

# Principals' Leadership Style and Students' Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools in HomaBay County, Kenya

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## Abstract

The thrust of this study was to examine the effects of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Homabay County, Kenya. This study was based on combinations of modified Bossert's framework and Pitner's moderated effects model of effective schools. The main objective of the study was to examine the extent principals leadership styles influence students' academic performance in national examinations in HomaBay County Kenya. The study adopted the ex-post facto research design. Combinations of stratified random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used to draw 216 secondary school teachers and 39 principals yielding a sample size of 255 respondents. The study employed a questionnaire for teachers and interview guide for principals. It was established that school principals utilize diverse leadership behaviour, some pointing to the more democratic and transactional styles while others skewed towards the more autocratic and laissez-faire types. The use of diverse leadership behaviour notwithstanding, it was evident that most principals were deficient in the types of leadership behaviour that support the creation of a conducive learning environment and support to teachers necessary for effective teaching and the expected enhanced students' academic achievement. A test of null hypothesis retained the null hypothesis that that there was no statistically significant relationship between principals' leadership styles and students' academic performance. It was recommended that school principals should aspire to establish a school environment which is conducive for effective teaching and learning (236 words).

**Keywords:** Leadership styles, principal, public secondary schools, HomaBay County, Kenya.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background information

This study on effects of principals' leadership style on students' academic performance in national examinations in public secondary schools is undertaken at a time when education stakeholders have expressed their concerned over the poor quality of educational output of institutions (Oketch & Ngware, 2012; Oluremi, 2013; Odhiambo, 2012; Osangie & Okafor, 2013; Orodho, 2014). Arguably, part of the blame for the poor performance has been directed towards school administrators (principals) and the teachers while some portion of the blame has been put squarely on the shoulders of the students themselves and the parents (Sawamuran & Sifuna, 2008; Oluremi, 2012; Osangie & Okafor, 2013; Orodho, 2013).

There is no doubt that students' academic achievement is very crucial at every level; from a perspective of an individual, a family, an organization (like a school) and the nation as a whole. For a school to perform well both in academics and in co-curricular activities, effective leadership is needed (Cole, 2004; Orodho, 2013). Leadership at work in educational institutions is thus a dynamic process where an individual is not only responsible for the group's tasks but also actively seeks the collaboration and commitment of all the group members in achieving group goals in a particular context (Cole, 2004; Richlin & Cox, 2004; Bizimana & Orodho, 2014).

Waweru and Orodho (2014) have contended that the leadership style of the headteachers is of utmost importance in the school performance. The school headteachers has the role of providing direction and exerting influence on persons and other things in order to achieve the school's goals (Leithwood, 2003; Orodho, 2013). This shows the importance of the school principal's role in improving student performances and achievement. It is against this background that this study sought to examine the possible effect of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance at the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) in public secondary

schools in HomaBay County, Kenya.

## 1.2. State of the Art Review

Leadership style is the manner and approach of providing direction, implementing plans and motivating people. Lewin led a group of researchers to identify different styles of leadership. This early study has been very influential and established three major leadership styles. The three major styles of leadership are Autocratic or Authoritarian, Democratic (participative) and Laissez faire. A good leader uses all three styles, with one of them normally dominant while bad leaders tend to stick with one style (Oluremi, 2013).

Lewin found out from his research that it was more difficult to move from an authoritarian style to democratic style than vice versa. Abuse of authoritarian style is viewed as controlling, bossy and dictatorial. Levin's study found out that Democratic leadership was generally the most effective. In his study, children in this group were less productive than the members of the autocratic group, but their contributions were of much higher quality. Children under the Laissez-faire leadership were the least productive of all the three groups.

