



Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement of Teachers in Secondary Schools in Bugiri District

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Abstract: *The study examined the relationship between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement among teachers in secondary schools in Bugiri District. The study followed a cross sectional design with purely a quantitative approach to data collection and analysis from a target population of 450 respondents (439 teachers and 11 headteachers) leading to a sample size of 212 respondents (201 teachers and 11 headteachers). The use of structured questionnaires enabled the researcher to generate findings that were entered in statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) for automatic generation of statistics. The relationship between variables was established using Pearson correlation analysis while simple linear regression as used to respond to the null hypotheses. Findings show a significant statistical relationship between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement of teachers in secondary schools in Bugiri District ($\beta = 0.520$; $p < 0.05$). Based on these scores, ethical leadership contributes much more to cognitive engagement of teachers. Conclusively, ethical leadership demonstrates weak to moderate statistically significant relationship with cognitive engagement among teachers in secondary schools in Bugiri District. It is thus recommended that stakeholders such as ministry of education officials, school administrators and well-wishers support efforts that are geared towards establishing an environment that enable teachers register cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagements.*

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership, Cognitive Engagement, Teachers, Secondary Schools, Bugiri District*

How to cite this work (APA):

Tikabula, F. & Suubi, U. S. M. (2026). Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement of Teachers in Secondary Schools in Bugiri District. *Journal of Research Innovation and Implications in Education*, 10(4), 464 – 471. <https://doi.org/10.59765/ye75k>

1. Introduction

The concept of "employee engagement" was coined in the year 1990 by William A. Kahn, a professor of organisational behaviour (Robinson, 2022). He introduced the term to describe an individual's active and emotional involvement in their work, where they find meaning and fulfilment. Kahn's research highlighted the importance of having a sense of purpose and connection to one's job for overall career satisfaction and success (Kular, 2008; Robinson, 2022). In Uganda, Mugizi et al. (2022) assessed the relationship between head teachers perceived support and teacher engagement in secondary schools in Buhweju district a hard-to-reach rural district

in south-western Uganda. The findings revealed that while pay and training had a positive and significant relationship with teacher engagement, promotion support had a positive but insignificant relationship with teacher engagement.

Whereas cognitive engagement has attracted attention of some authors in Uganda, its state in relation to ethical leadership lacks empirical evidence in the context of secondary schools in Bugiri district. Atuhaire (2022)'s study established the relationship between intellectual capital, ethical leadership, employee commitment and innovative work behaviors in Public Senior Secondary Schools in Kampala. Regression results revealed that intellectual capital and ethical leadership were found no

significant influence on innovative work behavior while employee commitment was found to be significant. This shows available gaps in the current and previous research work regarding ethical leadership and employee engagement among teachers in secondary schools, making the current study relevant. Low employee engagement among teachers in secondary schools is a pressing issue that poses significant challenges to educational outcomes and student development. In Bugiri District, indicators of teacher engagement such as frequent teacher absences disrupt the learning process and adversely affect student performance (Kagoda & Sentongo, 2018). On the other hand, while professional development is crucial for teachers to enhance their skills and stay updated with educational advancements, Bugiri District demonstrates a large-scale lack of interest in personal and professional growth (Nabukenya et al., 2019). Further, whereas innovative teaching methods foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills among students, teachers in Bugiri District often rely on traditional teaching approaches, which do not effectively engage students or stimulate their intellectual curiosity (Mwonge et al., 2020). Further, whereas effective communication is vital for creating a supportive educational environment, Bugiri District demonstrates insufficient interaction between teachers and stakeholders resulting in a lack of collaboration and support, further diminishing the quality of education (Lugemwa & Nakayima, 2021).

1.1 Purpose of the study

The study examined the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement among teachers in secondary schools in Bugiri District.

1.2 Hypothesis

H0₁: There is no significant statistical relationship between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement of teachers

2. Literature Review

In their study, Smith and Johnson (2022) revealed that ethical leadership practices significantly boost teachers' commitment and engagement, leading to enhanced educational outcomes. The researchers found that leaders demonstrating integrity, fairness, and ethical decision-making foster an environment where teachers feel valued and motivated to engage cognitively with their work. This aligns with findings from a study in Australia by Micheal and Kin (2023), which highlighted that ethical leadership directly correlates with higher levels of employee engagement among teachers and satisfaction. The Australian study emphasized the importance of ethical behavior in cultivating trust and collaboration within educational settings. In Japan, Tanaka and Saito (2022) demonstrated that ethical leadership contributes

to a more supportive and intellectually stimulating environment, fostering teachers' cognitive engagement.

