

The Leadership Style of School Principals as a Lever for Academic Success: The Case of Secondary Schools in the City of Benguerir

Zineb Boughalib^{1*}, Judicael Alladatin²

¹UM6P Sustainable Development, Université Mohammed VI Polytechnique, Benguerir, Morocco

²Département d'administration et fondements de l'éducation, Faculté des sciences de l'éducation, Université de Montréal, Montreal, Canada

*Corresponding Author: zinebboughalib@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of school principals' leadership styles on academic achievement and school climate in secondary schools in Benguerir, Morocco. Grounded in the "Making Sense by Actors" interpretive framework, the study employed qualitative methods including shadowing observations, structured interviews, and self- and staff-assessments using the Blake and Mouton Managerial Grid. Data were collected from four school principals and 39 teaching and administrative staff members. Findings reveal that 50% of principals exhibit a democratic leadership style, 25% participative, and 25% compromising. Most staff (71%) perceived their principals' leadership as strong and inspiring, contributing to a favorable school climate and participatory planning processes. The study identifies a direct relationship between inclusive leadership practices and improved academic outcomes, with one school reporting an increase in student success from 38% to over 90% in three years under participative leadership. Key competencies associated with effective leadership include communication, trust-building, and motivation. Additionally, the study highlights a gender imbalance in administrative roles, indicating a need for equity-oriented leadership development. The findings underscore the importance of strategic and democratic leadership in fostering professional engagement, institutional cohesion, and sustainable educational improvement. The study recommends investment in comprehensive leadership training programs to develop visionary and transformational school leaders. The implications extend to policy, suggesting that leadership style is critical for educational quality and reform..

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, developing countries have adopted new governance approaches within their educational systems to address increasingly complex challenges. These reforms are aligned with the principles of the New Public Management (NPM) framework, which seeks to enhance institutional performance and promote sustainable development in the public sector. Among the key determinants of educational quality, school management plays a critical role by influencing teaching effectiveness, the utilization of infrastructure, and the overall learning process, including time management (Cissé, 2024). The Moroccan education system is transforming substantially, with leadership recognized as a strategic pillar for improving governance and educational outcomes. The primary focus extends beyond providing universal access to education; it also

emphasizes cultivating an engaging learning environment that motivates students to remain in school until age 15 (UNESCO, 2010). Despite these efforts, Morocco continues to grapple with significant educational challenges, including a persistently high illiteracy rate of 32% and alarming dropout rates. National enrollment figures remain suboptimal, with 87.6% of students enrolled at the middle school level and only 61.1% at the high school level (INE & UNICEF, 2021).

Empirical studies underscore the significance of teacher and school administrator training, infrastructure quality, and resource availability as critical determinants of educational performance (El Fatini, 2022). One proposed approach to addressing educational challenges is adopting a managerial ideology that repositions schools as autonomous entities, capable of independently planning, developing, and evaluating their educational projects (Garant & Letor, 2017). The effective management of educational institutions is central to ensuring their efficiency and overall success. School leaders—especially principals—are expected to cultivate environments conducive to learning by demonstrating strong leadership, implementing strategic planning, and encouraging innovation. Effective school leadership also encompasses the optimization of available resources, the integration of technology, and the nurturing of a positive and inclusive school culture (Ekaviana & Nurkhin, 2016).

Leadership in educational management is pivotal, as it facilitates collaboration, delegation of responsibilities, and the enhancement of organizational efficiency. A well-structured leadership approach promotes synergy among administrators, teachers, and students, improving educational quality (Brest, 2011, as cited in Cissé, 2024). In addition, school principals are responsible for upholding equity and fairness, addressing discrimination issues, resolving conflicts, and supervising instructional practices to enhance student outcomes (Toker, 2022). The successful development and implementation of school-based projects depend on leadership explicitly oriented toward academic achievement. As Bennis and Nanus (1985) and Day et al. (2016) emphasize, effective leadership is instrumental in driving educational innovation. In alignment with this perspective, ongoing Moroccan educational reforms underscore the critical role of dynamic and proactive leadership. Principals are increasingly expected to foster a culture of pedagogical innovation by inspiring their teams to creatively fulfill their responsibilities while ensuring continuous monitoring and evaluation of outcomes. Recent research by Simbre et al. (2023) has further examined the evolving nature of leadership in developing educational ecosystems. Moroccan educational policy also emphasizes the need for robust leadership and managerial expertise at all levels of school administration (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Day et al., 2016; De Ketele, 2013; Gunter, 2012; Leininger & Kuhn, 2021; Pont et al., 2008).

