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# Ethical School Leadership as a Foundation for Sustainable Teacher Work Engagement in the Public Schools

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examined the relationship between ethical leadership practices of school administrators and teachers' work engagement in public elementary schools of Inabanga North District during the 2025–2026 school year. Using a quantitative descriptive-correlational design, data were gathered from 82 teachers through a validated questionnaire covering demographic profile, ethical leadership dimensions (ethics of care, justice, and critic), work engagement (vigor, dedication, absorption), and challenges in sustaining engagement. Descriptive statistics and Spearman's rho were employed, while qualitative responses were organized and ranked according to the frequency of occurrence of the pre-determined options. Findings revealed that teachers perceived a high extent of ethical leadership and a high level of work engagement. Administrators consistently demonstrated care, fairness, and reflective decision-making, while teachers exhibited strong enthusiasm, commitment, and immersion in their work. A significant moderate positive relationship was found between ethical leadership and work engagement, indicating that ethical practices of administrators enhance teachers' motivation and involvement. Challenges encountered were situational, including workload in teaching and administrative tasks, limited resources and bureaucratic constraints, emotional and cognitive strain, role overload, insufficient recovery time, and occasional stress related to both challenge and hindrance demand in the workplace. The study concludes that ethical leadership fosters a supportive environment that sustains teacher engagement. It recommends a contextualized enhanced professional development plan focusing on strengthening ethical leadership competencies, promoting supportive conditions, and sustaining teachers' professional commitment and performance across participating schools informing policy and practice.

**Keywords:** *Ethical leadership, work engagement, sustainable engagement, school administrators, professional development*

## INTRODUCTION

The quality of education is closely linked to teachers' engagement, as it significantly influences student learning outcomes, school performance, and overall educational effectiveness. Teacher work engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in teaching tasks. Recent studies indicate that higher levels of engagement are associated with improved teacher well-being and enhanced professional functioning in educational settings (Nugroho & Harahap, 2025).

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Sustaining teacher work engagement is increasingly recognized as essential in contemporary education systems. Sustainable engagement refers to the capacity of teachers to maintain motivation, commitment, and resilience over time despite persistent challenges such as heavy workloads, limited resources, and administrative demands (Sittar, 2020; Li & Chan, 2023). In the Philippine context, sustaining engagement is particularly critical due to ongoing professional pressures in public schools. It contributes to teacher retention, reduces burnout, and ensures consistency in instructional quality (Cadampog & Licaros, 2023).

One of the most significant factors influencing teacher engagement is ethical leadership. Ethical leadership is characterized by fairness, integrity, transparency, and concern for employee welfare (Bedi, Alpaslan, & Green, 2022). School administrators who demonstrate ethical leadership foster a culture of trust, accountability, and respect within schools. This environment encourages teachers to engage in professional development, collaborate with colleagues, and sustain commitment to instructional excellence (Collier, 2022). Consequently, ethical leadership plays a vital role in strengthening teachers' motivation and sustaining their engagement over time.

Conversely, the absence of ethical leadership may negatively affect teachers' work engagement. When fairness, transparency, and integrity are lacking, teachers may experience distrust, dissatisfaction, and declining morale. Studies show that weak ethical leadership discourages professional development participation and may contribute to burnout, disengagement, and turnover intentions (Collier, 2022; Haroon, Hassan, & Arif, 2023). These conditions ultimately undermine instructional quality and student achievement, highlighting the importance of ethical leadership in educational settings.

Ethical leadership in schools can be further understood through three interrelated paradigms: care, justice, and critique, which guide leaders in addressing moral professionalism in school settings (Hanhimäki, 2023). The ethics of care emphasize empathy and prioritization of teachers' well-being, fostering supportive relationships within the school environment, while the ethics of justice focus on fairness, equity, and consistency in decision-making. The ethics of critique encourages school leaders to critically examine policies and practices that may hinder teacher development or reinforce inequities. Collectively, these paradigms align with multiple ethical frameworks in educational leadership that support principled decision-making in complex school contexts (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021).

