



Influence of Leadership Style on the Quality of Education in Zambia

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ABSTRACT:

Leadership style plays a pivotal role in shaping the quality of education in Zambia. The effectiveness of school leadership directly affects teacher performance, student outcomes, and the overall functionality of educational institutions. Research shows that different leadership styles have a direct impact on the quality of education in Zambia. Transformational leadership, which encourages teamwork, vision sharing, and teacher motivation, is linked to better school performance. In contrast, authoritarian and laissez-faire leadership styles often lead to poor communication, low teacher morale, and weak student outcomes. Studies also emphasize that involving teachers in decision-making leads to a more positive school environment and improved teaching effectiveness. The study employed a descriptive and a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A sample size composed of 200 respondents; headteachers, teachers and pupils who were selected using purposive sampling method. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews as well as focus group discussions (FGDs). The quantitative obtained were analyzed using software such as SPSS for statistical analysis whereas the qualitative collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that schools led by transformational leaders exhibit higher levels of teacher commitment, student engagement, and overall academic performance. These leaders promote a shared vision, encourage professional development, and foster a supportive environment. Conversely, schools under autocratic or laissez-faire leadership styles report lower staff morale, reduced innovation, and inconsistent academic outcomes. The results underscore a strong correlation between inclusive leadership practices and improved educational quality. The study therefore recommended that leadership training programs for headteachers and administrators be strengthened with an emphasis on transformational and participatory leadership.

Keywords: Educational Quality, Leadership Style, School Performance, Teacher Motivation, and Transformational Leadership.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigated the relationship between leadership style and the quality of education in Zambia, focusing on how different leadership approaches influence educational outcomes. Effective leadership is a cornerstone of successful education systems, as it directly affects teacher performance, student achievement, and the overall school environment. In Zambia, where schools often face challenges such as inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms, and disparities between rural and urban education, the leadership style adopted by school leaders can have a profound impact on the delivery and quality of education. Alma et al. (2024) say that the quality of education in any country is closely tied to the effectiveness of its school leadership. In Zambia, educational institutions face numerous challenges, including inadequate resources, low teacher morale, and inconsistent student outcomes (Chanda, 2023a). Leadership style plays a critical role in navigating these challenges by influencing how schools are managed, how staff are motivated, and how educational goals are achieved (Mulenga & Lubinda, 2020). Effective leadership fosters a positive school climate, encourages professional development, and ensures that teaching and learning processes are well-coordinated. As such, the leadership approach adopted by school administrators has a direct impact on educational quality at all levels.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of adopting transformational leadership in improving educational outcomes. This style is characterized by a shared vision, trust, and encouragement of innovation among staff members, which often results in higher teacher satisfaction and improved student performance (Uleanya, 2024). On the other hand, authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership styles are often associated with poor communication, lack of teacher autonomy, and diminished academic results. Understanding the relationship between leadership style and the quality of education is therefore essential for policy formulation, school management, and capacity-building efforts aimed at enhancing the Zambian education system.

Gondwe (2020) say that educational quality refers to the extent to which educational services effectively promote learning and meet the needs of students, teachers, and the broader community. In the Zambian context, educational quality is influenced by various factors such as teacher competence, availability

of learning materials, school infrastructure, and most importantly, leadership practices. Quality education is characterized by learner-centered teaching, continuous assessment, and a supportive learning environment that fosters critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Chanda et al., 2024a). Leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring these elements are in place by guiding curriculum implementation, supervising instructional methods, and motivating teachers to perform at their best. Without effective leadership, schools struggle to maintain high standards, which can lead to low student achievement and reduced public confidence in the education system (Phiri, 2020).

Leadership style refers to the approach and behavior a leader adopts when guiding, motivating, and managing individuals or groups within an organization. In the educational context, the leadership style of school heads and administrators significantly affects how schools function and how educational goals are achieved. In Zambia, transformational leadership marked by vision, collaboration, and empowerment has been found to positively impact school performance by improving teacher motivation, student discipline, and overall academic achievement (Mumba & Zulu, 2021). In contrast, authoritarian or laissez-faire leadership styles often lead to poor communication, low staff morale, and lack of accountability, which negatively influence the teaching and learning environment (Kunda & Tembo, 2020). Therefore, the choice of leadership style is a crucial factor in determining the success and quality of education in Zambian schools.

