

## Research Article

# The influence of educational leadership on students' academic performance in secondary schools: A case of Itilima district

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of educational leadership on students' academic performance in secondary schools. The researcher applied the descriptive research design, which allowed the in-depth study of the influence of educational leadership on students' academic performance. The study population included 109 respondents, which comprised Heads of Schools (HoSs), Secondary Schools' Academic Masters, discipline masters, and Ward Educational Officers (WEO). The study used a simple random and purposive sampling technique to select a sample size of 52 respondents. The researcher collected data through questionnaires. The data was analyzed by Ms-word and Ms-Excel and presented using tables. The Chi-square test and the T-test were employed in testing the association between leadership styles and students' academic performance. The findings established that democratic leadership styles mostly influence students' academic performance (R-value=0.932), implying that there is a strong and positive significant influence of democratic leadership styles on students' academic achievement at a  $p = 0.004$  level. For the laissez-faire leadership style, the relationship revealed an insignificant negative influence on students' academic performance with a very weak relationship (R-value of 0.1) and was not significant ( $p = 0.072$ ). Also, in the autocratic leadership style, although the relationship was moderate (R = 0.546), the relationship was insignificant with a p-value of 0.08. The results show that most school leaders prefer the use of democratic leadership style. The study recommends that head teachers should mostly use democratic leadership style if they want students to achieve or excel in good academic performance.

**Keywords:** educational leadership; leadership styles

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership is the responsibility of school administrators who strive to create positive change in educational policy to enhance quality education and guiding teachers towards improving educational processes (Nsubuga, 2008). The qualities of a good leader include providing a vision, establishing effective organizational structure, being an effective role model, inspiring and motivating, delegating and empowering, and effective time management (Bank, 2020). School performance is influenced by various kinds of leadership styles employed by heads of schools, which in turn leads to the achievement of school goals and national goals at large (Kambambovu, 2018; Karadag, 2018; Isundwa, 2015; Thomas, 2015). Florence (2012) provided a full-range of leadership theories such as behaviour theory, normative decision theory, cognitive resource theory and path-goal theory. From the theories, the leadership styles were identified: democratic, authoritarian (autocratic) and laissez-faire. Democratic leadership is characterised by coordination, cooperation, and collaboration where people are the primary decision-makers under a democratic management approach (Suraya & Yunus, 2012). Subordinates have a bigger say in decision-making, academic policy, and the execution of teaching systems and procedures, which leads to school discipline and, as a result, academic excellence and overall school achievement. On the other hand no participation in decision-making is allowed under an autocratic leadership style (Yulk, 2005). According to Nsubuga (2008), the autocratic leadership style is the one in which the manager retains the majority of control and makes choices with the goal of ensuring that the staff follows through. Autocratic leaders are detested by the general population because they do not allow followers to take initiative, evaluate their surroundings, or improve themselves. Teachers and students at schools where the leaders use authoritarian leadership style, feel uncomfortable and fearful of the authority which limits their ability to realize their full potential. However, there are times when an autocratic leadership style is suitable, such as when you have all the information you need to solve an issue, there is limited time, and the staff are highly motivated (Ogunyinka & Adedoyin, 2013).

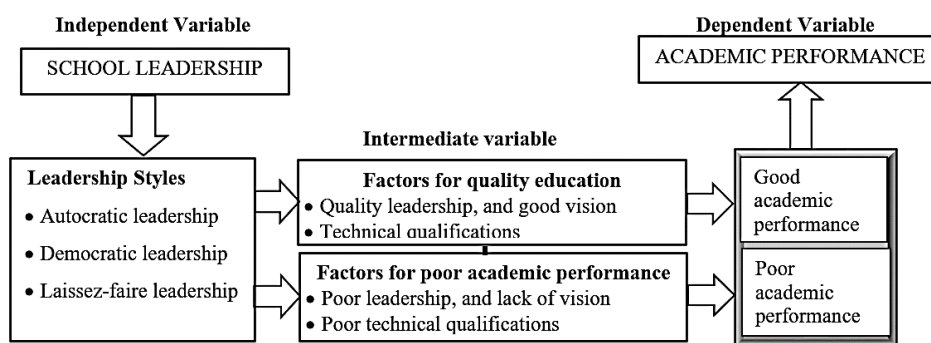
A leader who adopts the laissez-faire leadership style, all the school's affairs will be in his possession, as will the entire staff, in order to ensure that they perform effectively and meet the organization's goals and objectives. Because the leader or head teacher has them involved in the management of the school, subordinates are empowered to work with freedom and free will. This has a positive impact on students' academic performance (Ogunyinka & Adedoyin, 2013). The leadership style that is most effective depends on the characteristics of the situation and of the subordinates, although in most instances, leaders must be flexible and adopt whichever style is called for (Adeyemi & Bolarinwa, 2013).

