

# The Extent to which Principals' use of Democratic Leadership Style Influences Students' Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of Democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mwala Sub-county, Kenya. This study used a descriptive survey research design. Target population of the study was all the 72 schools, all the 72 principals, and all the 471 teachers in Mwala Sub-county public secondary schools. Out of the population of 72 schools, 36 were chosen through stratified random sampling technique. All the 36 principals of the sampled schools were purposively included in the study. Yamene (1967) formula was used to give a sample of 216 teachers. Proportional allocation method was used to identify a weighted teachers' sample for each school. Simple random sampling technique was employed to select the participating teachers in each school. The instruments were validated through piloting and by research experts to ascertain content validity while reliability was achieved through piloting using the test-retest reliability technique. Data were coded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23.0 for analysis. Inferential statistics which involved running correlation analysis at a 0.05 level of significance were employed to test the nature and strength of relationships between variables. The results established that there was a weak positive but statistically significant correlation between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance ( $R=.365$ ,  $p=.043$ ). Based on the findings, the study recommends to the Kenya Institute of Educational Management (KEMI) and the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) to regularly in-service teachers on leadership styles; principals to enhance practices associated with democratic leadership practices since it improves academic performance.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is a powerful strategy identified by governments worldwide to eradicate poverty, spur economic growth, and develop human capital (United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organization, UNESCO, 2016). In essence, a student who goes to school is expected to acquire quality education often measured through academic performance. On the other hand, research has shown that school leadership is an overriding factor influencing students' academic performance (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). According to Sun and Leithwood (2017), principals' leadership directly influences school conditions that enhance teachers' output such as school culture and climate. Increased teachers' output is reflected in improved students' academic performance. Hence, school leadership has an indirect influence on students' academic performance. Moreover, Handford and Leithwood (2013) assert that effective leadership inspires and guides teachers to enhance student's learning outcomes. According to Mwove, Mwanja and Kasivu (2023) a school's academic performance is partly dependent on the quality of school leadership. The role of the 21st-

century principal has become complex partly due to increasing accountability pressures and the need to produce good student outcomes (Bush, 2013). Bush and Glover (2016) state that principals must think strategically, handle multiple ambiguous tasks at once, stay clear and steadfast on fundamental vision and values, maintain integrity and interpersonal sensitivity, and handle stress effectively. Viewed from this angle, it can be seen that the role of the principal has evolved from that of a government administrator expected to fulfill a bureaucratic role in the school.

Makgato and Mudzanani (2017) qualitative study conducted in South Africa found that the democratic leadership style contributes to high educational performance of learners. It can be inferred from the results of this study that the training principals received could have nevertheless improved their leadership and thus highlighted the need to prepare school leaders. In Tanzania, there is evidence suggesting that school principals use ineffective leadership styles leading to poor performance. In this regard, a study done in Dodoma Municipality, Tanzania by Akaro (2017) to investigate how leadership styles impacted students' academic performance established that principals often employed democratic, laissez-faire and autocratic leadership styles. This study notes that democratic leadership was a frequently used style. Furthermore, the study found that the democratic leadership style was highly regarded by teachers because it involved them in decision-making. According to Jamal (2014), the democratic leadership style is effective in increasing staff's feeling of satisfaction because it involves them in decision-making but is sometimes ineffective when there is an urgency to make decisions. This study sought to establish whether principals in Mwala public secondary schools employ the democratic leadership style and find out how it is related to academic performance. The study was carried out in Mwala Sub-county because its performance is below the county's average.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ampairea and Namusonge (2015), a democratic leader believes in decision-making through consensus. Wangai (2015) elaborates that a democratic leader listens to ideas and suggestions but still makes the final decision. Kitavi (2014) posits that a democratic leader will allow participatory communication like open and negotiating communication strategies. The author elaborates that participatory communication strategies can be achieved through holding open forums such as staff and student meetings where the leader directly discusses issues with teachers and students and gets prompt feedback. It can be seen from the foregoing that this leadership style seeks to involve followers in leadership aspects and thus; it can motivate them to implement agreed activities leading to high output.

Although autocratic, transactional, and transformational leadership styles are minimally used in Pakistan schools, research shows that the democratic leadership style is highly practiced. In this regard, a study done in Pakistan by Alam (2017) to probe the effect of leadership styles on learning processes establishes that democratic leadership is commonly employed. Further, results show that democratic leadership had a positive effect on learning processes. Essentially, the study results confirm that democratic leadership style is effective in improving students' academic performance. However, this study is foreign, was conducted in one private school and employed a qualitative case study approach while the present study employed a descriptive survey research design, involved 36 schools, and included a sample of 252 participants.