Beyond managerial functions, school leaders are critical in promoting fairness and justice, eliminating discrimination, and fostering inclusive learning environments. Their responsibilities include supervising pedagogical strategies, facilitating teacher professional development, and motivating school teams to achieve institutional objectives (Toker, 2022). This multifaceted role underscores the complexity of pedagogical leadership, which is both comprehensive and nuanced and serves as the foundation for educational transformation. Pedagogical leadership is closely linked to principals' leadership strategies, emphasizing creativity in task execution and continuous assessment of learning outcomes.

The effectiveness of teaching and learning processes largely hinges on the leadership style employed by school principals (Leininger & Kuhn, 2021), although other variables also contribute to student academic performance. Schools today no longer function as monolithic entities uniformly applying national policies, but rather as autonomous institutions capable of producing diverse outcomes based on local resources and contextual strategies (Cousin, 1993). This transformation allows schools to develop distinctive management and governance styles tailored to their challenges and assets.

Such autonomy enhances schools' capacity to efficiently mobilize human and material resources, thereby increasing their effectiveness in addressing educational needs. Empirical research supports the positive relationship between school leadership practices and student achievement (El Alaoui et al., 2021). However,

despite this established correlation, the specific leadership styles most significantly influence academic success remain elusive and context-dependent. This ambiguity gives rise to a fundamental research question: How do the leadership styles of school principals influence academic achievement and the overall school climate? In response to this question, the present study investigates the impact of various leadership styles within school administration, aiming to identify which approaches are most conducive to fostering student success and cultivating a supportive educational environment.

This research seeks to determine effective strategies for enhancing learning outcomes and school climate by analyzing school principals' daily leadership practices. The study is anchored in a theoretical framework that differentiates between formal, prescribed leadership roles and the actual practices enacted in school settings. Through this perspective, the study contributes to the expanding body of knowledge on educational leadership, particularly its influence on academic performance and institutional atmosphere.

Définition of leadership

Etymologically, the concept of *leadership* is derived from the English language, combining the morphemes *leader* and *-ship*. The term *leader* signifies a person who guides or directs, while *ship*, derived from Old English *scip*, metaphorically refers to a vessel or a state of being (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023). This etymological construction implies that leadership embodies the ability, competence, and art of assuming, exercising, and sustaining the role of a guide or commander by harmonizing financial, human, material, and temporal resources. The metaphor of a ship—whether small or large—suggests the varying scale of challenges that leaders must navigate: the larger the vessel, the more complex the leadership responsibilities.

In the educational context, the principal's role is pivotal in leading administratively and pedagogically to enhance the quality of teaching and learning for all students. This role is typically organized into four essential dimensions: (1) shaping the future of the school through vision-building and change management; (2) leading and managing staff while fostering professional development; (3) ensuring the success of every student; and (4) strengthening partnerships with the broader school community (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024). The school leader is thus expected to adopt a systemic and integrative approach to managing educational structures to ensure cohesion and effectiveness in the learning environment.

Over the past two decades, interest in educational leadership has surged considerably. In 2000, approximately 496 scholarly publications focused on this field, which rose to over 5,000 by 2023 (Vorontsova & Dahari, 2024). Research in this domain increasingly explores effective leaders' behaviors, traits, and strategic roles, their influence on school culture, and their contributions to institutional transformation.

Numerous studies emphasize the critical importance of school leadership in promoting effective governance and improving student outcomes (Adjé & Sanni, 2017; Blaya, 2015; Dutercq et al., 2017; Endrinizzi & Thibert, 2012; Garant & Letor, 2014; Gather Thurler, 2001; Moisset et al., 2018; Ouedraogo et al., 2023; Pelletier et al., 2015; Simbre et al., 2023). Principals are viewed as motivational catalysts, encouraging teachers and staff to work collaboratively toward shared goals of academic excellence (Brice, 2003). Leadership is conceptualized as identifying, acquiring, allocating, coordinating, and leveraging social, material, and cultural resources to create optimal teaching and learning conditions (Spillane et al., 2008). More specifically, it involves influencing individuals and groups by inspiring them to pursue collective objectives and promoting a transparent, purpose-driven, fulfilling institutional environment.

