



## School Leadership and Teacher Performance Evidence from Public Schools in Kenya

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between school leadership practices and teacher performance in Kenyan public schools, investigating how principals' leadership approaches influence instructional quality, professional commitment, and student learning outcomes. Utilizing a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from 520 teachers and 65 principals across public secondary schools in five Kenyan counties through surveys, interviews, and performance evaluations. Quantitative analysis employed hierarchical linear modeling to account for nested data structures, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify leadership practices impacting teacher effectiveness. Findings reveal significant positive associations between transformational and instructional leadership styles and various teacher performance indicators, with effect sizes ranging from moderate to substantial. Key mediating factors include professional development opportunities, collaborative cultures, resource allocation, and performance feedback mechanisms. However, challenges persist including inadequate leadership training, resource constraints, excessive administrative burdens, and limited autonomy in decision-making processes. This research contributes empirical evidence from an African context regarding leadership-performance relationships while providing practical recommendations for

## INTRODUCTION

Educational leadership has emerged as a critical determinant of school effectiveness and student achievement, with substantial research evidence demonstrating that principal leadership practices significantly influence organizational climate, teacher motivation, instructional quality, and ultimately learning outcomes. The recognition that school leaders serve as pivotal agents of educational improvement has intensified global interest in understanding which leadership approaches prove most effective in diverse contexts and what mechanisms mediate leadership's influence on teaching and learning. According to Leithwood et al. (2020), school leadership represents the second most important school-level factor affecting student achievement after classroom instruction itself, accounting for approximately 25% of total school effects on learning. This substantial impact occurs primarily through indirect pathways, as leaders shape conditions enabling effective teaching rather than directly influencing student learning (Muhsyanur and Mustapha, 2023).

Kenya's education system faces distinctive challenges that make understanding leadership-performance relationships particularly important for policy and practice. Following the introduction of free primary education in 2003 and subsidized secondary education in 2008, Kenyan schools experienced dramatic enrollment increases that strained infrastructure, human resources, and instructional quality. Principals navigate complex responsibilities including managing large student populations, addressing resource scarcity, maintaining community relations, ensuring examination performance, and implementing frequently changing national policies. Okumbe (2018) and (Kartini and Muhsyanur, 2025) argues that Kenyan school leaders operate within highly centralized systems that limit local autonomy while simultaneously holding principals accountable for outcomes largely determined by factors beyond their control. Understanding how effective leaders navigate these constraints to support teacher performance becomes essential for strengthening educational quality.

Theoretical frameworks examining leadership-performance relationships draw upon multiple disciplinary perspectives including organizational behavior, educational psychology, and management science. Transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes leaders' capacity to inspire shared vision, provide intellectual stimulation, offer individualized support, and model professional values, has dominated educational leadership research over recent decades. Hallinger and Heck (2010) propose that transformational approaches influence teacher

performance through motivational mechanisms, enhancing commitment, self-efficacy, and willingness to invest discretionary effort in instructional improvement. Complementing this perspective, instructional leadership frameworks focus more directly on leaders' involvement in curriculum matters, teaching quality monitoring, and professional learning facilitation, emphasizing technical rather than inspirational dimensions of educational leadership (Muhsyanur et al, 2024).

Despite extensive research in Western contexts, evidence regarding school leadership effectiveness in African educational settings remains limited, with most existing studies conducted in North America, Europe, or East Asia. The relatively sparse research examining African contexts often focuses on leadership challenges and constraints rather than identifying effective practices or empirically testing leadership-performance relationships. Bush and Oduro (2006) note that African school leadership occurs within distinctive sociocultural contexts shaped by colonial legacies, resource scarcity, hierarchical governance structures, and community expectations that may influence which leadership approaches prove most effective. Assuming that leadership practices effective in well-resourced Western schools will transfer directly to resource-constrained African contexts risks overlooking contextual factors that moderate leadership effectiveness (Muhsyanur et al., 2022).

Teacher performance in Kenyan public schools has attracted considerable policy attention due to concerns about instructional quality variation, absenteeism, and examination results that often fall below national expectations. Multiple factors influence teacher effectiveness including initial preparation quality, working conditions, professional development access, motivation levels, and accountability mechanisms (Muhsyanur et al, 2025a). However, the specific role of school leadership in shaping these performance dimensions remains inadequately understood despite widespread recognition that principals significantly influence the organizational contexts within which teachers work (Muhsyanur et al, 2025b). Onderi and Makori (2013) suggest that many Kenyan principals lack adequate preparation for their leadership roles, often appointed based on teaching experience and seniority rather than demonstrated leadership competencies, potentially limiting their capacity to effectively support teacher performance improvement.