Similar results were arrived at by a study conducted in Indonesia by Nellitawati (2020) which sought to determine how principals' use of democratic leadership style contributed to teacher performance. Results of this study establishes a positive significant relationship between democratic leadership style and teacher performance. The results thus imply that use of democratic leadership style is effective in enhancing teacher output as reflected by students' academic performance. The study utilized questionnaires to gather data. It adopted a quantitative research design and involved a sample of 86 elementary school teachers. The survey involved a smaller sample of 86 respondents relative to the 252 that were included in the present study. It

used a quantitative design while the present study employed a descriptive survey research design. Further, the study was done in Indonesia while the present study was conducted in Kenya which is a different setting altogether.

Using a sample of 384 respondents, Eric and Tobias (2020) employed a cross-sectional research design to assess the impact of school leadership on student's academic performance in Northern Ghana. The study used questionnaires and interview guides to solicit data from participants. The study results indicate that schools whose principals adopted a democratic leadership style performed better than schools whose heads were undemocratic. Thus, from the foregoing, it can be seen that the democratic leadership style is effective in improving students' academic outcomes. This study adopted a cross-sectional research design as opposed to the descriptive survey research design adopted in the current study. Moreover, this study was done in Ghana while the present study was implemented in Kenya, a different setting.

In South Africa, Makgato and Mudzanani (2017) adopting a qualitative research design undertook a study to determine the influence of leadership styles on academic performance. Results of the study established that the democratic leadership style contributed to high academic achievement. The results suggest that democratic leadership style is effective in improving students' academic performance. This study included a smaller sample of 10 schools where 50 teachers were interviewed in separate focus group discussions consisting of 5 teachers in each school. Moreover, this study was done in South Africa while the current study was carried out in Kenya which is a completely different setting. The study was implemented in a small sample of 10 schools. On the contrary, the present study was carried out in a larger sample of 36 schools.

Ferdinandi and Kiwonde (2023) designed a study to determine the impact of school leadership on student's academic performance in secondary schools in the Itilima District of Tanzania: The researchers used a descriptive survey research design and employed a combination of purposive and stratified random sampling technique to draw a sample of 52 study participants from a target population of 109. This sample included school heads, secondary schools' academic masters, discipline masters, and ward educational officers. To collect data, the study used questionnaires and document analysis checklists. The study results indicate that there was a strong and positive relationship between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance which was statistically significant. Thus, the results confirm that the democratic leadership style is effective in fostering students' academic performance in the district. Compared with the current study, there are gaps noted. For instance, this study sampled a smaller sample of 52 respondents as opposed to the 252 respondents included in the present study. Again, this study was conducted in Tanzania while the current study was done in Kenya. The reviewed study was wider in scope in terms of respondents and research instruments compared to the current study which involved only principals and teachers and utilized only questionnaires to collect data.

In Kenya, the democratic leadership style is commonly practiced. For instance, a study done in Nyamira County by Nyambura (2019) which probed the influence of principals' leadership styles on academic performance established that democratic leadership style was commonly preferred. The survey noted that schools whose principals employed this leadership style had moderate academic performance. The results thus imply that democratic leadership style is effective in facilitating good academic results. The study used a concurrent triangulation research design and randomly selected 56 principals, 56 deputy principals, and 56 senior teachers. This study employed a concurrent triangulation research design while the present study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This study was carried out in Nyamira County while the current study was done in Machakos County.

Oyugi and Gogo's (2019) utilized a descriptive survey research design to understand how school heads' leadership styles impacted academic performance in Awendo Sub-county, Migori County. Saturated sampling was used to include 30 principals and a simple random sampling technique was utilised to select

186 teachers and 301 students. Data were collected by administering questionnaires, conducting interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. The results of the study established that there was a positive and moderate significant relationship between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance. The results thus suggest that a democratic leadership style is effective in enhancing students' academic performance. This survey was conducted in Awendo Sub-county, Migori County while the current study was implemented in Mwala Sub-county. It was also wider in scope for it used various instruments to collect data and involved more classes of respondents as compared to the current study was limited to responses from principals and teachers only and used questionnaires only to gather data.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used Descriptive research survey design. This design was preferred because the study intended to collect primary data to describe the democratic leadership style employed by principals in the study area. This design was expected to enable the study to make conclusions on whether democratic leadership style practiced could be responsible for low academic performance experienced in Mwala sub-county public secondary schools.