Transformational leadership is a style that emphasizes inspiration, motivation, and the development of a shared vision to drive change and improve performance. In the context of education in Zambia, transformational leaders are seen as key drivers of school improvement, as they actively engage teachers, students, and other stakeholders in setting and achieving educational goals (Chanda et al., 2024a). This leadership style fosters a collaborative culture, encourages professional growth among teachers, and creates a positive school climate that enhances student learning outcomes (Phiri & Banda, 2021). Studies have shown that schools led by transformational leaders often experience higher levels of teacher satisfaction, improved instructional practices, and better academic performance compared to those led by authoritarian or passive leaders (Mwansa & Kapambwe, 2020). Thus, transformational leadership is essential for promoting innovation, accountability, and sustainable quality education in Zambia's schools.

Teacher motivation is a critical factor that influences teacher performance, classroom effectiveness, and overall student achievement. Motivated teachers are more likely to demonstrate commitment, creativity, and resilience in their teaching practices, leading to improved learning outcomes. A 2024 study in Makueni Sub-county found that principals' motivational strategies, such as recognition and support for professional development, significantly influence teachers' job satisfaction. Teachers who felt valued and appreciated were more satisfied and contributed positively to the school environment (Mutuku & Mwanja, 2024). Similarly, a 2023 study at the University of Education, Winneba, demonstrated that leaders exhibiting transformational leadership traits such as idealized influence and inspirational motivation positively impacted staff motivation and performance (Otieno & Orodho, 2022). These findings suggest that leadership styles that prioritize teacher engagement and empowerment are crucial for creating a motivated and high-performing teaching workforce, which is equally relevant in the Zambian context.

Chanda (2024a) say that school performance is a multifaceted concept that encompasses student academic outcomes, teacher effectiveness, leadership quality, and overall institutional efficiency. Globally, research has shown that school leadership plays a crucial role in shaping school performance by setting goals, managing resources, and creating a positive learning environment. For instance, a study in Kenya found that effective school leadership significantly contributed to improved learner achievement through better instructional supervision and teacher support (Muganda & Kibabii, 2020). Similarly, research in Nigeria highlighted that schools with participatory leadership practices tend to perform better academically due to enhanced teacher collaboration, morale, and accountability (Odhiambo, 2023). These findings demonstrate that leadership style is a major determinant of school performance, and adopting inclusive, supportive leadership approaches can help raise the quality of education in various educational settings, including in Zambia.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The quality of education in Zambia has remained a pressing concern, with persistent challenges such as low academic performance, poor infrastructure, limited teacher motivation, and high dropout rates. While various factors contribute to these issues, leadership style within educational institutions plays a crucial yet often overlooked role. Effective leadership is essential for fostering a positive school climate, motivating teachers, enhancing instructional practices, and ultimately improving student outcomes (Chituta & Simui, 2021). However, in many Zambian schools, leadership practices tend to be authoritarian, inconsistent, or lacking in vision, which hampers collaboration, innovation, and accountability (Mulenga & Namangala, 2022). Despite ongoing reforms aimed at enhancing education quality, there is limited empirical research examining how different leadership styles directly influence the learning environment and outcomes in Zambia (Mwanza, 2023). This gap creates an urgent need to investigate the relationship between leadership approaches and educational quality to inform better training, recruitment, and development of school leaders. Hence, this study was conducted to assess the influence of leadership style on the quality of education in Zambia.

1.3. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- Assess the impact of different leadership styles on teacher motivation and performance in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Zambia.
- Examine the relationship between leadership styles and student academic performance in secondary schools within Lusaka district, Zambia.

1.4. Research Questions

- What is the impact of different leadership styles on teacher motivation and performance in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district of Zambia?
- What is the relationship between leadership styles and student academic performance in secondary schools within Lusaka district of Zambia?

1.5 Study Hypothesis

Main Hypothesis:

- **H₀ (Null Hypothesis):** There is no significant relationship between leadership style and the quality of education in Zambia.
- **H₁ (Alternative Hypothesis):** There is a significant relationship between leadership style and the quality of education in Zambia.