This study addresses gaps in existing literature by systematically examining relationships between school leadership practices and teacher performance in Kenyan public schools, identifying which leadership approaches correlate most strongly with various performance indicators, and investigating mechanisms through which leadership influences teacher effectiveness. Research questions guiding this investigation include: What relationships exist between principals' leadership practices and teacher performance in Kenyan public secondary schools? Which specific leadership dimensions show strongest associations with different teacher performance indicators? What contextual factors and mediating mechanisms influence how leadership affects teacher performance? According to Day et al. (2016), answering these questions requires methodological approaches capturing

both leadership practices and performance outcomes while accounting for the complex organizational contexts shaping their relationships.

## **METHODE**

This research employed a concurrent mixed-methods design integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative interview and observation evidence to provide comprehensive understanding of leadership-performance relationships in Kenyan public schools. The study was conducted across 65 public secondary schools in five counties representing diverse geographic regions and socioeconomic contexts: Nairobi, Kiambu, Nakuru, Kisumu, and Mombasa. The quantitative sample comprised 520 teachers and all 65 school principals, selected through stratified random sampling ensuring representation across school sizes, performance levels, and urban-rural locations (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). Data collection instruments included adapted versions of validated leadership practice surveys measuring transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership dimensions, teacher performance questionnaires assessing instructional quality, professional commitment, and collaboration, and school performance records including examination results and inspection reports. Qualitative data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 45 purposively selected teachers and 20 principals, classroom observations documenting instructional practices, and document analysis examining school policies and performance management systems. All instruments underwent pilot testing with 50 teachers and 8 principals not included in the final sample, with reliability analysis yielding Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.82 to 0.91 for key scales.

Data analysis employed hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) for quantitative data to account for the nested structure of teachers within schools, with leadership variables entered at the school level and performance indicators at the individual teacher level while controlling for relevant covariates including teaching experience, educational qualifications, subject area, and school characteristics. Mediation analysis examined potential mechanisms including professional development access, collaborative culture, and resource availability through which leadership might influence performance (Mulyana et al., 2021). Qualitative data underwent systematic thematic analysis using NVivo software, with initial coding conducted independently by two researchers to establish inter-rater reliability before collaborative refinement of thematic structures. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during interpretation, allowing statistical patterns to be enriched with contextual understanding from participant narratives. Ethical approval was obtained from Kenyatta University Ethics Review Committee, with informed consent secured from all participants and confidentiality protections implemented throughout data collection and reporting. Limitations include the cross-sectional design's inability to establish definitive causality, potential social

desirability bias in self-reported performance measures, and challenges generalizing findings beyond the specific counties studied.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Leadership Styles and Teacher Performance Outcomes**

Hierarchical linear modeling analysis reveals significant positive relationships between principals' leadership practices and multiple dimensions of teacher performance, with transformational and instructional leadership styles showing particularly strong associations. Teachers working under principals scoring one standard deviation above the mean on transformational leadership measures demonstrated performance ratings 0.68 standard deviations higher than those under average-scoring principals ( $p < 0.001$ ), representing a substantial effect size. Instructional leadership showed similarly robust associations with performance, particularly regarding instructional quality indicators where the effect size reached 0.74 ( $p < 0.001$ ). Distributed leadership practices, measured through perceptions of collaborative decision-making and shared responsibility, showed moderate positive associations with teacher collaboration and innovation (effect size = 0.52,  $p < 0.01$ ) but weaker relationships with individual instructional quality measures.

Examining specific performance dimensions separately reveals differential leadership effects across various aspects of teacher work. Instructional leadership demonstrated strongest associations with classroom teaching quality, lesson planning thoroughness, and assessment practices, aligning with this leadership approach's explicit focus on teaching and learning processes. Principals who regularly observed lessons, provided constructive feedback, and facilitated subject-specific professional learning had teachers with significantly higher instructional quality ratings from both peer observations and independent evaluators. Transformational leadership showed strongest effects on affective and motivational outcomes including professional commitment, job satisfaction, and willingness to undertake additional responsibilities beyond contractual requirements. Teachers describing their principals as inspiring, supportive, and intellectually stimulating reported substantially higher organizational commitment and lower turnover intentions.

