

Engaging Teachers through Authentic Leadership: A Study of Private International Schools in Sulaymaniyah

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement among teachers in four private international schools in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. A cross-sectional survey design was used, and 52 teachers completed self-administered questionnaires that measured their perceptions of authentic leadership and their levels of employee engagement on five-point Likert scales. Descriptive analysis showed that teachers reported moderately high levels of perceived authentic leadership and relatively high engagement. Pearson correlation analysis indicated a statistically significant, moderate positive association between authentic leadership and employee engagement ($r = 0.346$, $p = 0.012$), suggesting that teachers who perceive their school leaders as more authentic also tend to report higher levels of engagement in their work. These findings are consistent with the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) perspective, which views authentic leadership as a job resource that can strengthen motivation and sustain engagement. The study contributes context-specific evidence from a growing private school sector in the Kurdistan Region and highlights the importance of leadership development initiatives that strengthen self-awareness, relational transparency and ethical decision-making among school leaders. Practical implications for school owners and policy makers are outlined, and directions for future research on leadership and engagement in education are proposed.

Keywords: Authentic Leadership, Employee Engagement, Teachers, Private Schools, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Introduction

The education sector in the Kurdistan Region has seen substantial growth in private schooling, including international-curriculum schools that compete on quality and reputation (Hassun, 2023; Saleh, 2024). Recent empirical study shows that the number of private schools has increased to at least 144 institutions enrolling more than 33,000 students by 2018, with continued growth documented over the last decade (Hassun, 2023; Saleh, 2024). In this expanding sector, engaged teachers are crucial for maintaining high instructional standards and ensuring positive learning experiences for students. However, research and practitioner reports indicate that teachers in many systems face heavy workloads, strong accountability pressures and limited involvement in decision-making. These conditions can increase stress and burnout and, over time, weaken teachers' engagement and commitment (Al Shuaili, 2024; Gámez-Genovart et al., 2025; Mukundan et al., 2024). At a global level, teacher shortages and an ageing workforce, with over one-third of primary and secondary teachers in OECD countries aged 50 or above and only about 9% of secondary teachers younger than 30, raise concerns about the sustainability of the profession, especially when working conditions are demanding (OECD, 2025).

Research on employee engagement and teacher well-being in public organisations shows that leadership and organisational support are among the strongest predictors of engagement and related outcomes (Gámez-Genovart et al., 2025; Santosa et al., 2025; Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023). Yet, most empirical studies have been conducted in Western, Asian or African public sector contexts, with relatively few focusing on Middle Eastern education systems. Within the Kurdistan Region, recent scholarships have mainly addressed issues such as governance, quality assurance and structural reforms, rather than school-level leadership and teacher engagement, and has rarely examined the private school sector (Hassun, 2023; Omer & Queenan, 2025; Saleh, 2024). In addition, existing education-focused studies on authentic leadership and engagement have tended to investigate teachers in Turkey, South Africa and Southeast Asia, leaving a clear gap in knowledge about private schools in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region.

Given this gap, there is limited empirical evidence to help school owners and policy makers design leadership development and human resource practices that support teacher engagement in Sulaymaniyah's private schools. Without such evidence, schools may adopt imported leadership models that do not fit local cultural expectations or organisational realities. This study responds to that need by examining whether, and to what extent, teachers' perceptions of authentic leadership are associated with their employee engagement in this specific context.

Literature Review*Employee Engagement*

Within the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) tradition, employee engagement is conceptualised as a positive, work-related state of mind characterised by high energy (vigour), a strong sense of importance, enthusiasm and pride in one's work (dedication), and deep concentration or immersion in work activities (absorption) (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Crawford et al., 2010). Engagement is not seen as a brief emotional reaction, but as a more enduring psychological condition in which employees feel connected to their work and willing to invest extra effort.