Sub-Hypotheses (based on specific leadership styles):

1. **H₀₁:** Transformational leadership style has no significant effect on the quality of education in Zambian schools.
H₁₁: Transformational leadership style has a significant effect on the quality of education in Zambian schools.
2. **H₀₂:** Transactional leadership style has no significant effect on the quality of education in Zambian schools.
H₁₂: Transactional leadership style has a significant effect on the quality of education in Zambian schools.
3. **H₀₃:** Laissez-faire leadership style has no significant effect on the quality of education in Zambian schools.
H₁₃: Laissez-faire leadership style has a significant effect on the quality of education in Zambian schools.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Transformational Leadership Theory. The theory has increasingly been recognized as a pivotal framework for enhancing the quality of education in Zambia. This leadership style emphasizes inspiring and motivating educators to exceed expectations by fostering a shared vision, promoting professional development, and encouraging innovation. Recent studies in Zambia have demonstrated that transformational leadership significantly influences teacher motivation and job performance, which are critical factors in improving educational outcomes. For instance, Augustine & Rebekah (2024) found that schools led by transformational leaders experienced higher levels of teacher motivation and job performance compared to those with other leadership styles. Similarly, Phiri (2022) observed that head teachers employing transformational leadership practices contributed to better academic performance among pupils in Eastern Province secondary schools. These findings underscore the importance of adopting transformational leadership approaches to address challenges such as low teacher morale and student underachievement in Zambia's education system. By cultivating an environment that values collaboration, continuous improvement, and shared goals, transformational leaders can drive meaningful change and elevate the quality of education across the country.

1.7. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in understanding the critical role that leadership plays in shaping educational outcomes. Leadership within schools and educational institutions directly influences the effectiveness of teaching, learning environments, and resource allocation, all of which contribute to the overall quality of education. By examining different leadership styles (e.g., transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire), this study may offer insights into how school leaders can foster an environment that encourages teacher development, student achievement, and institutional growth. Additionally, the study highlights the impact of leadership on the implementation of policies, curriculum development, and the management of educational resources, all of which are crucial in addressing the challenges facing Zambia's education sector. Ultimately, this study may provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing leadership practices to improve educational standards and contribute to the development of a more effective education system in Zambia.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a descriptive and a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This allowed for a holistic understanding of how leadership styles impact the quality of education. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select a representative sample of 5 secondary schools within Lusaka district of Zambia. For in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, purposive sampling was used to select school leaders and teachers based on their experience and knowledge of leadership practices in their schools. Also a representation from student populace was considered in this study. A sample size of 200 respondents was picked representing 10% of the target population 2000.5 head teachers were picked; 1 coming from each selected school. 25 teachers; 5 coming from each selected school and 170 pupils; 34 coming from each selected school. Structured questionnaires were developed and administered to the pupils to collect data on the leadership styles of school leaders and the quality of education in their schools while semi-structured interviews were conducted with school head teachers to gain insights into their leadership approaches and how they believe these influence educational quality. Additionally, teachers participated in focus group discussions to provide a more nuanced

understanding of the relationship between leadership and education quality at the grassroots level. Document analysis such as policy documents, annual reports, and school performance records were also analyzed to supplement interview and survey data. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) was used to summarize data, while inferential statistics (correlation analysis, regression analysis) was used to explore the relationship between leadership styles and educational outcomes. Also, software such as SPSS or Excel was used for statistical analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to interview and focus group data. The responses were coded to identify key themes related to leadership styles and quality education. Additionally, the study upheld research ethical considerations such as voluntary participation of the respondents, confidentiality, honesty, and right of privacy.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The following findings and discussions were presented according to set research objectives:

