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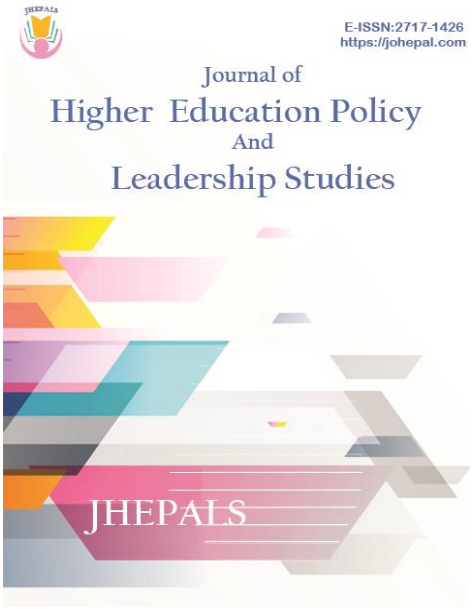

Identity, Capacity, and Efficacy for Ethical Leadership Education

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Abstract

Ethical leadership education is vital for developing leaders capable of navigating complex moral landscapes with integrity and purpose. This paper offers a thorough analysis of scholarly literature surrounding three interrelated constructs essential to ethical leadership development in higher education: identity, capacity, and efficacy. Leadership identity encompasses an individual's evolving self-concept as a moral leader, shaped through reflection, mentorship, and socialization. Capacity refers to the skills, knowledge, and emotional intelligence necessary for recognizing and addressing ethical dilemmas. Efficacy captures one's belief in their ability to lead ethically, particularly in high-stakes or ambiguous contexts. Drawing from research in leadership studies, moral development, and experiential education, the paper explores how pedagogical strategies such as reflective writing, service-learning, mentoring, simulations, and feedback enhance these three dimensions. The article underscores the importance of integrating identity, capacity, and efficacy through curricular and co-curricular experiences to cultivate principled, confident, and competent ethical leaders. It concludes by recommending future research on the intersectionality of these dimensions across diverse student populations and educational contexts, highlighting the need for intentional, inclusive, and developmental approaches in ethical leadership education. This integrated framework provides educators with a meaningful structure to guide and assess leadership learning, ensuring that students are prepared to lead with both moral clarity and practical effectiveness.

Keywords: Identity; Capacity; Efficacy; Ethical; Leadership; Higher Education

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Introduction

Ethical leadership education has become increasingly essential in preparing individuals to navigate complex organizational and societal challenges. Central to this form of education are the concepts of *identity*, *capacity*, and *efficacy*, which are crucial in shaping the development of ethical leaders. Leadership, by its nature, involves responsibility not only for decisions and actions but also for the moral integrity behind those decisions. Understanding these three key elements is fundamental for cultivating leaders who act ethically and likewise inspire others to do the same.

- Identity refers to how individuals perceive themselves in the context of their role as ethical leaders and how their values and principles influence their leadership behavior (Eubanks, Brown, & Ybenma, 2012).
- Capacity relates to the skills, knowledge, and moral reasoning abilities which enable leaders to act ethically and make sound decisions (Begley, 2006).
- Efficacy encompasses the belief in one's ability to execute ethical actions and create a positive impact on others (Luthans & Yousef, 2007).

This paper offers an analysis of scholarly literature related to the development of ethical leadership in higher education. Specifically, it synthesizes research on identity formation, leadership capacity-building, and the development of leadership efficacy. My intent is to examine how various pedagogical strategies, documented in leadership and education scholarship, inform ethical leadership education practices. Rather than proposing a new framework, my analysis engages with existing literature to highlight convergences, gaps, and implications for future research and practice.

Identity in Ethical Leadership Education

Identity is our constantly developing self-image (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021). Leadership identity is an individual's self-conception of who they are as a leader, which is deeply rooted in their personal values, ethical beliefs, and social roles. In the context of ethical leadership education, identity formation involves understanding oneself as a moral agent who holds a responsibility toward others. This ethical leadership identity informs how individuals make decisions, influence others, and respond to ethical challenges (Hannah et al., 2011).

Ethical leadership identity does not develop in isolation, but is shaped through experiences, reflection, and engagement with others. As individuals move through different stages of leadership development, their sense of self as ethical leaders becomes more integrated with their values. This evolution is crucial for leaders to internalize ethical principles and ensure their leadership practices align with these principles (Komives et al., 2005).