In the context of Inabanga North District, Division of Bohol, teachers encounter distinct challenges that may threaten sustainable engagement. These include geographically dispersed schools, limited instructional materials, increasing administrative responsibilities, and heavy teaching loads (Haroon, Hassan, & Arif, 2023). Additionally, ethical concerns such as favoritism in task allocation, unequal access to professional development, and inconsistent policy implementation may arise. Despite the growing body of literature on ethical leadership and teacher engagement, there remains a limited understanding of how ethical leadership sustains teacher work engagement in rural Philippine public elementary schools.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between ethical leadership through the dimensions of care, justice, and critic and sustainable teacher work engagement. The findings aim to provide empirical evidence that can inform leadership development programs, enhance school policies, and contribute to improved teacher performance and educational outcomes.

**Statement of the Problem**

This research assessed the relationship between the extent to which ethical leadership of school administrators and the perceived level teachers' work engagement in public elementary schools of Inabanga North District during the school year 2025 – 2026 as a basis for enhanced professional development plan. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

**1.** What is the extent of ethical leadership practices of school administrators as perceived by public elementary school teachers in terms of ethics of care, ethics of justice and ethics of critics?

**2.** What is the perceived level of teachers' work engagement in the public elementary school in terms of vigor, dedication, and absorption?

**3**.Is there a significant relationship between the extent perceived ethical school leadership practice and the perceived level of teachers' work engagement?

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**4**.What challenges do teachers face in sustaining work engagement even when ethical leadership practices are present?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employed a quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design to examine the extent to which ethical leadership, through the paradigms of care, justice, and critique, fosters teachers' work engagement in terms of vigor, dedication, and absorption, as well as the challenges encountered by teachers in maintaining work engagement despite the presence of ethical leadership practices. It assessed the extent of ethical leadership practices of school administrators, and the level of teachers' work engagement. Furthermore, it determined the significant relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' work engagement. The findings served as the basis for the development of an Enhanced Professional Development Plan aimed at strengthening leadership practices, improving teacher engagement, and contributing to better educational outcomes.

### Respondents

The study involved eighty-two (82) teachers from Inabanga North District, Bohol, selected as respondents to ensure reliable and valid findings on the relationship between ethical leadership and teachers' work engagement. The sample provided context-specific insights within a localized educational setting, reflecting the diverse conditions of schools in the district. Respondents were distributed across ten elementary schools, with representation ranging from 7 to 10 teachers per school, ensuring balanced participation. Overall, the distribution of participants ensured that no single school dominated the sample, supporting the representativeness of the data.

### Instrument

The study used a survey questionnaire as the main instrument to gather data on teachers' perceptions of ethical school leadership and their work engagement. The instrument, adapted from Archuleta (2025) and Magboo, Velasco, and Luis (2023), was validated by experts and pilot-tested to ensure reliability, clarity, and contextual appropriateness. It consisted of sections covering ethical school leadership practices, teachers' work engagement, and challenges in sustaining engagement. Data were collected through self-administered questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive, inferential, and content analysis to generate comprehensive findings.

### Data Gathering Procedure

After obtaining permission from the Schools Division Office and the principals of the sampled schools, the researcher finalized the validated and reliability-tested questionnaire. A formal request to conduct the study was approved, after which the purpose of the study, the contents of the questionnaire, and the respondents' roles were explained to the Head Teachers. The questionnaire was administered face-to-face, allowing the researcher to clarify items and ensure complete and accurate responses. Completed questionnaires were collected, organized, and prepared for analysis, while ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw were strictly observed throughout the process.