Crawford et al. (2010) extended the JD-R model by integrating stressor-appraisal theory and testing the model using meta-analytic structural equation modelling. Their study showed that job resources such as autonomy, performance feedback and social support are consistently and positively related to employee engagement. In contrast, the effect of job demands depend on how those demands are perceived. Demands typically viewed as hindrances, such as role conflict, organisational politics and job insecurity, show negative relationships with engagement. By contrast, demands appraised as challenges, such as workload or time pressure associated with learning and achievement opportunities, can be positively related to engagement because they signal growth and accomplishment (Crawford et al., 2010).

In this refined JD-R framework, employee engagement is understood as a motivational state that develops when employees have sufficient job and personal resources to manage their demands and when at least some demands are experienced as challenging rather than purely hindering (Crawford et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). For teachers, resources such as supportive leadership, professional autonomy and collegial relationships are therefore essential for sustaining engagement in the face of curriculum change, accountability pressures and complex classroom demands. Recent reviews of teacher well-being and engagement in public sector and educational settings highlight that perceived leadership, job design, individual psychological resources and organisational interventions all play key roles in shaping employee engagement and related outcomes (Gámez-Genovart et al., 2025; Santosa et al., 2025; Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023).

Authentic Leadership

Authentic leadership is often defined as a pattern of leader behaviour that draws on and promotes positive psychological capacities and an ethical organisational climate, leading to higher self-awareness and self-regulated positive behaviour in both leaders and followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Polat et al., 2024; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Building on this foundation, Neider and Schriesheim (2011) developed and validated the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI), a multidimensional instrument that assesses authentic leadership through four related dimensions: self-awareness, balanced processing, relational transparency and internalised moral perspective.

In the ALI framework, self-awareness refers to a leader's understanding of their strengths, weaknesses, motives and values. Balanced processing captures the extent to which leaders actively seek out and fairly evaluate different viewpoints before making decisions. Relational transparency reflects leaders' willingness to share information openly and present their true selves in interactions with followers. Internalised moral perspective refers to a value-driven orientation in which leaders' actions are guided more by internal moral standards than by external pressures (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Rather than relying on impression management, authentic leaders behave consistently with their values and encourage followers to express their views, which is particularly important in professional environments such as schools where expertise is distributed among staff.

Using confirmatory factor analyses, Neider and Schriesheim (2011) provided evidence for the content validity, internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity, and concurrent validity of the ALI, as well as its relative freedom from impression-management response bias. Their results also raised questions about treating authentic leadership as a single global

construct or combining it with transformational leadership into a broad composite. Evidence from previous research similarly highlights substantial conceptual overlap between authentic and transformational leadership, while still supporting authentic leadership's unique contribution to follower attitudes and behaviours (Banks et al., 2016; Polat et al., 2024). Consequently, many scholars recommend examining the distinct effects of the four authentic leadership dimensions to better understand how different facets of authenticity influence follower attitudes and behaviours (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Banks et al., 2016; Walumbwa et al., 2008). This multidimensional, psychometrically sound view of authentic leadership underpins the current study's focus on how teachers' perceptions of authenticity in their school leaders may be linked to their employee engagement.

Authentic Leadership and Employee Engagement

Empirical research in recent years has increasingly examined the relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement across a range of organisational settings. Evidence from hospitality, education and public service sectors consistently indicates that employees who perceive their leaders as more authentic report higher levels of work engagement (Başaran & Kiral, 2020; Vermeulen & Scheepers, 2020; Niswaty et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2023; Wirawan et al., 2020; Masindi & Khashane, 2025).

In the education sector, Başaran and Kiral (2020) found that school administrators' authentic leadership behaviours significantly and positively predicted secondary school teachers' employee engagement, with dimensions such as balanced processing and relational transparency playing particularly important roles. Masindi and Khashane (2025) reported that authentic leadership among school leaders in South Africa influenced educators' engagement both directly and indirectly through psychological capital, highlighting the importance of leadership in shaping teachers' psychological resources.

Other studies show that authentic leadership can promote engagement through mediating variables such as perceived organisational support and job satisfaction. For example, Silva, Duarte and Oliveira (2023) demonstrated that work meaningfulness and work-family enrichment mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement in Portuguese organisations, suggesting that authentic leaders help employees experience their work as meaningful and compatible with their family roles.

