



An Investigation into The Impact of Leadership Styles on Teacher Performance in The Context of Public High Schools in Burundi

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Abstract- School leadership style is widely regarded as a decisive influence on teacher performance, yet empirical evidence from Burundian public schools has been almost entirely absent from the literature. This study examined how leadership styles adopted by public high school principals affect teacher performance in Burundi and proposed recommendations for school leadership improvement. Three research aims guided the study: (1) to assess teachers' and principals' perceptions of leadership styles and teacher achievement; (2) to analyze the relationship between principals' leadership styles and teacher performance; and (3) to recommend leadership styles that would improve public school performance. A descriptive survey design was employed with principals and teachers as the target population across 20 randomly selected public high schools in the Educational District of Bujumbura City (EDBC), Burundi. Using Nassiuma's formula, a sample of 150 respondents was drawn from an accessible population of 452. Quantitative data were collected using structured Likert-scale questionnaires and analyzed in SPSS v.22 using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentages, standard deviations) and Pearson correlation; qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with school principals and analyzed thematically. A pilot study pre-tested the validity and reliability of the research instruments. Results showed that the democratic leadership style was the least practiced, with the lowest mean of 1.525, while laissez-faire ($M = 2.5608$) and, most prominently, autocratic leadership ($M = 2.725$) were the most commonly practiced styles. Leadership style overall was significantly associated with teacher performance ($r = 0.739^{**}$), with democratic leadership showing a very strong positive correlation with performance ($r = 0.957^{**}$), laissez-faire a moderate correlation ($r = 0.523^{**}$), and autocratic leadership only a weak correlation ($r = 0.378^{**}$). Thematic analysis of principal interviews identified autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and training as the dominant themes, with strictness, threat, inclusivity, autonomy, and the absence of formal leadership training recurring across principals' accounts. The study concludes that autocratic leadership practices should be discouraged as they contribute to poor teacher performance, and recommends mandatory leadership training for all school principals together with the promotion of democratic leadership as the style most conducive to a productive school environment, while cautioning that leadership style alone is insufficient without adequate principal training. Further comparative research across Eastern African countries is recommended to establish the wider regional generalizability of these findings.

Keywords: Leadership Styles; Teacher Performance; Autocratic Leadership; Democratic Leadership; Laissez-Faire Leadership; School Principals; Burundi; Educational Leadership

I. Introduction

In the developing world, the most vital strategy to develop a society is to educate a nation (Aikman and Unterhalter, 2005), and educating everyone remains a substantial challenge that many countries face today (Rena and Tedla, 2017). The success and realization of such an educational strategy, however, depends significantly on the leadership styles school principals choose to adopt (Ibrahim and Orodho, 2014; Drewziecka and Roczniowska, 2018), since human resource studies show that a country's high educational standards,



complemented by efficient school administration, do more to determine national human resource development than material assets alone (Asrar-ul-Haq and Kuchinke, 2016). School leadership and its effect on teacher performance has accordingly become one of the most researched subjects in global educational scholarship (Sulaiman, 2009; Muhammad, 2009), with numerous studies confirming that principals' leadership styles and behavior patterns are critical factors shaping both teacher and school performance (Bryman, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Haque et al., 2015; Younas et al., 2022; Adeyemi, 2010; Imhangbe et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2020).

Most existing research on leadership style and job performance, however, has been conducted in the developed world rather than in developing countries such as Burundi (Oner, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004; Bass, 1999), and evidence specifically within the educational sphere remains comparatively limited (Leithwood et al., 1999). Among the few leadership studies conducted in Eastern Africa, a study at universities in Mogadishu, Somalia, found that teachers preferred a democratic leadership style over an autocratic one, even though most schools were led autocratically (Ali et al., 2013), while a study across Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda found that democratic leadership positively affected teacher job performance and satisfaction, with autocratic leadership showing the opposite effect (Simparingoma, 2017). Despite education reform across Eastern Africa aimed at improving academic performance, high school performance in the region has continued to decline: Tanzanian high school results were described as “disastrous and shocking” after the 2012 national examination failure rate rose to 61% from 46% the previous year (Uwezo, 2013).

