



ORGANIZATIONAL ETHICS VARIABLES ON EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN RIVERS STATE



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Abstract

The study investigated organizational ethics variables on effective management of public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. Three objectives and research questions guided the study. The study used descriptive survey design. A self-designed questionnaire titled “school management effectiveness questionnaire” was used to collect information for the study. 800 school managers made up the population of the study and a sample of 250 respondents was drawn from the population using stratified random sampling technique. Out of the 250 copies of questionnaire administered, only 238 were retrieved and used for the study’s analysis. The instrument was face and content validated through expert review by educational management specialists in Rivers State University and legal/ethical studies scholars, and the internal consistency of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach Alpha. Overall reliability index of 0.82 was obtained. The data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. Findings revealed that legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values influence effective school management to a high extent in public secondary schools in Rivers State. It was recommended that, the Ministry of Education should provide regular training and sensitization for school managers on the legal frameworks governing school operations to ensure greater compliance and accountability, school leadership development programmes should prioritize ethical behaviour, focusing on fairness, transparency, and moral responsibility and schools should collaboratively define and promote core values such as respect, excellence, inclusiveness, and accountability. These values should be embedded in school culture and daily practices.

Keywords: Organizational Ethics Variables, Effective Management, Legal Compliance, Ethical Leadership, Core Institutional Values

Introduction

Effective school management is a cornerstone of quality education delivery. Especially in public secondary schools, where managerial leadership significantly influences teaching, learning, discipline, resource management, and stakeholder engagement. In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the role that organizational ethics variables such as legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values play in fostering a conducive learning environment and ensuring effective governance in schools. According to Okafor and Okocha (2021) these variables are essential not only for regulatory purposes but also shaping the moral and operational character of educational institutions. Legal compliance in school administration refers to adherence to established laws, policies, and regulations that govern the operation of educational institutions. These include national education laws, state policies, teacher service codes, procurement guidelines, and child protection statutes. In the Nigerian context, the Universal Basic Education Act (2004), the National Policy on Education (2014), and state-level educational edicts provide a legal framework within which public schools must operate.

Compliance with these laws helps prevent administrative malpractice, ensures accountability, and protects the rights of students and staff (Adebayo & Ogunyemi, 2019). Failure to comply with legal standards often leads to managerial inefficiency, financial mismanagement, and loss of public trust in school leadership.

Ethical leadership is equally central to effective school management. Ethical leaders are guided by principles such as fairness, honesty, integrity, transparency, and responsibility in decision-making. In the school setting, this translates into equitable treatment of students and staff, honest handling of school funds, ethical hiring practices, and responsible disciplinary measures (Ugwulashi, 2017). Ethical leadership also fosters trust and collaboration among stakeholders, which enhances staff motivation, student discipline, and overall school performance. In Rivers State, where challenges such as politicization of education, mismanagement of resources, and corruption are not uncommon, ethical leadership becomes a critical countermeasure to ensure that school goals are achieved efficiently and morally.

Furthermore, core institutional values such as respect, excellence, accountability, and commitment to service form the cultural bedrock of schools and influence the behaviour of managers, teachers, and students. Values shape how decisions are made, how conflicts are resolved, and how members of the school community interact. Institutions that promote strong positive values tend to promote strong positive values to record higher levels of staff commitment, student discipline, and managerial coherence (Onyije & Olanrewaju, 2020). In Rivers State, where socio-political and economic pressures may challenge the moral compass of public institutions, institutional values serve as internal guiding principles that uphold standards even in the absence of external supervision.

The interrelationship among legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values is crucial. While legal frameworks provide the structural boundaries within which schools operate, ethical leadership ensures moral direction, and institutional values instill a shared sense of purpose and identity. Together, they influence managerial effectiveness by promoting transparency, accountability, and student-centered policies. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how these variables interact to affect the effectiveness of school management in public secondary schools in Rivers State.

The study therefore seeks to fill this gap by empirically investigating the influence of legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values on the effectiveness of school management in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. The findings are expected to contribute to policy refinement, leadership development programmes, and the formulation of strategies for improved school governance.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three interrelated theories: Institutional Theory, Ethical Leadership Theory, and Transformational Leadership Theory. Each of these theories provides a conceptual lens through which the variables: legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values can be examined in relation to school management effectiveness.