Writing on the caliber of leadership, Waters, Marzano, and Mcnulty (2003) aptly argue that the caliber of leadership in a school could have a dramatic effect on student achievement. Furthermore, their study indicate that there was a strong relationship between effective leadership style and student achievement. Waweru and Orodho (2014) found out that authoritative leadership style had a significant effect on school effectiveness (an indicator of student achievement) as compared to democratic style in public schools in Murang'a County, Kenya. Haymon (1990) found a positive relationship between leadership styles and student performance in the elementary schools. Valesky (1992) found that a democratic style produced higher test scores than an authoritarian or Laissez-faire leadership style did in high schools in Memphis, Tennessee.

A study in Uganda by Nsubuga (2009) revealed that the democratic or consultative form of leadership was widely used and found to be effective in public schools the country. It was also found that most headteachers in Uganda used this kind of leadership in order to create ownership. The findings of the study also showed that no one kind of leadership style was used in schools. Although the democratic style was the most preferred, it was found that depending on situations in schools, leaders tended to use the different leadership styles and at times used other styles of leadership. It was established that where the democratic style of leadership was practiced, the school was likely to achieve good overall school performance.

Ngugi (2006) observed that headteachers who used democratic leadership style posted high exam results. No significant relationship was found between the autocratic leadership style and academic performance in public secondary schools in Murang'a District, Kenya. Onyango (2008) stated that good academic performance in K.C.S.E was exhibited by schools whose headteachers were having a mixture of autocratic (Task-oriented behaviour) and democratic leaders (relationship-oriented behavior). From the following studies, it was still not clear whether a particular leadership style resulted in the most effective form of organizational behaviour.

In the democratic leadership style the workers were involved in decision making and this promoted high morale among the workers. In the laissez-faire leadership style, the leader waived responsibility and allowed workers to work as they chose with minimum interference. The advantages and disadvantages of each leadership style were also discussed. Several empirical studies on influence of headteachers leadership styles on students' performance were reviewed. This study indicated different findings. For some studies there were relationships while in others, there were no relationships between leadership styles and students performance in national examinations. There was no consistency in the findings related to the variables.

A number of researchers have developed theoretical frameworks of instructional leadership roles of school principals, contributing to the clearer conceptualizations of the term. The works of Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982) may be considered pioneering efforts directed toward a deeper understanding of instructional leadership roles of a school principal. These researchers emphasized that a school principal, through his or her activities, roles, and behaviors in managing school structures does not affect student achievement directly, in the ways the teachers do. However, classroom teaching may be impacted by principals' actions, such as setting and clearly communicating high expectations for all students, supervising teachers' instructional performance, evaluating student progress, and promoting a positive teaching/learning environment. The works of Bossert et al. (1982) were expanded by the studies of Murphy, Hallinger, Weil, and Mitman (1983), Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Sweeney (1982), and Smith and Andrews (1989).

Much effective school research over the past two decades has concentrated on examining the relationship between the leadership behaviour of school principals and the enhancement of organizational performance (Shum & Cheng, 1997). Of particular interest have been studies that have highlighted the mediating role principal's serve between teachers and learners (Silins & Murray-Harvey, 1999). Interestingly, results from these studies have suggested that principals have the ability to indirectly affect student achievement by improving the tone or learning environment of a school (Johnson, Livingston, Schwartz and Slate, 2000).

However, while the concepts of school leadership and school learning environment seem to be

intuitively linked, there have been few studies that have related these concepts together (Griffith, 1999). Further, recent paradigm shifts in conceptualizing leadership have also encouraged educational researchers to consider these relationships from the perspective of new leadership models. Prominent among them is the transformational and transactional leadership models (Burns, 1978) which suggests that follower performance can be lifted to beyond what is normally considered to be acceptable (Bass, 1985). Further, transformational leaders are able to manipulate and alter their environmental constraints in order to achieve their performance goals (Kirby, King & Paradise, 1992).