In Burundi specifically, despite the Ministry of Education's 2013 reform of the education system to improve academic performance (Ibrahim and Orodho, 2014; MoE, 2013; Umugiraneza et al., 2017), high school performance and student dropout have remained a persistent challenge. In 2019, of the 99% of candidates who sat the national examination, only 14% achieved a score above 50% (MENRS, 2019), and more than 160,000 students were at risk of dropping out of school (UNOCHA, 2021). This poor performance has been linked to poor leadership styles (the failure to effectively align critical objectives and operational necessities with school staff) and a lack of principal training (Freya, 2017; Apple, 2015; Darder et al., 2016; Giroux, 2010; McLaren, 2016; Basheer et al., 2019). No prior study had examined the relationship between school leadership and school performance specifically within Burundian public schools, motivating this study's central aim: to examine how leadership styles adopted by public high school principals affect teacher performance in Burundi and to suggest recommendations for school leadership improvement. Three specific research aims followed: (1) to assess teachers' perceptions and principals' perspectives regarding leadership styles and teacher achievement; (2) to analyze the relationship between principals' leadership styles and teacher performance; and (3) to suggest leadership styles that would improve public school performance.

II. Literature Review And Theoretical Framework

School leadership is understood here as the process through which principals manage, design, and develop effective resources to achieve educational objectives (Okumbe, 2001), playing a vital role in policy-making and the smooth functioning of school activities (Wilmore, 2002). Two theoretical lenses inform the analysis. Implicit and cognitive leadership theory holds that leaders form representative mental models of their followers, studying and analyzing teachers' behavior to guide improvement (Ibrahim and Al-Taneji, 2013; Ronfeldt et al., 2015). John Maxwell's five-levels-of-leadership theory situates school principals as level-three leaders (fit managers with high organizational skill effectively achieving goals) progressing toward level-four and level-five leadership as they more fully equip themselves and their staff to accomplish shared objectives (Mahdy, 2016; Nyenyembe et al., 2016).



Three leadership styles structure the empirical analysis. The democratic (participative) style is characterized by cooperation and shared decision-making, with the leader integrated within the team and seeking followers' opinions, promoting social equality and follower interest (Ukaidi, 2016; Mullins, 2005); it is documented as predominant in many successful schools and businesses, decentralizing control and authority (Okumbe, 1998; Sultan, 2017; Northouse, 2018), and is considered particularly effective in highly aligned and motivated schools (Omeke and Onah, 2011). The laissez-faire style grants employees full freedom with minimal supervision or guidance, allowing teachers to set their own goals and solve their own problems (Mbiti, 2007; Wu and Shiu, 2009; Igwe et al., 2017); while this can foster mistrust and poor academic achievement where staff require direction (Ekmekci and Tosunoglu, 2016), it can also be beneficial in institutions with enthusiastic, mature staff capable of working autonomously (Hackman and Johnson, 2009). The autocratic style vests decision-making authority entirely in the leader, who gives instructions without consultation, rarely communicates, and does not delegate (Smylie and Jack, 1990; Hoy and Miskel, 1992; John, 2002; Gyasi et al., 2016); it is nonetheless considered valuable for instilling discipline in some developing-country contexts (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 2004) and can be more effective than other styles in emergency situations requiring rapid decision-making (Bhoomireddy, 2004; Goel, 2005; Crum and Sherman, 2008).

Empirical studies outside the Eastern African region consistently favor democratic leadership. In China, a study of 539 teachers found that 90% of schools operated under a democratic leadership style, with principals' leadership and decision-making style significantly affecting teacher performance (Hui, 2013). In Israel, a study of 745 teachers found that principals' transformational leadership combined with a democratic style had direct and indirect positive effects on teachers' job performance (Bogler, 2001). Three Nigerian studies, sampling between 280 and 1,260 teachers, similarly found that democratic leadership enhanced teachers' job satisfaction and performance, and recommended its wider adoption in both primary and secondary schools (C and A, 2012; Kiboss and Jemiryott, 2014; Adeyemi and Bolarinwa, 2013). Within the Eastern African region, a Tanzanian study of 200 teachers across 20 schools found democratic leadership prevalent in the best-performing schools and autocratic leadership more dominant in poor-performing ones (Machumu and Kaitila, 2014); a Kenyan study of 150 schools found autocratic and laissez-faire leadership negatively affecting national examination performance (Ibrahim and Orodho, 2014); an Eritrean study attributed declining school performance to inexperienced, unskilled principals rather than resource constraints (Namirembe, 2005; Mengesha and Tessema, 2019); and Ugandan studies found that principals' management training and teacher participation in decision-making were each positively associated with performance (Odubuker, 2007; Mpierwe, 2007). No equivalent empirical study had previously been conducted within Burundian schools, and studies of leadership style are considerably more developed in Western contexts than in developing countries such as Burundi (Cloete et al., 2018; Bennell and Mukyamuzi, 2005), the gap this study addresses. The literature further indicates that leadership style alone is insufficient to improve school performance without adequate principal training (Basheer et al., 2019; Odubuker, 2007), with both principals and teachers ideally receiving parallel professional development opportunities (Caldwell, 2014; Ibrahim and Al-Taneji, 2013).