Institutional Theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977)

Institutional Theory posits that organizations function within a structured and regulated environment where formal rules, laws, and norms influence organizational practices. Compliance with these external expectations legitimizes the organization and enhances its credibility and efficiency. In the context of school management, legal frameworks such as the Universal Basic Education Act (2004), the National Policy on Education (2013), and state-level educational policies act as institutional mechanisms that define how public schools should operate. Adherence to these legal instruments foster transparency, accountability, and consistency in school governance (Okafor & Okocha, 2021). Thus, Institutional Theory supports the argument that legal compliance is a prerequisite for effective school management.

Ethical Leadership Theory (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005)

Ethical Leadership Theory emphasizes the role of morality, fairness, integrity, and role modeling in effective leadership. Ethical leaders set standards for behaviour, make fair decisions, and encourage others to act ethically through communication and example. In the context of school leadership, ethical managers create a climate of trust, fairness, and professional conduct, which significantly impacts teacher morale, student behavior, and organizational cohesion (Ugwulashi, 2017). By applying Ethical Leadership Theory, this study recognizes that the presence of ethical behavior in school leadership enhances decision-making, conflict resolution, and staff motivation, thereby improving managerial effectiveness.

Transformational Leadership Theory (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985)

Transformational Leadership Theory focuses on leaders who inspire and motivate followers to exceed expectations by fostering a shared vision, promoting innovation, and nurturing organizational values. It is particularly relevant in educational settings where leaders are expected to instill a sense of mission and commitment among teachers and students. This theory provides the basis for understanding how core institutional values such as respect, accountability, and commitment can be embedded in school culture and contribute to managerial effectiveness. Transformational leaders align the values of staff and students with institutional goals, creating a cohesive and purpose-driven environment (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Synthesis of Theories

Together, these three theories offer a robust framework for understanding the interplay between external legal requirements (Institutional Theory), internal moral behavior (Ethical Leadership Theory), and shared cultural values (Transformational Leadership Theory) in shaping school management effectiveness. The synergy of these perspectives allows for a comprehensive analysis of how leadership, law, and values interact to enhance the functioning of public secondary schools in Rivers State.

Legal Compliance in School Management

Legal compliance serves as the foundation of responsible and effective school governance. Laws and regulations in the education sector ensure that school managers uphold standards in areas such as curriculum implementation, personnel management, financial accountability, student welfare, and infrastructure development. Adebayo and Ogunyemi (2019) stated that adherence to legal provisions enhances managerial transparency and minimizes occurrences of misconduct or abuse of power. In the Nigeria context, public secondary schools are expected to comply with frameworks such as the National Policy on Education (2014), Child Rights Act (2003), and laws. Non-compliance can lead to legal sanctions, loss of stakeholder confidence, and diminished institutional performance (Okoro & Ibe, 2018).

Ethical Leadership and Managerial Effectiveness

Ethical leadership has been shown to play a pivotal role in influencing the quality of decision-making and the moral tone of school leadership. Ethical leaders demonstrate integrity, fairness, empathy, and a strong sense of justice, which promotes a culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility in schools (Brown & Trevino, 2006). In Nigeria, studies indicate that ethical lapses such as favoritism in staff promotion, misappropriation of funds, and lack of transparency in student assessments hinder managerial effectiveness (Ugwulashi, 2017). Ethical leadership enhances communication, builds trust, and strengthens teamwork among staff and students, thereby improving organizational climate and learning outcomes (Edeh & Nwankwo, 2020).

Institutional Values and School Culture

Institutional values from the cultural identity of schools and guide behaviours, decision-making and relationships. Values such as respect, responsibility, excellence, and accountability are instrumental in shaping the ethos of school communities (Onyije & Olanrewaju, 2020). Schools that internalize and promote strong values experience better student discipline, stronger teacher commitment, and improved academic performance. Moreover, institutional values reinforce ethical leadership and facilitate compliance with rules by nurturing a shared understanding of what is right and expected (Adepoju & Adelabu, 2019).