To be effective, school leaders must possess specific core competencies, including:

- Effective communication skills for articulating a vision and engaging stakeholders;
- Influence and mobilization capacities to promote collaboration and motivation;
- Strategic visioning and vision-sharing abilities to align staff and organizational goals;
- Creative problem-solving skills for addressing challenges and fostering innovation.

Collectively, these competencies define the capabilities of educational leaders to foster student achievement, institutional resilience, and sustainable educational progress.

Leadership Styles

The theory of leadership styles delves into the psychological effects of various leadership behaviors on subordinates, offering a dynamic lens through which to understand leadership in organizational contexts. This theoretical shift marks an evolution from the static portrayal of leadership traits to a more nuanced, empirical investigation into leadership behaviors and their situational applications (Aldaeri & Tamim, 2025). Pioneering studies in this domain—by Lewin (1947), Blake and Mouton (1964), Hersey and Blanchard (1969), Vroom and Yetton (1988), and House (1971)—have laid the groundwork for classifying and analyzing leadership styles according to their influence on group dynamics, decision-making, and institutional effectiveness.

Within the educational sphere, several leadership styles have emerged as particularly relevant:

- **Participative Leadership** emphasizes collaborative engagement across institutional levels. This style encourages shared decision-making, allowing school principals and teachers to work collectively to enhance student outcomes. Promoting mutual adaptation and continuous innovation creates a dynamic school culture centered on student well-being and academic achievement.
- **Authoritarian Leadership**, in contrast, involves centralized decision-making by the school principal, with minimal input from teaching staff. While often criticized for limiting teacher autonomy, research offers conflicting views on its impact. Olukayode and Mshelia (2022) found no significant relationship between autocratic leadership and academic achievement. In contrast, studies by Oyugi and Gogo (2019) and York (2022) suggest it can positively influence academic outcomes and reduce dropout rates under certain conditions.
- **Transformational Leadership** represents a visionary and team-oriented approach, where school principals foster a collaborative ethos among staff. This style supports innovation, staff development, and organizational transformation through clear goal-setting, professional autonomy, and shared accountability (Olukayode & Mshelia, 2022). Transformational leaders balance emotional support and institutional efficiency to drive both individual and collective success.
- **Democratic Leadership** requires principals to demonstrate creativity, expertise, and responsiveness to contextual needs. It promotes participative governance through inclusive dialogue, joint decision-making, and shared evaluation mechanisms (Agustin et al., 2022). This model enhances trust and fosters a cooperative work culture, with empirical studies indicating that democratic leadership is among the most effective in cultivating team cohesion and productivity (Cansoy, 2024).

Recent empirical findings affirm that leadership style is a critical determinant of educational quality. Studies by Kandaria (2016) and Ombao (2025) show that school principals' leadership approaches significantly influence teachers' professional engagement and instructional quality, which in turn affects student performance. Aquino et al. (2021) highlight the principal's role as a change agent—facilitating professional networks, mentoring programs, and inclusive learning environments. Echoing this, Yalçinkaya et al. (2021) argue that leadership style directly contributes to institutional success and academic excellence. In sum, the selection and implementation of appropriate leadership styles are foundational to developing effective schools, improving student outcomes, and sustaining long-term organizational progress.

Academic achievement

Academic achievement serves as a critical metric for assessing the extent to which students have attained the prescribed learning objectives, thereby reflecting the effectiveness of educational policies and instructional strategies. Conventionally, this achievement is quantified through summative assessments, such as national examinations or standardized tests, which determine students' eligibility for diplomas, certificates, or other formal qualifications outlined by the curriculum (Brice, 2003; Moisset et al., 2018). However, academic success is not solely a product of assessment outcomes; rather, it is shaped by a constellation of contextual, organizational, and individual factors.

A growing body of empirical research underscores the significant influence of school-level variables on academic performance. These include the quality of the school climate, the nature of teacher-student and teacher-administrator relationships, the availability of extracurricular activities, the leadership style of school principals, institutional organization, teacher training, professional experience, and intrinsic motivation. Equally important are extrinsic determinants such as socioeconomic status, access to learning materials and infrastructure, and students' psychological well-being (Yvon et al., 2022).

