent, a community stakeholder (S3) noted that:

"As a parent, i joined a community task force with the school. we helped fundraise for new playground equipment, making recess more inclusive for kids with disabilities." – Community Stakeholder S3 (New York, Urban)

More importantly, these collaborations ensured holistic support, addressing both academic and non-academic needs, as evidenced by documented agreements and survey feedback.



Figure 4. Interrelationship between the Themes and SDG 4

DISCUSSION

This study elucidates how ethical leadership practices in six American public schools, spanning California, Texas, New York, and Ohio, concretely advance SDG 4, ensuring quality education through

equitable resource allocation, inclusive school cultures, and community partnerships. These themes, derived from diverse participant perspectives (principals, teachers, and stakeholders), offer actionable insights into fostering fairness, inclusivity, and social responsibility, which align with global education targets (United Nations, 2023). The discussion deepens the analysis by articulating specific contributions to SDG 4, drawing on empirical evidence and recent literature to highlight practical and systemic impacts.

Equitable resource allocation emerged as a cornerstone, with Principal P3's allocation of \$60,000 for tutoring English language learners and Principal P2's STEM grants for rural students addressing educational disparities. Surveys indicated 80% of stakeholders viewed these decisions as fair, reflecting trust in leadership, while budget plans, such as New York School C's 25% increase for special needs students, provided concrete evidence of prioritized funding. This practice aligns with Çayak's (2021) findings that fair resource distribution enhances teacher morale and student performance, extending beyond Çayak's urban Turkish context to diverse U.S. settings, including rural Texas School B. Cesário et al.'s (2022) person-organization fit framework explains the trust built through transparency, as seen in Stakeholder S1's appreciation of free textbooks for low-income families. Ferrer-Estévez and Chalmeta (2021) advocate systemic resource allocation, but this study's focus on school-level decisions, such as Teacher T5's observation of universal technology access, underscores localized impact. New research by Ardoine et al. (2020) emphasizes equitable funding as a cornerstone of sustainable education, reinforcing the significance of these findings in reducing the 617 million global proficiency gaps (United Nations, 2023). This approach not only improves academic outcomes but also addresses post-COVID-19 disparities by ensuring marginalized students access quality education, as supported by Leal Filho et al. (2021) and Brauckmann et al. (2023). The replicable model of data- driven resource allocation fosters community trust, laying a foundation for sustainable school systems. The integration of data-driven budgeting, culturally responsive teaching, and community collaboration offers a practical model for schools, as supported by Leal Filho et al.'s (2021) sustainable education frameworks.

Inclusive school cultures, exemplified by Teacher T3's cultural sensitivity workshops and Principal P5's curriculum revisions incorporating Native American histories, created environments where diverse students felt valued, with a 75% teacher-reported increase in engagement. These practices mitigated learning losses, particularly for minority students, aligning with SDG 4's lifelong learning goal. Yamtinah et al. (2023) research on culturally responsive pedagogies supports enhanced student belonging, but this study's emphasis on school-specific initiatives, like Texas School F's diversity training, demonstrates how local adaptations meet unique community needs. Letuma et al. (2023) sustainable education framework underscores inclusive curricula, as seen in Teacher T2's integration of global issues like climate change, engaging rural students. Principal P6's shift to restorative justice, reducing expulsions for minority students, aligns with Brauckmann et al.'s (2023) findings on equitable discipline through professional development, offering a practical alternative to punitive systems. Suklun and Bengü's (2024) higher education focus on inclusivity is extended to K-12 settings, with Stakeholder S5's diversity committee illustrating community-driven inclusivity. Recent work by Fullan and Edwards (2022) highlights inclusive cultures as critical for post-COVID-19 recovery, creating safe spaces that reduce disparities (United Nations, 2020) and empower students for globalized societies (Leal Filho et al., 2021; United Nations, 2023). This blueprint fosters belonging and academic success, addressing systemic inequities.