When this data was collected, there were 72 schools, 72 principals, and 486 teachers. Therefore, the study targeted all the (72) schools, all the (72) principals, and all the (471) teachers in the Sub-county. In total, there were 543 respondents. A stratified random sampling technique was used to stratify the schools into their respective zones. Out of the 72 schools, the study intended to include a sample of 36 (50.0%) schools which according to Oso and Onen (2009) were appropriate. The 72 public secondary schools were stratified into their 5 educational zones in Mwala Sub-county. These zones include: Mwala (14); Masii (15); Muthetheni (16); Yathui (12); and Mbiuni (15). After stratification, the study employed a simple random sampling technique to select 50% of schools in each zone. All 36 heads of the selected schools were included in the study. To determine the teachers' sample, Yamene's (1967) formula was employed as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where  $n$  is the required sample,  $N$  is the entire population, and  $e$  is the sample error at 95% confidence level.

$$\begin{aligned} n &= \frac{471}{1 + 471(0.05)^2} \\ &= 216 \text{ teachers.} \end{aligned}$$

$$\text{Sample per school (s)} = \frac{216}{471}$$

Further, proportional allocation method was used to sample 45.85% of teachers in each school as shown below:

$$\begin{aligned} &\times 100 \\ &= 45.85\% \end{aligned}$$

At school level, simple random sampling technique was employed to select the 45.85% participating teachers. In total, the study included 36 principals and 216 teachers making a total sample 252 respondents as shown on Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample Size Table

Description	Population(N)	Sample Size (n)
Principals Teachers	72 471	36 216
<b>Total</b>	<b>543</b>	<b>252</b>

Questionnaires were the main instruments of collecting data used in this study. This study was purely quantitative and thus collected quantitative data. Data were coded and entered into Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) computer program (version 23.0) for analysis.

## RESULTS

The objective of the study sought to establish the extent to which principals’ use of democratic leadership style influences students’ academic performance in public secondary schools in the Mwala sub-county. Data was collected using principals’ and teachers’ questionnaires. The sections that follow present descriptive and inferential analysis.

### Responses of the Principal on their Use of Democratic Leadership Style

The principals were given 10 statements to rate using a 5 – item Likert scale calibrated as follows: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, 5 = Always. Table 2 gives the results.

Table 2: Principals’ Views on their Use of Democratic Leadership Style

Statement	1	2	3	4	5		Mean	Std Dev
I wait patiently for the results of a decision.	(F) 3 (%) 9.7	3 9.7	9 29.0	9 29.0	7 22.6	31 100	3.45	1.234
I let staff members know what is expected of them.	(F) 4 (%) 12.9	6 19.4	5 16.1	5 16.1	11 35.5	31 100	3.51	1.478
I am friendly and approachable.	(F) 4 (%) 12.9	7 22.6	5 16.1	5 16.1	10 32.3	31 100	3.32	1.469
I keep staff working together as a team.	(F) 3 (%) 9.7	4 12.9	10 32.3	2 6.5	12 38.7	31 100	3.52	1.387
I accept defeat in stride.	(F) 1 (%) 3.2	7 22.6	7 22.6	12 38.7	4 12.9	31 100	3.35	1.082
I try out my ideas in the staff	(F) 2 (%) 6.5	1 3.2	9 29.0	13 41.9	6 19.4	31 100	3.65	1.050
I give advance notices of any changes.	(F) 3 (%) 9.7	4 12.9	4 12.9	7 22.6	13 41.9	31 100	3.74	1.390
I am able to tolerate postponement and uncertainty.	(F) 1 (%) 3.2	8 25.8	9 29.0	6 19.4	7 22.6	31 100	3.32	1.194
I get my superiors to act for the welfare of the staff members.	(F) 1 (%) 3.2	1 3.2	7 22.6	12 38.7	10 32.3	31 100	3.94	0.998
I maintain cordial relationship with my superiors.	(F) 2 (%) 6.5	6 19.4	6 19.4	2 6.5	15 48.4	31 100	3.71	1.419

The mean of 2 is indicative that the majority of the principals often maintained cordial relationships with their superiors while the standard deviation of 1.419 points out that the views expressed concerning this

statement were divergent.

### Teachers’ Assessment of their Principals’ Democratic Leadership Practices

Teachers were presented with six statements that describe a democratic leader to rate using a 5-point Likert scale calibrated as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree. The analysis of the responses is provided in Table 3.

