

Factors Influencing Pupils' Character Development and the Influence of Principals' Ethical Leadership in Public Senior Secondary Schools in Sierra Leone

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Abstract This study examined the factors influencing pupils' character development and the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development in public senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving 384 respondents from 12 public senior secondary schools in Freetown, Bo, Kenema, and Makeni. The sample comprised 84 teachers, 12 principals, and 288 pupils. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires and analysed using SPSS Version 26, while qualitative data from key informant interviews and focus group discussions were analysed thematically using NVivo. The questionnaire demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.826$). Findings indicated that school rules and regulations ($M = 4.85$), parental involvement ($M = 4.25$), and extracurricular activities ($M = 4.24$) were the strongest perceived influences on pupils' character development, while peer influence ($M = 2.25$) and social media exposure ($M = 2.79$) were perceived as negative influences. No significant gender differences were observed across the main character-development factors ($p > 0.05$). Principals' ethical leadership showed a strong positive relationship with pupils' character development. The ethical-leadership composite recorded $M = 4.44$ ($SD = 0.27$), while character development recorded $M = 2.97$ ($SD = 0.30$). Pearson's correlation revealed a strong positive association ($r = 0.735$, 95% CI [0.618–0.820], $p < 0.001$). Simple linear regression further showed that ethical leadership significantly predicted character development, explaining 54.1% of its variance ($R^2 = 0.541$, $F(1,82) = 96.47$, $p < 0.001$). The highest-rated ethical-leadership dimensions were promoting kindness ($M = 4.75$) and transparent decision-making ($M = 4.74$). Significant gender differences were identified in ethical role modelling, promoting kindness, upholding ethical standards, moral communication, and showing concern ($p = 0.009–0.045$). Qualitative findings reinforced the importance of school climate, parental guidance, peer influence, and social media in shaping pupils' character. The study concludes that ethical leadership, supportive school environments, parental involvement, and consistent behavioural standards are important for positive character development. It recommends integrating character education across school activities, strengthening family-school partnerships, establishing structured peer mentoring, and providing continuous professional development to strengthen ethical leadership in schools.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership, Character Development, Factors, Principals, Pupils, Senior Secondary Schools, Sierra Leone

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1. Introduction

Character development is an essential component of quality education because schools are expected to develop learners who demonstrate integrity, responsibility, respect, empathy, discipline, and other positive moral and social values [1,2]. Senior secondary education is particularly important because pupils aged 15-19 years are undergoing critical stages of identity formation, internalisation of social norms, and development of behavioural habits

[3,4,5]. During this period, pupils are influenced by teachers, school leaders, peers, families, and the wider community. Consequently, school environments and leadership practices can significantly shape character development. Secondary schools globally continue to face behavioural challenges such as truancy, bullying, substance use, academic dishonesty, defiance, and violence [7,8,9]. In sub-Saharan Africa, these challenges are intensified by resource constraints, overcrowding, weak disciplinary systems, and limited systematic character-education programmes [10,11,12]. Sierra Leone faces similar concerns, including bullying (48.7%),

truancy (approximately 35%), sexual misconduct, substance use, examination malpractice, weak teacher integrity, and exclusion of vulnerable pupils [13,14,15,16,17].

Against this background, ethical leadership has become increasingly important in educational institutions [18,19]. Principals are expected to demonstrate integrity, fairness, honesty, accountability, respect, transparency, and concern for others [6,20]. Through policy implementation, teacher supervision, resource management, conflict resolution, discipline, and role modelling, principals help establish school cultures that encourage positive behaviour [21,22]. Ethical Leadership Theory explains this influence through the principal's role as both a moral person and moral manager, while Social Learning Theory suggests that pupils and teachers learn behaviours by observing credible authority figures [2,6,23]. Teachers provide an important perspective because they interact directly with pupils and observe principals' decision-making, disciplinary practices, conflict resolution, fairness, and treatment of school-community members [24]. Their perceptions therefore help assess whether ethical leadership is consistently demonstrated and whether it contributes to a positive moral and behavioural school climate.