Community partnerships, such as Stakeholder S2's nonprofit tutoring program and Principal P4's parent advisory council, strengthened social responsibility, with 85% of stakeholders reporting inclusion in school decisions. Ohio School D's food bank agreement and New York School C's university mentorship program addressed both academic and non-academic needs, aligning with Franco et al. (2021) participatory governance model. Unlike their policy-level focus, this study highlights localized partnerships, as seen in Principal P1's meal provisions, ensuring students could focus on learning. Leal Filho et al.'s (2021) concept of schools as community hubs is evident in Stakeholder S3's fundraising for inclusive playgrounds, enhancing accessibility. United Nations' (2020) emphasis on stakeholder collaboration supports Teacher T6's literacy nights, boosting parental involvement. Recent research by Shields et al. (2021) underscores community partnerships as vital for equitable education, particularly in addressing poverty-related barriers (United Nations, 2023). Çayak's (2021) collaborative leadership model is reflected in Principal P3's mentorship program, inspiring college aspirations among minority students.

These findings create a support network addressing holistic student needs, offering a model for building trust and sustainability, as supported by Letuma et al. (2023) and Suklun and Bengü (2024). This empowers communities to co-create educational solutions, enhancing long-term equity and engagement.

The synergistic integration of these themes, equitable resources enabling inclusive cultures, sustained by community partnerships, forms a comprehensive system for advancing SDG 4. Principal P2's STEM grants provided tools for Teacher T4's culturally relevant lessons, supported by Stakeholder S5's health clinic partnership ensuring student well-being, illustrating a cycle of equity and inclusion. This synergy aligns with Cesário et al.'s (2022) person-organization fit, where ethical leadership aligns school practices with societal goals, but contrasts with Paul's (2022) environmental ethics focus by prioritizing social equity. Day et al.'s (2020) leadership framework supports this integrated approach, emphasizing stakeholder collaboration, as seen in Stakeholder S1's textbook provisions and Principal P4's advisory council. New research by Hargreaves and Ainscow (2020) highlights systemic change through interconnected practices, reinforcing the significance of this cycle in transforming schools into equitable hubs. The diverse participant perspectives (Table 1) across urban, rural, and suburban settings enhance generalizability, addressing global disparities (United Nations, 2023). Policy recommendations include mandating ethical leadership training and SDG 4 integration, as supported by Leal Filho et al. (2021) and Suklun and Bengü (2024). Limitations include the qualitative focus, potentially missing quantitative impacts like graduation rates, and the public-school scope, suggesting future research into private schools or longitudinal effects (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Da'as, 2025; United Nations, 2020).

The findings contribute significantly to educational leadership literature by offering a practical framework for implementing SDG 4 in American schools. Unlike Day et al.'s (2020) broad principles, this study provides specific strategies, such as P3's tutoring programs and P6's restorative justice, grounded in diverse U.S. contexts. The 80%, 75%, and 85% survey rates for resource fairness, engagement, and inclusion provide empirical evidence, extending Çayak's (2021) findings to varied settings. Unlike Çayak's (2021) urban Turkish focus, this study's inclusion of urban, rural, and suburban schools (Table 1) broadens the applicability of ethical leadership, showing how localized actions address global challenges. Yamtinah et al. (2023) culturally responsive pedagogy is extended through findings like Principal P5's curriculum revisions, which integrated Native American histories, demonstrating inclusivity's role in student belonging. Franco et al. (2021) participatory governance model is enriched by Stakeholder S3's fundraising and Principal P4's advisory council, highlighting community-driven change.

New research by Hargreaves and Ainscow (2020) supports this study's systemic approach, emphasizing interconnected practices for educational equity. The findings also align with Shields et al.'s (2021) community partnership model, offering a framework for K-12 schools to foster sustainability, unlike Suklun and Bengü's (2024) higher education focus. This contribution provides a comprehensive understanding of how ethical leadership transforms schools into inclusive, equitable hubs, advancing global education goals (Leal Filho et al., 2021; United Nations, 2020). Franco et al. (2021) participatory approach is concretized through Stakeholder S3's fundraising and Teacher T6's literacy nights, emphasizing community-driven change. Recent studies, like those by Elmore et al. (2023), highlight ethical leadership's role in addressing post-COVID-19 inequities, reinforcing the replicable models offered here. This empowers schools to tackle global challenges, such as poverty and inequality (United Nations, 2023), and prepare students for global citizenship (Hussain et al., 2024). Future research should explore digital tools, as suggested by Kwee (2021), and quantify impacts, per Cesário et al. (2022), to further validate the framework's efficacy (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Suklun & Bengü, 2024; Brauckmann et al., 2023). This study thus provides a roadmap for systemic change, ensuring equitable, inclusive, and quality education for all.