Taken together, these findings support the idea that authentic leadership functions as a key job resource within the JD-R framework, helping employees cope with demands and maintain high levels of engagement. However, empirical evidence from Middle Eastern educational settings, especially private schools in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region, is still limited. This study addresses this gap by testing the association between authentic leadership and employee engagement among teachers in Sulaymaniyah.

Methodology

Research Design

This study used a cross-sectional quantitative survey design to attain teachers' perceptions of authentic leadership and their self-reported employee engagement at a single point in time. This research design is widely used in engagement research and grants researchers to examine relationships between variables in real organisational settings.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of teachers working in four private international schools in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq. According to school records, this population included 120 teachers. Because the population was relatively small and the researchers wanted to maximise representation, a census approach was adopted in which all 120 teachers were invited to participate rather than selecting only a subset. In this context, a census approach indicates an intention to include every member of the defined population in the survey frame, which helps reduce sampling error and allows the findings to be interpreted in relation to the whole staff group in these schools.

Questionnaires were distributed both in paper form and electronically. In total, 52 usable responses were received, yielding a response rate of approximately 43%. Although not all teachers chose to participate, the census-based design ensured that every teacher had an equal opportunity to be included, while the final dataset reflects the views of those who actually completed the questionnaire. While this response rate is modest, it is acceptable for organisational surveys in similar contexts and provides a reasonable basis for exploratory correlational analysis.

Instruments

The study used an adapted questionnaire with three main sections which includes demographic information, perceived authentic leadership and employee engagement. Authentic leadership was measured using items adapted from widely used authentic leadership scales that operationalise self-awareness, relational transparency, internalised moral perspective and balanced processing, consistent with the four dimensions specified in the Authentic Leadership Inventory (ALI) (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). These items were designed to capture the multidimensional pattern of authentic leader behaviour described in that framework. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Employee engagement was measured using items that reflect vigour, dedication and absorption, aligned with contemporary multidimensional engagement frameworks that define engagement in terms of these three core dimensions (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010; Crawford et al., 2010). Teachers indicated the extent to which each statement described their work experience on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher engagement.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was carried out after obtaining permission from the management of the four participating schools. Teachers were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of their responses. Questionnaires were administered in both paper-based and online formats to accommodate teachers' schedules and preferences. Paper questionnaires were distributed during non-teaching periods, while online questionnaires were accessed via a secure survey link.

Participants were assured that no identifying information would be collected and that responses would be reported only in aggregate form. Completing the questionnaire was taken

as an indication of informed consent. The completed questionnaires were collected by the researcher and stored securely for data entry and analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were computed to summarise levels of perceived authentic leadership and employee engagement. Pearson's correlation analysis was then conducted to examine the relationship between authentic leadership and employee engagement, in line with the study's research question. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used to determine statistical significance.

Results

Descriptive Findings

Overall, teachers reported a moderately high perception of their school leaders' authentic leadership behaviours. The overall mean score for authentic leadership was 3.44 on a five-point scale, indicating that teachers tended to agree that their leaders behaved consistently with their values, shared information openly and considered multiple perspectives before making decisions. Some items scored slightly lower, suggesting room for improvement in areas such as seeking teachers' input in key decisions.

Meanwhile, teachers also reported relatively high levels of employee engagement. The overall mean score for employee engagement was 4.32, reflecting strong agreement with statements capturing vigour and dedication and indicating that many teachers felt energetic, enthusiastic and proud of their work. Items related to absorption showed somewhat lower, though still positive, mean scores, suggesting that not all teachers always experienced full immersion in their work.

Correlation between Authentic Leadership and Employee Engagement

Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between perceived authentic leadership and employee engagement. The results indicated a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between authentic leadership and employee engagement ($r = 0.346$, $p = 0.012$; $p < 0.05$). This suggests that teachers who perceived higher levels of authentic leadership from their school leaders also reported higher engagement in their work.

Table 1

Pearson correlation between authentic leadership and employee engagement (N = 52)

Variables	r	p-value
Authentic leadership – Employee engagement	0.346	0.012

* $p < 0.05$ indicates a statistically significant relationship.