Identity Formation and Development

According to Komives et al. (2005), leadership identity develops through a series of stages, beginning with awareness and exploration and culminating in the integration and synthesis of leadership into one's self-concept. The development of ethical leadership identity follows

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a similar trajectory, wherein individuals move from understanding ethical principles to actively integrating them into their leadership behaviors.

Leaders with a well-developed ethical identity are more likely to be consistent in their moral actions and serve as role models for others. These leaders have a clear sense of who they are, what they stand for, and how their values guide their leadership decisions. The role of ethical leadership education is to facilitate this process by encouraging self-reflection, providing opportunities for ethical decision-making, and fostering a commitment to ethical values.

The Role of Personal Values and Socialization in Identity

Personal values play a significant role in shaping leadership identity. Leaders who prioritize honesty, integrity, fairness, and accountability are more likely to develop a strong ethical leadership identity (Treviño et al., 2003). Furthermore, the process of socialization in organizations and educational settings contributes to identity formation. As leaders are exposed to ethical norms, expectations, and role models, they begin to align their behavior with these ethical standards.

Ethical leadership education often emphasizes the importance of reflecting on personal values and experiences, helping individuals understand how their values influence their leadership behavior. This reflective process is critical for leaders to develop a coherent ethical identity to guide their actions in complex and challenging situations.

Ethical Leadership Identity in Practice

A strong ethical leadership identity enables leaders to navigate ethical dilemmas and pressures with integrity. Leaders with a clear ethical identity are less likely to compromise their values for short-term gains or external pressures (Brown et al., 2005). Instead, they are guided by their internalized ethical principles, making decisions aligned with their sense of moral responsibility. In practice, these leaders act as ethical role models, fostering a culture of trust, accountability, and ethical behavior within their organizations.

Capacity in Ethical Leadership Education

Capacity in leadership refers to the skills, knowledge, and competencies empowering individuals to lead effectively (Slater, 2008). In the context of ethical leadership, capacity includes technical skills, as well as the moral reasoning abilities and emotional intelligence necessary to make ethical decisions and inspire ethical behavior in others (Ciulla, 2014). Ethical leadership capacity encompasses the cognitive and emotional capabilities required to recognize ethical issues, evaluate options, and act toward ethical outcomes.

Ethical leadership education benefits from evidence-based strategies that strengthen moral reasoning and ethical capacity (Gentile, 2015). It builds these capacities by equipping leaders with the resources needed to navigate ethical challenges. This includes training in ethical decision-making, moral reasoning, conflict resolution, and communication skills.

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Developing Moral Reasoning and Decision-Making Skills

Core to ethical leadership capacity is the ability to engage in moral reasoning. Rest's (1986) model of moral decision-making outlines four key components: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. These components are essential for leaders to recognize ethical dilemmas, evaluate potential actions, and choose courses of action aligned with ethical principles.

Ethical leadership education often incorporates case studies, simulations, and role-playing exercises to help leaders develop these moral reasoning skills. By practicing ethical decision-making in controlled environments, leaders enhance their capacity to handle real-world ethical challenges (Northouse, 2018). This experiential learning process allows leaders to reflect on their decisions, receive feedback, and refine their ethical decision-making strategies.

Building Emotional Intelligence and Ethical Leadership Capacity

Emotional intelligence (EI) is another critical aspect of leadership capacity. Leaders with high EI are better able to understand and manage their own emotions, empathize with others, and navigate interpersonal relationships with fairness and respect (Goleman, 1995). In ethical leadership, EI plays a vital role in helping leaders create ethical organizational cultures, foster trust, and manage conflicts effectively.

Research indicates emotionally intelligent leaders are more likely to engage in ethical decision-making and create positive environments where employees feel empowered to act with integrity (George, 2000). Ethical leadership education emphasizes the development of EI through activities that promote self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation.

Organizational and Social Capacity in Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership capacity is not limited to individual skills and competencies; it also includes the ability to create ethical organizational cultures. Leaders who promote ethical behavior within their organizations play a key role in establishing ethical norms, setting clear expectations, and holding individuals accountable for their actions (Kaptein, 2011). Ethical leadership education, therefore, focuses on building leaders' capacity to influence organizational culture and structure in ways that promote ethical behavior at all levels.