3.1 The Impact of Different Leadership Styles on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

3.1.1 The Impact of Transformational Leadership Style on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

Data collected from the study revealed that transformational leadership has a significant impact on teacher motivation and performance, particularly in the context of secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. Transformational leaders inspire and empower teachers by creating a shared vision, fostering an environment of trust, and promoting professional growth. Recent studies have demonstrated that school leaders who exhibit transformational qualities such as individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation positively influence teachers' job satisfaction and commitment to teaching. For instance, Thomas et al. (2020) found that transformational leadership directly and indirectly enhances first-year teachers' job attitudes through professional collegial support and self-efficacy. Similarly, Maheshwari (2021) reported a positive relationship between transformational leadership and teachers' job satisfaction and performance in Vietnamese high schools. In the context of Zambia, transformational leadership plays a crucial role in motivating teachers to overcome systemic challenges like limited resources and large class sizes. Augustine & Rebekah (2024) found that transformational leadership styles were most effective in creating a motivating work environment, enhancing teacher motivation and job performance in selected secondary schools in Monze District, Southern Province, Zambia. These findings underscore the importance of transformational leadership in enhancing educational outcomes, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

Moreover, transformational leadership contributes to creating a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement, which enhances teacher performance in measurable ways. Leaders who engage teachers in decision-making processes, recognize achievements, and provide regular constructive feedback often witness improved instructional practices and learner outcomes (Adarkwah & Zeyuan, 2020). This approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability among teachers, boosting their intrinsic motivation and willingness to adapt to educational reforms and innovations. In Lusaka District, the implementation of transformational leadership practices has been associated with improved teacher attendance, reduced turnover, and enhanced student engagement (Chikopa, 2020). As a result, schools led by transformational leaders are more likely to experience holistic development and sustained academic progress. The evidence underscores the importance of leadership training and support systems for school heads to fully harness the potential of transformational leadership in improving teacher morale and overall school performance.

3.1.2 The Impact of Transactional Leadership Style on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

The study further found that transactional leadership, characterized by structured systems of rewards and punishments, plays a critical role in shaping teacher motivation in secondary schools within Lusaka District. One of the head teachers alluded that:

“Leaders who adopt this style emphasize clear goals, routine supervision, and performance-based incentives, which can foster a sense of direction and accountability among teachers”-.

In schools where transactional leadership is prevalent, teachers are often motivated through extrinsic rewards such as recognition, promotions, and financial incentives, which may enhance their commitment to achieving institutional goals. However, while this leadership style can improve short-term motivation and ensure compliance with administrative directives, it may not necessarily foster intrinsic motivation or long-term professional growth. A study conducted by Chishimba & Mwanza (2021) on Zambian schools found that teachers under transactional leaders performed well in structured tasks but lacked enthusiasm for innovation and learner-centered pedagogies. Moreover, transactional leadership tends to emphasize efficiency and outcomes over teacher well-being, which can affect morale if not complemented with supportive leadership practices (Mulenga & Namusonge, 2020).

In terms of teacher performance, transactional leadership often promotes task completion, adherence to policy, and alignment with institutional benchmarks in secondary schools (Makombo et al., 2024). Teachers under transactional leadership tend to exhibit high levels of discipline, timely syllabus coverage, and improved classroom management as a result of clearly defined expectations and monitoring mechanisms. This style may be especially effective in Lusaka's public secondary schools, where resource constraints and administrative challenges require efficient performance management systems. However, the reliance on reward and punishment can result in mechanical teaching approaches that hinder creativity and teacher autonomy (Thompson 2024). While transactional leadership can drive performance metrics, it often falls short in nurturing innovation and teacher empowerment,

which are vital for sustained educational improvement. Therefore, while it serves as a useful tool for accountability, its long-term impact on teacher motivation and professional fulfillment in Lusaka's educational context remains limited without complementary leadership styles such as transformational leadership.

3.1.3 The Impact of Laissez-faire Leadership Style on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

Laissez-faire leadership, characterized by a hands-off approach where leaders provide minimal guidance and allow subordinates to make decisions, has shown mixed impacts on teacher motivation and performance in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. One of the teachers noted that:

“This leadership style can lead to a lack of direction and accountability, especially in educational settings where clear goals and performance standards are necessary”-.

Teachers under laissez-faire leaders may experience decreased motivation due to the absence of support, feedback, and recognition, which are essential components of a productive work environment. In the Lusaka District, schools operating under laissez-faire leadership have reported reduced teacher engagement and diminished instructional effectiveness, as the lack of leadership involvement can contribute to confusion and inconsistency in teaching practices (Chituta, 2021). Moreover, without adequate leadership, teachers may struggle with professional growth and feel undervalued, negatively affecting their motivation and overall job satisfaction.