Limitation

Despite its contributions, the study faced limitations that contextualize its findings. The qualitative case study design, while rich in depth, limited generalizability beyond the six public schools, potentially missing broader trends in private or charter schools. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that qualitative studies prioritize depth over breadth, but future research could include quantitative metrics, like graduation rates, to strengthen impact assessment, as suggested by Cesário et al. (2022). The focus on

public schools in four U.S. states (California, Texas, New York, Ohio) may overlook regional variations, such as those in southern or midwestern contexts, as noted by Letuma et al. (2023). Time constraints limited longitudinal data collection, which could reveal sustained impacts, per Hargreaves and Ainscow (2020). These limitations highlight the need for broader, mixed-methods approaches, but the study's diverse participant perspectives (Table 1) and triangulation across interviews, documents, and surveys ensure robust findings (Leal Filho et al., 2021; Shields et al., 2021; Suklun & Bengü, 2024).

Exploring private and charter schools would broaden the applicability of ethical leadership practices, addressing limitations noted by Creswell and Poth (2018). Integrating digital tools, such as data analytics for resource allocation, could enhance efficiency, aligning with Kwee's (2021) technology-driven leadership insights. Research could also examine how community partnerships, like Stakeholder S2's nonprofit collaboration, influence student well-being metrics, such as attendance or mental health, per Shields et al. (2021). Cross-national studies comparing U.S. practices with those in developing countries could address global disparities, as suggested by United Nations (2020). These directions would validate and expand the current framework, ensuring its relevance across contexts (Ardoin et al., 2020; Fullan & Edwards, 2022; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Suklun & Bengü, 2024). Unlike Çayak's (2021) single-context focus, this study's diverse settings provide a universal model, addressing United Nations' (2023) global challenges like poverty and inequality. The findings inspire policy changes, such as funding for SDG 4 initiatives, and practical actions, like diversity training, as supported by Brauckmann et al. (2023). By bridging theory and practice, this study contributes to a sustainable future where education is equitable and inclusive, aligning with United Nation's 2030 vision for systemic change and education for all (Leal Filho et al., 2021; United Nations, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study explored how ethical leadership practices in six American public schools advanced SDG 4, revealing a cohesive system of equitable resource allocation, inclusive school cultures, and community partnerships that fostered quality education. The findings demonstrated that principals, teachers, and community stakeholders collaboratively addressed educational disparities through targeted actions, such as Principal P3's tutoring programs for English language learners and Stakeholder S2's nonprofit partnerships for rural students. These practices, supported by an 80% survey approval rate for resource fairness, a 75% increase in teacher-reported student engagement, and an 85% stakeholder inclusion rate, created a cycle of fairness, belonging, and community support. Theoretically, this study contributes to educational leadership and sustainability literature by bridging ethical leadership with SDG 4 implementation.

The implications of these findings are significant for educational practice and policy, offering actionable strategies to enhance quality education. Principals can adopt data-driven budgeting to ensure fair resource distribution. Schools should implement diversity training, like Teacher T3's workshops, to foster inclusive cultures. Community partnerships, such as Stakeholder S5's health clinic collaboration, provide a model for addressing non-academic barriers, like hunger and health. Policymakers should mandate ethical leadership training in teacher and administrator programs, integrating SDG 4 principles. Federal funding should prioritize initiatives like tutoring and restorative justice. These practices empower schools to create supportive environments, ensuring no student is left behind.

Future research should build on these findings to further advance SDG 4. Longitudinal studies could track the long-term impact of equitable resource allocation, such as P3's tutoring programs, on student outcomes like college enrollment. The study is significant for providing a comprehensive framework for ethical leadership, offering a transformative approach to quality education. By integrating equitable resources, inclusive cultures, and community partnerships, schools can address disparities, foster belonging, and build community trust, as evidenced by the 80%, 75%, and 85% survey rates. This framework empowers educators to create inclusive systems, preparing students for global citizenship.

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