



Principal's Leadership Styles and Students' Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools in Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri, Kenya

Ann Nyaguthii Gachuru¹, Professor Peter Koros²

¹MED Student, Department of Educational Planning and Administration, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA)

²Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

P.O. Box 62157 – 00200, Nairobi, Kenya

ABSTRACT

This study explored the impact of principals' leadership styles on student academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub County, Nyeri, Kenya, guided by Total Quality Management (TQM) theory. A mixed methods approach was employed, incorporating quantitative data from 285 students and 20 teachers through structured questionnaires and qualitative data from in-depth interviews with 20 principals. The sampling involved purposive selection for teachers and stratified random sampling for students. The questionnaire's reliability was validated with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78. Data analysis utilized SPSS version 25 for quantitative results and thematic analysis for qualitative insights. Results indicated a significant positive correlation between transformational leadership and academic performance, with a mean effectiveness score of 1.1404 (SD = 0.35794). Principals exhibiting supportive and motivational leadership significantly enhanced student outcomes. The study underscores the importance of principals' leadership styles in effective resource management, active curriculum involvement, and robust communication for academic success. Recommendations include the Ministry of Education instituting policies that promote transformational leadership and provide continuous professional development for principals. Additionally, principals are encouraged to embrace transformational practices, engage actively in curriculum implementation, foster strong communication with stakeholders, and implement motivational programs to improve academic performance and create a conducive learning environment.

Key Words: principals, leadership style, students, academic performance, public secondary schools, Mathira Sub County.

1.0 Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a key driver of economic and societal advancement, crucial for enhancing living standards and promoting national progress (Jenatabadi, 2015). Effective leadership within public secondary schools is vital for achieving educational objectives, with principals playing a pivotal role through their leadership styles (Momanyi, 2020). This leadership not only influences academic performance but also impacts overall school effectiveness, including the management of resources and the development of a conducive learning environment (Avidov-Ungar, 2017).

Leadership styles in educational settings have been shown to significantly affect school performance. For instance, principals who adopt democratic or participatory styles can improve teacher morale and student outcomes by fostering a collaborative environment (Arusei, 2023). This contrasts with more authoritarian styles, which may create a restrictive atmosphere detrimental to academic achievement (Kosgei, 2019). Effective school management practices, which include strategic implementation and resource management, are critical for addressing challenges such as inadequate facilities, insufficient teaching resources, and financial constraints (Ngoma, 2022).

Empirical studies underscore the importance of principals' leadership styles in shaping school performance. The study by Day and Gu (2018) highlighted that principals who align their leadership with their core values and moral purposes are more successful in implementing policies that enhance school culture and student achievement. Similarly, research by Thiruaru (2016) and Monitoring (2018) indicates that teacher attitudes and physical infrastructure significantly impact student performance, further emphasizing the role of effective leadership in addressing these issues.

The principal's leadership style is integral to overcoming educational challenges and improving student outcomes. By adopting effective management strategies and engaging teachers and the community, principals can foster an environment that supports both academic and co-curricular success (Kilwake, Okemasisi, & Aringo, 2023; Mpaata & Mpaata, 2019). This study aims to explore the impact of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in national examinations, providing insights into how different leadership approaches can influence educational outcomes in public secondary schools.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In Mathira Sub County, Nyeri County, students' academic performance in public secondary schools is notably below expectations, with ineffective leadership and management by school principals being a significant contributing factor. Despite various government efforts to enhance educational outcomes, persistent issues such as inconsistent leadership styles, inadequate resource management, limited curriculum engagement, and ineffective communication continue to impact student achievement negatively. These challenges are not unique to Mathira, as similar management problems have been reported in other regions, including Imenti North Sub County, leading to comparable deficiencies in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results. Given that the principal's leadership style plays a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes, it is essential to explore how different leadership approaches affect student performance. This study seeks to investigate the influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub County, Nyeri County, aiming to provide actionable recommendations for improving leadership practices and enhancing student achievement.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to establish the influence of principals's leadership styles and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri, Kenya.

1.3 Literature Review

Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, proposed by Hobfoll (2011), emphasizes the significance of managing both internal and external resources to navigate challenges effectively. In educational settings, internal resources include principals' leadership skills and personal resilience, while external resources encompass financial support, community engagement, and infrastructure. Applying COR Theory to Mathira Sub County, Nyeri, Kenya, highlights the importance of effective resource management by principals in shaping student academic outcomes. Proper allocation of these resources is crucial for creating an environment that supports student success (Hobfoll, 2011).

