

# Influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in secondary schools in Awendo sub-county, Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

Studies conducted in USA, Dubai, South Africa, Nigeria, Uganda, central region of Kenya and some part of Nyanza region have revealed that principals' leadership styles influence performance in schools. Leadership style was found to contribute 32.8% to the students' performance in Kinangop. However, there was no information about the influence principals' leadership style has had on the students' academic performance. Awendo sub-county performed below average with a mean of 4.9 for the period 2012 to 2016 yet in the same region Uriri sub-county had a mean of 6.5 and Rongo sub-county 5.8. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to establish the influence of the principals' leadership styles on secondary students' academic performance in Awendo sub-county. The objectives of the study were to: determine the influence of principals' democratic leadership style on students' performance; establish the influence of principals' autocratic leadership style on the students' performance; and to establish the influence of principals' laissez faire leadership styles on students' academic performance. A conceptual framework was used to show the interplay regarding the independent variable, which is leadership styles and that of the dependent variable, which is students' academic performance. The research employed descriptive survey and correlational designs to obtain information. The study population consisted of 35 principals, 340 teachers and 1400 form four students of 2015. Saturated sampling method was used to obtain 30 principals as the remaining 5 were used for piloting. Simple random sampling was used to sample 186 teachers and 301 students from the 30 sampled schools. Data was collected using questionnaire, interview schedules, document analysis and focus group discussions. Face and content validity of the instruments were determined by experts in educational administration. The reliability was tested using test-retest method and a Pearson's  $r$  of 0.86 for Principals' questionnaire obtained. Quantitative data was analyzed using frequency count, mean, percentage, correlation and simple linear regression. Qualitative data was transcribed, analyzed and used for triangulation. Leadership styles were measured using a rating scale adopted from Don Clark Questionnaire Model for attributes of democratic, autocratic and laissez faire styles whilst students' performance was measured by the school mean score. The study established that democratic leadership accounted for 37.4% of variation in students' academic performance as signified by adjusted R square 0.374. Autocratic leadership accounted for 43.8% of variation in students' academic performance and Laissez faire leadership style accounted for 15.7% of variation in students' academic performance. Principals are encouraged to balance the use both democratic and autocratic styles but avoid Laissez faire style. The study is significant to stakeholders in education in assisting principals to practice leadership styles that would enhance students' academic performance in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Leadership style, principal, academic performance, secondary education.

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## INTRODUCTION

Leadership style consists of a leader's general personality, demeanour and communication patterns in

guiding others toward reaching organizational or personal goals and it is believed to affect performance (Wallace,

2009). Cole (2004) observes that even if an institution has all the financial resources to excel, it may fail dismally if the leadership does not motivate others to accomplish their tasks effectively. Thinking in a similar direction other studies also put forth that good leadership can certainly contribute to school improvement by abetting the motivation, participation, and coordination of the teachers (Harris, 2005).

Maicibi (2005) asserts that, without a proper leadership style, effective performance cannot be realized in schools. Namirembe (2005) further argues that many secondary schools still lack the necessary performance requirements, not only because of inadequate funds or even poor facilities, but as a result of poor leadership. Several reports from the Ministry of Education Science and Technology have indicated that principals' leadership styles have direct bearing on the overall effectiveness of school because both the teacher and student perform under the leadership of school principal (UNESCO, 2012). For example, a study in Malaysia by Wan and Jamal (2012) found that the role of principal is important in determining the high-academic performance of students in examinations.

Even though different authorities in leadership as a subject have come up with various classifications of leadership styles this study will focus on Lewin (1939) classification that identified three leadership styles namely, authoritarian or autocratic, democratic or participative and laissez-faire or passive. This is because the rest of the classifications borrow from Lewin only that the terms are different.

Democratic leadership style is consultative and participatory in nature and leaders here not only offer guidance to group members, but they also participate in the groups and allow input from other group members (Bass and Bass, 2008). Autocratic leadership style which is also referred to as authoritarian leadership style encompasses being arbitrary, controlling, power-oriented, coercive, punitive, and close-minded. It means taking full and sole responsibility for decision and control of followers' performance. Autocrats stress obedience, loyalty, strict adherence to rules; they make and enforce the rules. This style is influenced by McGregor's Theory X which presumes that people are naturally lazy and need close supervision. Lastly, *Laissez faire* leadership style is the style whereby little or no guidance is offered to group members and leave decision-making up to group members. While this style can be effective in situations where group members are highly qualified in an area of expertise, it often leads to poorly defined roles and a lack of motivation (Bass and Bass, 2008). The principal who applies this leadership style is influenced by McGregor's Theory Y concept which argues that people are innately motivated, that they naturally like work and are interested in doing their work and therefore need no coercing (Wasonga, 2014, citing McGregor, 1964).