Combined Influence on Managerial Effectiveness

The synergy among legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values is critical to effective school management. Research by Iroegbu and Okafor (2021) demonstrates that school managers who operate within legal boundaries, lead ethically, and promote institutional values tend to achieve higher levels of performance and stakeholder satisfaction. Conversely, schools lacking in these areas often suffer from conflict, poor staff morale, and inefficient resource use. While studies have independently examined each of these variables, there is dearth of empirical research exploring their combined influence, particularly in the public education sector of Rivers State.

Statement of the Problem

School managers in Rivers State often operate in environments marked by irregular policy enforcement, moral dilemmas, and conflicting value systems. These factors can compromise managerial decisions and affect school effectiveness. The extent to which legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values contribute to resolving these challenges remains underexplored.

Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate organizational ethics variables on effective management of public senior secondary schools Rivers State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the extent to which legal compliance influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
2. Examine the extent to which ethical leadership influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.
3. Ascertain the extent to which core institutional values influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. To what extent does legal compliance influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
2. To what extent does ethical leadership influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?
3. To what extent does core institutional values influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Methodology

A descriptive survey design was adopted in the study, and the population of the study consisted of 800 school managers in all the public senior secondary schools in Rivers State. A sample of 250 respondents was drawn from the population using stratified random sampling technique to ensure representation across the three senatorial zones of Rivers State (Rivers East, Rivers West, Rivers South-East). Each stratum included participants from both urban and rural schools to capture a broad range of administrative contexts. The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled "School Management Effectiveness Questionnaire (SMEQ). The instrument

contained 15 items, which were responded to on a 4-point modified Likert scale of Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE), and Very Low Extent (VLE). These weights were summed and divided by 4 to arrive at 2.50, which was the criterion mean score used to agreeing or disagreeing with the questionnaire items. Content and face validity was established through expert review by educational management specialists in Rivers State University and legal/ethical studies scholars, and the internal consistency of the questionnaire was determined using Cronbach Alpha. Reliability indexes of 0.82, 0.84, and 0.80 was realized from the three clusters. Out of the 250 copies of questionnaire administered, only 238 were retrieved by the researchers with the help of a trained research assistant at a date and time agreed upon with the respondents. The research questions raised in this study were answered using mean and standard deviation statistics.

Results and Findings

Research Question 1: To what extent does legal compliance influence school management effectiveness in public senior secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 1: Mean Ratings on the influence of Legal Compliance on School Management Effectiveness

S/No	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
1	The school leadership adheres to government educational policies and regulations.	3.52	0.70	HE
2	Managerial decisions in this school comply with the rules and codes of conduct provided by the Ministry of Education.	3.19	1.02	HE
3	Financial expenditures are subject to legal approval and auditing procedures.	2.76	1.14	LE
4	There is regular training on legal obligations and compliance for school leaders.	3.55	0.99	HE
5	The school maintains accurate and legally required documentation for all operations.	3.83	1.08	HE

The data on table 1 showed that the respondents to a high extent generally agreed on the influence of legal compliance on school management effectiveness. Based on the responses of these respondents to the question posed it is obvious that the respondents agreed to a high extent on all the items except variable item 3 which stated that financial expenditures are subject to legal approval and auditing procedures which has a low extent agreement.

Research Question 2: To what extent does ethical leadership influence school management effectiveness in public secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 2: Mean Ratings on the influence of Ethical Leadership on School Management Effectiveness

S/No	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
6	The school administrator models honesty and integrity in decision-making.	3.31	0.75	HE
7	Staff are treated fairly and equitably regardless of gender, tribe, or religion.	3.24	1.10	HE
8	Ethical behavior is encouraged and rewarded among staff members.	3.06	1.01	HE
9	The school head accepts responsibility for their decisions and actions.	3.15	0.94	HE
10	Transparency is maintained in the allocation of duties and use of resources.	3.04	1.16	HE

The data on table 2 showed that the respondents generally agreed to a high extent on all the variable items concerning the influence of ethical leadership on school management effectiveness. This can be attested to by the total mean which ranged from 3.04 to 3.31 which is higher than the criterion mean of 2.50. Variable item 6 which concerns the school administrator models honesty and integrity in decision-making has the highest total mean of 3.31.