Leadership styles significantly impact educational outcomes, with transformational and democratic approaches showing positive effects on student performance. Transformational leadership, which focuses on inspiring and motivating staff and students, fosters a supportive environment conducive to high achievement. Democratic leadership, emphasizing participative decision-making, enhances teacher morale and engagement, thereby benefiting students (Hussain Shah, Mahmood & Shah, 2015). Studies by Even and BenDavid-Hadar (2021) and Wang and Hamid (2024) reveal that transformational leadership improves performance among disadvantaged students, and integrating various leadership styles can enhance overall student achievements.

Empirical evidence supports the positive correlation between effective leadership styles and improved academic performance. In South Africa, Ghana, and Kenya, transformational and democratic leadership styles are associated with better educational outcomes (Makgato & Mudzanani, 2019; Oti-Agyeman, 2021). However, there are gaps in understanding the long-term effects of leadership styles and their interaction with local contexts. Insights from Yahya (2015) and Ocheme (2023) highlight the importance of principal experience and other factors beyond leadership styles in influencing academic performance. Further exploration is needed to understand how leadership styles impact educational outcomes and their application in diverse settings (Yahya, 2015; Ocheme, 2023).

1.4 Research Method

This study utilized a mixed-methods research approach with a convergent parallel design to investigate the relationship between principals' leadership styles and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri, Kenya. This approach was chosen to enable the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the research topic (Creswell, 2015). The study targeted Form Two students across 30 public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County, totaling a population of 2,300 students. A sample of 347 students was selected using a combination of probability random stratified sampling and purposive sampling techniques to ensure both representative and relevant data (Kombo & Tromp, 2019).

Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires using a modified four-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with results indicating acceptable internal consistency: leadership style ($\alpha = 0.76$), resource management ($\alpha = 0.78$), curriculum implementation ($\alpha = 0.78$), communication strategies ($\alpha = 0.79$), and general management practices ($\alpha = 0.79$). The overall Cronbach's alpha for the instrument was 0.78, demonstrating strong reliability (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019).

Data analysis included calculating means and standard deviations to address research questions and conducting regression analysis to test hypotheses at a 0.05 alpha level. Qualitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews to provide relevant insights into the impact of leadership practices on student outcomes. They integrated these data types to triangulate findings, enhancing the validity and depth of the conclusions regarding the effects of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in the Mathira Sub-County (Creswell, 2015).

Results and Discussion

The study goal was to examine the principal's leadership styles and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri, Kenya.

Demographic Information

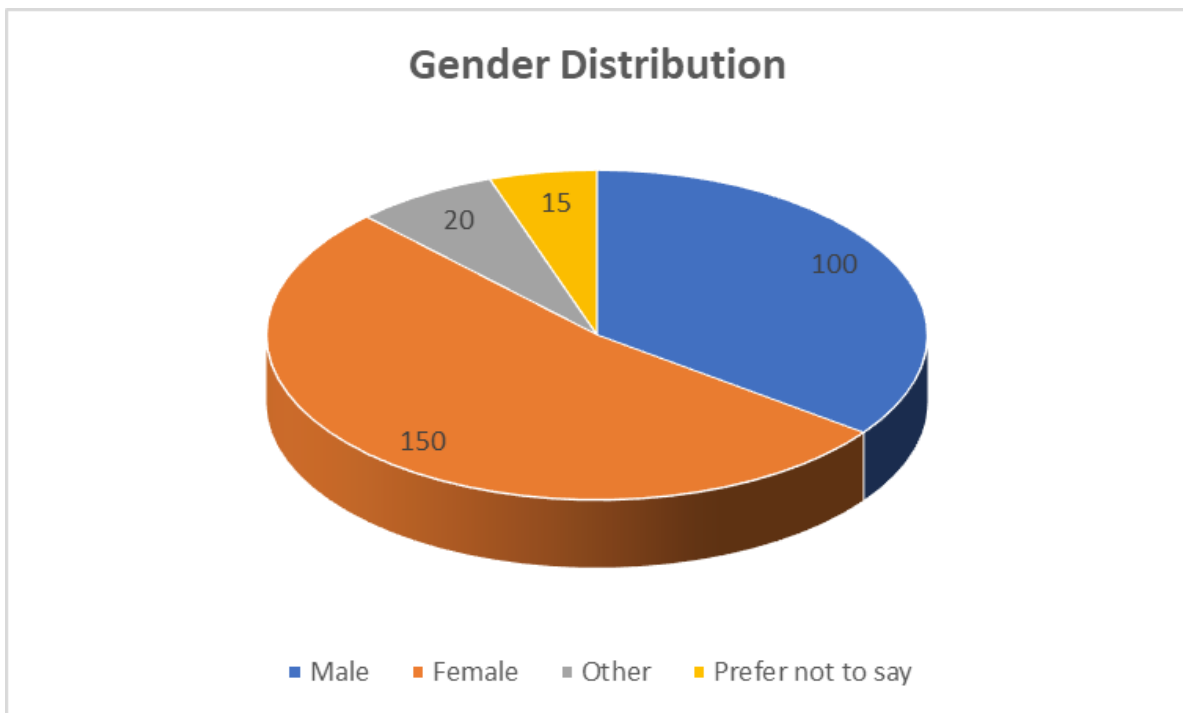
The demographic information of the study participants is crucial for understanding the context and diversity of the sample. This section presents key details about the participants, including their gender, age distribution, and level of education.

