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Strengthening Ethical Leadership Practice: Implications for Learning Outcomes in Public Secondary Schools in Mkuranga District, Tanzania

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Abstract: This study investigates the contribution of ethical leadership to strengthening school governance and improving learning outcomes in public secondary schools in Mkuranga District, Tanzania. Using a mixed-methods design, (qualitative and quantitative) parallel with exploratory sequential mixed method design to offer a comprehensive investigation on how ethical leadership practice contributes learning outcomes in public secondary school in Mkuranga District. Quantitative data through questionnaire were collected from teachers, students and School Board members to explore how ethical values such as transparency, integrity, fairness, and accountability shape governance practices and school performance. While qualitative data through interview were collected from school Heads and Ward Education Officer (WEO). Based on these findings, the data from quantitative techniques show that ethical leadership significantly improves resource management, teacher motivation, student discipline, and stakeholder trust. "Schools whose leaders demonstrated strong ethical commitment recorded higher student attendance, fewer behavioural problems, and improved academic achievement. The study concludes that ethical leadership is central to effective school governance and recommends leadership capacity-building, accountability mechanisms, and strengthened community participation to enhance the quality of education". The findings from qualitative data from head of schools revealed that ethical leadership practices such as transparency, fair treatment of staff and students, and integrity in financial management were widely practiced in Mkuranga District.

Keyword : Ethical leadership, school governance, learning outcomes, public secondary schools, Tanzania, Mkuranga District.

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INTRODUCTION

School governance plays a pivotal role in determining the quality of education, particularly in low-resource contexts where resource allocation, teacher accountability, and stakeholder participation directly influence teaching and learning outcomes (Northouse, 2021; Ndalichako, 2022). In Tanzania, public secondary schools face persistent challenges such as limited instructional resources, low teacher motivation, mismanagement of funds, and weak oversight mechanisms, all of which

undermine the delivery of quality education and contribute to low student performance (Nyoni & Matete, 2023; Msangya, 2025). Ethical leadership, characterized by integrity, transparency, fairness, and responsible decision-making, has increasingly been recognized as a crucial driver of effective school governance and improved learning outcomes (Ugwu & Pansiri, 2022; Adan & Njuguna, 2024). By modelling ethical behavior and enforcing fair policies, ethical leaders foster trust, promote accountability, and ensure that resources are utilized efficiently to support teaching and learning (Kosgey, Ongera & Thuo, 2020).

Empirical evidence suggests that ethical leadership positively influences teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment, which in turn enhances student achievement (Cansor, Parlar & Türkoğlu, 2021; Sabir, 2020). In Tanzanian schools, weak governance and unethical leadership manifested through fund mismanagement, teacher absenteeism, limited instructional supervision, and poor communication with communities has been identified as a key factor contributing to substandard learning outcomes (Ndalichako, 2022; Nyoni & Matete, 2023). Ethical leadership mitigates these challenges by fostering an ethical school climate where teachers feel valued, supported, and held accountable, thereby improving instructional quality and student performance (Msangya, 2025; Sergiovanni, 2019). Despite growing attention to school leadership, the direct link between ethical leadership and learning outcomes in Tanzania remains under-examined. This study addresses this gap by exploring how ethical leadership practices in public secondary schools in Mkuranga District influence governance processes and contribute to enhanced educational performance. It posits that embedding ethical principles in school leadership through transparent decision-making, fair treatment of staff, and responsible resource use is foundational to creating learning environments that support teacher effectiveness and improve student achievement.

Literature Review

This study is anchored in both Transformational Leadership Theory and Ethical Leadership Theory, providing a robust lens for understanding how school leaders influence governance and educational performance. Transformational Leadership Theory, first proposed by Burns (1978) and elaborated by Bass and Avolio (1994), emphasizes the leader's ability to inspire followers through vision, integrity, and personal modelling. Transformational leaders articulate a compelling moral purpose, stimulate professional growth, and create organizational conditions that enhance teaching and learning. Their focus on motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized support enables staff to exceed performance expectations, making the theory particularly relevant in educational contexts where morale, commitment, and instructional quality are critical. Ethical Leadership Theory complements this perspective by highlighting the centrality of morality in leadership. As Brown,

Treviño, and Harrison (2005) argue, ethical leaders embody moral principles through consistent, fair, and transparent decisions. They influence teacher behaviour by modelling integrity, rewarding ethical conduct, and enforcing rules impartially, thereby cultivating trust and accountability. The integration of these two theories provides a comprehensive framework for examining how leadership grounded in ethical principles and transformational capacity can strengthen governance structures, motivate teachers, and foster conducive learning environments. This combined theoretical perspective is especially pertinent in low-resource contexts such as Mkuranga District, where morally grounded and transformational leadership is essential for sustaining educational improvement.