Qualitative interview data provides important context for interpreting these statistical relationships and illuminating mechanisms through which leadership influences performance. Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of principals who "see and appreciate our efforts," suggesting that recognition and emotional support significantly impact motivation and performance. Multiple participants contrasted current and previous principals, describing how leadership changes dramatically affected their engagement and teaching quality. However, teachers also noted that leadership effects depend substantially on broader organizational conditions including workload manageability, resource availability, and policy environments. Several high-performing teachers working under less effective leaders maintained strong performance through intrinsic motivation and

peer support, while some teachers under strong leaders struggled due to excessive class sizes or inadequate teaching materials, suggesting that leadership represents one important factor among multiple influences on performance.

### **Mediating Mechanisms and Contextual Influences**

Analysis of potential mediating mechanisms reveals that school leadership influences teacher performance substantially through its effects on professional learning opportunities, collaborative cultures, and working conditions rather than primarily through direct supervision or evaluation. Statistical mediation analysis indicates that professional development access mediates approximately 34% of the relationship between instructional leadership and teaching quality, with principals who prioritize and facilitate meaningful professional learning experiences seeing significantly stronger teacher performance. Qualitative data elaborates these patterns, with teachers describing how effective principals create time for collaborative planning, arrange relevant training opportunities, and support implementation of new instructional approaches through ongoing coaching and resource provision.

Collaborative professional culture emerged as another critical mediating factor linking leadership to performance, with school climate variables mediating approximately 28% of transformational leadership's effects on teacher commitment and effort. Schools where principals actively cultivated collegial relationships, encouraged peer observation and feedback, and created structures for collaborative problem-solving showed significantly higher levels of teacher cooperation and collective efficacy. Teachers in these environments described feeling part of professional communities where colleagues supported each other's improvement rather than working in isolation. However, fostering genuine collaboration proved challenging in contexts where competitive examination pressures created incentives for teachers to hoard effective practices rather than share them, and where hierarchical cultural norms sometimes inhibited open dialogue between principals and teachers.

Resource allocation and advocacy constituted a third important pathway through which leadership affected teacher performance, particularly in resource-constrained Kenyan contexts where material scarcity significantly constrains instructional quality. Effective principals strategically allocated limited resources to maximize instructional impact, advocated with education authorities and community members for additional support, and creatively identified alternative resources including partnerships with NGOs or local businesses. Teachers working under principals skilled at resource mobilization reported significantly better access to teaching materials, functional equipment, and adequate facilities, which in turn supported higher performance levels. Conversely, teachers in schools with ineffective resource management described how material shortages undermined their capacity to implement quality instruction regardless of their skills or

motivation, highlighting how contextual constraints can limit leadership's capacity to influence performance.

### **Implementation Challenges and Barriers to Effective Leadership**

Despite evidence of leadership's positive influence on teacher performance, multiple systemic challenges constrain Kenyan principals' capacity to exercise effective leadership, with inadequate preparation and professional development emerging as primary concerns. Survey data reveals that only 32% of participating principals had received formal leadership training prior to appointment, with most learning leadership responsibilities through trial and error. Interview participants consistently described feeling unprepared for their roles, particularly regarding instructional leadership, performance management, and strategic planning. This preparation gap reflects broader policy limitations, as Kenya lacks systematic leadership development programs comparable to initiatives in many other countries, instead relying on occasional workshops that principals characterized as insufficient and often disconnected from their practical challenges.

Excessive administrative burdens and bureaucratic demands emerged as another significant constraint limiting principals' capacity to focus on instructional leadership and teacher support. Principals reported spending 60-70% of their time on administrative tasks including financial management, government reporting requirements, facility maintenance, and responding to education office directives, leaving limited time for classroom observation, professional learning facilitation, or meaningful teacher interaction. Multiple principals expressed frustration that accountability systems emphasized administrative compliance and examination results rather than recognizing leadership practices supporting teacher development and instructional improvement. This misalignment between accountability demands and effective leadership practices creates incentives for principals to prioritize visible administrative tasks over less immediately measurable investments in teacher capacity building.

Centralized governance structures limiting school-level autonomy represent a third critical challenge constraining leadership effectiveness in Kenyan public schools. While principals bear responsibility for school performance, they possess limited authority over critical decisions affecting teacher performance including hiring, compensation, professional development budgets, and curriculum implementation. The Teachers Service Commission controls teacher deployment and transfers, often moving teachers regardless of school needs or principals' preferences, undermining leaders' capacity to build stable, high-performing teams. Principals described feeling accountable for outcomes they cannot fully control, creating frustration and sometimes leading to focus on factors within their influence even when these represent lower-leverage improvement strategies. These structural constraints suggest that strengthening school leadership's impact on teacher performance requires not only developing individual principals' capacities but also

reforming governance systems to provide greater school-level authority aligned with accountability expectations.