Gender Distribution

The distribution of participants by gender provides insights into the gender composition of the study sample.

Figure 4.1

Gender Distribution



Source: Field data, 2024.

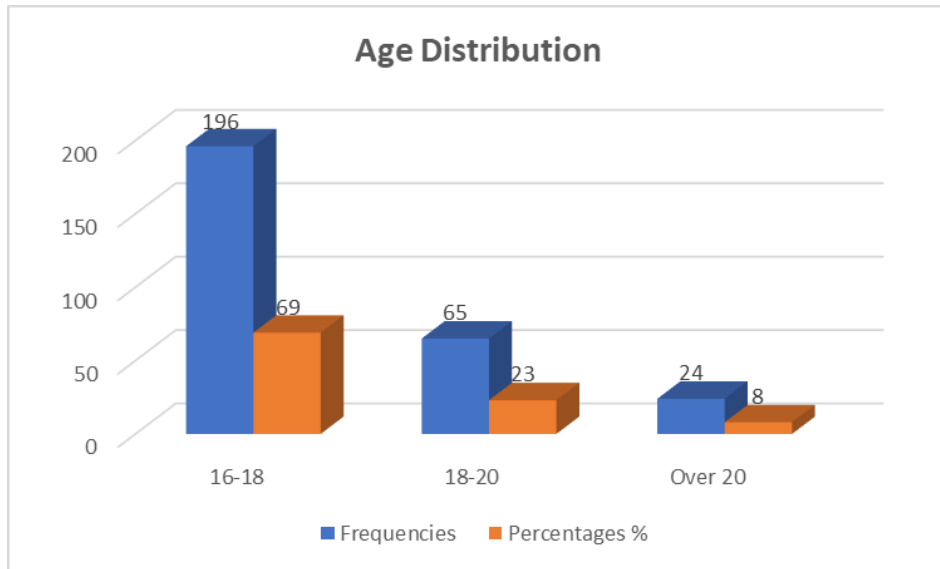
The gender distribution data from the study indicates that 35% of respondents are male, 53% are female, 7% identify as other, and 5% chose not to disclose their gender. This distribution shows a predominance of female respondents, with males representing a smaller portion of the sample. The presence of respondents identifying as other genders and those who opted not to disclose their gender further highlights the sample's diversity. These findings emphasize the importance of employing a gender-sensitive approach in analyzing the study's results. Given the majority of female respondents, particular attention must be given to their perspectives when evaluating the impact of principals' engagement on students' academic performance. Moreover, the diversity in gender identities and the presence of non-disclosure responses require a thorough analysis that encompasses all gender groups.

The researcher observes that incorporating gender diversity into the analysis will lead to a more nuanced understanding of how principals' involvement in curriculum application influences students' academic outcomes. This inclusive approach will ensure that recommendations and conclusions address the needs and perspectives of all gender identities, contributing to equitable and effective educational practices and policies in Mathira.

Age Distribution

Age distribution reveals the range and concentration of ages among participants, offering a perspective on the age diversity within the sample.