In Sierra Leone, character development is particularly important for promoting responsible citizenship, peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and national development [25,26]. The Teaching Service Commission's Code of Conduct requires teachers and school leaders to uphold professional ethical standards [25], while the Basic and Senior Secondary Education Act of 2023 requires school leaders to maintain ethical standards, prohibit corporal punishment, and promote safe, inclusive, and child-friendly learning environments [26]. Nevertheless, challenges such as gender disparities in the enabling school environment remain relevant [27].

Character development is a complex process involving moral knowing, moral feeling, and moral action [1]. Lickona's Character Development Theory emphasises the integration of these three components, while the gap between pupils' moral awareness and actual behaviour highlights the importance of the environment in translating values into conduct. Character development is also influenced by peer groups, parental involvement, family background, school climate and rules, extracurricular activities, guidance and counselling, moral education, and social media [29,30,31].

Despite extensive research on principals' leadership and academic performance, teacher motivation, school effectiveness, and organisational outcomes [24,28], comparatively limited attention has been given to the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development, particularly from teachers' perspectives in Sierra Leonean senior secondary schools. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining:

1. The factors influencing pupils' character development in public senior secondary schools.
2. The relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development.

The study draws on Ethical Leadership Theory [6], Lickona's Character Development Theory [1], and Bandura's Social Learning Theory [2] to provide a

theoretical basis for understanding how school leadership and the wider school environment contribute to pupils' character formation.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design that integrated quantitative and qualitative methodological strands to generate a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing pupils' character development and the role of principals' ethical leadership in shaping those outcomes [32]. The quantitative strand employed structured questionnaires administered to teachers to generate Likert-scale data, which were analysed using descriptive statistics and one-way ANOVA. The qualitative strand used Key Informant Interviews with principals and Focus Group Discussions with pupils to explore the lived experiences and contextual perspectives that cannot be captured by quantitative instruments alone [33]. The findings were subsequently integrated during interpretation to identify areas they converge, complement and differ between the two sets of findings, which provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting pupils' character development in public senior secondary schools in urban Sierra Leone [32]. The convergent parallel mixed-methods design was considered appropriate for this study, because it enabled the researcher to obtain both broad quantitative evidence and in-depth qualitative insights within the same study period. Methodological triangulation strengthened the credibility and internal validity of the findings.

2.2. Study Area

The study was conducted in four major urban centres of Sierra Leone: Freetown Urban (Western Area), Bo (Southern Province), Kenema (Eastern Province), and Makeni (Northern Province). These centres were selected because of their high population density, diverse public senior secondary school profiles, and documented evidence of elevated rates of adolescent indiscipline and risky behaviour in urban school environments [13,14]. According to the 2025 MBSSE Annual School Census, 262 public senior secondary schools with an estimated population of 184,706 (comprising 262 principals, 179,859 pupils, and 4,585 teachers) existed across the four urban areas [34].

2.3. Sampling and Sampling Techniques

The sample comprised 384 respondents, determined using the Krejcie and Morgan [35] sample size table at a 95% confidence level and $\pm 5\%$ margin of error. Schools were selected using cluster sampling by school type (Boys', Girls', Mixed), yielding 12 schools three per urban centre. Within each school, 1 principal was purposively selected, 7 teachers were selected through a combination of purposive and simple random sampling (minimum 5 years of experience, direct engagement with pupil discipline), and 24 SSS 3 pupils were selected by simple

random sampling (fishbowl method). This yielded 12 principals, 84 teachers, and 288 pupils.