According to Waller, Smith and Warnock (1989), a dimension of leadership style that is associated with the autocratic/democratic continuum is the task- versus relationship-oriented style of leadership, with the task orientation being similar to the autocratic method and the relationship oriented style being similar to the democratic method. According to the authors, current research has established that the difference between the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the four leadership styles is the appropriateness of the leader's behavior to the particular situation in which it is used. With respect to the foregoing, Waller et. al (1989) state that one of the basic factors that will elevate or debilitate each of the four leadership styles is the basic task maturity of the individual or group being led with maturity being defined in terms of the capacity to set high but realistic goals.

Kemp and Nathan (1989) identified three styles of leadership namely authoritarian, democratic or delegative, and or laissez-faire. According to Campbell, Bridges and Nystrand (1993) the authoritarian or autocratic leadership style is used when leaders tell their employees what they want done and how they want it accomplished, without getting the advice of their followers. This style results in the group members reacting aggressively and apathetically in the work environment. They further suggest that authoritarian style should normally only be used on rare occasions. This often results in unending industrial disputes in an organization hence affecting the achievement of the overall goals and objectives. The participative or democratic leadership style involves the leader including one or more employees in the decision making process in determining what to do and how to do it. However, the leader maintains the final decision making authority. Using this style is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a sign of strength that your employees will respect.

Delegative or free reign is where the leader allows the employees to make the decisions. This is used when employees are able to analyze the situation and determine what needs to be done and how to do it. The laissez-faire style of leadership, according to Kemp and Nathan (1989) is where a leader succumbs to Theory Y (McGregor, 1960). The theory argues that people are innately motivated, naturally like to do work and therefore there should be no rules since everybody has an inborn sense of responsibility. However, this style of leadership may result in indiscipline due to non-enforcement of rules and regulations in a school leading to poor performance in KCSE examinations. The analysis of the three leadership styles by Nzuve (1999) concluded that effective headteachers pays more attention to planning work and special tasks, and permits teachers to participate in decision making processes in an effort to achieve school goals, as participatory leadership style provides the climate of sense of unity in pursuit of set goals.

Njuguna (1998) found out that there is a relationship between headteachers' leadership styles and professional experience. Headteachers with professional experience of 16 years and above are rated higher on consideration behaviour. This concurs with Okoth (2000) that headteachers with an administrative experience of 11 -15 years are rated as being democratic than those with less administrative experience, the same finding corroborated by Wangui (2007). Asunda (1983) observes that teachers with long teaching experience rate headteachers as being democratic. Kimacia (2007) however found that there is no relationship between professional experiences of teachers in rating leadership styles of headteachers. There is need to investigate further on the noted points of contrast.

Pervasive and sustained student learning is more likely to occur in schools with strong instructional leadership. Morphet, Johns and Reller (1974) stress that administrative efficiency will be valid only to the extent to which it will contribute to the attainment of goals of the organization, the goals of actors in the organization and the extent that it will meet the requirements of the environment for the survival of the organization. Bell (1992) notes that effective leadership will provide schools with a vision, explicit philosophies laid on consultation and team work and lead to success in attainment of good results in national examinations.

In classifying studies with respect to outcomes, Bridges (1982) made a distinction between those studies dealing with the impact that school administrators have on school outcomes and ratings of administrator's effectiveness. In the administrator's impact studies, researchers attempted to determine whether administrators made measurable differences in schooling. As observed by Bridges (1982), when assessing the impact of school administrators, researchers are far more likely to focus on organizational maintenance than organizational achievement. In his words: As the notion of educational leadership style evolved through the past decades, so did the research of the impact of the school leaders' style on the school. At the time when the idea of instructional leadership became dominant, a number of researchers conducted empirical studies in an attempt to determine if the instructional leadership roles, behaviors, and activities practiced by school leaders may be correlated with school outcomes.