A recent study in South Africa by Nkosi and Dlamini (2023) highlighted the transformative impact of ethical leadership on employee engagement among teachers, particularly in resource-constrained settings. The study emphasized that ethical leaders who exhibit empathy and respect for teachers' professional autonomy significantly enhance cognitive engagement.

According to Zhang et al. (2021, pp. 531-548), ethical leadership through honesty, fairness, and integrity enables teachers to direct their cognitive resources toward their work, for instance, it is natural for employees to view ethical leadership behaviors as being rooted in the organization, which in turn will enhance their trust in the organization. In addition, Msangya (2025) asserts that ethical leadership among heads of institutions brings about role models that influence behaviours and serve as a living example that followers [teachers] internalise through observation and imitation, prompting teachers to engage in deeper self-reflection about their own conduct. According to Micheal et al. (2005, pp. 117-134), behavioural influence in turn brings about a culture of ethical awareness, where both leaders and followers continuously shape and reinforce one another's values and actions. This literature is relevant in a sense that it portrays ethical leadership as a weapon to engagement in terms of behavioural influence. However, no empirical studies have so far been conducted to ascertain this, in the context of secondary schools in Bugiri District.

Further evidence by Li (2024) suggests that ethical leadership strengthens employees' attributes, thereby influencing employee cognition and satisfaction. Expounding this, Lorenz (2025) found that when leaders consistently model fairness and transparency, employees internalise these values, leading to stronger psychological safety, higher engagement, and shapes employee cognition through observed leadership behaviour. In the current study, the employee aspect is substituted for teachers such that the researcher will establish the possibility that headteachers' ethical leadership influences teachers' cognition and satisfaction prompting them to develop a strong sense of belonging with in the secondary school setting in Bugiri District.

Kin et al. (2021) demonstrates that ethical leadership reduces emotional exhaustion and employees with low levels of emotional exhaustion have sufficient cognitive resources and are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction while employees who experience high emotional exhaustion find their cognitive bandwidth depleted, leaving them less able to recognise or respond to ethical cues from leadership. However, no studies explain the connection between ethical leadership and emotional exhaustion among teachers in secondary schools in the context of Bugiri District. Moreover, the

statistical implications are not established in the current literature, thus making the current study relevant.

Further still, Su et al., (2021) prompt that ethical leadership that is characterized by transparency and integrity creates an environment where employees feel compelled to share knowledge not merely for personal gain, but as an expression of their moral commitment to collective growth and organisational success. In a setting like Bugiri District where employee engagement among teachers appears to be less appreciable, there is need to conduct a study to establish whether ethical leadership defines cognitive behaviours in terms of moral commitment to collective growth and in turn defining the overall success of secondary schools.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a correlational research design to allow the researchers examine the relationship between ethical leadership and employee engagement among teachers without manipulating any variables. This design provided valuable insights into how ethical leadership

influences employee engagement among teachers in the educational setting.

3.2 Target Population

The total target population was 450 respondents comprising 11 headteachers and 439 teachers from eleven (11) government-aided secondary schools in Bugiri District. The participation of these groups in this research is essential for obtaining a thorough understanding of these complex dynamics. Headteachers, as primary leaders, play a crucial role in establishing the ethical atmosphere within schools. This in turn offers a broad understanding of how ethical standards are maintained and can positively influence employee engagement among teachers.

Including teachers was vital, as they are the frontline implementers of educational policies and practices. Their level of engagement can indicate the effectiveness of leadership styles and ethical practices, providing valuable firsthand insights into the daily challenges and successes encountered. Table 1 shows the structure of the target population of study.

Table 1: Target Population for the 11 Government Secondary Schools

No.	School	Headteachers	Teachers		
			Male	Female	Total
1.	School A	1	54	19	74
2.	School B	1	15	12	28
3.	School C	1	28	06	35
4.	School D	1	37	13	51
5.	School E	1	19	09	29
6.	School F	1	27	30	58
7.	School G	1	27	08	36
8.	School H	1	26	10	37
9.	School I	1	22	09	32
10.	School J	1	28	08	37
11.	School K	1	22	10	33
Total		11	305	134	450

Source: Headteachers' offices in the Respective Secondary Schools of Study

3.3 Sample Size

The sample size was determined using Krejci and Morgan (1970) Table guide. The most appropriate

sample size for 439 teachers was 201 teachers. Headteachers for the 11 secondary schools were directly included. Altogether, 212 respondents were considered for the sample size.