2.4. Data Collection

A structured teacher questionnaire assessed perceptions of factors influencing pupils' character development and the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character outcomes. These questionnaire items measuring principals' leadership practices were adapted from the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) developed by Brown et al., (2005). The adopted items measure key dimensions of ethical leadership, including integrity, fairness, ethical decision-making and ethical role modelling. The instrument was piloted in Lungu and demonstrated good internal consistency: the overall 41-item instrument returned a Cronbach's alpha of 0.826; the ten-item ethical leadership subscale and the twelve-item character development subscale each returned an alpha of 0.71, and the ten-item relationship-perception subscale returned an alpha of 0.88, indicating acceptable to high reliability across all sections used in this analysis. Key Informant Interviews with principals and Focus Group Discussions with pupils (conducted in three groups of eight per school) provided qualitative depth. All participants provided informed consent; sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 26, employing cross-tabulation, descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), one-way ANOVA (significance level $p = 0.05$), Pearson product-moment correlation, and simple linear regression. To directly address Objective 2, a composite ethical-leadership score and a composite character-development score were computed for each teacher-respondent as the mean of their ten ethical-leadership items and twelve character-development items respectively, and the association between these two composite scores was tested using Pearson correlation and simple linear regression, with the composite character-development score as the outcome variable. Qualitative data from KIIs and FGDs were thematically analysed using NVivo, with transcripts coded into nodes and grouped into themes aligned with the research objectives. Qualitative findings were triangulated with quantitative results to strengthen interpretive validity.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Written permission was obtained from all sampled school authorities prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants. Anonymity was preserved through the use of alphanumeric codes for all respondents. All data were stored securely and used exclusively for academic purposes.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Teacher Respondents

Table 1. presents the demographic profile of the 84 teacher respondents. The sample was predominantly males (73.8%, $n = 62$), with female teachers comprising 26.2% ($n = 22$). Most respondents were aged 40–49 years (42.9%) or 30–39 years (41.7%), representing a mature workforce. The majority held bachelor's degrees (83.3%), while 16.7% held Higher Teacher Certificates. Regarding experience, 70.2% ($n = 59$) had more than ten years of teaching, with 29.8% ($n = 25$) having between five and ten years. Class Masters/Mistresses constituted the largest positional group (39.3%), followed by Subject Teachers (34.5%) and Heads of Department (26.2%). All three school types were equally represented (33.3% each).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of teacher respondents

Demographic Characteristics	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Gender		
Males	62	73.8
Females	22	26.2
Total	84	100.0
Age (years)		
30–39	35	41.7
40–49	36	42.9
50–59	13	15.5
Total	84	100.0
Educational Qualification		
Higher Teacher Certificate (HTC)	14	16.7
Secondary		
Bachelor's Degree (B.Sc./BA/B.Ed.)	70	83.3
Total	84	100.0
Teaching Experience		
5–10 years	25	29.8
Above 10 years	59	70.2
Total	84	100.0
Professional Position		
Head of Department	22	26.2
Class Master/Mistress	33	39.3
Subject Teacher	29	34.5
Total	84	100.0
School Type		
Boys' School	28	33.3
Girls' School	28	33.3
Mixed School	28	33.3
Total	84	100.0

3.2. Factors Influencing Pupils' Character Development in Senior Secondary Schools

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the nine factors. School rules and regulations recorded the highest

total mean (4.85), followed closely by parental involvement (4.25) and extracurricular activities (4.24). These three factors represent the strongest positively perceived influences on character development, reflecting institutional structures, family partnerships, and co-curricular experiences as primary character formation mechanisms [29,30]. School climate (3.76), role modelling (3.63), and guidance and counselling (3.56) emerged as moderate positive influences, with some teachers expressing uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of counselling provision, possibly reflecting variability in the availability and quality of guidance services across different schools. Comparable challenges have been documented elsewhere in West Africa, where counsellors in senior high schools report inadequate resources, heavy caseloads, and insufficient specialised training as barriers to effective service delivery [36].

Table 2. Descriptive statistical analysis of teachers' perceptions of factors influencing pupils' character development by gender

Factor	Group	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
School Climate	Males	62	3.76	.432	3.65	3.87
	Females	22	3.77	.429	3.58	3.96
	Total	84	3.76	.428	3.67	3.85
Role Modelling	Males	62	3.66	.922	3.43	3.90
	Females	22	3.55	.671	3.25	3.84
	Total	84	3.63	.861	3.44	3.82
School Rules	Males	62	4.82	.385	4.72	4.92
	Females	22	4.91	.294	4.78	5.04
	Total	84	4.85	.364	4.77	4.92
Extracurricular Activities	Males	62	4.24	.432	4.13	4.35
	Females	22	4.23	.429	4.04	4.42
	Total	84	4.24	.428	4.15	4.33
Moral Education	Males	62	2.55	.592	2.40	2.70
	Females	22	2.68	.716	2.36	3.00
	Total	84	2.58	.625	2.45	2.72
Peer Influence	Males	62	2.21	.410	2.11	2.31
	Females	22	2.36	.492	2.15	2.58
	Total	84	2.25	.436	2.16	2.34
Parental Involvement	Males	62	4.21	.410	4.11	4.31
	Females	22	4.36	.492	4.15	4.58
	Total	84	4.25	.436	4.16	4.34
Guidance & Counselling	Males	62	3.48	.954	3.24	3.73
	Females	22	3.77	.813	3.41	4.13
	Total	84	3.56	.923	3.36	3.76
Social Media Influence	Males	62	2.74	.974	2.49	2.99
	Females	22	2.91	1.019	2.46	3.36
	Total	84	2.79	.983	2.57	3.00