Ethical leadership has increasingly gained prominence in educational research as scholars examine how leaders' moral conduct shapes school culture, performance, and stakeholder relationships (Brown & Treviño, 2020). It emphasizes values such as honesty, justice, compassion, responsibility, and accountability (Northouse, 2021). In schools, ethical leaders model behaviours that align with professional standards, respect institutional policies, and safeguard the rights and welfare of teachers and students (Starratt, 2017). These principles create an environment in which fairness guides administrative decisions, grievances are addressed transparently, and ethical dilemmas are approached with principled judgment rather than personal interest (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). Studies show that when leaders prioritize ethical behaviour, they foster trust among teachers and learners, enhance teamwork, reduce conflict, and encourage open communication (Walumbwa et al., 2022). Ethical leadership becomes a stabilizing force in schools facing governance challenges such as inequitable resource allocation, teacher misconduct, and weak accountability systems (Nguni, 2020).

School governance refers to the systems, structures, and processes through which schools are managed, supervised, and held accountable for delivering quality education (Bush, 2020). Effective governance entails responsible financial management, participatory decision-making, transparent reporting, and mechanisms for monitoring performance. In Tanzania, weak governance manifested through mismanagement of funds, poor oversight of teacher attendance, and limited community involvement has been identified as a key factor contributing to poor learning outcomes (Makwinya & Komba, 2021; Uwezo, 2022). Strong governance ensures that resources reach classrooms, teachers adhere to professional standards, and students receive adequate instructional support (World Bank, 2023). It also enhances stakeholder confidence, motivating parents and community members to engage in school improvement efforts (Nguni, 2020). Empirical studies indicate that schools with robust governance report higher student retention, better academic performance, and improved behavioural outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2020),

demonstrating that governance is fundamental to learning outcomes rather than merely administrative oversight.

Empirical research has further demonstrated that ethical leadership positively influences teacher motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment, which in turn enhances student achievement (Cansor, Parlar & Türkoğlu, 2021; Sabir, 2020; Ngussa & Makewa, 2019). In Tanzanian schools, weak governance and unethical leadership practices manifested through fund mismanagement, teacher absenteeism, limited instructional supervision, and poor communication with communities have been identified as key factors contributing to substandard learning outcomes (Ndalichako, 2022; Nyoni & Matete, 2023). Ethical leadership mitigates these challenges by fostering an ethical school climate where teachers feel valued, supported, and held accountable, thereby improving both instructional quality and student performance (Msangya, 2025; Sergiovanni, 2019; Mukasa & Kabonesa, 2022). Despite this evidence, research in Tanzania has largely overlooked the direct link between ethical leadership and learning outcomes, highlighting a significant gap in the literature (Utari & Pardosi, 2022; Müller & Hofmann, 2021). This study addresses that gap by examining how ethical leadership practices in public secondary schools in Mkuranga District influence governance processes and contribute to enhanced educational performance. It argues that embedding ethical principles in school leadership through transparent decision-making, fair treatment of staff, and responsible use of resources is foundational to creating learning environments that support teacher effectiveness and improve student achievement (Senge, 2021; Rafferty & Griffin, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using an exploratory sequential design to investigate how ethical leadership contributes to stronger school governance and improved learning outcomes. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the research captured both measurable patterns and the lived experiences of school stakeholders. Questionnaires for teachers and students provided insights into trends in leadership behaviour, teacher conduct, and student performance, while interviews with school heads, School Board members, and education officers explored deeper perspectives on governance practices. This combination of methods allowed for triangulation of data, enhancing the validity and credibility of the findings, particularly in the context of Mkuranga District, which faces infrastructural limitations, resource shortages, high teacher absenteeism, and fluctuating school performance.

The study targeted 48 participants, including school heads, teachers, students, Ward Education Officers, the District Education Officer, and a representative from the Teacher Service Commission, all purposively selected for their relevance to school governance. Stratified random sampling was applied to ensure representation across

key stakeholder groups while maintaining depth of insight. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies, and percentages, to summarize patterns of leadership behaviour and learning outcomes. Qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis, systematically coding transcripts to identify recurring themes related to fairness, transparency, trust, and accountability in school governance. This approach provided an in-depth understanding of how ethical leadership influences decision-making, resource management, teacher motivation, and ultimately student achievement, while maintaining ethical standards such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The study revealed a srong connection between ethical leadership and effective resource management in public secondary schools. Quantitative findings from questionnaires highlighted the importance of ethical leadership practices in shaping positive school environments. Teachers reported that leaders who treated all staff equitably fostered a learning climate where everyone felt valued and motivated, with one noting, "Leaders who treated everyone equally created a positive learning environment where everyone felt valued and motivated" (Interview, teacher, July 2025). Ethical principals ensured that capitation grants were allocated to priority needs and that expenditure records were accessible to both teachers and School Board members. Similarly, students observed that disciplinary matters were handled fairly and that high-performing teachers and students were rewarded based on merit, reinforcing motivation and commitment. Schools led by ethical principals displayed improved access to textbooks, laboratory equipment, and classroom supplies, conditions closely linked to higher instructional quality, whereas schools with unethical leadership practices, such as favoritism or misappropriation of funds, experienced persistent shortages and declining facilities. These findings underscore that ethical leadership is fundamental for safeguarding educational resources and ensuring they effectively support student learning outcomes.