In some schools, particularly community secondary schools (Ward Secondary Schools), majority of pupils do not perform well in their exams, preventing them from continuing their studies resulting in disappointing summative evaluation outcomes (Laddunuri, 2012). However, experience and records have proven that the leadership style of the schools' head-teacher has a direct impact on the schools' overall success, because both instructors and pupils are expected to perform under the schools' leadership (Florence, 2012). Effective leaders have been found to create school climates and cultures that encourage both students and instructors, resulting in improved teaching and learning settings that are more conducive to higher levels of academic accomplishment for students. Furthermore, in most school systems, a school leader is obliged by systemic authorities to increase student learning and is held accountable for doing so by establishing shared visions for motivating and energizing teachers and students (Ross & Gray, 2006).

Tilley and Woodthorpe (2011) asserted that among the key factors that affect academic achievement at schools is leadership style. Also, the study by Akaro (2017) found that the education system in many parts of the world is managed poorly and administered inefficiently, resulting in unsatisfactory students' academic performance. Tanzania has been witnessing a decline in academic achievement levels, which requires serious attention to resolve the problem. Much efforts have been made to increase the students enrolment. However, what is persistently happening in education sector poses a need for research to explore the ways leadership styles influence students' academic performance in Tanzania secondary schools hence the necessity for this study. This study was guided by the assumption that there is a direct relationship between educational leadership and students academic performance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The conceptual framework in **Figure 1** indicates the dependent variable (academic performance) which is depending on the independent variable (education leadership). Education leadership depends on the leadership styles applied by educational leaders to perform their duties; these styles are autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, and laissez-faire leadership. Also, the conceptual framework includes intermediate variables (quality leadership, and technical qualification).



**Figure 1.** Conceptual Framework  
Source: Researchers' Construction

## 3. RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. The study used stratified and purposive sampling technique to select a sample size of 52 respondents from a population size of 109 respondents in Itilima district, the district that has been performing poorly in recent years. The study employed questionnaires as a primary data collection method and documentary review as a secondary data collection method. The questionnaires with Likert scale questions were administered to the teachers of the selected secondary schools.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Demographic Information of the Respondents

**Table 1** presents the personal information of the respondents such as gender, education level and age.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information of the Respondents (n = 52)

Variable	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Gender		
Male	38	73
Female	14	27
Total	52	100
Educational level		
Certificate	-	-
Diploma	20	38
Degree	30	58
Post-graduate	2	4
Total	52	100
Age		
Below 30 years	20	38
31-40 years	18	35
41-50 years	8	15
Above 51 years	6	12

Total	52	100
Working experience		
Below 5 years	5	10
6–10 years	19	35
11 years +	28	55
Total	52	100
Type of Leadership		
Authoritarian	5	10
Democratic	30	58
Laissez Faire	17	32
Total	52	100

Source: Field Data, 2021

**Table 1** indicates the gender attribute that assisted the researcher to understand the gender distribution in the selected sample. The findings show that most of the respondents 73% (38) were males, and 27% (14) of the respondents, were females. The findings revealed the participation of both males and females in the study with males exceeding in number. Also, the findings from **Table 1** indicate that most of the respondents 58% (30) had a bachelor's degree in education followed by 38% (20) of respondents having a diploma in education, and 4% (2) of respondents having a post-graduate. This implies that most of the respondents who participated in this study had the necessary academic qualifications to be employed in the teaching profession and had varying levels of educational qualification. Therefore, these findings reveal that the participants have satisfactory understanding of the topic in discussion hence were able to provide their comments about the influence of educational leadership on students' academic performance.

Moreover, the findings from **Table 1** shows that the majority of the respondents 38% (20) were below 30 years of age; this was closely followed by 35% (18) of respondents whose age group was 31-40 years while 15% (8) of respondents were between 41-50 years, and another 12% (6) of respondents were 51 years and above. These results show that majority of the respondents were aged below 30 years, and between 31-40 years old. This indicates that a good number of teachers who took part in this study had experience that enabled them to understand the influence of educational leadership on students' academic performance. In addition, the findings from table 1 revealed that majority of teachers had experience of 11 years and above (55%) which indicated that a good number of teachers who took part in this study have taught for a period of more than 6 years, and they are assumed to have enough experience to understand the influence of educational leadership on students' academic performance.