However, in some cases, laissez-faire leadership may empower self-driven and experienced teachers by granting them autonomy and flexibility in executing their responsibilities. In certain Lusaka secondary schools, this autonomy has been linked to increased innovation and creativity among teachers who prefer minimal supervision and thrive under self-management (Mutale, 2022). Such teachers may feel more trusted and respected, which can enhance their intrinsic motivation and commitment to student success. Nevertheless, this positive impact is highly dependent on the individual teacher's work ethic and experience, and the absence of structured leadership may still pose risks of inconsistency and lack of coordination in school operations. For effective results, the laissez-faire approach must be applied cautiously and supplemented with periodic guidance and oversight to ensure accountability and cohesion in teaching outcomes (Kapesa & Mumba, 2020).

3.1.4 The Impact of Democratic or Participative Leadership Style on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

The study results also revealed that democratic or participative leadership has a profound impact on teacher motivation and performance in secondary schools. This leadership style, characterized by shared decision-making, open communication, and collaboration, fosters a sense of ownership and belonging among teachers, significantly enhancing their intrinsic motivation. When school leaders involve teachers in key decisions such as curriculum planning, school policies, and professional development initiatives they feel valued and respected, which leads to increased job satisfaction and morale (Chanda et al., 2024c). Morimoto & Baguio (2025) added that participative leadership also encourages teachers to be more innovative and take initiative, as they perceive their contributions as meaningful to the overall school success. This leadership style nurtures a positive school culture where teachers are more committed, engaged, and willing to go the extra mile to improve student outcomes.

Furthermore, democratic leadership has been linked to improved teacher performance through the creation of a supportive and empowering work environment. Teachers under participative leaders are more likely to engage in collaborative teaching practices, share best practices, and continuously seek professional growth opportunities (Lin, 2022). This results in improved instructional quality and more effective classroom management. One of the head teachers pointed out that:

“The inclusive nature of democratic leadership also contributes to reduced teacher turnover, as it promotes stability and loyalty among staff”-.

Importantly, when teachers experience autonomy and support in their roles, they are better able to adapt to educational reforms and challenges, enhancing both individual and institutional performance (Uleanya, 2024). Consequently, democratic leadership is essential not only for teacher motivation but also for sustaining high levels of performance and educational excellence in secondary schools.

3.1.5 The Impact of Authoritarian or Autocratic Leadership Style on Teacher Motivation and Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Lusaka District, Zambia

The study findings further revealed that authoritarian or autocratic leadership, characterized by a centralized decision-making process where the leader maintains control over all decisions and expects obedience from followers, can have significant impacts on teacher motivation and performance in secondary schools. One of the teachers expressed that:

“This leadership style often leads to a lack of teacher autonomy, limiting their ability to innovate or contribute ideas to the teaching process. Teachers under autocratic leadership may feel disempowered, which can result in reduced job satisfaction and lower motivation”-.

When teachers are not encouraged to collaborate or make decisions about their own classrooms, their sense of ownership and engagement in their work may decline (Alonderienė & Stankevičienė, 2020). Research has shown that in environments where autocratic leadership predominates, teachers tend to experience higher levels of stress and burnout, which can negatively affect their overall performance (Uwamahoro et al., 2024). Consequently, this diminished motivation leads to reduced effectiveness in the classroom, as teachers may disengage from their professional responsibilities.

However, the effects of authoritarian leadership on teacher motivation and performance can vary depending on the specific context and the nature of the school environment. While some teachers may prefer clear direction and structure, which authoritarian leadership can provide, others may resist such control, viewing it as stifling creativity and professional growth. This dynamic can create a disconnection between school leaders and their staff, further impacting teacher morale and performance (Chanda et al., 2024b). Moreover, the negative impact on motivation is often exacerbated when there is little recognition or support for teachers' efforts, further perpetuating a cycle of disengagement. In contrast, leadership that promotes teacher autonomy, professional development, and mutual respect tends to foster more motivated and effective educators. Therefore, the long-term effects of authoritarian leadership on teacher motivation and performance in secondary schools may ultimately be detrimental, as it may contribute to higher turnover rates and a decline in the quality of education (Anyinyo, 2023).

