



# **The Relationship Between Heads of Schools' Leadership Styles and Students' Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools: Evidence from Mbozi District, Tanzania**

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## **ABSTRACT :**

This study investigates the relationship between heads of schools' leadership styles and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mbozi District, Songwe Region, Tanzania. Employing a mixed-methods convergent parallel design, the research draws on transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership theories. Data were collected from 289 respondents, including heads of schools, teachers, and education officials, using questionnaires, interviews, and document reviews. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression analyses revealed that transformational ( $\beta = 0.393, p < .001$ ) and democratic ( $\beta = 0.473, p < .001$ ) leadership styles significantly enhance academic performance, while transactional leadership has a moderate positive effect ( $\beta = 0.194, p < .001$ ). Autocratic leadership showed an insignificant negative effect ( $\beta = -0.084, p \approx .061$ ), and laissez-faire leadership negatively impacted performance ( $\beta = -0.138, p = .002$ ). Qualitative findings underscored the importance of participatory and motivational leadership in fostering conducive learning environments. The study recommends leadership training programs emphasizing transformational and democratic styles to improve educational outcomes in Tanzania's secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Leadership styles, academic performance, transformational leadership, democratic leadership, public secondary schools, Tanzania

## **1.0 Introduction**

The effectiveness of educational systems and students' academic performance are profoundly influenced by the leadership styles employed by school administrators. International research spanning developed and developing nations consistently demonstrates that leadership is a critical factor in school improvement, with styles such as transformational and democratic often correlating with enhanced student outcomes through increased teacher motivation, innovative teaching practices, and positive school climates (Leithwood *et al.*, 2019; Bush & Glover, 2014). Conversely, autocratic and laissez-faire approaches have been linked to lower performance levels, as they may stifle creativity, reduce stakeholder engagement, and fail to address diverse educational challenges (Northouse, 2021; Rashid *et al.*, 2021). This worldwide evidence underscores the need for adaptive leadership strategies to tackle universal issues like educational inequality, resource constraints, and varying socio-economic contexts in pursuit of academic excellence.

Leadership within educational institutions is pivotal in shaping academic outcomes, influencing teacher motivation, school culture, and resource management (Leithwood *et al.*, 2019). In Tanzania, public secondary schools face challenges such as inconsistent academic performance despite reforms in curriculum, infrastructure, and teacher training (MoEST, 2021). The role of heads of schools as key decision-makers makes their leadership styles critical to addressing these challenges. This study focuses on the first specific objective of a broader dissertation: to examine the relationship between heads of schools' leadership styles and students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mbozi District, Songwe Region, Tanzania.

Mbozi District, a diverse socio-economic region, provides a unique context due to its fluctuating academic outcomes in national examinations (NECTA, 2023). Previous research globally and regionally suggests that leadership styles transformational, democratic, transactional, autocratic, and laissez-faire differentially impact student performance (Rashid *et al.*, 2021; Ferdinandi & Kiwonde, 2023). Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration and intellectual stimulation, is often linked to improved outcomes (Bass & Riggio, 2006), while autocratic and laissez-faire styles may hinder performance (Northouse, 2021). In Tanzania, studies like Nguni *et al.* (2006) emphasize transformational and democratic leadership's positive effects, yet rural contexts like Mbozi remain underexplored. The research question guiding this study was "What is the relationship between the leadership styles of heads of schools and student academic performance in public secondary schools?" The question aims to gain evidence-based insights for inform educational leadership practices and policy.

## 2.0 Methodology

### 2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in Mbozi District, Songwe Region, southwestern Tanzania, a region along the Tanzania-Zambia highway with a mix of rural and urban public secondary schools as shown in Figure 1. Mbozi's diverse socio-economic and educational landscape, coupled with fluctuating academic performance, makes it an ideal setting to explore leadership dynamics (Mbozi District Profile, 2022). The district's 1037 education stakeholders, including heads of schools, teachers, and officials, provided a robust population for this investigation.



Figure 1: Map of Mbozi District

### 2.2 Research Approach and Design

A mixed-methods approach with a convergent parallel design was adopted to integrate quantitative and qualitative data, offering a comprehensive understanding of leadership impacts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The descriptive survey design facilitated systematic data collection from heads of schools and teachers without variable manipulation, capturing current leadership practices and their effects on academic performance (Godwin & Kabeta, 2019).

### 2.3 Population, Sampling Procedure, and Sample Size

The target population comprised 1037 individuals (heads of schools, teachers, and education officers) in Mbozi District's public secondary schools. A sample of 289 respondents was determined using

$$\text{Yamane's formula: } n = \frac{N}{(1 + N(e)^2)}$$

Where (N = 1037) and (e = 0.05) (95% confidence level). Purposive sampling selected 20 heads of schools and 34 education officers based on their roles and experience, while random sampling selected 235 teachers to ensure objectivity and diversity (Perkasa, 2023).