Figure Age Distribution



Source: Field data, 2024

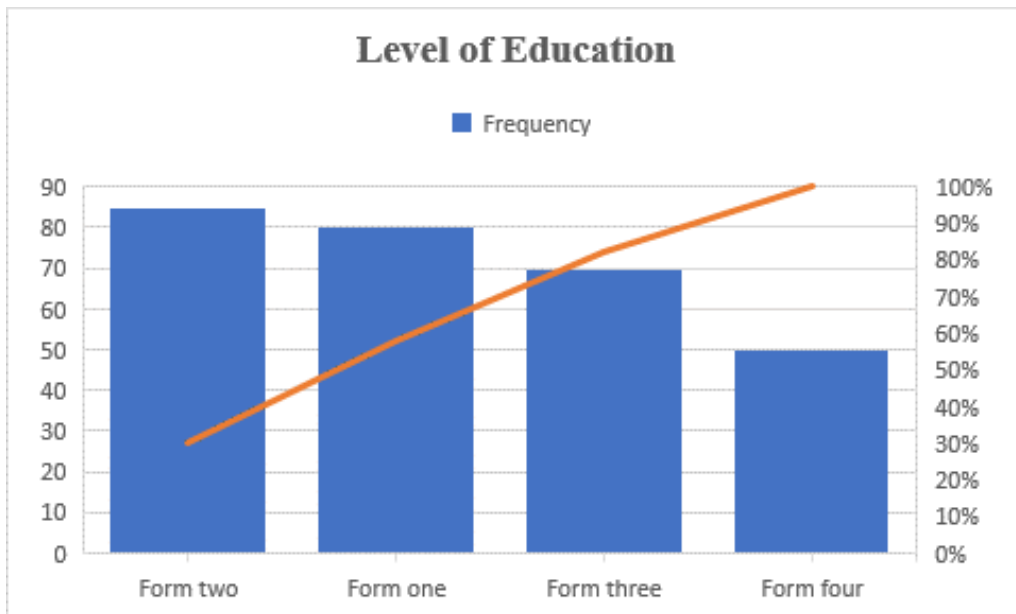
The age distribution of the 285 respondents reveals a dominant concentration in the 16-18 age group, comprising 196 individuals, or 69% of the sample. This majority indicates that the study primarily reflects the perspectives of younger students, typically in their secondary education phase. Additionally, 65 respondents, or 23%, are within the 18-20 age range, suggesting they are transitioning from secondary education to higher education or entering the workforce. Only 24 respondents, or 8%, fall into the over-20 age category, indicating limited representation of older students.

The predominance of the 16-18 age group implies that the study’s findings are significantly shaped by the experiences and needs of this younger demographic. This group is essential for assessing the impact of principals’ engagement in curriculum implementation, as it includes students at a formative stage of their educational journey. While the insights from the 18-20 age group are valuable, their smaller representation means their experiences may be less influential in the study’s outcomes. The underrepresentation of respondents over 20 suggests a potential gap in the research, which future studies could address to better understand how principals’ engagement affects older students.

Level of Education

The educational background of the participants is examined to understand their educational qualifications and how these might influence their responses.

Level of Education



Source: Field data, 2024

The data reveals a relatively balanced distribution of respondents across various educational levels, with Form Two and Form One students constituting the largest proportions at 29% and 28%, respectively. Form Three students account for 25% of the sample, while Form Four students represent the smallest group at 18%. This distribution indicates that the study predominantly reflects the experiences of students in the earlier stages of secondary education, who may have different needs and perspectives compared to those in higher levels. The inclusion of Form Three and Form Four students, though smaller in proportion, provides valuable insights into the experiences of students in more advanced stages of secondary education.

This distribution necessitates a nuanced analysis of how principals' engagement in curriculum application impacts students at various stages of their secondary education. Findings and recommendations should be tailored to address the specific contexts and needs of students in each educational level to ensure that the implications are relevant and applicable across all stages. This approach will support the development of targeted strategies and policies that effectively address the diverse needs of students throughout their secondary education journey.

Influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance

The influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance investigates how different leadership approaches affect student outcomes. This study examines the influence of various styles, such as transformational, transactional, and instructional leadership, on students' academic achievements and engagement. Understanding these effects can help optimize leadership practices to improve educational results and create a positive learning environment.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
My principal's leadership style motivates me to perform better academically.	285	1.00	2.00	1.0702	.25589
My principal encourages a positive learning environment.	285	1.00	2.00	1.0737	.26172
The principal's leadership has improved my school's academic performance overall.	285	1.00	2.00	1.0737	.26172
The principal addresses student needs and concerns effectively.	285	1.00	2.00	1.0702	.25589
The principal's leadership style encourages student participation in academic activities	285	1.00	2.00	1.0772	.26737

Source: Field data, 2024

The mean score for the statement "My principal's leadership style motivates me to perform better academically" was 1.0702 (SD = 0.25589). This low mean value, close to 1, indicates strong agreement among students that their principal's leadership significantly motivates them to achieve better academic results. This finding aligns with Yahya (2015), who reported that principals using democratic and transformational leadership styles effectively boost student motivation. Principals who inspire and challenge students create a motivating environment that enhances academic performance.

By fostering a supportive and engaging atmosphere, principals can drive students to achieve higher academic standards, reinforcing the importance of motivational leadership in schools. The statement "My principal encourages a positive learning environment" received a mean score of 1.0737 (SD = 0.26172). This suggests that students perceive their principals as successful in promoting a positive and supportive learning atmosphere. This result supports the findings of Chunda (2022) and Huma (2015), which highlight the significant role of principals in creating conducive learning environments. A positive learning environment is crucial for student engagement and academic success. Principals who foster such environments help facilitate better learning experiences and outcomes for students, emphasizing the need for leaders who prioritize and enhance the educational climate. Students rated the impact of their principal's leadership on overall school performance with a mean score of 1.0737 (SD = 0.26172). This indicates a strong belief that principals' leadership positively influences the academic achievements of the entire school. This finding is consistent with Ogalo (2013) and Obama, Eunice, and John (2015), who found that effective leadership significantly contributes to improved academic performance at the school level. Principals play a vital role in guiding and supporting the academic mission of their schools. Their leadership can drive overall improvements in school performance, demonstrating the critical impact of their role on educational outcomes.

The mean score for "The principal addresses student needs and concerns effectively" was 1.0702 (SD = 0.25589). This score indicates that students feel their principal is responsive to their needs and concerns. This aligns with Oyugi & Gogo (2019), who emphasized the importance of principals' responsiveness to student needs for enhancing academic performance. Effective principals who address student concerns contribute to a supportive learning environment, thereby improving students' educational experiences and performance. This finding underscores the importance of principals being attentive and responsive to the needs of their students. The statement "The principal's leadership style encourages student participation in academic activities" had a mean score of 1.0772 (SD = 0.26737). This result reflects that students perceive their principals as successful in promoting active student involvement in academic activities.

This finding supports Ocheme (2023) and Huma (2015), who noted that principals who encourage student engagement positively impact academic outcomes. Engaging students in their learning processes fosters motivation and enhances their academic performance. Principals who actively promote student participation play a crucial role in driving educational success, highlighting the importance of leadership in student engagement. Based on these findings, the researcher observed that principals' leadership styles ranging from motivational and supportive to responsive and participatory significantly influence students' academic performance. These results are consistent with existing literature and underscore the essential role of effective leadership in promoting educational success.

1.4 Conclusion and Recommendations

This study assessed the influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri, Kenya. The findings reveal that transformational leadership, characterized by motivation, inspiration, and support, significantly enhances students' academic outcomes. Principals who adopt such leadership styles foster improved student engagement, motivation, and performance. Furthermore, effective resource management, active curriculum involvement, and open communication are crucial elements that contribute to creating a conducive learning environment, further supporting academic success.

1.5 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study on principals' leadership styles and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Ministry of Education should establish policies that encourage principals to adopt effective leadership styles, particularly transformational leadership, and provide continuous professional development to enhance their leadership skills.
2. Principals should embrace transformational leadership practices to motivate staff and students while ensuring efficient management of resources. This will create a conducive learning environment and support improved academic performance.
3. School principals should actively participate in curriculum implementation, strengthen communication with all stakeholders, and introduce motivational programs for teachers and students to foster collaboration, enhance learning, and promote continuous improvement.

1.6 Acknowledgment

The study extends our sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions who contributed to the successful completion of this study. We especially thank the school principals of Mathira Sub-County, Nyeri County, for their valuable participation and insights during interviews, which provided essential data for the research. Appreciation is also extended to the teachers and students who contributed through surveys and discussions, enriching the study's findings.

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