### Statistical Treatment

The researcher employed appropriate statistical tools to analyze the data. The weighted mean and standard deviation were used to determine the level of ethical leadership practices and teachers' work engagement. Spearman's rank-order correlation (ρ) was used to examine the relationship between ethical leadership and work engagement. Ranking was used to identify and prioritize the challenges encountered by teachers in sustaining engagement. All results were interpreted to provide a clear and comprehensive understanding of the variables under study.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1. Extent *of Ethical Leadership Practices of School Administrators as perceived by the Teachers*

| Dimensions | Mean | SD | Verbal Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ethics of Care | 4.62 | 0.65 | Always |
| Ethics of Justice | 4.58 | 0.66 | Always |
| Ethics of Critics | 4.37 | 0.81 | Always |
| Grand Mean | 4.52 | 0.71 | Always |

Legend: 4.20–5.00 = Always; 3.40–4.19 = Often; 2.60–3.39 = Sometimes; 1.80–2.59 = Rarely; 1.00–1.79 = Never.

Table 1 shows the extent of ethical leadership practices of school administrators as perceived by teachers. The results reveal a very high level of ethical leadership, with a grand mean of 4.52 (SD = 0.71), interpreted as "Always," indicating that ethical leadership is consistently demonstrated in the school setting. This suggests that administrators strongly uphold ethical standards that foster a positive, supportive, and professionally sound school environment characterized by fairness, care, and accountability.

Across the three dimensions, all were rated "Always," indicating strong and consistent ethical leadership practices. Ethics of Care obtained the highest mean (M = 4.62), followed by Ethics of Justice (M = 4.58), while Ethics of Critics recorded the lowest mean (M = 4.37), though still within the "Always" category. The high rating in Ethics of Care implies that administrators demonstrate empathy, support, and responsiveness toward teachers' needs, which strengthens trust and collegial relationships. This is consistent with the findings of Cansor, R., et.al. (2021), who found that principals' ethical leadership positively influences teacher job satisfaction, with ethical climate serving as a key mediating factor. This suggests that caring and ethical leadership behaviors directly contribute to improved teacher well-being and satisfaction through a supportive school environment. Meanwhile, the strong rating in Ethics of Justice reflects fairness, transparency, and equal treatment in decision-making processes, which aligns with the study of Kemer, M., et.al. (2022), who reported a significant positive relationship between organizational justice and school climate, emphasizing that fair treatment of teachers enhances a more positive and collaborative school environment. Although Ethics of Critics obtained the lowest mean, it still indicates that administrators engage in reflective and evaluative leadership practices, which are essential for continuous improvement and institutional responsiveness.

The findings imply that the consistently very high level of ethical leadership practices among school administrators plays a vital role in shaping a positive school environment characterized by care, fairness, and reflective practice. The strong emphasis on Ethics of Care suggests that teachers benefit from supportive and empathetic leadership, which enhances motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Similarly, the high rating in Ethics of Justice indicates that fair and transparent decision-making strengthens trust and improves school climate. These findings are further supported by Hsieh, C.-C. et.al. (2023), who emphasized that ethical leadership research is strongly grounded in social learning and social exchange theories, explaining how ethical leaders influence followers through trust-building, role modeling, and reciprocal relationships. Overall, the results suggest that ethical leadership is a key factor in strengthening school climate, teacher satisfaction, and organizational effectiveness, highlighting the need to sustain and further enhance ethical leadership practices in schools.

Table 2. *Perceived Level of Teachers' Work Engagement*

| Dimensions | Mean | SD | Verbal Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Vigor | 4.37 | 0.68 | Highly Engaged |
| Dedication | 4.61 | 0.56 | Highly Engaged |
| Absorption | 4.31 | 0.70 | Highly Engaged |
| Grand Mean | 4.43 | 0.70 | Highly Engaged |

Legend: 4.20–5.00 = Highly Engaged; 3.40–4.19 = Engaged; 2.60–3.39 = Moderately Engaged; 1.80–2.59 = Slightly Engaged; 1.00–1.79 = Not Engaged.