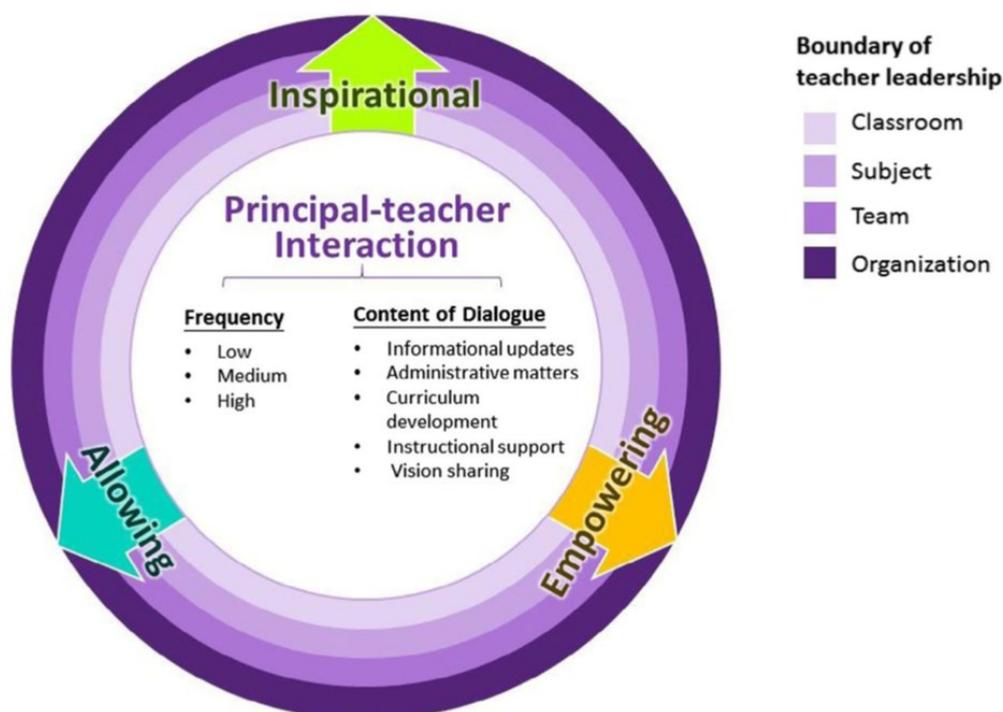


Figure 1. A framework of principal–teacher interaction effects on teacher leadership development.

Figure 1. Teacher Performance Indicators by Principal Leadership Style (N=520 teachers, 65 schools)

Note. Scores represent mean performance ratings adjusted for teacher experience, qualifications, and school characteristics. Transformational, instructional, and distributed leadership styles demonstrate significantly higher performance across all indicators compared to transactional and laissez-faire approaches ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that school leadership practices significantly influence teacher performance in Kenyan public secondary schools, with transformational and

instructional leadership approaches showing particularly strong positive associations with instructional quality, professional commitment, and student achievement outcomes, though leadership effectiveness depends substantially on contextual factors including professional development access, collaborative cultures, resource availability, and governance structures that either enable or constrain principals' capacity to support teacher improvement. Findings reveal that leadership influences performance primarily through indirect mechanisms including creating supportive working conditions, facilitating meaningful professional learning, fostering collaborative cultures, and strategically managing limited resources rather than through direct supervision alone.

Based on these findings, recommendations for policy and practice include establishing comprehensive leadership development programs providing aspiring and practicing principals with systematic preparation in instructional leadership, performance management, and organizational development; restructuring accountability systems to recognize and incentivize leadership practices supporting teacher development rather than emphasizing only administrative compliance and examination results; providing principals with greater autonomy over key decisions affecting teacher performance including professional development budgets, scheduling flexibility, and input into teacher selection while maintaining appropriate accountability; reducing administrative burdens through streamlined reporting requirements and enhanced administrative support, allowing principals to focus greater attention on instructional leadership; creating structures supporting peer learning among principals through networks, mentoring programs, and collaborative problem-solving opportunities; and investing in improved working conditions including reasonable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and functional facilities that enable teachers to translate skills and motivation into effective instruction. Future research should employ longitudinal designs tracking leadership and performance changes over time, investigate how leadership development interventions influence subsequent practices and teacher outcomes, examine leadership effectiveness across diverse school contexts including rural and urban environments, explore culturally responsive leadership approaches appropriate for African educational settings, and investigate how leadership practices can effectively support teacher performance improvement in severely resource-constrained environments where material limitations substantially constrain instructional possibilities.

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