III. Materials And Methods

A descriptive survey design was employed, suited to exploring the implications of principals' leadership style on teacher effectiveness by collecting information on attitudes, behaviors, and opinions and summarizing this information for interpretation (Orodho, 2009). The study was conducted in the Educational District of Bujumbura City (EDBC), Burundi, purposively selected as a district with a high concentration of schools and persistent poor performance over the preceding five years, and as the provincial



representative district at the national level. The target population comprised 20 principals and 432 teachers across the EDBC's public high schools. Sample size was calculated using Nassiuma's (2000) formula, $n = NC^2 / (C^2 + (N-1)e^2)$, applied to an accessible population of 452 permanent academic employees with a coefficient of variance of 30% and a standard error of 2%, yielding a sample of 150 participants ($n = 452 \times 0.09 / (0.09 + 451 \times 0.0004) = 150.44$). Simple random sampling was used to select the overall sample, with purposive sampling applied to select one principal and six to seven full-time teachers from each of the 20 sampled schools.

Both primary and secondary data were used. Primary quantitative data were collected via structured Google Forms questionnaires using a three-point Likert scale (1 = disagree, 2 = sometimes, 3 = agree), covering items on democratic, laissez-faire, and autocratic leadership practices and on teacher performance; primary qualitative data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with school principals, audio-recorded with consent. A pilot study involving two principals and six teachers from two neighboring, non-sampled schools pre-tested the instruments, with adjustments made on the supervisor's advice to improve validity; reliability was assessed using a test-retest method with a two-week interval, correlated via the Spearman-Brown formula. Quantitative data were analyzed in SPSS version 22 using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages) and Pearson correlation to test the relationship between leadership style and teacher performance; qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). Ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's supervisor and formal written permission from EDBC prior to data collection; participation was voluntary, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through coded identifiers and password-protected data storage, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, consistent with British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines.

IV. Results

1. Respondent Demographics

All 150 sampled respondents fully participated, yielding a response rate above the 70% scientifically recommended threshold for satisfactory results (Sataloff et al., 2021). Female respondents made up 63.3% of the sample and men 36.7%, while 75% of principals specifically were men, a pattern consistent with broader regional dynamics in women's participation in leadership roles (AFRABU, 2016; Connell and James, 2005). Age distribution showed 60% of respondents under 40 years old (20% under 30, 40% aged 31–40), with 22% aged 41–50 and 18% over 50. Regarding qualifications, 83.3% of respondents held a Bachelor's degree, 12.7% a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, and 4% a Master's degree, with no respondent holding a doctorate. Tenure at current school was predominantly short: 60% of principals and 50% of teachers had served between one and five years, 25% of principals and 23.8% of teachers six to ten years, 10% of principals and 16.2% of teachers eleven to fifteen years, and 5% of principals and 10% of teachers more than sixteen years.

2. Leadership Styles Practiced In Edbc Schools

Descriptive analysis of the three leadership styles showed a clear ordering (Table 1). The democratic leadership style was the least practiced, with 57% of respondents disagreeing with statements describing its use and an overall low mean of 1.525, indicating that teachers were rarely involved in school decision-making or had their interests thoughtfully considered. The laissez-faire style was moderately practiced, with 63% of respondents agreeing with related statements and a mean of 2.5608, indicating teachers were frequently left to make decisions with limited guidance. The autocratic style was the most prevalent by a clear margin, with 77% of respondents agreeing with statements describing strict, top-



down, uncommunicative principal behavior and the highest mean of 2.725, directly answering the study's first research question regarding the predominant leadership style in Burundian public high schools.