### 2.4 Data Collection Methods and Tools

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) assessing leadership styles and their impact on academic performance, measured via NECTA scores and internal assessments. The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.82$ ). Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 10 education officers, exploring leadership practices and challenges, and document reviews of school performance records.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 25) for descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations), Pearson correlations, and multiple regression to assess the relationship between leadership styles (independent variables) and academic performance (dependent variable, 0–100 scale). Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, triangulating with quantitative findings for robustness (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## 2.6 Validity and Reliability

Validity was ensured through expert review of instruments by supervisors and pilot testing with 20 respondents outside the sample. Reliability was confirmed via Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ) for the questionnaire. Triangulation of data sources (questionnaires, interviews, document reviews) and member checking enhanced credibility and dependability. Ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation.

## 3.0 Results

### 3.1 Demographic Profile

The study's 289 respondents included 54% males and 46% females, reflecting gender inclusivity in Mbozi's education sector (Mosha, 2018). Most respondents (33.9%) were aged 30–40 years, indicating a youthful, adaptable workforce (Kimaro & Machumu, 2020). Academic qualifications showed 57.4% with bachelor's degrees and 23.9% with master's degrees, aligning with Tanzania's push for professional development (MoEST, 2021). Experience levels varied, with 28.4% having 11–15 years and 28.4% over 16 years, suggesting a mix of seasoned and newer educators. However, 73% had been in their current schools for less than 4 years, raising concerns about staff turnover (Mikidadi & Lezhnev, 2020). Table 1 shows the demographic profile.

**Table 1: Demographic profile**

Demographic Characteristic	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	54
	Female	46
Age	30–40 years	33.9
Academic Qualifications	Bachelor's degrees	57.4
	Master's degrees	23.9
	Other (implied lower qualifications)	18.7
Professional Experience	11–15 years	28.4
	Over 16 years	28.4
	Other (implied 0–10 years)	43.2
Tenure in Current School	Less than 4 years	73
	4 years or more (implied)	27

The demographic characteristics of the 289 respondents in the study on the relationship between heads of schools' leadership styles and students' academic performance in Mbozi District's public secondary schools provide critical insights into how these factors may modulate leadership effectiveness and outcomes. The gender distribution (54% male, 46% female) highlights a relatively inclusive environment, potentially supporting democratic leadership styles by incorporating diverse perspectives that enhance collaborative decision-making and foster better academic performance through equitable teacher engagement.

The predominance of respondents in the 30–40 age bracket (33.9%) suggests a youthful workforce that is likely more receptive to transformational leadership, as younger educators may respond positively to innovative and motivational approaches, thereby amplifying their impact on student motivation and achievement. High academic qualifications, with 57.4% holding bachelor's degrees and 23.9% master's degrees, indicate a well-educated sample capable of critically evaluating and implementing structured transactional leadership particularly in contexts requiring clear goals and rewards to maintain performance in resource-limited settings. The balanced experience levels (28.4% with 11–15 years and 28.4% over 16 years) imply a blend of expertise that could strengthen positive leadership effects, but the high staff turnover (73% in current schools for less than 4 years) poses challenges, potentially weakening the consistency needed for effective leadership and exacerbating negative impacts from laissez-faire styles or insignificant autocratic approaches, as instability may hinder the establishment of a stable, conducive learning culture.

### 3.2 Heads of Schools' Leadership Styles and Students' Academic Performance

Descriptive statistics in Table 2 summarize leadership style ratings and their correlations with academic performance (N = 235 teachers).

**Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Leadership Styles and Performance (N = 235)**

Leadership Style	Mean Rating	SD	Correlation with Performance (r)
Transformational	4.12	0.61	0.78**
Democratic	3.97	0.58	0.93**
Transactional	3.45	0.72	0.45**
Autocratic	3.79	0.65	-0.65*
Laissez-faire	4.05	0.59	-0.14*

\*\*p < .001, \*p < .05

Transformational and democratic styles showed high mean ratings and strong positive correlations with performance, while autocratic and laissez-faire styles had negative or weak correlations.

Multiple regression analysis in Table 3 explained 41.2% of variance in academic performance ( $R^2 = 0.412$ ,  $F(5, 229) = 32.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 3: Regression Coefficients in academic performance**

Predictor	B	SE	$\beta$	t	p
Transformational	4.898	0.512	0.393	9.566	<.001
Democratic	5.872	0.623	0.473	9.425	<.001
Transactional	2.546	0.789	0.194	3.227	<.001
Autocratic	-0.922	0.491	-0.084	-1.878	.061
Laissez-faire	-1.290	0.418	-0.138	-3.089	.002

Transformational and democratic styles had the strongest positive effects, increasing performance scores by 4.898 and 5.872 points per unit increase, respectively. Transactional leadership had a moderate effect, while laissez-faire leadership negatively impacted performance. Autocratic leadership's effect was statistically insignificant.