Efficacy in Ethical Leadership Education

Efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). In the context of ethical leadership education, efficacy relates to leaders' confidence in their ability to lead ethically, make ethical decisions, and positively influence others. Leadership efficacy is essential because leaders who believe in their ability to lead are more likely to take initiative, persist in the face of challenges, and inspire others to follow their ethical example (Bandura, 1997).

Ethical leadership efficacy specifically refers to leaders' confidence in their ability to navigate ethical dilemmas, make morally sound decisions, and foster ethical behavior in their followers. Leaders with high ethical efficacy are more likely to act in alignment with their values, even when faced with pressures or temptations to compromise their integrity.

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Ethical Leadership Education

The Role of Self-Efficacy in Ethical Leadership

Self-efficacy plays a crucial role in shaping a leader's behavior and decision-making. Leaders with high self-efficacy are more likely to set challenging goals, persist through adversity, and take responsibility for their actions. In the context of ethical leadership, self-efficacy is particularly important because leaders often face complex ethical challenges requiring confidence in their ability to make the right decisions (Walumbwa et al., 2011).

Research suggests self-efficacy is positively related to ethical leadership behaviors. Leaders who believe in their ability to act ethically are more likely to engage in ethical decision-making and create environments where ethical behavior is valued and rewarded. Conversely, leaders with low self-efficacy may be more susceptible to external pressures, leading them to compromise their ethical principles (Hannah et al., 2011).

Enhancing Ethical Leadership Efficacy Through Education

Ethical leadership education aims to enhance leaders' efficacy by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to build confidence in their ability to lead ethically. This includes training in ethical decision-making frameworks, conflict resolution, and communication strategies, as well as opportunities for leaders to practice ethical leadership in real-world scenarios.

Experiential learning approaches, such as those discussed by Schwartz (2015), further reinforce the confidence of emerging leaders to act ethically in high-stakes environments. By providing leaders with opportunities to practice ethical decision-making, receive feedback, and reflect on their experiences, ethical leadership education helps build leaders' confidence in their ability to handle ethical challenges (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). These experiences reinforce leaders' belief in their capacity to act ethically and make a positive impact on their organizations and communities.

Integrating Identity, Capacity, and Efficacy in Ethical Leadership Education

The relationships between identity, capacity, and efficacy are fundamental in shaping ethical leadership education. These three elements form the core of ethical leadership development, influencing leaders' behaviors, decision-making processes, and their ability to foster ethical environments. Leadership programs that integrate identity, capacity, and efficacy can draw on models, such as those explored by Zhu and colleagues (2015), to provide a robust ethical leadership framework. Since their integration is crucial for cultivating leaders who are both well-equipped with ethical knowledge and confident in applying it in complex, real-world situations, I offer one such framework which is described in the following sections.

Identity as the Moral Compass

A strong ethical leadership identity serves as the foundation for ethical behavior, providing leaders with a clear sense of self grounded in moral values and principles. Leaders with a well-defined ethical identity are more likely to act consistently with their values, even in challenging situations (Treviño et al., 2003). Ethical identity functions as a moral compass, guiding leaders in making decisions aligned with their core values and ensuring their actions

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reflect a commitment to integrity. When leaders internalize ethical standards as part of their identity, their leadership becomes authentic, inspiring trust and ethical behavior in others (Walumbwa et al., 2008). This identity-based approach to leadership is particularly important in ethical leadership education, as it emphasizes the development of a durable moral self-conception.

Developing a strong ethical leadership identity requires both personal reflection and experiential learning. Ethical leadership education encourages leaders to reflect on their values, ethical beliefs, and leadership experiences, helping them to integrate these elements into their leadership identity (Komives et al., 2005). This reflective process makes leaders more self-aware and committed to their ethical standards, ensuring their identity remains a consistent guide in their leadership journey.

Capacity as Ethical Competency

While identity provides the moral framework, capacity refers to the competencies necessary for leaders to enact their ethical identity in practical, meaningful ways. Capacity in ethical leadership includes the development of critical skills, such as moral reasoning, decision-making, and emotional intelligence, which enable leaders to recognize ethical issues, evaluate options, and make sound decisions (Ciulla, 2014). These competencies are essential for ethical leaders to navigate the complexities of modern organizations and respond effectively to ethical challenges.

Ethical leadership education focuses on enhancing this capacity by providing leaders with the resources necessary for ethical decision-making. For instance, Rest's (1986) model of moral reasoning emphasizes the need for moral sensitivity (recognizing ethical dilemmas), moral judgment (evaluating courses of action), moral motivation (prioritizing ethical outcomes), and moral character (acting with integrity). Leaders who have developed these competencies are better equipped to make decisions congruent with their ethical values and can effectively address the ethical dilemmas.