Table 3: Teachers’ Views on Principals’ Use of Democratic Leadership Style

Statement	1	2	3	4	5		Mean	Std Dev
I have enough time to teach and do other responsibilities assigned.	(F) 9 (%) 4.8	25 13.4	4 2.1	83 44.4	66 35.3	187 100	3.92	1.159
Performance is a result of teamwork.	(F) 8 (%) 4.3	10 5.3	6 3.2	61 32.6	102 54.5	187 100	4.28	1.051
We discuss before implementing school academic plans.	(F) 17 (%) 9.1	16 8.6	19 10.2	78 41.7	57 30.5	187 100	3.76	1.232
The principal is a good listener.	(F) 10 (%) 5.3	21 11.2	22 11.8	69 36.9	65 34.8	187 100	3.84	1.174
We discuss with staff who to attend seminar/workshop.	(F) 29 (%) 15.5	47 25.1	18 9.6	55 29.4	38 20.3	187 100	3.14	1.403

A mean of 3 reveals that this practice was moderate while the standard deviation (1.403) indicates that the views were divergent.

### Hypotheses Testing

A null hypothesis was formulated which stated as follows:  $H_0$ : *There is no statistically significant relationship between principals’ use of democratic leadership style and students’ academic performance in public secondary schools in the Mwala sub-county.* The principals’ data relating to democratic leadership practices were transformed using the SPSS version 23.0 software to create a new variable. The software was used to generate a normality test table and normality of the new variable was tested at Shapiro-Wilk level of significance. A Spearman’s rank-order correlation was performed at a 0.05 level of significance to test the null hypothesis. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlation between Democratic Leadership and Academic Performance.

			Democratic Leadership	Academic Performance
Spearman’s rho	Democratic Leadership	Coefficient	1.000	.365*
		Sig.	.	.043
		N	31	31
	Academic Performance	Coefficient	.365*	1.000
		Sig.	.043	.
		N	31	31

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Results reported in Table 4 show that there was a weak positive correlation between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance, which was statistically significant ( $R = .365, p = .043$ ). With a  $P = 0.043 < 0.05$ , the null hypothesis which stated that "*H<sub>0</sub>: there is no statistically significant relationship between principals' use of democratic leadership style and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mwala sub-county*" was rejected. It can be seen from the results that democratic leadership styles is statistically related with academic performance.

## DISCUSSION

Globally, the findings agree with Alam's (2017) study done in Pakistan which show that democratic leadership has a positive influence on learning processes. The results confirmed that the democratic leadership style is thus effective in improving students' academic performance. The findings are further supported by Nellitawati's (2020) study done in Indonesia which established that there is a positive significant relationship between democratic leadership style and teacher performance. Given that academic performance is determined by teacher performance, the results thus suggested that the use of a democratic leadership style was effective in enhancing students' academic performance.

Regionally, the findings are consistent with Eric and Tobias' (2020) study done in Ghana which established that schools whose principals adopted a democratic leadership style performed better than schools whose heads were undemocratic. Like the present study, the results suggested that a democratic leadership style was effective in facilitating good academic performance. The study results also agree with Makgato and Mudzanani's (2017) study done in South Africa which determined democratic leadership style contributed to high academic achievement. Thus, the results of this study imply that principals' democratic leadership practices are effective in improving students' academic performance. The results are further supported by Ferdinandi and Kiwonde (2023) study done in Tanzania which indicated that there was a strong and positive relationship between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance which was statistically significant. Hence, the results suggest that a democratic leadership style is effective in fostering students' academic performance.

In Kenya, the results of the study agree with a study done in Nyamira County by Nyambura (2019) which found that schools whose principals employed a democratic leadership style had moderate academic performance. Thus, the results confirmed that the democratic leadership style was effective in enhancing students' academic performance. The results further agree with Oyugi and Gogo's (2019) done in Awendo Sub-county of Migori County which reports a statistically positive and moderate relationship between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance. Essentially, like the present study, this study indicated that a democratic leadership style was effective in enhancing students' academic performance. In support of this, Kitavi (2014) posits that a democratic leader will allow participatory communication like open and negotiating communication strategies. The author elaborates that participatory communication strategies can be achieved through holding open forums such as staff and student meetings where the leader directly discusses issues with teachers and students and gets prompt feedback. It can be seen from the foregoing that this leadership style seeks to involve followers in leadership aspects and thus; it can motivate them to implement agreed activities leading to high output such as good academic performance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) and TSC regularly in-service principals on how they can best use the democratic leadership style to enhance students' academic performance in conjunction with other leadership styles. It is also recommended that principals enhance the practice of democratic leadership style since it enhances students' academic performance.

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