The impacts of various leadership styles on students' academic performance are evident from the study's findings. Transformational leadership, with a high mean rating of 4.12 and a strong positive correlation ( $r = 0.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ), inspires teachers and students, leading to enhanced motivation and improved academic outcomes. Democratic leadership, rated at 3.97 with the strongest correlation ( $r = 0.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ), promotes participation and collaboration, fostering a supportive environment that significantly boosts student performance. Transactional leadership, with a mean of 3.45 and moderate correlation ( $r = 0.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ), provides structure through rewards and monitoring, resulting in steady but less pronounced improvements in academic results. In contrast, autocratic leadership, mean 3.79 with a negative correlation ( $r = -0.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ), may suppress creativity and morale, leading to poorer student performance. Laissez-faire leadership, rated 4.05 but with a weak negative correlation ( $r = -0.14$ ,  $p < .05$ ), offers minimal guidance, often resulting in disorganization and declined academic achievement.

Qualitative data supported these findings. An education officer noted, "In well-performing schools, heads are often democratic, allowing teachers to contribute to decisions" (July 22, 2025). Conversely, laissez-faire leadership was criticized: "Lack of direction leads to poor results" (Education Officer, July 17, 2025). Document reviews confirmed higher pass rates in schools with transformational and democratic leaders.

## 4.0 Discussion

The findings confirm a significant relationship between heads of schools' leadership styles and students' academic performance in Mbozi District. Transformational leadership's strong positive effect ( $\beta = 0.393$ ,  $p < .001$ ) aligns with Bass and Riggio (2006), who argue that inspirational leadership fosters teacher commitment and student engagement. Democratic leadership's even stronger effect ( $\beta = 0.473$ ,  $p < .001$ ) supports Lewin *et al.*'s (1939) theory, emphasizing participatory decision-making's role in creating collaborative learning environments. These results resonate with Ferdinandi and Kiwonde (2023), who reported a high correlation ( $R = 0.932$ ) between democratic leadership and performance in Tanzanian schools.

Transactional leadership's moderate effect ( $\beta = 0.194$ ,  $p < .001$ ) reflects Bass's (1990) view that structured rewards and discipline can enhance outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained settings like Mbozi, where clear expectations stabilize operations (Malingumu *et al.*, 2016). The insignificant negative effect of autocratic leadership ( $\beta = -0.084$ ,  $p \approx .061$ ) aligns with Rashid *et al.*'s (2021) finding of a negative correlation ( $r = -0.65$ ) with performance, suggesting that authoritarian approaches suppress teacher morale and creativity (Mosha, 2018). Laissez-faire leadership's negative impact ( $\beta = -0.138$ ,  $p = .002$ ) corroborates Northouse (2021), indicating that minimal guidance leads to academic stagnation, especially in schools needing strong direction (Maqbool *et al.*, 2024).

In the context of secondary schools in Mbozi District, the main leadership styles influencing academic performance include transformational, democratic, transactional, autocratic, and laissez-faire approaches, each with distinct effects amplified by local socio-economic and educational challenges. Transformational leadership fosters innovation and motivation among teachers, leading to improved student engagement and higher academic outcomes in resource-limited settings (Komba & Nkumbi, 2020; Nguni *et al.*, 2006).

Democratic leadership enhances performance through collaborative decision-making, increasing teacher satisfaction and stakeholder involvement, as evidenced in similar Tanzanian districts where it correlates strongly with student success (Ferdinandi & Kiwonde, 2023; John & Mkulu, 2020). Transactional leadership provides necessary structure and rewards, moderately boosting performance by stabilizing operations amid constraints like inadequate infrastructure (Malingumu *et al.*, 2016). Conversely, autocratic styles often hinder creativity and morale, resulting in negative or insignificant impacts on academic results (Rashid *et al.*, 2021), while laissez-faire leadership leads to disorganization and poor discipline, detrimentally affecting student achievement in schools requiring strong guidance (Northouse, 2021; John & Mkulu, 2020).

Mbozi's resource-limited context amplifies the importance of transformational and democratic leadership, which foster innovation and community engagement (Komba & Nkumbi, 2020). Challenges like teacher absenteeism and inadequate resources necessitate leaders who motivate and involve stakeholders. The high adoption of transformational (36.17%) and democratic (31.48%) styles suggests heads of schools recognize their efficacy, aligning with Tanzania's Education Sector Development Plan (MoEST, 2021) promoting inclusive leadership. The low prevalence of autocratic (9.78%) and laissez-faire (5.95%) styles reflects their limited effectiveness in dynamic educational settings (Bush & Glover, 2014).

## 5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study establishes that transformational and democratic leadership styles significantly enhance students' academic performance in Mbozi District, while laissez-faire and autocratic styles are detrimental or ineffective. To improve educational outcomes, the Ministry of Education should implement targeted leadership training programs emphasizing transformational and democratic approaches, establish mentorship systems to support novice heads of schools, and allocate resources to address infrastructural constraints, thereby fostering environments conducive to academic success.

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