Emotional intelligence is another critical component of capacity in ethical leadership. Leaders with high emotional intelligence empathize with others, manage their own emotions, and navigate interpersonal relationships to promote ethical behavior (Goleman, 1995). Ethical leadership education often includes training in emotional intelligence, helping leaders understand how their emotions and the emotions of others can impact decision-making and organizational culture (George, 2000). By developing these competencies, leaders are better prepared to foster ethical environments where employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to act with integrity.

Efficacy as Ethical Confidence

Efficacy, or the belief in one's ability to achieve desired outcomes, plays a critical role in ethical leadership. Leadership efficacy is particularly important in ethical leadership because it determines whether leaders have the confidence to act on their ethical beliefs, especially in the face of adversity or resistance (Bandura, 1997). Leaders with high ethical efficacy are more likely to persist in ethical decision-making, even when faced with pressures to compromise.

Research has demonstrated the tight coupling of self-efficacy and ethical leadership behaviors (Walumbwa et al., 2011). Leaders who believe in their ability to lead ethically are

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more likely to take proactive steps to ensure ethical behavior within their organizations, set ethical standards for others, and hold themselves and their followers accountable. Conversely, leaders with low efficacy may be more susceptible to external pressures and may be less likely to act on their ethical beliefs.

Ethical leadership education seeks to build efficacy by providing leaders with experiences and opportunities to reinforce their confidence in their ability to lead ethically. Experiential learning, such as role-playing ethical dilemmas, case studies, and feedback from peers and mentors, allows leaders to practice ethical decision-making in a safe environment. These experiences help leaders build the confidence needed to navigate complex ethical challenges in the real world (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). Additionally, as leaders successfully engage in ethical leadership practices, their efficacy is further reinforced, creating a positive cycle of ethical behavior and confidence in their leadership.

The Holistic Integration of Identity, Capacity, and Efficacy

Ethical leadership education aims to integrate identity, capacity, and efficacy into a cohesive framework for leadership development. This holistic approach ensures leaders are both grounded in strong ethical principles and equipped with the skills and confidence necessary to lead ethically in their organizations. The integration of these elements fosters a comprehensive model of ethical leadership where leaders are self-aware, competent, and confident in their ability to make ethical decisions and influence others positively (as seen in Figure 1).

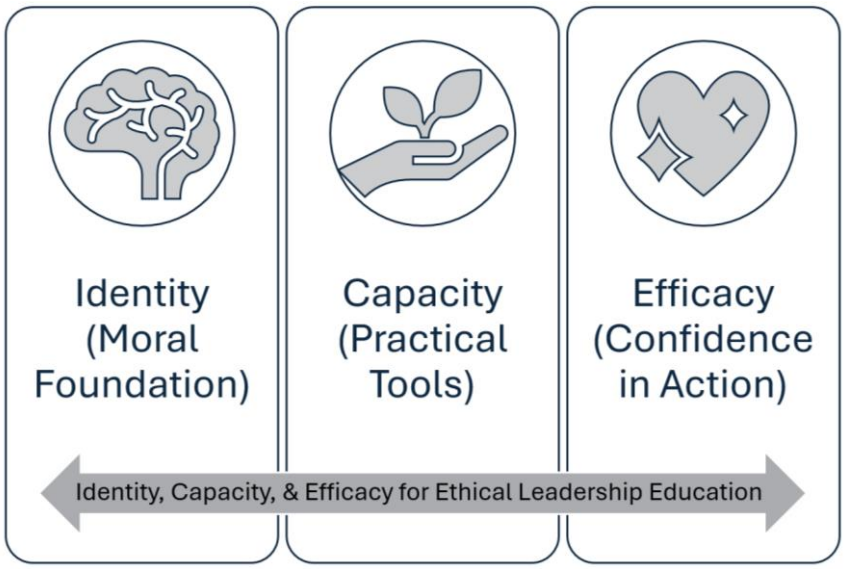

Figure 1. Identity, Capacity, & Efficacy for Ethical Leadership Education

A leader's ethical identity informs their sense of moral responsibility and guides their actions. Their capacity provides them with the practical tools needed to recognize and address ethical dilemmas. Efficacy ensures they believe in their ability to act ethically and lead others toward ethical behavior. Together, these three elements create a robust foundation for ethical leadership, allowing leaders to act with integrity and inspire others to follow their example.