In addition, educational policy frameworks and the pedagogical models adopted within schools play a crucial role in shaping student achievement. Contemporary instructional innovations, including collaborative learning, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction, have been found to enhance student engagement and cognitive development (Hattie, 2009). Among these contributing factors, school leadership remains pivotal. Principals not only shape the institutional culture and teaching climate but also influence teacher motivation and the school's overall academic performance (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). In this context, effective leadership is both a structural and cultural force, mediating the relationship between policy implementation and learning outcomes.

School Climate

In the educational setting, leadership transcends routine managerial functions. It is better understood as a dynamic process of influence and collaboration between school leaders and their stakeholders, all working toward shared goals, most notably, academic success. Such success, however, is attainable only within a supportive and enabling school climate. This climate encompasses not only the physical and psychological quality of life in the school but also the communication channels and interpersonal relationships among all educational community members. A favorable school climate is grounded in shared values, collective attitudes, and mutual perceptions, all of which directly influence teachers' and students' engagement and performance (Beaumont, 2018; Enguta & Ndibeyeng, 2023).

Research consistently underscores the necessity of mobilizing all educational actors—teachers, administrators, parents, and students—to enhance academic outcomes. A climate of trust, in particular, fosters motivation, creativity, and personal investment from both educators and learners (Thapa et al., 2013; Normand et al., 2014). In this context, school climate functions as an intermediary variable that mirrors the quality of relationships among teaching staff, school leaders, and administrative personnel, and the extent to which these individuals feel recognized and supported within the institution.

Moreover, the construct of school climate extends beyond classroom interactions to include other vital dimensions such as perceived safety, mechanisms for conflict resolution, fairness and equity in treatment, and the pedagogical models adopted by the institution (Thapa et al., 2013). Each of these dimensions plays a substantial role in shaping students' motivation and academic performance. Ryan and Deci (2000) state that a structured and emotionally supportive school environment enhances students' intrinsic motivation, fostering more profound and sustained learning.

At the policy level, international organizations such as UNESCO and the OECD regard school climate as a strategic lever for educational equity and excellence. These bodies advocate for systemic reforms that prioritize the psychological well-being of students and teachers alike, aiming to narrow achievement gaps and promote inclusive educational success (UNESCO, 2022).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative interpretive approach, grounded in the *"Making Sense by Actors"* method, which seeks to understand how individuals within educational institutions interpret and give meaning to leadership practices and their implications. This approach emphasizes the subjective experiences and interpretations of actors, principals, teachers, and administrative staff to access the deeper dynamics of school leadership in context.

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in the Marrakech-Safi region, particularly in the city of Benguerir, involving participants from public secondary education institutions. The purposive sample consisted of four school principals (N=4) and thirty-nine (N=39) members of the administrative and teaching staff. These institutions were selected based on accessibility and their willingness to engage in a study centered on leadership practices in the Moroccan educational context.

Data Collection Strategy

To ensure methodological rigor and comprehensive data capture, a triangulation of data sources and instruments was applied, by qualitative research best practices (Creswell, 2014). This triangulated approach integrates multiple forms of evidence to reinforce the trustworthiness of the findings and offer a multi-perspective view of leadership behavior.

The following instruments were utilized:

- **Observation Sheets with Shadowing Technique:** The researcher followed the school principals during daily activities to closely observe their leadership behaviors and interactions in real-time contexts. This immersive method offered insight into the actual leadership practices enacted within school environments.
- **Assessment Grid Based on Blake and Mouton's Managerial Grid Model (1964):** This grid was used to assess leadership orientation along two core dimensions: *Concern for People (Human Relations)* and *Concern for Task (Task Accomplishment)*. The model was applied through both self-evaluations by school principals and structured assessments by teachers and administrative staff. It enabled the identification of leadership styles such as authoritarian, democratic, participative, and compromising.
- **Self-Assessment Declarations:** School principals were asked to reflect on and articulate their own leadership styles based on their perceptions and practices, aligning these with the Blake and Mouton framework.
- **Structured Interviews and Feedback Sessions:** Teachers and administrative personnel provided qualitative feedback through structured interviews. This input was used to corroborate or challenge the self-perceptions of principals, thereby enabling cross-validation of leadership styles.

Justification for Instrumentation

The Blake and Mouton (1964) Managerial Grid Model was selected due to its theoretical comprehensiveness and practical adaptability to varied institutional contexts, including the Moroccan education system. Its dual-axis structure allows for an integrated analysis of leadership behaviors and provides a conceptual lens through which various leadership theories may be categorized and interpreted. Similar studies have previously acknowledged its relevance and empirical utility in educational research.