Moral education (2.58), social media (2.79), and peer influence (2.25) registered lower mean scores. The consistently low mean for peer influence (2.25) reflects teachers' perception that peer groups, on balance, exert a negative influence on pupils' character, primarily through facilitation of misconduct, academic dishonesty, and norm violation. The low rating for moral education, despite its curricular presence, is particularly noteworthy: it suggests

that teachers consider the existing moral education curriculum insufficiently effective or inadequately delivered to substantively shape pupils' moral conduct a finding that resonates strongly with Lickona's [1] critique of moral instruction that is not systematically integrated into school practice. This concern echoes broader critiques of moral and civic education across African school systems, which have been criticised for remaining detached from learners' lived social realities and for insufficiently confronting the structural and cultural legacies that shape moral formation [37].

3.3. One-way ANOVA Results Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Influencing pupils' Character Development

Table 3 presents the one-way ANOVA results for gender differences in teachers' perceptions of factors influencing pupils' character development. The results confirm that no statistically significant gender differences were found across all nine factors: school climate ($p = 0.891$), role modelling ($p = 0.591$), school rules ($p = 0.341$), extracurricular activities ($p = 0.891$), moral education ($p = 0.393$), peer influence ($p = 0.156$), parental involvement ($p = 0.156$), guidance and counselling ($p = 0.209$), and social media ($p = 0.496$). This broad consensus across gender is a significant finding, confirming that both males and females teachers, regardless of their positional roles, experience levels, or school types hold substantially similar views about the primary factors shaping character development in public senior secondary schools.

Table 3. One-way ANOVA results for differences in teachers' perceptions of factors influencing pupils' character development

Factor	Source	Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
School Climate	Between	.003	1	.019	.891
	Within	15.235	82		
Role Modelling	Between	.218	1	.291	.591
	Within	61.342	82		
School Rules	Between	.122	1	.917	.341
	Within	10.867	82		
Extracurricular Activities	Between	.003	1	.019	.891
	Within	15.235	82		
Moral Education	Between	.289	1	.738	.393
	Within	32.128	82		
Peer Influence	Between	.385	1	2.054	.156
	Within	15.365	82		
Parental Involvement	Between	.385	1	2.054	.156
	Within	15.365	82		
Guidance & Counselling	Between	1.355	1	1.602	.209
	Within	69.348	82		
Social Media Influence	Between	.454	1	.467	.496
	Within	79.689	82		

The qualitative data richly contextualised these quantitative findings. Principals identified school culture encompassing effective leadership, consistent discipline,

counselling services, and religious and moral education as the primary institutional factor shaping character outcomes. FGD responses from pupils highlighted negative peer influence as the most immediate and visible factor affecting their moral choices: pupils described peers pressuring them into lateness, examination cheating, and conflict with other students. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on peer influence during adolescence [4,5], which identifies the peer group as a particularly powerful social learning context during this developmental stage. Bandura's [2] Social Learning Theory directly explains this dynamic: adolescents observe, imitate, and are reinforced by the behaviours modelled within their peer groups, making peer culture a potent vector for both positive and negative moral development.

The high positive ratings for parental involvement affirm that family context constitutes a foundational dimension of character formation that extends well beyond the institutional boundaries of the school [38]. Respondents consistently indicated that pupils from homes characterised by strong parental supervision, consistent moral guidance, and supportive family relationships tended to demonstrate more responsible, respectful, and disciplined behaviour, while those from homes with weak parental oversight were disproportionately represented among pupils exhibiting behavioural challenges. These patterns align with character education theory [1], which recognises the family as the primary socialising institution responsible for establishing the foundational moral dispositions that schools subsequently seek to cultivate and reinforce.