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Table 2 shows the perceived level of teachers' work engagement across three dimensions: Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption. The results reveal a high overall level of work engagement, with a grand mean of 4.43 (SD = 0.70), interpreted as "Highly Engaged." This indicates that teachers consistently demonstrate strong energy, emotional commitment, and cognitive involvement in their professional roles. The findings suggest that teachers are highly motivated and actively engaged in their teaching responsibilities, reflecting a positive work environment that supports sustained professional involvement.

Among the three dimensions, Dedication obtained the highest mean (M = 4.61, SD = 0.56), indicating that teachers exhibit strong enthusiasm, pride, and meaningful involvement in their profession. This reflects a deep sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation, which aligns with Job Crafting Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory. As supported by Kuijpers et al. (2020), meaningful work engagement—particularly dedication and absorption—can be strengthened when employees experience alignment between their job roles and personal strengths, especially under conditions of manageable workload. This suggests that teachers' high dedication may be driven by a sense of meaningfulness and professional identity in their teaching roles.

This is followed by Vigor (M = 4.37, SD = 0.68), indicating that teachers consistently display high levels of energy, resilience, and persistence in performing their duties. This finding is consistent with work engagement literature emphasizing that vigor is sustained when employees experience adequate psychological and social support in the workplace. However, Jones et al. (2019) caution that excessive or poorly managed support or role demands can sometimes influence self-efficacy and motivation, which may indirectly affect work engagement outcomes. In the school context, this suggests that maintaining appropriate support systems is important to sustain teachers' energy and prevent potential decline in motivation over time.

Meanwhile, Absorption recorded the lowest mean (M = 4.31, SD = 0.70), though still interpreted as "Highly Engaged," indicating that teachers are deeply focused and immersed in their work. This reflects cognitive engagement, where teachers become fully concentrated on instructional tasks. Kuijpers et al. (2020) further emphasize that absorption is strongly linked to job crafting behaviors, particularly when teachers actively shape their work to match their strengths and interests, enhancing sustained focus and engagement in teaching activities.

Overall, the findings imply that teachers are highly engaged in their work, demonstrating strong dedication, sustained vigor, and meaningful absorption. This high level of engagement suggests that teachers experience meaningfulness and motivation in their professional roles, which contributes to effective teaching performance and organizational stability. Consistent with Kuijpers et al. (2020), work engagement is enhanced when employees actively align their work with their strengths and experience manageable workload conditions. However, Jones et al. (2019) highlight that workplace dynamics, including the nature of support received, may influence psychological states such as self-efficacy, which can indirectly affect long-term engagement and career intentions. Therefore, sustaining balanced support systems, professional autonomy, and positive working conditions is essential to maintain high levels of teacher engagement and prevent potential decline in motivation.

Table 3. *Relationship between the Dimensions of Perceived Ethical School Leadership Practice and Teachers' Work Engagement*

| Ethical Leadership Dimensions | Vigor | Dedication | Absorption |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ethics of Care | 0.441 | 0.204 | 0.349 |
| Ethics of Justice | 0.426 | 0.124 | 0.387 |
| Ethics of Critics | 0.639 | 0.208 | 0.589 |

Table 3 shows the relationship between the dimensions of perceived ethical school leadership practice and teachers' work engagement. The results reveal that all dimensions of ethical school leadership practice have positive relationships with the dimensions of teachers' work engagement. Among the three dimensions, Ethics of Critics posted the highest relationship with Vigor (rho = 0.639) and Absorption (rho = 0.589), indicating a stronger

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positive association compared with the other dimensions. Ethics of Care and Ethics of Justice also showed positive relationships with Vigor and Absorption, while all three ethical leadership dimensions showed relatively lower relationships with Dedication. Overall, the findings suggest that perceived ethical school leadership practice is positively associated with teachers' work engagement, particularly in terms of vigor and absorption.