Also, findings in **Table 1**, shows that majority of school leaders 58% (30) reported utilizing a democratic leadership style. Few school leaders 32% (17) use laissez-faire, and 10% (5) use autocratic leadership styles. The findings imply that, this form of leadership is viewed as a valuable instrument for empowerment, teamwork, and collaboration. It has been proven that when teachers are involved in the decision-making process, the school performance is improved. The findings support a study by Allen (2009), which discovered that leaders use multiple leadership styles to address the many scenarios that happen in the school, which can alter depending on the circumstances. The democratic leadership approach enables a head teacher to direct tasks at diverse ability levels and in a variety of scenarios. A good leader may change his leadership style to meet the changing needs of the firm and its employees. Furthermore, due to diverse situational elements emerging from the subjects, the leaders choose the style to deploy depending on the situation. He goes on to say that a smart leader must always strategize and think of a method to overcome any problem by adopting a variety of leadership styles. As a result, leaders adopt multiple leadership styles based on the situation in order to minimize bias in leadership.

#### 4.2 The Influence of Educational Leadership to Students' Academic Performance

**Table 2.** The Relationship between School Heads' Leadership Styles and Students' Academic Performance

S/ N	Performance	Teachers		Head Teachers		Sum of Mean average	Mean sum Rank	Decision
		Mean	Rank	Mean	Rank			
1	I prefer democratic leadership to bring academic performance	3.89	1	4.1	1	4.0	1	Agree
2	Quality leadership, good vision, and good technical qualifications of teachers	3.76	4	4.2	1	4.1	1	Agree
3	The system of administration is top-down	3.33	2	3.48	2	3.4	3	Neutral
4	I prefer authoritarian leadership to bring academic performance	2.9	6	2.85	6	2.9	6	Disagree
5	I prefer laissez-faire leadership to bring academic performance	2.38	7	2.21	7	2.3	7	Disagree
6	Ordinary teachers are involved in making decisions	3.72	1	3.93	4	4.0	2	agree
7	Head-teachers' ability to work harmoniously with teachers (student academic performance is dependent on the leadership style I use)	3.89	3	3.79	4	4	2	Agree

Source: Field Data, 2021

Although the researcher in this case regarded performance in the context of the overall school academic mean score, the study sought to compare it with the prevailing style of leadership. Both head teachers were provided with this statement: "Student academic performance is dependent on the leadership style I use." About 87% of respondents strongly agree that academic performance is dependent on teachers' or head teachers' leadership styles. Then, this variable was analyzed by using descriptive statistics analysis of the overall means of other suitable indicators of academic performance employed by the schools' head in the researched schools. Findings in table 2 shows that overall mean responses for both

teachers and head teachers showed that majority of the teachers prefer not to use authoritarian leadership (2.9) and laissez-faire leadership (2.3) to improve academic performance.

Also, based on the results in **Table 2**, the overall mean responses for the academic performance indicators of both teachers and head teachers showed that majority of the teachers prefer democratic leadership to achieve academic performance (4.0). This is supported by the majority of teachers who indicated that ordinary teachers are involved in making decisions (4.0) and that quality leadership, good vision, and good technical qualifications of teachers are key to academic performance in schools (4.0). Also, findings revealed that head teachers' ability to work harmoniously with teachers (student academic performance is dependent on the leadership style I use) has very high influences (4.0) on student academic performance, meaning that head teachers' leadership styles play a very good role either positively or negatively depending on different strengths. To justify the significance level of the variables with respect to leadership styles, analysis of variance statistical significance Confidence Interval (CI) 95% at P-values  $\leq 0.05$  using Mann-Whitney U-Test for differences between groups (leadership styles) to students' academic indicators the results in table 3 were noted.

Martin (2001) is also consistent in his assertion that the national examinations target provides a common measure of students' achievement for all previous examinations and paints a picture of a school that is determined to perform and has put in place the necessary measures to ensure that they do so, thus serving as an academic indicator. The achievement of national examination targets also demonstrates a well-coordinated collaboration between teachers and students under the direction of a good head teacher. The findings are similar to the study by Devi & Subiyantoro (2021) who suggest that educational leaders should be involved in policy creation with regard to leadership issues in order to have a control over group activity. This is because if the leader does not assist in decision-making, the group lacks direction (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012).

Teachers do not want to be in a position of commanding authority since it lowers their morale and causes them to neglect their responsibilities. To get things done, autocratic leaders use coercion which discourages teachers from performing well hence poor performance. The autocratic head teachers were also task-oriented leaders who had to do whatever it was necessary to complete the task, regardless of the staff's predicament. Furthermore, according to documentary evidence in a report by Nsubuga (2005), teachers despise severe administrators who consistently cause students' academic records to deteriorate. On the other hand, the democratic leadership style of head teachers has a favorable influence on pupils' academic performance.

The study also investigated the effects of democratic, laissez-faire, and authoritarian leadership styles on student performance. The findings demonstrate that autocratic leadership styles have a detrimental impact on academic attainment because they use a severe leadership style that is disliked by instructors. It implies that the employment of more authoritarian approaches has a negative impact on student academic achievement. Charlton (2000) discovered that head teachers who use severe control tactics are more likely to meet resistance from students and teachers, as well as an increase in indiscipline, because they (teachers and students) tend to criticize authoritarian measures deployed.