The large wave of research on instructional leadership occurred in 1980s and 1990s. Hallinger and Heck (1998) used Pitner's (1982) framework of administrator effects as criteria for classifying 43 studies on instructional leadership and school outcomes published during the period 1980-1995. All studies reviewed were cross-sectional and non-experimental in nature, meaning that researchers had little or no influence on extraneous variables. Five theoretical approaches identified by Pitner represented conceptual models which served as a means for categorizing existing studies of administrator effects on school outcomes. These five models were direct-effects, moderated-effects, antecedent-effects, mediated-effects, and reciprocal-effects. Current shifts in the area of principals' leadership, from instructional to transformational leadership, have resulted in a substantial decrease in the number of studies focused on examining the instructional leadership style of school principals.

Koontz and Wehrich (1990) and Luthans (2002) stress that effective leadership style will be on the basis of utilizing a variety of styles ranging from highly boss-centered to highly subordinate-centered. Accordingly, effective leadership styles will be on the basis of the following elements: Forces operating in the manager's personality: These will include his or her value system, confidence in subordinates, inclinations and feelings of security in uncertain situations. Forces in subordinates: These will be including their willingness to assume responsibility in decision-making, interests in problems, degree of tolerance for ambiguity and identification with the organizational goals. Forces in the situation: These will include the values of the organization and traditions, effectiveness of subordinates as a working unit, nature of the problem, feasibility of safely delegating authority to handle it and the pressure of time. In a school setting, Farrant (1997) notes that school leadership will only be effective if headteachers have strong leadership qualities and endeavour to develop team spirit in school which will result in mutual respect, shared ideals and hence hard work towards attaining good results in national examinations.

### **1.3. Statement of the problem**

Despite the fact that students' academic performance is determined by many factors, not much literature exists on the effect of leadership style on school quality of school outcomes in the study locale of Homa Bay County, Kenya. Yet, principals' leadership styles have been documented as having a significant input on student achievement in national examinations (Leitner, 1994). Most studies done on the effect of leadership styles on students' Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) performance give differing results and very few are in agreement on their findings.

### **1.4. Purpose and objectives of the Study**

The study aimed at investigating the effect of headteachers' leadership styles on student academic performance in national examinations in Homa Bay County Kenya.

### **1.5. The hypothesis**

This research addressed the null hypotheses;

1. There is no significant relationship between the type of school and the principals' leadership styles.
2. There is no significant relationship between principals' leadership styles and students' academic performance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A combination of a modified Bosserts (1982) framework and Pitners moderated effects model (1982) were utilized in this study. According to Bosserts model, a principals managerial behavior is shaped by school context (external and district) and the principals personal characteristics. The theoretical framework for this study is based on a mediated-effects model of effective schools as discussed by Hallinger and Heck (1998). This mediated-effects model provides a more complex representation of administrator effects within schools than does a simple direct effects or moderated effects approach. It is acknowledged that antecedent variables can have an important causal influence that effect desired outcomes such as student achievement. However, the focus of this study is to examine the relationship between the leadership practices of the principal and school and classroom variables, namely school learning environment and teacher satisfaction.

In this model, the variable of the principal's role is assumed to be both a dependent and an independent factor (Hallinger & Heck, 1998). As a dependent factor, the principal is subject to the influence of external antecedent factors such as socioeconomic status, or prevailing external environment conditions such as technological change. As an independent variable, the principal is considered to be the agent of change, influencing directly the actions of teachers, the learning conditions within the school, and the attainment of outcomes such as teacher job satisfaction and indirectly, student learning outcomes. At the same time, a principal's managerial behavior directly influences school climate and instructional organization, and indirectly school outcomes.