3.2. The Relationship between Leadership Styles and Student Academic Performance in Secondary Schools within Lusaka District, Zambia

According to study results, school climate and discipline play a vital role in shaping the academic environment and significantly influence student performance. In secondary schools within Lusaka District, the leadership style adopted by school heads has a direct impact on the school climate, which encompasses the quality of interactions among students, teachers, and administrators, as well as the overall atmosphere of safety and respect. Transformational leaders, for instance, foster a positive and inclusive climate by promoting values such as collaboration, trust, and shared goals. This type of leadership often results in improved student morale, reduced behavioral issues, and enhanced academic focus (Cheng & Cheung, 2020). Conversely, authoritarian leadership may create a rigid and stressful atmosphere, increasing student anxiety and reducing motivation. Thus, school leaders who strategically cultivate a supportive climate through participatory leadership practices contribute to better student engagement and performance outcomes (Odhiambo, 2023).

Chanda (2025) in her study showed that discipline, closely linked to school climate, is also greatly influenced by the leadership approach employed. One of pupils stated that:

“Effective school leaders establish clear rules, fair disciplinary procedures, and consistent enforcement mechanisms, which help maintain order and minimize disruptions to learning”-.

In Lusaka District secondary schools, democratic leadership styles where students and staff are involved in decision-making tend to promote self-discipline and mutual respect, leading to fewer disciplinary incidents and greater academic achievement (Chituta, 2021). In contrast, laissez-faire leadership can result in a lack of structure, leading to increased indiscipline and academic decline. Leaders who strike a balance between firm discipline and emotional support create an environment where students feel valued and motivated to succeed academically. Therefore, leadership that emphasizes both a positive school climate and effective discipline is critical to enhancing student academic performance.

Moreover, socio-economic factors play a significant role in shaping the relationship between leadership styles and student academic performance in secondary schools within Lusaka District, Zambia. School leaders who adopt democratic or transformational leadership styles often attempt to create inclusive environments that address the diverse socio-economic backgrounds of students. However, students from low-income households frequently face challenges such as limited access to educational resources, poor nutrition, and unstable home environments, which hinder their academic progress despite effective leadership strategies (Mumba & Chishimba, 2020). Leadership styles that emphasize equity and emotional support are better positioned to mitigate these barriers by fostering student motivation and resilience (Kangwa & Chanda, 2025). For instance, principals who engage parents and the community can secure additional support and create partnerships that enhance students' learning experiences regardless of their socio-economic status. Therefore, a responsive leadership style that acknowledges and adapts to socio-economic realities becomes critical in improving academic outcomes.

Moreover, socio-economic disparities influence how students and their families perceive and interact with school leadership (Chanda, 2024b). In schools where economic hardship is widespread, authoritarian leadership may worsen the situation by alienating students and discouraging open communication, whereas transformational leaders can build trust and hope among students and staff (Kalumbi, 2021). Such leaders often tailor interventions, such as scholarship programs or school feeding initiatives, which directly address the socio-economic challenges faced by learners, thereby improving attendance and concentration in class. The effectiveness of any leadership style, therefore, hinges on the ability of school leaders to recognize and respond to the economic context of their students. This dynamic underscores the importance of socio-economic awareness in educational leadership, especially in urban districts like Lusaka, where inequality is pronounced and directly linked to disparities in student achievement.

Resource allocation is a critical factor that reflects the effectiveness of leadership styles in secondary schools and directly impacts student academic performance. One of the headteachers revealed that:

“Leadership styles such as transformational and instructional leadership are often associated with equitable and strategic distribution of resources, including qualified teaching staff, teaching and learning materials, and infrastructural support”-.

In Lusaka District, headteachers who exhibit transformational leadership are more likely to prioritize the provision of adequate learning resources and ensure that financial and human capital is allocated in ways that support both teachers and learners (Mulenga & Kabika, 2022). Moreover, resource allocation influenced by leadership practices can promote inclusive education by ensuring that marginalized students have access to learning aids, thereby improving academic performance across the board (Kalimaposo, 2020). When leaders allocate resources effectively, they not only address immediate instructional needs but also create a supportive environment that boosts morale and enhances student engagement and achievement (Simui et al., 2021).