Qualitative data from interviews with school heads and Ward Education Officers revealed that ethical leadership significantly influences teacher motivation and professional conduct. Principals demonstrating fairness, respect, and professionalism fostered environments where teachers felt valued, supported, and accountable. Teachers reported involvement in decision-making, receipt of constructive feedback, and clear performance expectations, which contributed to punctuality, lesson preparation, and adherence to instructional duties. Conversely, schools with unethical leadership exhibited low morale, irregular supervision, and increased absenteeism, indicating a weakened professional culture. Ethical leadership was also associated with stronger stakeholder trust, reflected in active parental

involvement, collaborative monitoring of school finances, and engagement in student welfare initiatives. Furthermore, students in ethically led schools reported greater feelings of safety, belonging, and responsibility, contributing to higher engagement and improved academic performance. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that ethical leadership positively impacts learning outcomes by integrating effective resource management, teacher professionalism, stakeholder trust, and student behaviour, establishing a conducive learning environment that is particularly critical in resource-constrained settings like Mkuranga District.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that ethical leadership is a decisive factor in shaping governance processes and improving learning outcomes in public secondary schools. Principals who consistently model integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability create conditions where resources are effectively managed, teachers are motivated, and students experience a conducive learning environment. This aligns with Ethical Leadership Theory, which emphasizes that leaders' moral conduct directly influences subordinate behavior and organizational climate (Brown, Treviño & Harrison, 2005). In the present study, schools where capitation grants were allocated transparently and expenditure records were accessible to teachers and School Boards demonstrated improved availability of textbooks, laboratory equipment, and classroom supplies, thereby supporting instructional quality. Such findings corroborate prior research suggesting that ethical leadership mitigates resource mismanagement and promotes equitable access to educational inputs (Adan & Njuguna, 2024; Kosgey, Ongera & Thuo, 2020). Conversely, schools where unethical practices prevailed, such as favoritism or fund misappropriation, experienced persistent shortages and deteriorating facilities, indicating a direct negative impact of poor governance on teaching and learning (Msangya, 2025).

Ethical leadership also emerged as a crucial determinant of teacher motivation, professionalism, and engagement. Principals who involved teachers in decision-making, provided constructive feedback, and set clear expectations enhanced compliance with professional standards, reduced absenteeism, and strengthened teacher–student interactions. These findings are consistent with Transformational Leadership Theory, which argues that leaders who inspire, provide intellectual stimulation, and offer individualized support can elevate follower performance (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978). Moreover, ethical practices promoted stakeholder trust and collaboration, evidenced by active parental involvement and School Board oversight, which are essential mechanisms for accountability in low-resource contexts (Ugwu & Pansiri, 2022; Capuyan & Tabile, 2025). The impact on student behaviour and engagement further demonstrates that ethical leadership produces a positive feedback loop: principled governance encourages professional conduct among

teachers, which in turn fosters responsible and committed student behaviour, ultimately enhancing academic outcomes (Sabir, 2020; Cansor, Parlar & Türkoğlu, 2021). These findings critically highlight that ethical leadership in Tanzanian secondary schools is not merely an aspirational ideal but a practical necessity, particularly in resource-constrained districts like Mkuranga, where weak governance structures and past mismanagement have historically undermined educational quality (Ndalichako, 2022; Nyoni & Matete, 2023).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study concludes that ethical leadership significantly enhances governance and learning outcomes in public secondary schools in Mkuranga District. Principals who consistently demonstrate integrity, fairness, transparency, and accountability positively influence resource management, teacher motivation, stakeholder trust, and student behaviour. Such leadership creates a conducive learning environment where instructional resources are effectively utilized, teachers are professionally committed, and students feel safe, supported, and motivated to engage in their learning. Conversely, unethical practices, including mismanagement of funds and favoritism, undermine these processes, resulting in resource shortages, low teacher morale, poor instructional quality, and diminished student performance. These findings underscore that ethical leadership is not only a normative ideal but a practical necessity for improving school performance, particularly in low-resource and governance-challenged contexts like Mkuranga District.

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that educational authorities prioritize the promotion of ethical leadership among school principals through targeted training programs that emphasize integrity, transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making. Schools should establish clear policies and oversight mechanisms to ensure fair and responsible use of resources, while also encouraging teacher involvement in governance processes to foster ownership and professional commitment. Additionally, continuous monitoring and evaluation of leadership practices should be institutionalized to identify gaps and reinforce ethical behaviours. Finally, stakeholders, including parents and School Boards, should be actively engaged in school governance to enhance transparency and accountability, thereby creating a sustainable culture of ethical leadership that supports improved teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

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