## II. Research Methodology

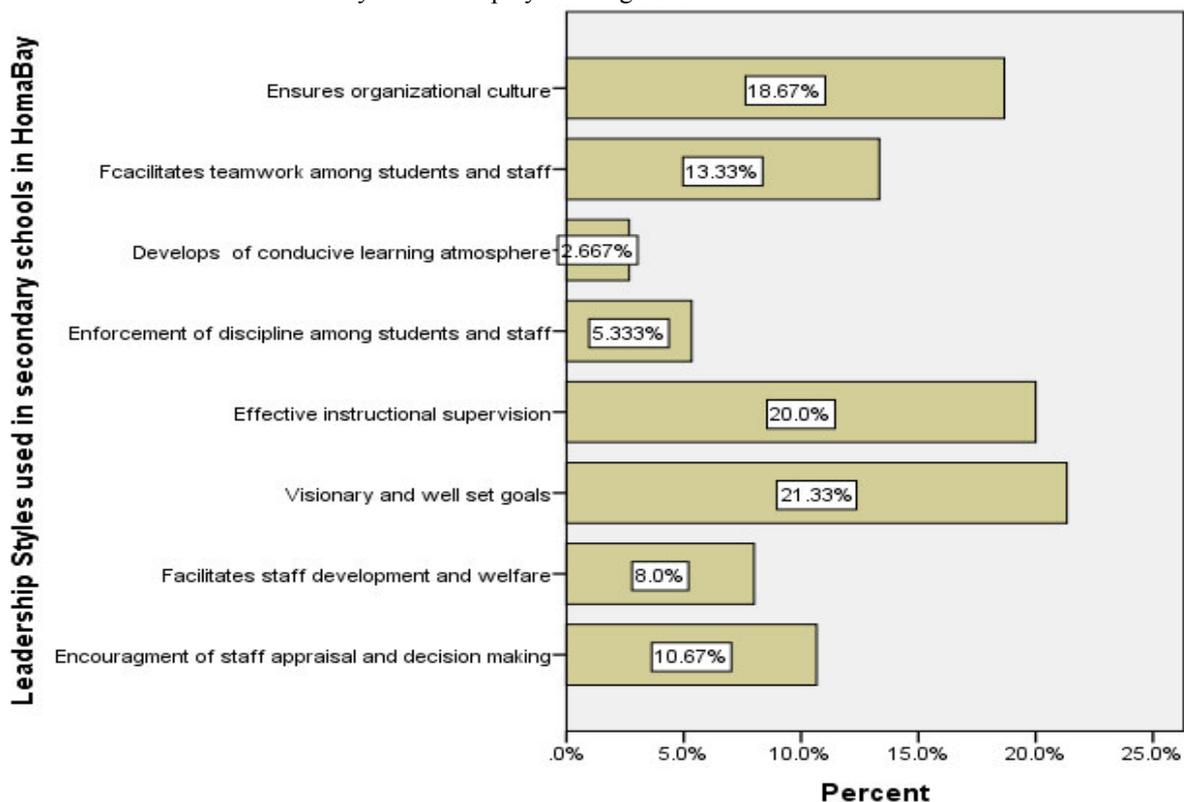
The study adopted ex-post facto research design. The design was deemed appropriate because the variables in the study namely leadership styles of the headteachers and students’ performance in the KCSE examinations had already occurred. A simple cause-effect relationship was explored. Inferences about variables were made without manipulation of independent and dependent variables by the researchers. The stratified random sampling was used to draw 216 secondary school teacher and 39 principals yielding a sample size of 255 from HomaBay County for the study.

The main data collection instruments were questionnaires for teachers and interview guides for school principals. After obtaining permission from the National Commission for Science, Technology and innovation,(NACOSTI), data was collected according to an agreed itinerary developed and agreed upon by prospective respondents (Orodho,2009, 2012). The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed with the assistance of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for windows computer programme (Orodho, Ampofo, Bizimana & Ndayambaje, 2016). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data (Orodho, Khatete, & Mugiraneza, 2010). The qualitative data from interview schedules were analyzed thematically (Orodho, 2009, 2012).

## III. Findings and Discussions

### 3.1. Teachers’ perception on their headteachers’ leadership styles

The study aimed at establishing the perception of teachers on the leadership styles of their headteachers on students’ academic performance in national examinations in HomaBay County, Kenya. The teachers were requested to indicate the extent they considered the effect of principals leadership styles on students’ academic performance. The results were analyzed and displayed in Figure1.