In contrast, autocratic or laissez-faire leadership styles may result in poor or inequitable resource allocation, which undermines teaching and learning processes in secondary schools. In Lusaka District, schools where leaders fail to engage staff in decision-making often experience inefficiencies in resource utilization, leading to shortages of textbooks, inadequate classroom infrastructure, and demotivated teachers. Ineffective resource allocation can also lead to overcrowded classrooms and insufficient instructional support, negatively affecting students' concentration and performance (Chilala & Sakala, 2021). Furthermore, without clear leadership-driven policies on how to prioritize and monitor the use of resources, schools may struggle to meet academic targets, especially in underfunded urban areas. It is therefore evident that the leadership style adopted by school administrators plays a pivotal role in determining how resources are mobilized and utilized to enhance student academic outcomes (Mwanakatwe & Banda, 2023).

The study results also noted that motivation and engagement are crucial factors in determining student academic performance, and leadership styles play a significant role in shaping these dynamics. In secondary schools within Lusaka District, transformational leadership characterized by vision, inspiration, and individualized support has been found to enhance students' intrinsic motivation by creating a positive and inclusive school environment (Chisanga, 2021). This style of leadership encourages both teachers and students to take ownership of the learning process, promoting deeper engagement and academic commitment. Internationally, research has supported this view; for example, Chishimba & Mwanza (2021) found that transformational leadership significantly increases student motivation by fostering trust and a sense of collective purpose. Similarly, Chikopa (2020) emphasized that instructional leadership, a component of transformational leadership, enhances student outcomes by supporting teacher development and maintaining a clear focus on learning. Kasonde & Phiri (2022) also highlight how transformational leaders in Zambian schools use motivational strategies to build student confidence, thereby enhancing engagement and performance.

Conversely, leadership styles such as autocratic and laissez-faire can hinder motivation and engagement, leading to reduced academic performance. In Lusaka District, schools led by authoritarian heads often report low student morale due to limited student participation and emotional support (Phiri & Banda, 2023). International studies support this observation, with noting that autocratic leadership often undermines autonomy, a critical component of motivation, particularly among adolescents. Democratic leadership, by contrast, tends to foster a sense of belonging and involvement, which research shows can significantly improve student engagement. In Zambia, Zimba & Chilufya (2022) found that democratic leadership in secondary schools correlates with increased student involvement in school activities and academic planning, which leads to improved academic performance. Furthermore, Mulenga (2021) emphasizes the importance of recognition and reward systems under democratic leaders in maintaining high levels of student motivation.

Additionally, teacher morale and professional development are critical factors in understanding the relationship between leadership styles and student academic performance in secondary schools within Lusaka District, Zambia. School leaders who employ transformational and participative leadership styles tend to create environments that enhance teacher motivation and job satisfaction, which subsequently lead to improved teaching practices and student outcomes. One of the teachers stated that:

“When teachers are supported through ongoing professional development, they are more likely to adopt innovative instructional strategies, collaborate effectively with peers, and remain committed to the school's academic goals”-.

Conversely, leadership styles that are autocratic or laissez-faire often contribute to low morale, reduced professional engagement, and diminished classroom performance, which negatively affects learners. Therefore, school leadership must intentionally invest in the continuous growth and well-being of teachers as a strategic pathway to improving academic performance (Mufune, 2021).

Also, the findings showed that cultural values significantly shape the relationship between leadership styles and student academic performance in secondary schools within Lusaka District, Zambia. In societies where respect for authority and hierarchical structures is deeply rooted as is common in many Zambian communities authoritative and autocratic leadership styles may be perceived as more effective, fostering discipline and structured learning environments (Chisanga, 2021). However, Chanda (2025b) noted that these styles may not always foster creativity and critical thinking. On the other hand, transformational and participative leadership styles, which emphasize collaboration, shared goals, and mutual respect, often align with cultural values that prioritize community and collective success, leading to increased student motivation and academic achievement (Mulenga & Mwanza, 2020). Additionally, international studies have shown that the success of leadership styles is largely contingent on the cultural context within which they are applied. For example, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory underscores the importance of aligning leadership behaviors with prevailing cultural norms to enhance effectiveness (Ssemata & Sendagi, 2024). In multicultural educational settings like those in Lusaka, culturally responsive leadership is thus essential in bridging the gap between administrative practices and students' academic success, making it imperative for school leaders to adapt their styles to the sociocultural realities of their institutions.