**Table 3.** Leadership Style Influence on Students' Performance

Leadership styles	Respondents n=52	
	Pearson Chi-Square (R)	P-values at 95% CI (Asymp. Sig. at $p \leq 0.05$ (2- tailed)
Democratic	0.932	0.004
Laissez-faire	0.101	0.072
Autocratic	-0.546	0.081

Source: Field Data, 2021

The results in **Table 3** indicate that democratic leadership styles influence students' academic performance due to the fact that their chi-square R-value is 0.932. Because the R-value is close to one, this implies that democratic leadership has a strong and positive influence on students' academic performance. Additionally, the relationship is also significant at the  $p 0.004$  level. In the case of the laissez-faire leadership style, the results showed that it also positively influences students' academic performances as the R-value is positive 0.101 and not significant ( $p=0.072$ ).

Although it is positive, the relationship is very weak. The laissez-faire head teacher tries to give away his powers and does not follow up on progress. In most cases, laissez-faire head teachers do not prompt good academic performance because they are too liberal and flexible. This is why their overall performance is often poor. The findings revealed that an autocratic leadership style strongly ( $R=0.546$ ) influences students' academic achievement, but the relationship is insignificant with a p-value of 0.081. The result indicated that the autocratic leadership style negatively influences academic achievement because the r value is negative as they adopt harsh leadership styles that are widely detested by teachers and students alike. It implies that the more autocratic leadership styles are used, the poorer the influence on academic achievement will be. The findings are similar to the study by Pepper & Thomas (2017) which found that there is direct effect of leadership in school performance.

With excellent leadership, everyone is more likely to be active, and where everyone is involved, responsibility is more observed. Being accountable necessitates a high level of performance. This is extremely crucial when it comes to academic development, particularly when it comes to the management of student preparation time and co-curricular activities. Teachers pointed out that proper consultation has improved cooperation between students, teachers, head teachers, and parents, as an example of how this has influenced performance. As a result, the head teacher who adopts a bottom-up strategy is more likely to succeed because when correctly implemented, democratic leadership can result in improved school performance. This is similar to the study by Chuma, (2015) who found that academic performance has been influenced by supporting and encouraging teamwork, good cooperation, and other elements such as good remuneration for all employees, staff motivation, and student motivation. In order for a democratically oriented head teacher to function well, the school must have a competent administration that is willing to implement ideas that will lead to good academic accomplishment as well as a collaborative decision-making system at all levels of the school.

Finally, the study found that, while there is a favourable association that is nonetheless weak, laissez-faire leadership styles have no substantial impact on students' academic achievement. This is probably because those who employ this technique fail to follow up and as they delegate responsibilities, performance suffers and/or no impact is observed. It is not administratively healthy to leave everything to the mercy of the subordinates, some of whom may lack the essential skills and competence to do the assignment. Others, particularly young and inexperienced teachers, may just not like to work unless they are monitored. The findings back up Nsubuga's (2005) research, which revealed that groups were less productive when supervisors avoided exercising control over their subordinates. This suggests that a laissez-faire leadership style allows for activity neglect and a lack of follow-up, potentially diluting concerns about successful student academic achievement. It should be noted that, while instructors are responsible for making academic judgments, the head teacher is responsible for overseeing and approving those decisions because he or she is a school leader. Whatever goes wrong, the leader must be held accountable. Within these parameters, the school leader should let already competent and motivated subordinates execute their responsibilities in the way they see fit, but for staff who require orders to get through challenging situations, laissez-faire approach can leave them leaderless and powerless.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The ongoing educational reforms require educational leaders who can work in democratic and participative ways in order to build successful relationships to ensure effective delivery of quality education. It is thus apparent from this study that there is a significant relationship between leadership styles (democratic) and school performance and that if schools hope to operate as successful entities; leaders need to adopt contingency leadership style that observes the educational situations and take cognizance of the diverse needs of all stakeholders to support academic performance in secondary schools.

## RECOMMENDATION

This study has established that students' academic performance in schools is positively related to the leadership style employed by secondary school head teachers. It is therefore recommended that the head teachers of secondary schools in particular be encouraged to use democratic style of leadership in the management of secondary schools. The study also recommends that there is a need for the government to put more endeavour in ensuring that seminars on school leadership are provided consecutively to educational leaders so as to improve schools' leadership and leadership styles towards good students' academic performance. Moreover, the government should train educational leaders leaving behind the notion of demoting educational leaders, thinking that it is the only weapon to improve students' academic results. In order to promote a democratic leadership style in schools, head teachers should do away with top-down decision-making processes, distribute the responsibility and power for leadership widely throughout the school, share decision-making powers with staff, and allow staff to manage their own decision-making committees.

## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors discussed the results and contributed to from the start to final manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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