Tarus (2009) and Musungu (2007) both agree that

head teachers' leadership has an influence on student's performance. However, both studies did not establish to what extent the identified leadership style contributes to academic performance. This study undertook to establish the relationship of democratic, autocratic and laissez faire leadership styles on academic performance and statistically indicate to what extent each contributes to performance.

The school principals are expected to provide institutional leadership in addition to being entrusted with school's financial management, human resource management, planning of development activities, discipline management, agents of Teachers Service Commission (TSC) and Ministry of Education (MoE) in charge of implementation and monitoring of policies (Okumbe, 2003). However, most schools in Awendo sub-county register low performance. The performance in KCSE was below average with mean scores of 5.2, 5.5, 5.4, 5.7 and 3.1 for the years 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016, respectively. Coincidentally during this period Awendo sub-county education office received and investigated complaints about certain school principals whose leadership styles were blamed for the deterioration and it is also reported that certain school means were noted to be on the rise as soon as some principals took over (Sub-County Education Office, SCEO, 2014). This raised a concern that prompted an investigation that will not only establish the relationship but also reveal the influence of each leadership style on academic performance.

### Objectives of the study

The purpose of this study was to establish the influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performance in secondary schools in Awendo sub-county, Kenya. The specific objectives were to:

- i) Determine the influence of the principals' democratic leadership style on the students' academic performance.
- ii) Establish the influence of the principals' autocratic leadership style on the students' academic performance.
- iii) Establish the influence of the principals' *Laissez faire* leadership styles on the students' academic performance.

### Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework was used to help focus on the variables in the study. The independent variables in the framework are the factors that are crucial contributors to the academic achievement which are principals' leadership styles, democratic, autocratic and *laissez faire*. The dependent variable is the mean score of the students in KCSE examination. The intervening variables were the government policies, ban of corporal

punishment, ban of class repetition and re-entry. This study assumed that the principals are aware of such government regulations and as the implementers of policies are keen on following them and therefore their effect did not affect this study.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey research design and correlational design. Descriptive survey research design allows researchers to gather information, summarize, present and interpret for the purpose of clarification (Borg and Gall, 2007). Correlational design was also useful in establishing the influence of each leadership style to students' performance. The target population for this study consisted of 35 principals, 340 teachers, 1400 students in form four in 2016 and 1 sub-county quality assurance officer (SCQASO, Awendo Sub-county, 2014). This research used saturated random sampling technique to arrive at 1 SCQASO and the number of schools which were 30 out of 35 since 5 schools were used for the pilot study. Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table was used to determine the sample size giving a total of 186 teachers and 301 form four students from the sampled schools. Simple random sampling method was used to identify the respondents. The research instruments used were the Principal's Questionnaires (PQ), Interview Schedules for the principals and the SCQASO and focused group discussions for the students. Validity and reliability were established through test-retest method in which a Pearson's  $r$  of 0.86 for Principals' questionnaire was obtained. The instruments were self-administered and the data analysis was done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in analyzing the level of each variable in the respondents' ratings such as means, percentages, correlation and simple linear regression. The mean ratings were analyzed (e.g. for democratic leadership style) as 1.00-1.44 = not democratic, 1.45-2.44 = partially democratic, 2.45-3.44 = democratic, 3.45-4.44 = highly democratic and 4.45-5.00 = very highly democratic. Pearson's correlation was carried out to measure the strength and direction of linear relationship between the independent and the dependent variables.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **Influence of the principals' democratic leadership style on students' academic performance**

The principals were asked to score how strongly they felt about the influence of the principals' democratic leadership styles on students' academic performance in

secondary schools. The parameters were on decision making, communication, ownership, professional growth and empowerment, and conflict resolution and management. The responses are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that the principals frequently try to include the staff in determining what to do and how to do it but retains the final decision making authority. The mean rating of 4.07 meant that the principals' involvement of the staff in decision making was highly democratic. This finding concurs with Bass and Bass (2008) describing democratic leaders as allowing input from other group members for efficiency in performance. The principals revealed openness in communication as they sought for ideas and input from the staff frequently on upcoming plans and projects at a mean rating of 3.97. This implied that principals are highly democratic in their dealings with communication. In addition, the principals frequently created an environment where the staff took ownership of projects and frequently exercised self-direction with commitment to the objectives at mean ratings of 3.97.