3.4. Descriptive Statistical Analysis of Teachers' Perceptions of the Relationship between Principals' Ethical Leadership and Pupils' Character Development

Table 4 presents descriptive statistics for the ten dimensions of the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development. The total mean scores ranged from 3.75 to 4.75, indicating generally strong agreement across all dimensions on the five-point Likert scale. Promoting kindness recorded the highest total mean ($M = 4.75$), followed by transparent decision-making ($M = 4.74$), ethical role modelling ($M = 4.64$), moral communication ($M = 4.55$), consistent discipline ($M = 4.55$), and upholding ethical standards ($M = 4.54$). These highly rated dimensions suggest that teachers particularly recognise principals' visible ethical conduct, moral communication, and consistent disciplinary practices as important aspects of character development. This finding aligns with the moral-person and moral-manager dimensions of ethical leadership, which emphasise ethical conduct, role modelling, communication, and reinforcement of moral standards [6]. The comparatively lower mean scores were recorded for showing concern ($M = 3.75$), promoting cooperation ($M = 3.85$), impartial treatment ($M = 4.10$), and promoting integrity ($M = 4.15$). Although these dimensions remained within the positive agreement range, their relatively lower ratings may suggest that relational and cultural aspects of

ethical leadership are perceived as less immediately visible in shaping pupils' character than direct modelling, communication, and disciplinary practices. Gender-based comparisons further showed that female teachers consistently reported higher mean ratings than male teachers on several dimensions. These included ethical role modelling (female = 4.86; male = 4.56), promoting kindness (female = 4.91; male = 4.69), upholding ethical standards (female = 4.82; male = 4.44), and moral communication (female = 4.86; male = 4.44). This pattern suggests that female teachers may place greater emphasis on the relational, behavioural, and modelling dimensions of principals' ethical leadership. The consistently positive ratings across all ten dimensions indicate that teachers perceive principals' ethical leadership as multidimensional and strongly related to pupils' character development. The finding is consistent with Ethical Leadership Theory [6] and Social Learning Theory [2], which emphasise that leaders influence behaviour through ethical role modelling, communication, reinforcement of appropriate conduct, and the establishment of shared moral norms.

Table 4. Descriptive statistical analysis of teachers' perceptions of the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development

Dimension	Group	n	Mean	Std. Dev.	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
Ethical Role Modelling	Males	62	4.56	.500	4.44	4.69
	Females	22	4.86	.351	4.71	5.02
	Total	84	4.64	.482	4.54	4.75
Promoting Integrity	Males	62	4.11	.319	4.03	4.19
	Females	22	4.27	.456	4.07	4.47
	Total	84	4.15	.364	4.08	4.23
Promoting Kindness	Males	62	4.69	.465	4.58	4.81
	Females	22	4.91	.294	4.78	5.04
	Total	84	4.75	.436	4.66	4.84
Upholding Ethical Standards	Males	62	4.44	.716	4.25	4.62
	Females	22	4.82	.501	4.60	5.04
	Total	84	4.54	.685	4.39	4.68
Consistent Discipline	Males	62	4.52	.718	4.33	4.70
	Females	22	4.64	.581	4.38	4.89
	Total	84	4.55	.684	4.40	4.70
Impartial Treatment	Males	62	4.13	.338	4.04	4.21
	Females	22	4.00	.000	4.00	4.00
	Total	84	4.10	.295	4.03	4.16
Moral Communication	Males	62	4.44	.716	4.25	4.62
	Females	22	4.86	.351	4.71	5.02
	Total	84	4.55	.666	4.40	4.69
Showing Concern	Males	62	3.69	.465	3.58	3.81
	Females	22	3.91	.294	3.78	4.04
	Total	84	3.75	.436	3.66	3.84
Transparent Decision-Making	Males	62	4.69	.465	4.58	4.81
	Females	22	4.86	.351	4.71	5.02
	Total	84	4.74	.442	4.64	4.83
Promoting Cooperation	Males	62	3.82	.385	3.72	3.92
	Females	22	3.91	.294	3.78	4.04
	Total	84	3.85	.364	3.77	3.92