The findings of this study are supported by recent research showing that ethical leadership in schools positively influences teacher engagement, motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment. Biniaminov and Moshel (2025) found that teachers' perceptions of fairness, integrity, and care are strongly associated with higher levels of teacher motivation, commitment, and engagement. Similarly, Özdoğru and Sarıer (2024) reported that ethical leadership demonstrated by school principals promotes positive organizational behaviors and attitudes among teachers, contributing to a healthier and more supportive school environment. Shao et al. (2025) further demonstrated that leadership behaviors closely related to ethical leadership, such as authentic leadership, significantly predict higher teacher work engagement through supportive school climates and enhanced teacher efficacy. Their findings revealed that authentic leadership directly strengthens teachers' engagement while also improving school climate and teacher confidence in their professional capabilities. Together, these studies confirm that ethical leadership fosters an environment where teachers feel valued, supported, and actively engaged in their professional responsibilities.

This implies that ethical leadership is not only a managerial expectation but a critical organizational factor that shapes teachers' psychological well-being and professional engagement. When school leaders consistently demonstrate fairness, integrity, and care, they strengthen teachers' sense of trust, belonging, and professional worth, which in turn enhances motivation and commitment to teaching. It also implies that sustaining high levels of teacher engagement requires institutionalizing ethical leadership practices through leadership development programs, mentoring systems, and school policies that promote transparency, empathy, and participative decision-making. Furthermore, the findings suggest that improving school climate through ethical leadership can serve as a strategic pathway to enhance teacher retention, instructional quality, and overall school effectiveness.

Table 4. *Significant Relationship Between the Extent of Perceived Ethical School Leadership Practice and the Perceived Level of Teachers' Work Engagement*

| Variables | rho-value | p-value | Degree of Relationship | Remarks | Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ethical School Leadership Practice and Teachers' Work Engagement | 0.551 | 0.000 | Moderate positive | Significant | Reject the Null Hypothesis |

Table 4 presents the significant relationship between the extent of perceived ethical school leadership practice, and the perceived level of teachers' work engagement. The result revealed a significant relationship between the variables, with a rho-value of 0.551 and a p-value less than 0.05. This indicates a moderate positive relationship, which means that as the extent of perceived ethical school leadership practice increases, the perceived level of teachers' work engagement also tends to increase. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

This finding is consistent with recent research indicating that ethical leadership has a significant and positive impact on teachers' engagement in educational settings. For instance, Yan, Lin, and Wang (2025) found that ethical leadership demonstrated by kindergarten principals was positively associated with preschool teachers' work engagement. Their study highlighted that the relationship was mediated by perceived organizational support and teachers' voice behavior, suggesting that leaders who are fair, caring, and transparent can create an environment where teachers feel valued, supported, and empowered to actively participate in school initiatives. Similarly, Siva Vikaraman et al. (2021) reported that ethical leadership practices facilitated higher levels of

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teachers' work engagement even in crisis contexts, such as during sudden policy changes or challenging educational circumstances. Their findings emphasize that ethical leadership enhances teacher well-being, provides emotional and professional support, and strengthens trust between administrators and staff, which collectively sustain engagement over time. Together, these studies underscore the critical role of ethical leadership in shaping not only teachers' motivation and commitment but also the overall climate of the school, demonstrating that leaders' ethical behaviors are key factors in promoting active, consistent, and meaningful teacher participation in educational processes and outcomes.

From the perspective of social exchange theory, these findings suggest that when teachers perceive ethical treatment from school leaders, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher levels of engagement, commitment, and discretionary effort. Ethical leadership strengthens the relational contract between administrators and teachers by fostering trust, fairness, and mutual respect, which serve as psychological conditions for sustained engagement.

This implies that ethical leadership should be strengthened through leadership training, mentoring, and policies that promote transparency, care, and fairness in decision-making. It also suggests that increasing organizational support and teacher voice can enhance engagement by making teachers feel valued in school governance. Ultimately, ethical leadership fosters teacher well-being and contributes to a more collaborative and effective school environment.