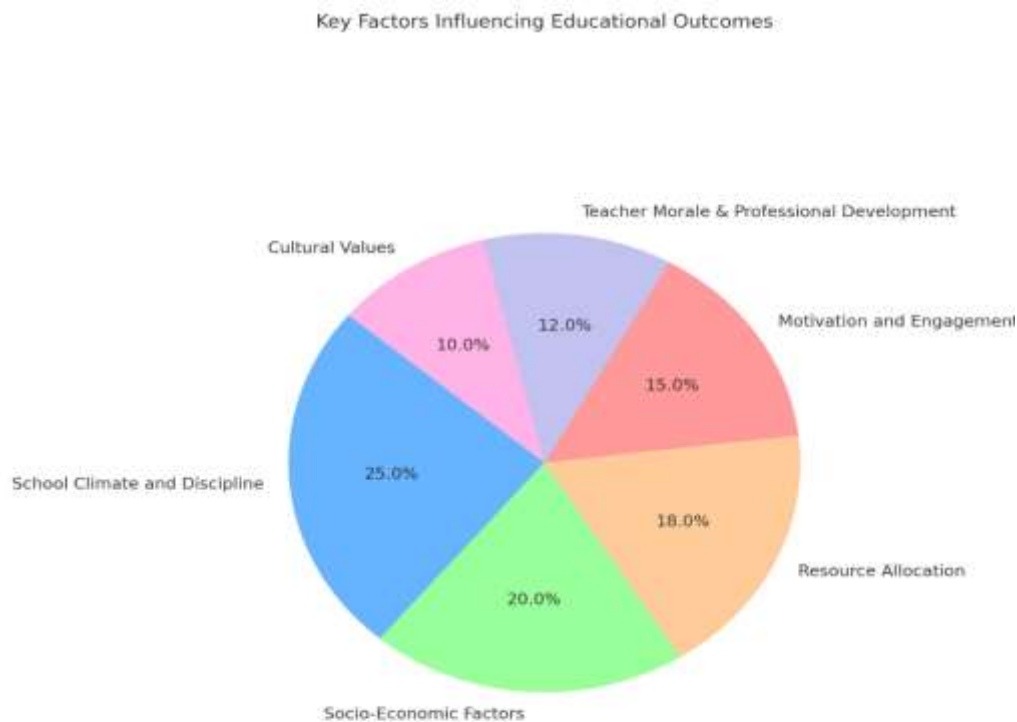


Figure 1: The Relationship between Leadership Styles and Student Academic Performance

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, leadership style plays a critical role in shaping the quality of education in Zambia. Effective educational leaders who adopt transformational and participative leadership styles tend to inspire teachers, foster innovation, and create inclusive and supportive learning environments, which significantly enhance student performance and institutional outcomes. Conversely, autocratic or laissez-faire leadership approaches may hinder teacher motivation, limit collaboration, and contribute to inefficiencies in the education system. The quality of education in Zambia, therefore, largely depends on the ability of school leaders and administrators to implement leadership practices that promote accountability, continuous professional development, and stakeholder engagement. Strengthening leadership capacity at all levels of the education system is essential for achieving long-term improvements in teaching quality, learner achievement, and overall educational equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote Transformational Leadership in Educational Institutions:

The Ministry of Education should take the lead in formulating policies that encourage the adoption of transformational leadership in schools. This includes promoting visionary, motivational, and participatory leadership styles among school heads to enhance teacher performance and student learning outcomes.

1. Strengthen Leadership Training and Capacity Building:

The Teaching Service Commission (TSC) in collaboration with the Zambia Education Management Training Colleges (ZEMT) should implement mandatory and continuous professional development programs for school leaders. These programs must focus on modern leadership practices, conflict resolution, strategic management, and effective school governance to boost educational quality.

2. Establish Accountability and Performance Monitoring Systems:

Standards officers and DEBS should design and enforce leadership performance monitoring tools. Regular school inspections, stakeholder feedback mechanisms, and leadership performance appraisals should be conducted to ensure accountability and guide improvements.

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