Data Collection Period

The data collection phase occurred over one month, from April 30 to May 30, across all selected schools. This timeframe allowed for in-depth observation and ensured consistency in comparing leadership practices, self-perceptions, and stakeholder feedback within and across school contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Identifying Leadership Styles Practiced by School Principals

The primary objective of this study was to identify the actual leadership styles practiced by school principals in secondary schools within the city of Benguerir. Using the triangulation of data sources—namely, shadowing observations, semi-structured interviews, and staff questionnaires (see Figure 1)—we analyzed the principals' leadership orientations based on the Managerial Grid Model (Blake & Mouton, 1964), which focuses on two dimensions: "Human Relations" and "Task Accomplishment."

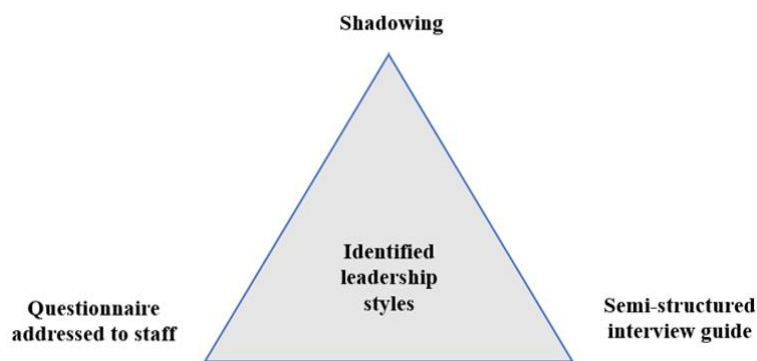


Figure 1. Resource Triangulation Method

As shown in the table below, 50% of the principals were identified as exhibiting a democratic leadership style, while 25% demonstrated a participative style, and the remaining 25% a compromising style.

Table 1. Leadership Styles Adopted by School Principals

Principal	Self-Declared Leadership Styles	Identified Leadership Style
A	Democratic, Participative	Democratic
B	Participative	Participative
C	Democratic, Participative	Democratic
D	Participative	Compromising

Source: Data collected from April 30 to May 30

Relationship Between Leadership Style, School Climate, and Academic Achievement

Through the *Making Sense by Actors* approach, we found that leadership style directly influences teacher and staff motivation, engagement, and academic climate. As shown in Figure 2, most participants (71%) described their principals' leadership as *strong and inspiring*, while 18% viewed it as *moderate*, and 11% as *weak and ineffective*.



Figure 2. Description of leadership as perceived by staff (administrative and teaching personnel)

Figure 1 presents the distribution of staff perceptions regarding the educational leadership demonstrated by school principals. A dominant proportion of respondents (71%) described the leadership as "strong and inspiring," indicating that the majority experienced a style of leadership characterized by motivation, vision clarity, and effective interpersonal engagement. This form of leadership is typically associated with the ability to guide teams effectively, foster collaboration, and create a supportive school climate. In

contrast, 18% of staff members perceived the leadership as “moderate,” suggesting the presence of fundamental leadership traits without the full impact needed to drive substantial institutional progress. Meanwhile, a smaller portion of the participants (11%) categorized the leadership as “weak and ineffective,” signaling notable concerns regarding leadership capacity, strategic oversight, or engagement with the school community. Although a minority, this perspective underscores areas requiring focused development and intervention. These varied perceptions demonstrate that, while the prevailing view is favorable, a spectrum of leadership experiences exists across institutions. To further explore the implications of these perceptions, it is essential to consider the observed correlation between leadership styles and academic performance within the participating schools.

Therefore, Figure 3 offers a comparative visual of academic achievement outcomes in relation to the predominant leadership styles identified, allowing for a deeper interpretation of how leadership effectiveness potentially shapes school success.