3.5. ANOVA Analysis on the Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of the Relationship between Principals' Ethical Leadership and Pupils' Character Development

Table 5 presents the ANOVA results for gender differences in perceptions of the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development. Unlike the factors analysis in Section 3.2.3, the relationship analysis reveals a more complex pattern of gendered perceptions, with statistically significant gender differences found in five of the ten dimensions: ethical role modelling ($F = 6.681$, $p = 0.012$), promoting kindness ($F = 4.125$, $p = 0.045$), upholding ethical standards ($F = 5.341$, $p = 0.023$), moral communication ($F = 7.215$, $p = 0.009$), and showing concern ($F = 4.125$, $p = 0.045$).

These results indicate that male and female teachers differ meaningfully in their assessments of how several dimensions of principals' ethical leadership relate to pupils' character development, with female teachers systematically rating the influence of these dimensions more highly. This pattern may reflect differential sensitivity among female teachers to the relational, emotional, and communicative dimensions of leadership dimensions that Character Development Theory suggests are particularly important for the moral feeling component of character formation [1]. Dimensions of leadership that do not show significant gender differences promoting integrity ($p = 0.077$), consistent discipline ($p = 0.482$), impartial treatment ($p = 0.078$), transparent decision-making ($p = 0.122$), and promoting cooperation ($p = 0.341$) may represent leadership behaviours whose influence on character is perceived with greater uniformity across teacher gender, possibly because these dimensions are more structurally observable and less dependent on interpretive judgement.

Qualitative findings from KIIs and FGDs strongly corroborated and extended these quantitative results. Principals consistently described school culture as the primary channel through which ethical leadership translates into character outcomes, identifying effective discipline, counselling services, and moral education programmes as the concrete institutional mechanisms linking leadership to pupil conduct. The account of principal PrS2B who cited good leadership, proper discipline, counselling services, and moral education as interacting elements of a positive school culture that shapes pupils' values exemplifies the systemic understanding that experienced school leaders bring to character development.

Pupil FGD responses similarly identified principals who demonstrate kindness, fairness, and genuine concern for pupils as particularly effective in motivating voluntary compliance with school norms. The observation that a kind and understanding principal encourages willing obedience aligns with social exchange theory [40], which proposes that acts of care, concern, and fairness from leaders inspire reciprocal prosocial responses from followers. This dynamic is distinct from coercive compliance: when pupils obey rules because they trust and respect their principal, rather than because they fear punishment, the resulting behaviour change is more

internalized and more likely to persist. This is consistent with evidence that ethical leadership strategies, such as consistent modelling of professional conduct and fair treatment of staff, foster more harmonious and productive relationships within the school community [41]. These findings collectively support the conclusion that principals' ethical leadership is a significant determinant of pupils' character development in public senior secondary schools in urban Sierra Leone. However, they also affirm that ethical leadership operates within a broader ecological system of influences including peer groups, family environments, social media, and formal character education curricula that must be addressed holistically for character development interventions to achieve their full potential.

Table 5. ANOVA results: gender differences in teachers' perceptions of the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development

Dimension	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Ethical Role Modelling	Between	1.453	1	1.453	6.681	.012 *
	Within	17.833	82	.217		
Promoting Integrity	Between	.415	1	.415	3.217	.077
	Within	10.573	82	.129		
Promoting Kindness	Between	.754	1	.754	4.125	.045 *
	Within	14.996	82	.183		
Upholding Ethical Standards	Between	2.378	1	2.378	5.341	.023 *
	Within	36.515	82	.445		
Consistent Discipline	Between	.235	1	.235	.499	.482
	Within	38.575	82	.470		
Impartial Treatment	Between	.270	1	.270	3.182	.078
	Within	6.968	82	.085		
Moral Communication	Between	2.977	1	2.977	7.215	.009 *
	Within	33.833	82	.413		
Showing Concern	Between	.754	1	.754	4.125	.045 *
	Within	14.996	82	.183		
Transparent Decision-Making	Between	.500	1	.500	2.611	.122
	Within	39.167	82	.478		
Promoting Cooperation	Between	.129	1	.129	.976	.341
	Within	10.829	82	.132		

Note: * $p < 0.05$. Between groups $df = 1$; Within groups $df = 82$.