3.4 Sampling Techniques

Simple random sampling was used to obtain a good representative sample of the teachers in the secondary schools while census sampling was used to include headteachers.

3.5 Methods of data Collection

The survey method was employed to guide visits to various schools and engage with respondents in their workplace settings. The survey method is important for quantitative study as it allows the collection of numerical data analysed statistically. This method provided a more objective and systematic approach to gathering information from a large sample size, ensuring the results are representative of the population being studied. By using surveys, the researcher easily compared and contrast different responses, identifying patterns and trends that may not be apparent through other data collection methods.

3.6 Instruments of data Collection

In this study, the researcher employed a structured questionnaire to gather responses from teachers and headteachers. Section A comprised questions on the social demographic characteristics of respondents and

the subsequent sections were designed based on the study variables, with ethical leadership serving as the independent variable and employee engagement among teachers as the dependent variable. The questionnaire was developed based on the structure of the literature review and self-administered to respondents.

3.7 Quality Control Measures

To guarantee the validity, reliability, and credibility of the instruments employed, the researcher developed the questionnaires, which were then manually reviewed by experts to rectify any potential errors and subsequently verified for the survey. The content validity index was employed for this purpose with results as follows;

$$CVI = \frac{\text{Number of Items rated as relevant}}{\text{Total number of items rate din teh questionnaire}} \times 100 = \frac{32}{38} = 0.842 = 84.2\%.$$

On the other hand, the reliability of the study was assessed using Cronbach's alpha method and the content validity index. Cronbach Alpha's scale of measuring reliability indicates that any scores less than .60 is an unacceptably low reliability, 0.60-0.69 defines marginally reliable results, 0.70-0.79 describes reliable results, 0.80-0.90 scale describes highly reliable results and >0.90 is a scale for very highly reliable (Martyn & Wilson, 2019). Table 2 shows the results from Cronbach Alpha Analysis.

Table 2: Reliability Results for the Study

C/No	Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient	Cronbach Alpha based on standardized items	Interpretation
1.	Ethical leadership	6	0.839	0.842	Highly Reliable
2.	Cognitive Engagement	7	0.843	0.843	Highly Reliable

Source: Primary data

The results in Table 3.2 show that results for the six items that measure ethical leadership are highly reliable. Similarly, results for cognitive engagement among teachers measure above 0.70, making them reliable.

3.8 Data Collection Procedure

An introductory letter was obtained from Busitema university research department to justify that the study was completely academic.

An official permission letter was also obtained from the District Education officer to allow for a legal research process in the secondary schools in Bugiri District.

In addition, the researcher made a comprehensive and clear introduction and the purpose of the study to the head teachers, and teachers.

Two research assistants were trained to help in data collection. This was done to ensure that respondents

are given adequate time and to keep regular checks of the respondents in the various secondary schools.

The researcher requested the Head teacher and the Teachers to work with research assistants at their workstation level and they accepted to collect the finished questionnaires.

Data were then computed and subjected to statistical analysis.

3.9 Data Analysis Plan

The questionnaires went through error verification before being processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22, under the guidance of an experienced statistician, to generate inferential statistics. The demographic characteristics were summarized in a table displaying frequencies and percentages. To assess the relationship between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement of teachers, items for ethical leadership and those for cognitive engagement

were rated and evaluated using mean and standard deviation. A correlation analysis was then performed to establish the statistical relationship at 99% confidence level. Results for hypothesis were analyzed using a simple linear regression at 95% confidence interval.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