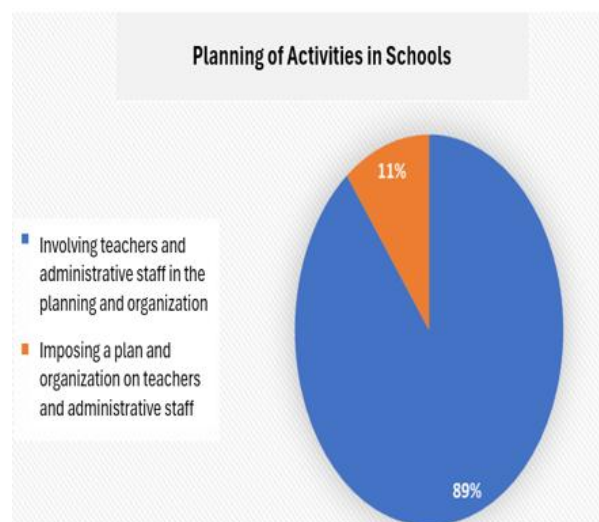


Figure 3. Planning of activities within schools

Figure 3 illustrates how schools engage in participatory planning by involving teachers and administrative staff in decision-making processes related to school activities. An overwhelming 89% of respondents reported that planning and organization were conducted collaboratively, with active teaching and administrative personnel involvement. This high percentage reflects a positive trend toward shared leadership and democratic governance structures within schools. Such an inclusive approach indicates a leadership style that values stakeholder input, promotes collective ownership of school initiatives, and fosters a sense of professional agency among staff. Participatory planning is often associated with increased commitment to school goals, improved morale, and better implementation of programs, as staff feel their voices are recognized and their expertise is utilized in shaping institutional priorities.

In contrast, only 11% of the participants indicated that planning and organization were imposed upon them without consultation, suggesting a top-down managerial approach in a minority of schools. This practice may hinder staff motivation and weaken institutional cohesion, undermining the principles of collaboration and shared responsibility. The data suggest that most schools in the sample have embraced participatory planning frameworks, which are generally considered effective in cultivating a strong and inclusive educational environment. These findings complement previous perceptions of leadership strength and may further explain the alignment between leadership style and institutional performance metrics discussed in subsequent sections.

This participative environment was observed to directly and indirectly impact school climate and academic performance. The testimonials of principals support this finding. For example, Principal D stated:

"Leadership must influence the group's work by believing in our competencies to achieve objectives and, consequently, lead students to success not only academically, but also ideologically."

He added:

"Thanks to my participative leadership, we collectively developed an action plan, improving our success rate from a disastrous 38% in 2018–2019 to 89% in 2019–2020 and 91% in 2021–2022."

This experience resonates with the perspective of Principal B, who highlighted the importance of a positive interpersonal environment:

"We must focus on the quality of human relationships, motivation, and the well-being of everyone to achieve our goals—it is a Win-Win equation."

Similarly, Principals A and C identified with a democratic-participative leadership style and focused on strengthening relationships among teachers, administrators, and parents. School stakeholders widely acknowledged this collective effort. One teacher reflected:

"Thanks to the principal's efforts and continuous supervision, this institution has regained its reputation and image at the provincial level, and we are honored to be part of it."

Staff and students consistently expressed trust and appreciation regarding the principals' leadership approaches. Principal D further emphasized that school climate should not only serve as a means to achieving academic results but also as an end goal of leadership practice:

"The essence of school leadership is exemplified through the principal, serving as a role model for staff and students regarding values, ethics, and professionalism. At the same time, it ensures a healthy and welcoming school climate where everyone feels fulfilled, comfortable, and safe, allowing them to give their best effort, which ultimately leads to success."

Core Leadership Competencies That Promote Academic Success

The study identified several competencies associated with effective school leadership based on staff responses. The most frequently mentioned characteristics were the ability to communicate effectively, build trust-based relationships, and create motivational environments.

Table 2. Key Characteristics of Effective Educational Leaders

Key Characteristic	Count	Percentage
Ability to communicate effectively with teachers and students	12	31.59%
Ability to create activities and support services	6	15.79%
Ability to encourage parental involvement in the educational process	3	7.89%
Ability to establish clear rules and enforce discipline	5	13.16%
Ability to build trust-based relationships with students	10	26.32%
Ability to motivate students	6	15.79%
Total	39	100.00%

Source: Data collected from April 30 to May 30

Demographic Context of Participants

Understanding the demographic composition of the research sample is important for contextualizing the results. The chart below illustrates the gender distribution among the teaching and administrative staff.