Table 1. Descriptive means for leadership styles practiced and teacher performance in EDBC schools.

Leadership style	Mean (M)	Agreement level	Interpretation
Autocratic	2.725	77% agreement	Most practiced style
Laissez-faire	2.5608	63% agreement	Moderately practiced
Democratic	1.525	10% in favor	Least practiced

Teacher performance (under prevailing styles)

3. 65% Disagreement With High-Performance Statements

Low overall performance

4. Relationship Between Leadership Style And Teacher Performance

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 2) showed that leadership style overall was significantly associated with teacher performance ($r = 0.739^{**}$). Disaggregated by style, democratic leadership showed a very strong positive correlation with teacher performance ($r = 0.957^{**}$, $p < .01$), laissez-faire leadership a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.523^{**}$), and autocratic leadership only a weak correlation ($r = 0.378^{**}$), indicating that the style most commonly practiced in EDBC schools was also the style least strongly associated with strong teacher performance.

Table 2. Pearson correlation coefficients between leadership styles and teacher performance ($** p < .01$).

Leadership style	Correlation with teacher performance (r)	Strength of association
Democratic	0.957**	Very strong
Laissez-faire	0.523**	Moderate
Autocratic	0.378**	Weak
Leadership style (overall)	0.739**	Strong

5. Qualitative Findings: Principal Interviews

Thematic analysis of principal interviews identified four themes: autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, and training. Under autocratic leadership, principals described strictness as prevalent and, in their view, necessary: “about 80% of the principals in this district lead their schools autocratically with strict rules so that teachers can comply with...” (P1), and “Burundian teachers never listen; they only listen to strict and authoritarian school principals...” (P2). Some principals acknowledged using intimidation: “some principals intimidate teachers and threaten them that if they don't produce results..., they would be punished or even fired..., teachers are always in fear and I believe this negatively affects teacher performance...” (P3).

Under democratic leadership, principals who practiced this style reported positive results: “I always involve my teachers whenever there is a decision to make, this makes my job easy...” (P5), though one principal noted a risk of being “taken for granted” by teachers under reduced authority (P6), and another observed that “democratic leadership is good only to those schools that are already developed with systems in place...” (P7). Under laissez-faire leadership, one principal warned directly against the style: “I used laissez-faire style and my teachers became lazy and I would fight with them to get the tasks done...” (P9). Under the training theme, principals consistently identified the absence of formal leadership training as a root cause of poor performance: “what we lack is training, I believe all principals should be thoroughly trained together with teachers about leadership styles...”



(P10); “without training principals will always use wrong styles which negatively affects school performance...” (P11); and “poor academic performance is a sign of principal incompetency due to insufficient leadership training...” (P12).

V. Discussion

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings converge on a consistent picture: autocratic leadership predominates in EDBC public high schools, yet is the style least strongly associated with strong teacher performance, while democratic leadership (the style most strongly associated with performance) is practiced least. This pattern is consistent with prior research in China, Israel, and Nigeria linking democratic leadership to enhanced teacher performance and job satisfaction (Hui, 2013; Bogler, 2001; C and A, 2012), and directly mirrors findings from Tanzania, where the best-performing schools were democratically led and poor-performing schools were more often autocratically led (Machumu and Kaitila, 2014). The interview data suggest a plausible mechanism: teachers working under autocratic principals described feeling discouraged, disrespected, and unappreciated, consistent with theoretical accounts linking authoritarian leadership to lower job satisfaction and, in turn, poorer performance (Yukl, 1994; Eliezer, 2011).

The demographic finding that 60% of teachers were under 40 years old is relevant to interpreting the prevalence of autocratic leadership, since research suggests employers tend to exercise more authoritarian leadership with younger employees (Adegoke, 2018); as EDBC's teaching workforce ages, a gradual shift away from autocratic leadership might plausibly be expected even without deliberate policy intervention, though this study's cross-sectional design cannot confirm this. Notably, while democratic leadership showed the strongest association with teacher performance, principals themselves cautioned that its effectiveness depends on institutional readiness; one principal explicitly noted that democratic leadership suits already-developed schools with systems in place, while another observed that reduced authority without adequate structure risked being “taken for granted” by teachers. This qualifies a straightforward recommendation to adopt democratic leadership universally and points instead toward leadership training as a necessary precondition, a conclusion also supported by the finding that laissez-faire leadership, though only moderately practiced, was associated with teacher performance to a greater degree than autocratic leadership despite lacking active guidance — suggesting that the specific harm of autocratic leadership in this context lies less in the absence of active direction than in its combination with strict, uncommunicative, and at times intimidating practice.