Table 5. *Challenges Faced by Teachers in Sustaining Work Engagement*

| Challenges | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| High workload across teaching tasks (e.g., lesson planning, grading, classroom instruction) | 50 | 2 |
| High workload due to administrative duties (e.g., paperwork, meetings, reports) | 40 | 5 |
| Challenge stress – demanding tasks that require extra effort but are achievable (e.g., adopting new teaching strategies, implementing curriculum changes) | 62 | 1 |
| Hindrance stress – obstacles that block goal achievement (e.g., bureaucratic procedures, unclear instructions, limited resources) | 47 | 3 |
| Emotional and cognitive strain (e.g., mental fatigue, burnout risk, difficulty concentrating) | 46 | 4 |
| Role overload and conflicting responsibilities (e.g., teaching, mentoring, supervising extracurricular activities simultaneously) | 38 | 7 |
| Insufficient recovery time (e.g., limited time for rest, personal life, or professional reflection) | 39 | 6 |

Table 5 presents the challenges faced by teachers in sustaining work engagement. The results indicate that challenge stress demanding tasks that require extra effort but are achievable, such as adopting new teaching strategies or implementing curriculum changes was identified as the most significant challenge (Frequency = 62, Rank 1). This suggests that while teachers are willing to engage with complex tasks, such challenges can place substantial demands on their energy and focus.

Other prominent challenges include high workload across teaching tasks (Frequency = 50, Rank 2) and hindrance stress, such as bureaucratic procedures and limited resources (Frequency = 47, Rank 3), indicating that both task-related demands and organizational barriers influence teachers' ability to sustain engagement. Emotional and cognitive strain (Frequency = 46, Rank 4) further highlights the mental and psychological pressures teachers

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face, which can impact resilience, motivation, and overall performance. Additional challenges such as high administrative workload (Frequency = 40, Rank 5), insufficient recovery time (Frequency = 39, Rank 6), and role overload with conflicting responsibilities (Frequency = 38, Rank 7) underscore the complexity of factors affecting teachers' work engagement.

Supporting these findings, Wang, Sun, Wang, and Liang (2025) examined the relationship between teachers perceived workload, challenge-hindrance stress, and work engagement. Their study found that perceived workload is closely linked to both challenge and hindrance stress, which in turn influence teachers' engagement levels. While challenge stress can sometimes enhance engagement by providing opportunities for growth, hindrance stress and excessive workload were shown to reduce work engagement and negatively affect teachers' motivation. This supports the current findings, highlighting that structural and psychological work demands remain significant factors in sustaining teachers' engagement even in environments with ethical leadership practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that managing workload, minimizing hindrance stress, and providing supportive organizational structures are essential to maintaining high levels of teachers' vigor, dedication, and absorption in their professional roles.

**Findings**

The findings suggest that ethical leadership significantly contributes to strengthening teachers' engagement by fostering a supportive, fair, and reflective school environment. Administrators' consistent demonstration of care, justice, and critique builds trust and enhances teachers' professional commitment and involvement in their work. However, the persistence of workload-related and structural challenges indicates that ethical leadership must be complemented by organizational support mechanisms. Addressing these concerns through targeted professional development and workload management strategies is essential to sustain high levels of teacher engagement and well-being.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that ethical leadership practices of school administrators in public elementary schools are strongly evident, particularly in terms of care, justice, and critique, and teachers demonstrate high levels of work engagement in terms of vigor, dedication, and absorption. The results further show that ethical leadership has a significant positive relationship with teachers' work engagement, indicating that supportive, fair, and reflective leadership strengthens teacher motivation and commitment. However, teachers still experience key challenges such as workload demands, resource limitations, organizational stress, and time constraints, which affect the sustainability of their engagement despite strong leadership practices.

To address these gaps, the proposed Contextualized Enhanced Professional Development Plan is recommended. This program emphasizes strengthening ethical leadership competencies through continuous training, reflective practice, mentoring, and collaborative professional learning communities while also addressing workload management, stress reduction, and resource support. By enhancing leadership capacity and providing targeted interventions for teachers' challenges, schools can sustain high levels of teacher engagement, improve instructional effectiveness, and ultimately strengthen overall school performance and learner outcomes.

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