In terms of professional growth and empowerment, the principals frequently considered the vision of members of staff and integrated into the school vision where appropriate; frequently allowed members of staff to set priorities with guidance; and frequently employed leadership power to help subordinates. The average mean rating of 3.83 suggest that principals frequently invest on staff professional growth and empowerment programs with the hope to better the schools' academic achievement thus highly democratic. Sparks (2005) on professional development observed that effective professional development is an essential element in promoting significant change in school leaders' practices, teachers' instructional practices and student learning. On conflict resolution and management, the principals worked frequently with the staff in resolving differences whenever there were differences in role expectations and frequently applying creativity and ingenuity to solve school problems. Thus, the average mean rating of 3.74 implied that the principals frequently took part in conflict resolution and management in the schools featuring them as highly democratic. Ramani and Zhimin (2010) on Conflict Resolution Mechanisms in secondary schools revealed that the causes of conflicts in public secondary schools are varied. Resolution of various forms of conflicts would therefore, require specific strategies since the root causes may be unique. Indeed, the principals in Awendo sub-county secondary schools highly involved democratic practices in their leadership at an overall mean rate of 3.87.

In order to establish the relationship between democratic leadership style and students' academic performance (measured as a mean score out of 12), a correlation analysis was conducted. Democratic leadership style by principals had a moderate positive and significant relationship with students' academic

**Table 1.** Level of principals' democratic leadership (n = 30).

Democratic practices	Average mean rating
Decision making	4.07
Communication	3.87
Ownership	3.97
Professional growth and empowerment	3.83
Conflict resolution and management	3.74
Overall mean	3.87

performance ( $r=0.631$ ,  $n=30$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). In addition, democratic leadership accounted for 37.4% of the variation in the students' academic performance as signified by the adjusted  $r^2$  of 0.374. The regression analysis shows that an increase of one unit in democratic leadership practice improved students' academic performance by 1.732 units as indicated in the regression equation:

$$Y = -2.563 + 1.732 x_1 \quad (1)$$

where Y is the students' academic performance  
 $x_1$  is democratic leadership style

The ANOVA test indicates that the regression model significantly ( $F(1, 28) = 16.503$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) predicts the students' academic performance. This means that democratic leadership can be relied upon to influence students' academic performance. This finding is consistent with Suskavcevic and Blake (2004) that democratic leadership styles positively affect students' academic achievement and general school performance because they motivate teachers to work with principals to achieve school objectives, Dubrin (2010) also noted that head teachers who employ this leadership style allow teachers to take initiatives so as to improve student academic achievement. Democratic leadership supports and encourages team work, good cooperation, good remuneration of all staff, motivation of staff and students.

The SCQASO confirmed this status when he said that "democratic leadership can be effectively utilized to extract the best from people and the most effective and efficient educational climate can be created in a school when democracy is employed". The students, in their FDGs, were of the opinion that if democratic leadership style was enhanced where they would be allowed to express their views without being victimised then performance would be better.

### **Influence of the principals' autocratic leadership style on students' academic performance**

The research question responded to here was: What is the influence of the principals' autocratic leadership styles on students' academic performance in secondary schools

in Awendo sub-county? The responses, used to gauge their level of autocracy, are as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 indicates that the principals occasionally retained the final decision making authority within the schools with a mean rating of 3.43. The rating suggests that the principals' leadership was autocratic in decision making. Moore et al. (2011) observed that authoritative decision style calls for an autocratic leadership approach where members will not be given an opportunity to water down the plans that might result into discrepancies between policy as stated and policy in use. Teachers, however, pointed out that an overall participative climate enhances satisfaction more than occasional participation on specific decisions or goal setting.

In terms of communication, the principals rarely did not consider suggestions made by the staff; rarely directed the staff on what should be done and how it should be done, and when something went wrong the staff was rarely informed and a new workable procedure established. The average mean rating of 2.11 suggest that principals' leadership was partially autocratic on communication practices. Autocratic leaders give orders in a certain manner, which shows directness and straight forwardness (Haswiny and Yazdanifard, 2015) and orders come from the top to the bottom. The staff receive information specific to their tasks.