These findings support the view, consistent across the reviewed literature spanning both developed and developing contexts, that leadership style alone is insufficient to guarantee strong school performance: principals require structured professional development to know when, how, and where to apply particular leadership styles appropriately (Armstrong, 2004; Basheer et al., 2019). The absence of any documented prior research on school leadership and performance specifically within Burundian public schools (Bennell and Mukyamuzi, 2005) means this study's findings provide a first empirical benchmark for the country, corroborating the Ministry of Education's own 2005 acknowledgment that the education system required reform (Obura, 2008) while identifying leadership style and principal training, specifically, as levers available for improvement.

Recommendations

For the autocratic leadership style, school principals should minimize its use in managing schools, since it prevents teachers from giving their best in the classroom and contributes to poor performance; where it must be used, principals should receive training in applying it more flexibly and tolerantly, in ways that build teacher confidence rather than provoke fear or resentment. For the democratic leadership style, qualified leadership-field personnel



should train all school principals in its best practices and application, ideally coordinated by an EDBC education officer in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and made compulsory for all principals, so that its demonstrated benefits for teacher performance are realized rather than left unrealized through unfamiliarity or misapplication. For the laissez-faire leadership style, principals who wish to use it should do so selectively, reserving it for highly skilled and experienced teachers who require less supervision and are intrinsically driven to succeed. More broadly, leadership training should be treated as a precondition for, rather than a substitute for, the choice of leadership style itself.

VI. Limitations And Future Research

This study's principal limitation is its geographic and institutional scope: it was conducted as a case study within a single educational district (EDBC) in Burundi's largest city, and its findings may not generalize to rural districts or to other Eastern African education systems without further verification. Data collection also encountered scheduling constraints arising from principals' competing administrative commitments, and the self-report nature of both the questionnaire and interview data raises the possibility of social-desirability bias, particularly among principals describing their own leadership practices. Future research should extend this study in several directions: more extensive investigation of other factors affecting school performance, such as teacher age, gender, and experience; comparative studies across other East African countries to establish whether these findings generalize regionally; research into emerging leadership approaches that are more democratic and less autocratic as educational contexts continue to evolve; and complementary research examining student academic performance directly, alongside teacher performance, to close the loop between leadership style and ultimate educational outcomes.

VII. Conclusion

This study examined how leadership styles adopted by public high school principals affect teacher performance in Burundi. The evidence shows that autocratic leadership is the predominant style practiced in EDBC public high schools, that democratic leadership (though the style most strongly associated with teacher performance) is the least practiced, and that leadership style overall is significantly associated with teacher performance. Autocratic leadership practices should be discouraged given their weak association with strong performance and their documented effects on teacher morale, while democratic leadership should be actively promoted as the style most conducive to a productive school environment. However, leadership style alone is not sufficient: the qualitative findings make clear that the absence of structured leadership training for principals is itself a root cause of poor teacher performance, regardless of which style is nominally adopted. Mandatory, coordinated leadership training for all school principals, alongside a deliberate institutional shift toward democratic practice, offers the most direct evidence-based path to improved teacher performance in Burundian public high schools, with further comparative research needed to establish whether these findings hold across the wider Eastern African region.

Declarations

- **Funding.** This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.
- **Conflict of Interest.** The authors declare no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.
- **Ethical Approval.** The study received ethical clearance from the researcher's supervisor prior to data collection, together with formal written permission



from the Educational District of Bujumbura City (EDBC). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of anonymity and confidentiality and informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, consistent with British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines.

- **Data Availability Statement.** The questionnaire and interview datasets generated and analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request, subject to the confidentiality undertakings given to participants and the Educational District of Bujumbura City.
- **CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement.** Prudence Ndungutse-Mubiri: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Shakhnoza Shamsuddinova: Supervision, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.
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