Discussion and Recommendations

Discussion

Overall, the results support recent international evidence that authentic leadership is positively associated with employee engagement (Başaran & Kırıl, 2020; Masindi & Khashane, 2025; Niswaty et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2023; Wirawan et al., 2020). The moderate positive correlation observed in Sulaymaniyah's private schools is broadly comparable to

findings from Turkey, South Africa and Indonesia, where authentic leadership has been linked to higher engagement both directly and indirectly through psychological capital, job satisfaction and perceived organisational support (Masindi & Khashane, 2025; Niswaty et al., 2021; Vermeulen & Scheepers, 2020; Wirawan et al., 2020).

Teachers' moderately high ratings of authentic leadership suggest that many school leaders display behaviours such as transparency, ethical decision-making and balanced processing, which align with the multidimensional conception of authentic leadership captured in the Authentic Leadership Inventory (Neider & Schriesheim, 2011). At the same time, the relationship with engagement is only moderate, indicating that leadership is one important, but not exclusive, driver of engagement. In line with the JD-R model, other factors such as workload, resources, career development opportunities and family demands are also likely to shape teachers' engagement levels (Crawford et al., 2010; Gámez-Genovart et al., 2025; Santosa et al., 2025; Zahari & Kaliannan, 2023).

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reinforce the view of authentic leadership as a key job resource within the JD-R framework (Crawford et al., 2010; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). By modelling integrity, encouraging open communication and recognising teachers' contributions, authentic leaders can help teachers experience their work as meaningful and aligned with their values, which in turn promotes sustained engagement (Baquero, 2023; Silva et al., 2023). The study therefore provides context-specific evidence from private international schools in the Kurdistan Region, suggesting that the benefits of authentic leadership for engagement extend across diverse educational and cultural settings and are not confined to Western or public-sector contexts.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings and the recent literature, several recommendations can be made for school leaders, owners and policy makers. They should invest in authentic leadership development for principals and senior teachers, with a focus on self-awareness, transparent communication and ethical decision-making, and strengthen participatory decision-making by systematically involving teachers in school-level decisions. Schools also need to support teachers' psychological resources through interventions such as coaching, peer support and strengths-based feedback, while addressing structural job demands by reviewing workload, class size and resource provision to ensure realistic expectations and fair recognition. In addition, embedding regular measures of teacher engagement and perceptions of leadership into HR practice can provide actionable feedback to inform leadership development, staff support initiatives and ongoing school improvement efforts.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although a census approach was used and all teachers in the four schools were invited to participate, only 52 questionnaires were returned, so non-response bias is possible if non-participants differ systematically from respondents. Second, the cross-sectional, self-report design limits causal inference and may be affected by common-method variance and social desirability bias. Third, the study focused on a small number of private international schools in a single city, which constrains the generalisability of the results to other school types, regions or education systems. Future research should use larger and more diverse samples

(including public schools and different types of private schools in other parts of Iraq), adopt longitudinal designs to track how changes in leadership behaviours influence employee engagement over time and incorporate multi-source and multilevel data to examine how psychological capital, perceived organisational support, meaningful work and school-level factors (e.g., climate and HR practices) jointly shape teachers' engagement.

Conclusion

This study examined how authentic leadership relates to employee engagement among teachers in four private international schools in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and found that teachers generally perceived their leaders as moderately authentic and reported relatively high engagement levels, with a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship between perceived authentic leadership and employee engagement. These results are consistent with JD-R-based research demonstrating that authentic leadership, as a job resource, is an important driver of employee engagement in both public and private sector organisations, including educational settings and this study contributes context-specific evidence from the Kurdistan Region while underscoring the need for leadership development and HRD strategies that foster authenticity, support teachers' psychological resources and address structural job demands. By cultivating authentic leadership practices and proactively supporting teacher engagement, private schools in Sulaymaniyah can strengthen their capacity to deliver high-quality education and respond effectively to the evolving demands of students, parents and the broader community.

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