For staff management, when a staff member made a mistake, the principals rarely told them not to ever do that again but made note of it; new staff members were occasionally not allowed to make decisions unless approved by the principals; principals frequently closely monitored their staff to ensure they were performing effectively; and that principals rarely liked the power they held by virtue of their leadership position over subordinates. The average mean rating of 2.56 implied that the principals' leadership in staff development and management was autocratic. Bunmi (2007) states that since autocratic leaders have absolute power over their employees, and the latter have little opportunity to make suggestions, even if it would be in the organization's best interest, this leadership style often leads to high levels of absenteeism and employee turnover. However, it could remain effective for some routine and unskilled jobs, as the advantages of control may outweigh the disadvantages. The principals added that use of autocracy can be very productive especially when dealing

**Table 2.** Level of principals' autocratic leadership (n = 30).

Democratic practices	Average mean rating
Decision making	3.43
Communication	2.11
Staff management	2.56
Conflict resolution and management	2.38
Overall mean	2.45

with new staff and those who are naturally lazy.

In regard to conflict resolution, the principals rarely believed that the staff must be directed or threatened with punishment in order to get them achieve the school objectives and that the staff rarely sought mainly security. These findings meant the principals' leadership was partially autocratic on conflict resolution and management with an average mean rate of 2.38. Mulder (2015) refers to McGregor's Theory X which starts from the assumption that people are naturally lazy, want to avoid work as much as possible, do not wish to take responsibility, have no ambition and prefer to be supervised. The authoritarian leadership style is therefore the most appropriate leadership style in Theory X. According to this theory, people want to avoid work and they must be continually coerced and controlled. Therefore, the system executed must be laid down in detail. This justifies use of autocratic practices. With an overall mean of 2.45 the principals in Awendo sub-county secondary schools openly submitted to autocratic practices in their leadership.

There was a strong, positive and significant relationship ( $r=0.678$ ,  $n=30$   $p<0.05$ ) between autocratic leadership and students' academic performance in Awendo sub-county secondary schools. Autocratic leadership style accounted for 43.8% of the variation in the students' academic performance as signified by adjusted  $r^2$  of 0.438. The study further sought to establish whether autocratic leadership was a significant predictor of students' academic performance. The regression Equation 2 shows that an increase in one unit in autocratic leadership practice improved students' academic performance by 2.345 units as signified by the coefficient 2.345.

$$Y = -1.444 + 2.345x_2 \quad (2)$$

where Y is the students' academic performance  
 $x_2$  is autocratic leadership style

The SCQASO noted that:

Autocratic leadership style not only ensure establishment of the system but also discipline, efficient time management, high respect of the authority and conformity to standards which are integral components of success in any learning institution. There is no doubt

things will move pretty good in this system blended just a little with democratic practises.

Teachers on the other hand, expressed their fears when extreme autocratic practices were put in place. They said that "there is no doubt performance will go down if the principals in their autocratic practices reduce us to a fiddle". Students pointed out the glaring differences in streams and attributed that to the difference in leadership styles. They noted for a stream in a school, that:

Stream A is kind of some prison but surprisingly, they are always in the lead in any exam. The principal jokingly refers to them as a different school because the mean difference between steam A and the second stream in any exams is always more than 2 points. They are the icons of discipline in the school.

The students further pointed out that even though stream D had the best class teacher, an envy of all streams, the class was always last in any exam. But they were the best in Mathematics, because their mathematics teacher was a no nonsense man.

ANOVA was computed and the results shown that the regression model significantly predicts the students' academic performance ( $F(1, 28) = 21.228$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). This means that autocratic leadership can be relied upon to influence students' academic performance. However, teachers on the other hand, expressed their fears when extreme autocratic practices were put in place. They said that "there is no doubt performance will go down if the principals in their autocratic practices reduce us to a fiddle. If you are working in a tensed environment for example, where the principal can even humiliate in the assembly, before students and your colleagues, for not accomplishing tasks or improper dressing, who will respect you?" Teachers advocate for moderate use of autocratic practices.

### **Influence of the principals' Laissez faire leadership style to students' academic performance**

The responses to the research question: What is the influence of the principals' *laissez faire* leadership styles on students' academic performance in secondary schools in Awendo sub-county? are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Level of principals' laissez faire leadership (n = 30).

Democratic practices	Average mean rating
Decision making	2.92
Communication	2.42
Staff management	3.19
Conflict resolution and management	3.45
Overall mean	3.03

The principals frequently advocate for voting whenever a major decision has to be made and that rarely must it have the approval of each individual or the majority. The average mean rating of 2.92 suggested that the principals practiced Laissez-faire leadership style. Chaudhry and Javed (2012) simply stated that with laissez-faire leadership there is no interface between the leaders and followers, and delay decision-making. Laissez-faire leaders usually allow their subordinate the power to make decisions about their work. The SCQASO asserted that "some principals cannot honestly draw a line between a democratic practise and laissez-faire. Some imagine that they are democratic yet they are laissez-faire". Indeed, it would be impractical and impossible to meet set objectives if one has to solicit for everyone's input.