This study explored significant ethical issues, including potential physical and psychological harm, deception, informed consent, and privacy. Ensuring the confidentiality of respondents' information was of paramount importance. Respondents were clearly informed that the research is conducted purely for academic purposes, and the self-administered

questionnaires were structured to guarantee anonymity. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and respondents had the freedom to withdraw at any point. Anonymity was preserved by not requiring respondents to reveal their names on the surveys. There is no expected risk of physical or psychological harm to respondents. The researcher obtained an introductory letter from Busitema University to present to the authorities and management of the Bugiri District to secure permission for data collection. Once permission was granted, the researcher distributed the questionnaires, with the assistance of two research aides.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 3: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Item	Measures	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	113	53.3%
	Female	99	46.7%
Age-bracket	18-25 years	3	1.4%
	26-31 years	8	3.8%
	32-38 years	28	13.2%
	39-45 years	130	61.3%
	46 years and above	43	20.3%
Academic qualification	Diploma	41	19.3%
	Degree	127	59.9%
	Masters	44	20.8%
	Others	00	00.0%
Work Experience	1-10 years	145	68.4%
	11-20 years	59	27.8%
	Above 20 years	8	3.8%
Marital status	Single	27	12.7%
	Married	169	79.7%
	Others (separated, widowed, etc.)	16	7.6%

$\varepsilon = 212$ (100%)

According to the findings in Table 3, 53.3% of the respondents were males while 46.7% were females. This indicates that males dominate the teaching profession in secondary schools in Bugiri district. In this study about ethical leadership and employee engagement, the implications of this gender disparity are that there may be a lack of diverse perspectives and experiences in leadership roles within secondary schools in Bugiri District. This could potentially impact decision-making processes and limit the range of ideas and solutions brought to the table.

On the other hand, results regarding age-bracket varied among respondents with the largest percentage 130 (61.3%) representing respondents in the age-group of 39-45 years old and the least percentage 3 (1.4%) representing respondents in the age-bracket of 18 to 25 years. The age structure of respondents indicate that results were obtained from a population that had been in

the profession for more than 30 years, which is crucial in obtaining reliable data from experienced respondents.

Considering the academic qualification of respondents, it is clear that majority of the teachers/headteachers are qualified which could also explain their commendable competences in the teaching profession. Specifically, a good percentage (53.2%) of the respondents were degree holders, followed by 26.9% with master's degree and only 19.9% had diploma as their highest level of education. This explains the largescale participation in improvement in academic qualifications of teachers.

Regarding the work experience of respondents, more than half of the study population (68.4%) had been in the teaching profession as teachers/headteachers for a period of 10years or less, 27.8% had worked for a period from 11years to 20 years, and the least percentage (3.8%) represented respondents who has worked for more than

20 years. This structure of work experience signifies that a majority of the respondents are relatively new to the teaching profession, with a significant portion falling within the mid-range of experience. The small percentage of respondents who have worked for more than 20 years may indicate a trend of turnover or retirement within the field. Overall, the distribution of work experience among the respondents provides valuable insight into the demographics of the teaching profession in this study.

Regarding the marital status of respondents, 79.7% represented the married group while 12.7% were not yet married and 7.6% were among the other groups. This means that more than 50% of the respondents had marital responsibilities. In a study about ethical leadership and employee engagement among teachers, this structure of marital status implies that those who are married may have additional responsibilities outside of work that could impact their ability to engage fully in their jobs. It

is important for leaders to be understanding and supportive of their employees' personal lives in order to foster a positive work environment. Additionally, those who are not yet married may have different priorities and motivations that could also affect their level of engagement in the workplace. understanding the diverse marital statuses of employees can help leaders tailor their approach to promoting ethical leadership and employee engagement.

Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement of teachers in Secondary Schools in Bugiri District

The relationship between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement of teachers in secondary schools in Bugiri District was examined using Pearson correlation analysis with results as indicated in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Relationship between ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement

		Ethical Leadership	Cognitive Engagement
Ethical Leadership	Pearson Correlation	1	.520**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	212	212
Cognitive Engagement	Pearson Correlation	.520**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	212	212

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

These results suggest a strong positive correlation between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement among the participants in the study ($r = .520^{**}$; $p < 0.01$). By implication, ethical leadership explains 52% of cognitive engagement of teachers in public secondary schools in Bugiri District. The significant p-value of .000 further supports the strength of this relationship.

H0₁: There is no Significant Statistical Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement of Teachers

Results for the first null hypothesis were determined using a simple linear regression analysis with ethical leadership as the independent variable and cognitive engagement as the dependent variable. Tables 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7 show results obtained respectively.