Research Question 3: To what extent does core institutional values influence school management effectiveness in public secondary schools in Rivers State?

Table 3: Mean Ratings on the influence of Core Institutional Values on School Management Effectiveness

S/No	Items	Mean	SD	Remarks
11	The school promotes shared values such as respect, accountability, and excellence.	3.95	0.82	VHE
12	Staff and students understand and uphold the core values of the institution.	3.20	0.93	HE
13	Conflicts are resolved in line with the moral and cultural values of the school.	3.60	1.13	LE
14	Leadership decisions reflect the school's stated mission and values.	3.45	0.92	HE
15	The school consistently reinforces a culture of professionalism	3.22	1.01	HE

The data on table 3 showed that all the core institutional values items considered on research question 3 were all generally agreed upon to a high extent to influence school management effectiveness. Based on the responses of the managers who constituted the respondents of the study on this research question, it is apparent that item 11 which states: the school promotes shared values such as respect, accountability, and excellence with a mean of 3.95 has the highest total mean. This means that this variable item influence school management effectiveness.

Discussion of Findings

On the first research question which considered the extent to which legal compliance influence school management effectiveness in public secondary schools in Rivers State, the researcher discovered that respondents affirmatively agreed to a high extent on all the items except item 3 which stated that financial expenditures are subject to legal approval and auditing procedures with a low extent agreement. These responses implies that when school managers adhere to established educational laws, policies, and regulatory frameworks, the school functions more efficiently, with clearer roles, accountability, and operational transparency. This finding supports the view of Ezeani and Ofojebe (2019), who asserted that legal compliance enhances procedural justice and reduces conflict in school systems. It also aligns with Adegbesan (2018), who found that regulatory adherence fosters a climate of fairness and discipline necessary for effective leadership.

The second research question analyzed the extent to which ethical leadership influence school management effectiveness in public secondary schools in Rivers State. It was revealed that respondents generally agreed to a high extent on all the variable items concerning the research question. The aggregate mean which ranged from 3.04 to 3.31 is higher than the criterion mean of 2.50. Ethical leadership practices such as transparency, integrity, fairness, and accountability were found to positively impact school operations. This supports findings by Brown and Treviño (2006) and Olagunju (2020), which emphasized that ethical school leaders foster trust, boost staff morale, and create environments conducive to teaching and learning. In the context of Rivers State, ethical leadership appears to mitigate issues of favoritism, mismanagement, and poor communication.

The third research question determined the extent to which core institutional values influence school management effectiveness in public secondary schools in Rivers State. Based on the analyzed result, it is apparent that all the core institutional values variables considered on research question 3

were all generally agreed upon to a high extent that core institutional values influence school management effectiveness. From the responses of the school managers who constituted the respondents of the study on this research question, it is apparent that item 11 which states: the school promotes shared values such as respect, accountability, and excellence with a mean 3.95 has the highest total mean. Such a high mean reflects that values such as respect for diversity, inclusiveness, accountability, and shared vision were instrumental in guiding school practices. This agrees with the work of Sergiovanni (1992), who argued that strong institutional values bind school communities together and provide a moral compass for leadership decisions. In public secondary schools in Rivers State, such values seem to help shape a professional culture that enhances collaboration and goal attainment.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by empirically demonstrating that legal compliance, ethical leadership, and institutional values jointly and significantly predict school management effectiveness in the Nigerian public secondary school context. It also highlights the importance of aligning managerial practice with law, ethics, and values for sustainable school development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that legal compliance, ethical leadership, and core institutional values are critical to effective school management in public secondary schools in Rivers State. School managers who adhere to legal standards, uphold ethical principles, and cultivate institutional values are more likely to run effective and result-oriented schools. Therefore, fostering legal literacy, promoting ethical conduct, and institutionalizing core values in school management are strategic steps toward achieving better educational outcomes in the public school sector.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Ministry of Education should provide regular training and sensitization for school managers on the legal frameworks governing school operations to ensure greater compliance and accountability.
2. School leadership development programmes should prioritize ethical behaviour, focusing on fairness, transparency, and moral responsibility.
3. Schools should collaboratively define and promote core values such as respect, excellence, inclusiveness, and accountability. These values should be embedded in school culture and daily practices.

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