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In practice, ethical leadership education involves a combination of reflective learning (to enhance ethical identity), skills training (to build ethical capacity), and experiential learning (to strengthen efficacy). This integrated approach helps prepare leaders to navigate ethical challenges, promote ethical behavior within their organizations, and contribute positively to society. Leaders who possess a strong ethical identity, the capacity to make ethical decisions, and the confidence to act on their ethical beliefs are more likely to lead with integrity and create organizational cultures that prioritize ethical behavior.

Ethical Leadership Identity, Capacity, and Efficacy in Action

To move from theory to practice, it is essential to situate constructs of identity, capacity, and efficacy within educational environments. Ethical leadership education must extend beyond abstract understanding to practical application in real-life scenarios. This means engaging students not only in critical reflection about who they are as leaders (identity), but also equipping them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (capacity) needed to act ethically and confidently (efficacy) in varied contexts.

Identity in Action

The development of leadership identity has become a central focus in leadership education research, emphasizing the importance of self-awareness, personal values, and evolving worldviews (Komives et al., 2005; Dugan, 2011). Scholars argue identity is not static but constructed through experience, reflection, and social interaction (Priest et al., 2016). This section synthesizes literature exploring how reflective writing, mentoring relationships, and identity-based assessments support students in developing a coherent leadership identity rooted in ethical principles.

Reflective writing serves as a foundational practice in this process. It encourages students to critically engage with their own experiences, values, and beliefs, helping them make meaning of their leadership journeys. Through journaling, personal essays, and structured reflection prompts, students explore how their social identities intersect with their leadership practices and ethical decision-making (Ash & Clayton, 2009). This form of meaning-making fosters authenticity and encourages students to connect their internal beliefs with external actions (Mezirow, 2000).

Mentoring relationships further reinforce identity development by offering students relational spaces to test and refine their leadership understandings. Mentors serve as sounding boards, role models, and challengers of assumptions, helping mentees to articulate and evolve their leadership identities over time (Campbell et al., 2012). Cross-cultural, or identity-conscious, mentoring can support students in navigating complex social and ethical dynamics related to power, privilege, and positionality (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Identity-based leadership assessments provide structured tools for students to gain insight into their leadership styles, strengths, and areas for growth. Assessments, such as the socially responsible leadership scale or StrengthsFinder allow students to examine how their personality traits, values, and experiences shape their approach to leadership (Komives et al., 2005; Rath, 2007). When paired with guided interpretation and coaching, these

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assessments affirm students' emerging identities and offer language for articulating their leadership philosophies.

Educators who prioritize these elements foster environments where students construct coherent narratives about who they are and why they lead. These narratives are critical for ethical leadership because they provide a moral compass rooted in personal authenticity and social responsibility (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). By emphasizing self-understanding alongside ethical reasoning, educators help students build the internal clarity necessary for principled leadership in diverse contexts.

Capacity in Action

While leadership identity lays the foundation for self-understanding, leadership capacity encompasses the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to enact ethical leadership in complex environments (Komives et al., 2011). Literature increasingly points to experiential learning as a key approach for developing such capacity (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). This section reviews studies on service-learning, case-based instruction, and leadership simulations, highlighting how these pedagogies foster critical thinking, moral reasoning, and practical decision-making in students.

Service-learning integrates community engagement with academic coursework to deepen students' understanding of social issues while developing leadership competencies. Through sustained partnerships with local organizations, students encounter real-world ethical dilemmas that challenge them to apply their values and leadership frameworks in unfamiliar settings (Eyler & Giles, 1999). These experiences promote civic responsibility, empathy, and systems thinking—core capacities for ethical leadership. Furthermore, when paired with structured reflection, service-learning fosters moral reasoning and intercultural competence (Mitchell, 2008).

Case studies offer another critical avenue for building capacity by immersing students in complex, often ambiguous scenarios that demand ethical reasoning and decision-making. Well-designed case studies simulate the kinds of dilemmas leaders face in practice—balancing competing values, stakeholders, and consequences (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). By analyzing such cases, students practice applying theoretical models, weighing trade-offs, and justifying their decisions. Discussions rooted in case studies also expose learners to multiple perspectives, enhancing their ability to engage in ethical dialogue and consider contextual nuances (Colby et al., 2003).