In terms of communication, the principals rarely send information through email, memos or voicemails compared to meetings and that they occasionally delegated tasks in order to implement new procedure or process. These findings suggest that principals rarely communicated to their staff through informal channels and thus applied partially Laissez-faire leadership practices with an average mean rating of 2.42. Ololube (2013) observed that Laissez-faire leadership could be effective if the leader monitors what is being achieved and communicates this back to the team regularly, something that most leaders ignore. He adds that such leaders avoid responsibilities, do not take care of the needs of the followers, and do not provide feedback.

On staff management, principals rarely allowed the staff to determine what needs to be done and how to do it; frequently allowed the staff to carry out the decisions to do their jobs; frequently shared leadership power with subordinates and that occasionally staff members were responsible for defining their jobs. This meant that principals were moderately Laissez-faire in taking interest in staff development and empowerment with an average mean rating of 3.19.

Frischer (2007) found out that the groups were unproductive if their supervisors avoided exercising control over their subordinates. This indicates that laissez-faire leadership style allows neglect and lack of follow up on activities, which may water down concerns towards effective academic achievements.

For conflict management, the principals occasionally believed the staff had the right to determine their own school objectives and could lead themselves frequently

just as well as the principals. The average mean rating of 3.45 meant the principals handled issues to do with staff conflict resolution and management and were highly *Laissez-faire*. On the whole, the principals in Awendo sub-county secondary schools integrated moderate *Laissez faire* leadership at an overall mean rating of 3.03.

The relationship between *Laissez-faire* leadership style and students' academic performance was a moderate, negative and statistically significant ( $r = -0.435$ ,  $n=30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This means that when a principal is more *Laissez faire* in leadership the academic performance decreases. *Laissez faire* leadership style accounted for 15.7% of the variation in the students' academic performance as adjusted  $r^2$  was 0.157. The regression (Equation 3) suggests that for every increase in one unit in *Laissez faire* leadership style there will be a decrease in performance by 1.423 units.

$$Y = 8.336 - 1.423x_3 \quad (3)$$

where Y is the students' academic performance  
 $x_3$  is laissez faire leadership style

The regression model ( $F(1, 28) = 5.826$ ,  $n=30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) significantly predicts the students' academic performance. The interviewed teachers from a poorly performing school expressed that an absent principal could not blame anybody when there is failure in the system. They asked "why would he expect anybody to care about the results when he is never there?" The SCQASO added that "the principals who use *Laissez-faire* leadership style should not expect any good results for no gain is said to bring no gain". *Laissez-faire* leadership style is not suited for use by principals because complete delegation without follow-up mechanisms creates performance problems. Ensuring affective academic performance requires the involvement of both the superiors and subordinates through collective participation and monitoring of performance for delegation of duties does not imply failure to monitor and follow up progress (Suskevcevic and Blake, 2005).

A teacher from a poorly performing school when interviewed expressed a concern that an absent principal could not blame anybody when there is failure in the system. He added that "the poor results are his own making; we can only do the little we can and keep our peace. The lawlessness that his 'most off-time' brings

here is sickening". That must explain the poor results in the school. However, students in the FGD revealed that they were motivated when they were accorded opportunities to make their own decisions. The acceptance of their opinions and ideas, together with the monitoring of their performance by principals is a healthy way of enhancing academic performance in secondary schools. They, nonetheless, pointed out that excess of that freedom might get them involved in things not useful to their success story.

## CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that whereas a positive increase in democratic and autocratic leadership styles influences students' academic performance directly, a positive change in *Laissez-faire* leadership inversely influences the students' academic performance. Autocratic leadership style accounted for the highest influence on student performance at 43.8%. This was followed by democratic leadership style at 37.4% while *Laissez faire* accounted for only 15.7%.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- i) Given that laissez-faire leadership style of school principals was found to have a negative influence on school performance in secondary schools in Awendo sub-county it is recommended that principals avoid their use of laissez faire leadership style in their management of schools to boost performance.
- ii) The principals of secondary schools should be encouraged to increase use of autocratic style of leadership but moderately apply democratic leadership style in the management of secondary schools to improve their academic attainment.

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