Table 5: Model Summary for Ethical leadership and Cognitive Engagement

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.520 ^a	.271	.267	.68168

a. Predictors: (Constant), Ethical Leadership

The model summary shows that ethical leadership accounts for the variance in cognitive engagement. This indicates that ethical leadership has a significant impact on cognitive engagement levels. The standard error of the estimate is 0.68168, suggesting that the model is fairly

accurate in predicting cognitive engagement based on ethical leadership. Overall, the results support the importance of ethical leadership in fostering cognitive engagement among individuals.

Table 6: ANOVA for Ethical leadership and Cognitive Engagement

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	36.215	1	36.215	77.933	.000 ^b
	Residual	97.585	210	.465		
	Total	133.800	211			

a. Dependent Variable: Cognitive Engagement

b. Predictors: (Constant), Ethical Leadership

The results of the ANOVA analysis revealed a significant effect of Ethical Leadership on Cognitive Engagement, as evidenced by the high F-value of 77.933 and a p-value of .000. This indicates that the Ethical Leadership predictor variable accounts for a significant

amount of the variance in Cognitive Engagement. The regression model was found to be a good fit for the data, as the Mean Square value for the regression was much higher than that of the residual.

Table 7: Coefficients of determination for Ethical leadership and Cognitive Engagement

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.941	.196		9.922	.000
	Ethical Leadership	.471	.053	.520	8.828	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Cognitive Engagement

These results indicate that there is a strong positive relationship between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement. The standardized coefficient of .520 suggests that for every one unit increase in ethical leadership, cognitive engagement is predicted to increase by .520 units. This relationship is statistically significant with a t-value of 8.828 and a p-value of .000. These findings support the idea that ethical leadership plays a significant role in promoting cognitive engagement among employees, thus rejecting the null hypothesis 1, which states that *There is no Significant Statistical Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement of Teachers*. These results suggest a strong positive correlation between ethical leadership and cognitive engagement among the participants in the study. By implication, ethical leadership explains A moderate level of cognitive engagement of teachers in public secondary schools in Bugiri District. In addition, findings support the idea that ethical leadership plays a significant role in promoting cognitive engagement among employees, thus rejecting the null hypothesis 1, which states that *There is no Significant Statistical Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Cognitive Engagement of Teachers*.

In support of these results Smith (2022) also indicated that ethical leadership practices significantly boost teachers' commitment and engagement, leading to enhanced educational outcomes. They point out that found that leaders demonstrating integrity, fairness, and ethical decision-making foster an environment where teachers feel valued and motivated to engage cognitively with their work. This aligns with findings from a study in Australia by Micheal and Kin (2023), which highlighted that ethical leadership directly correlates with higher levels of employee engagement among

teachers and satisfaction. The Australian study emphasized the importance of ethical behavior in cultivating trust and collaboration within educational settings.

In addition, a South Africa study by Nkosi and Dlamini (2023) also emphasized that ethical leaders who exhibit empathy and respect for teachers' professional autonomy significantly enhance cognitive engagement. Kin et al. (2021) demonstrates that ethical leadership reduces emotional exhaustion and employees with low levels of emotional exhaustion have sufficient cognitive resources and are more likely to experience greater job satisfaction while employees who experience high emotional exhaustion find their cognitive bandwidth depleted, leaving them less able to recognise or respond to ethical cues from leadership. However, no studies explain the connection between ethical leadership and emotional exhaustion among teachers in secondary schools in the context of Bugiri District. Moreover, the statistical implications are not established in the current literature, thus making the current study relevant.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Conclusively, the study finds that a strong sense of belonging in schools enhances teachers' cognitive engagement in Bugiri District secondary schools. However, some teachers feel unrecognized. Belief in the school's mission and motivation levels vary among teachers, influencing engagement. While many show commitments by following directives and addressing

mistakes, a need for support exists for those less focused on professional development.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

1. It is recommended that school administrators implement recognition programs to acknowledge teachers' hard work and dedication. This will help boost morale and motivation levels, leading to increased cognitive engagement among all teachers.
2. To the Ministry of Education officials, it is recommended that they prioritize the implementation of emotional support programs and training for school leaders to foster a more supportive and positive work environment for teachers.
3. By investing in these initiatives, they can improve job satisfaction, decrease feelings of isolation, and ultimately enhance the overall well-being of teachers in the education system.
4. Additionally, by promoting ethical leadership practices, they can further strengthen the emotional engagement and morale of teachers, leading to a more productive and harmonious school community.

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