Leadership simulations provide dynamic, experiential learning environments where students actively test and refine their leadership capacities. Simulations such as role plays, mock decision-making boards, or virtual environments challenge students to think on their feet, collaborate under pressure, and adapt to unfolding situations (Dugan et al., 2011). These immersive experiences help develop self-awareness, communication skills, and ethical agility—critical qualities for navigating today's leadership contexts. When debriefed effectively, simulations also offer space for critical reflection and feedback, reinforcing the learning cycle (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

To be effective, these pedagogical approaches must be integrated intentionally across the curriculum and co-curriculum. Faculty and practitioners should scaffold these experiences, linking them to leadership theories and ethical frameworks, while ensuring

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they are inclusive and developmentally appropriate. As students engage with real and simulated challenges, they build confidence in their ability to lead ethically and effectively in diverse environments—expanding both their competence and capacity.

Efficacy in Action

Beyond identity and capacity, the concept of leadership efficacy—defined as one's belief in their ability to lead effectively—is essential to ethical leadership development (Bandura, 1997; Hannah et al., 2008). The literature identifies several factors that shape leadership efficacy, including performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, and evaluative feedback. This section synthesizes research on how success experiences, modeling, and constructive feedback influence students' confidence in their ethical leadership abilities.

Success experiences, or performance accomplishments, are among the most powerful sources of efficacy because they involve direct encounters with leadership challenges that students successfully navigate. When students engage in authentic leadership roles—such as leading a student organization, facilitating a program, or organizing a service initiative, they build confidence through tangible achievement (McCormick et al., 2002). These experiences are most effective when they are challenging but achievable, allowing students to see the results of their decisions and actions. Leadership educators support this by creating tiered opportunities for increasing responsibility and ensuring students understand how their efforts contribute to broader goals.

Modeling, or vicarious learning, occurs when students witness peers, mentors, or faculty members demonstrate ethical leadership behaviors. Observing others successfully navigate complex dilemmas, handle interpersonal conflict with integrity, or speak up in morally charged situations inspire students to believe they can do the same. The perceived similarity between the observer and the model increases the impact of the modeling experience (Bandura, 1997). Leadership educators leverage this by intentionally showcasing diverse role models who reflect the varied identities, experiences, and values of their student groups (Komives et al., 2005). This helps normalize ethical risk-taking and underscores how leadership is accessible to all students; not just those in formal positions.

Constructive feedback is another essential mechanism in building leadership efficacy. Feedback that is specific, timely, and framed in a growth-oriented manner helps students recognize both their strengths and areas for development (London, 2003). Effective feedback supports self-regulation, encourages resilience in the face of setbacks, and helps students interpret challenges as learning opportunities rather than failures (Zimmerman, 2000). Educators foster efficacy by creating psychologically safe environments where students are encouraged to take risks, receive feedback, and iterate on their practice without fear of judgment.

When students repeatedly experience ethical leadership success, observe it in others, and receive affirming yet critical feedback, they internalize a belief in their ability to lead ethically under pressure. This sense of moral agency is critical in today's uncertain and often polarizing social climate. As students develop stronger leadership efficacy, they are more likely to persist through challenges, take principled stands, and influence their communities toward justice and equity (Dugan, 2017).

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Conclusion

The concepts of identity, capacity, and efficacy are central to the development of ethical leaders. Identity shapes how leaders see themselves in relation to their ethical values and responsibilities. Capacity equips leaders with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate ethical challenges. Efficacy provides leaders with the confidence to act on their ethical beliefs and create positive change.

The reviewed literature underscores the significance of experiential and relational pedagogies in shaping ethical leadership development. While considerable research highlights the importance of identity, capacity, and efficacy, few studies examine how these dimensions intersect in diverse educational contexts. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of these pedagogies and their adaptability across institutional types and student populations.

Ethical leadership education plays a crucial role in helping leaders develop into individuals who lead with integrity, promote ethical behavior, and inspire others to follow their example. As organizations and societies face increasingly complex ethical challenges, the need for ethical leadership has never been greater. By focusing on identity, capacity, and efficacy, ethical leadership educators prepare the next generation of leaders to rise to these challenges and make a meaningful difference in the world.

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Originality Note

I confirm the manuscript is my original work. The work of others, where included, has been properly cited and quoted.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author claimed that there is "No Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies" in preparing this research.

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