**Figure 1: Leadership styles used by school Principals in HomaBay County**

The results contained in Figure one indicates that the commonly used leadership traits by school principals was visionary and goal setting strategies. The principals were considered to be using more of a combination of democratic and transactional leadership styles. The other leadership styles directed towards enhancement of students’ academic performance was effective instructional supervision. Instructional supervision is considered as a major means of ensuring the quality of school organizations (Tyagi, 2009). The history of school- based instructional supervision can be traced to the early nineteenth century, when the concept expanded from Britain to the British Empire. This became a systems’ tool that government inspectors of schools used to monitor the academic performance of schools and teacher effectiveness (Wood, cited in Tyagi 2009). In effect, instructional supervision gives teachers the opportunities to collaborate, set goals and achieve them,

understand how their students learn, and become better teachers, with the added motivation of enhancing student achievement (Sullivan & Glanz, 2005 ; Kalule & Bouchamma, 2014).

The third mentioned leadership ingredients were the organizational culture in schools. The teachers rated the principals' ability to be high, as reported by 18.67% of all respondents. The third and fourth features demonstrated were facilitation of teamwork and encouragement of decision making by staff, as reported by 13.33% and 10.67%, respectively. These results are in tandem with what Koontz and Wehrich (1990) and Luthans (2002) found and lead us to stress that effective leadership style should entail utilizing a variety of styles ranging from highly boss-centered to highly subordinate-centered.

The leadership behaviours that were lowly ranked by the teachers were use of staff appraisal systems, enforcement of discipline which all point to autocratic leadership styles. The finding implies that some school principals are still using styles that are not popular to both students and staff. Certainly, such leadership styles were considered to be contributing to low staff morale and by extension, low academic performance by students. Undoubtedly, the single most important responsibility assigned to the school head is his /her instructional supervision (Foriska; Worner & Brown as cited in Mofareh, 2011). This is expedient for the development and maintenance of an effective school. In the view of Mofareh (2011), the most important supervision and guidance in the school setting is that given by the head of the school.

### 3.2 Test of statistical Hypothesis

To test the hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between the leadership styles of headteachers as perceived by teachers and student performance, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient ( $\rho$  or rho) were used. For each leadership style between group and within group Sum of Squares (SS) were worked out, degree of freedom (df) and Mean Scores (MS). Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was then used to test significance of mean differences. The Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient ( $\rho$  or rho) was then applied to reflect degree of linear relationship between leadership style of headteachers as perceived by teachers and student performance. Data showed that there was no significant relationship between the leadership styles of headteachers as perceived by teachers and student performance. That was shown by autocratic ( $F = .746$ ,  $p > .05$ ), democratic ( $F = 2.177$ ,  $p > .05$ ) and laissez-faire ( $F = 1.779$ ,  $p > .05$ ). That showed that headteachers' experience as headteachers had no influence in their leadership styles.

### IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

The central objective of this study was to examine the effect of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance. It was established that school principals in the study locate utilize a diversity of leadership behaviour, some pointing to the more democratic and transactional styles while some more autocratic and laissez-faire types. The use of diverse leadership behaviour notwithstanding, it was evident that most principals were deficient in the types of leadership behaviour that support the creation of a conducive learning environment and support to teachers necessary for effective teaching and the expected enhanced students' academic achievement. A test of null hypothesis retained the null hypothesis that that there was no statistically significant relationship between principals' leadership styles and students' academic performance, Based on the findings it was concluded that there was no significant relationship between the leadership styles of headteachers and experience.

Based on the findings the following recommendations were made:

1. That the headteachers should ensure that the school environment is conducive for learning.
2. There should be continuous motivational schemes for both students and teachers. Leadership needs to be consistent with the supportive aspect of supervisory types of behaviour.

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