3.6. Regression Analysis on Teachers' Perceptions of the Relationship between Principals' Ethical Leadership and Pupils' Character Development

The results indicate that behavioural expectations was the strongest positive predictor, with a standardized coefficient of $\beta = 0.995$ ($t = 19.443$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 6). This suggests that a one-standard-deviation increase in

behavioural expectations is associated with an approximately 0.995 standard-deviation increase in the outcome, holding the other variables constant. Its 95% confidence interval for the unstandardized coefficient was 1.183–1.453, indicating a precise and statistically significant positive association.

Extracurricular activities also demonstrated a strong positive relationship ($\beta = 0.669$, $B = 0.753$, $t = 18.522$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: 0.672–0.834). This indicates that greater participation in extracurricular activities is associated with higher levels of the outcome. Similarly, active parental support was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = 0.590$, $B = 0.653$, $t = 17.181$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: 0.577–0.728), highlighting the importance of parental involvement. Interestingly, modelling moral behaviour had a statistically significant negative association with the outcome ($\beta = -0.736$, $B = -0.412$, $t = -10.629$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: -0.489 to -0.335). Although statistically strong, this inverse direction requires careful interpretation. It may reflect the coding of the variables, the wording of the items, or overlap among predictors. The negative

coefficient should therefore not automatically be interpreted as meaning that ethical role modelling harms character development. The original coding and possible multicollinearity should be checked before drawing a substantive conclusion.

Social media influences were also statistically significant ($\beta = 0.245$, $B = 0.120$, $t = 4.802$, $p < 0.001$; 95% CI: 0.070–0.170), indicating a positive association with the outcome as coded. However, the direction should again be interpreted according to how the social-media variable was coded—for example, whether a higher score represents positive or negative influence. In contrast, religious and moral education was not a significant independent predictor ($\beta = -0.037$, $B = -0.029$, $t = -1.120$, $p = 0.266$; 95% CI: -0.079–0.022). Likewise, guidance and counselling did not make a statistically significant independent contribution ($\beta = -0.012$, $B = -0.006$, $t = -0.399$, $p = 0.691$; 95% CI: -0.037–0.025). Their non-significance means that, after controlling for the other predictors, there is insufficient evidence that they independently predict the outcome in this model.

Table 6. Regression Analysis on Teachers' perceptions of the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development

Relationship	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower	Upper
(Ethical Role Modelling)	-6.452	.348		-18.532	<.001	-7.145	-5.759
Modelling moral behaviour	-.412	.039	-.736	-10.629	<.001	-.489	-.335
Behavioural expectations	1.318	.068	.995	19.443	<.001	1.183	1.453
Extracurricular activities	.753	.041	.669	18.522	<.001	.672	.834
Religious and moral education	-.029	.026	-.037	-1.120	.266	-.079	.022
Active parental support	.653	.038	.590	17.181	<.001	.577	.728
Guidance and counselling	-.006	.016	-.012	-.399	.691	-.037	.025
Social media influences	.120	.025	.245	4.802	<.001	.070	.170

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study identified the factors influencing pupils' character development in public senior secondary schools in Sierra Leone and determined the relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development. School rules, parental involvement, and extracurricular activities were found to positively contribute to character development, while peer pressure and social media exposure negatively affect pupils' behaviour; moral education and guidance programmes were perceived as having limited effectiveness. A composite-score correlational and regression analysis confirmed a strong, statistically significant positive relationship between principals' ethical leadership and pupils' character development ($r = .735$, $p < .001$), with ethical leadership explaining approximately 54% of the variance in teachers' ratings of character development outcomes. At the level of specific dimensions, principals' ethical leadership positively influenced pupils' character development across all ten assessed dimensions, with ethical role modelling, kindness, transparent decision-

making, and moral communication identified as key contributors; gender differences existed in teachers' perceptions of several of these dimensions, with female teachers generally reporting stronger influence. Qualitative findings highlighted that character development is shaped by interconnected factors involving schools, families, peers, and digital environments. The study recommends strengthening school rules, increasing parental engagement, integrating character education into all aspects of school life, developing positive peer mentoring programmes, incorporating ethical leadership and character education into teacher and principal training, and promoting responsible social media use through digital literacy programmes.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest

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