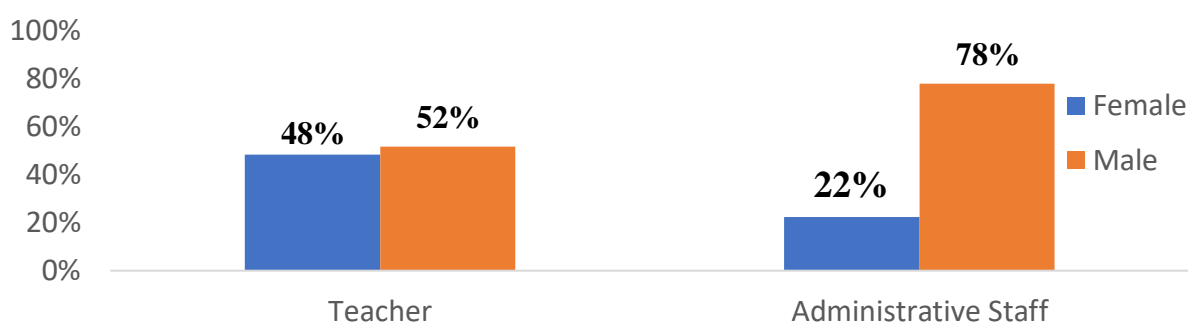


Figure 2. Distribution of the Sample of Administrative Staff and Teachers

Source: Data collected from April 30 to May 30

The bar chart in Figure 4 presents a comparative analysis of gender representation among teachers and administrative staff within the schools surveyed. The data reveal a relatively balanced gender distribution among teachers, with female staff representing approximately 47% and male staff slightly higher at 53%. This near parity reflects a positive trend in gender equity within the teaching profession, where men and women participate almost equally. In contrast, a stark gender disparity is observed among administrative staff, where male representation dominates at around 80%, while female representation is limited to only 20%. This imbalance suggests that men may still predominantly occupy administrative roles, particularly those potentially linked to management or operational decision-making. Such a distribution raises concerns regarding equal access to leadership or administrative advancement for women in the educational workforce.

The implications of this gender distribution extend beyond mere representation. A more balanced gender presence in teaching and administrative domains has been associated with more inclusive policy development, diverse perspectives in institutional governance, and a healthier organizational culture. Therefore, the data presented here underscore the need for gender-sensitive policies in recruitment, promotion, and capacity building, particularly administrative roles. This demographic insight complements earlier findings on participatory planning and leadership practices, as a more equitable and representative workforce is likely to contribute to more democratic and inclusive school management systems.

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with a growing body of international research that underscores the pivotal role of school leadership in shaping educational outcomes. Numerous studies have established a strong association between effective leadership and improved student achievement, either directly or through mediating variables such as instructional quality, school climate, teacher commitment, and parental involvement (Yalçın & Çoban, 2023; Alhosani, Singh, & Al Nahyan, 2017; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). In particular, transformational and instructional leadership styles have been shown to enhance academic performance by cultivating a culture of high expectations and fostering professional collaboration (Mitchell, Kensler, & Tschannen-Moran, 2015; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008; Dinham, 2005). Furthermore, the principal's leadership style significantly influences teacher effectiveness and satisfaction—two essential elements for sustaining high-quality teaching and learning environments (Pina, Cabral, & Alves, 2015; Sirisookslip, Ariratana, & Ngang, 2015; Okoroji, Anyanwu, & Ukpere, 2014; Alonderiene & Majauskaite, 2016). These results reinforce the broader understanding that strategic, inclusive, and supportive leadership is fundamental to advancing educational excellence.

In line with these insights, the data indicate that most principals in this study demonstrated such leadership orientations. Notably, 71% of staff members perceived their school climate as positive, suggesting the presence of participative and collegial leadership practices. This finding corroborates earlier theoretical propositions by Lewin (1890–1947), Blake and Mouton (1964), and Leithwood et al. (2009), who emphasized

that democratic and participatory leadership styles enhance communication, collegiality, and overall performance. Similar conclusions have been drawn in recent studies showing that schools led through democratic principles are more likely to report higher levels of staff satisfaction and student engagement (Simbre et al., 2023; Day et al., 2016; Itab, 2016).

Another important finding concerns the administrative disparity between male and female principals, which points to persistent gender equity issues in school leadership. While both genders may possess equivalent qualifications and capabilities, systemic barriers hinder equitable representation for women in leadership roles. This observation aligns with Abonyi et al. (2024), who reported notable differences in instructional leadership practices between male and female headteachers in Ghana, often rooted in institutional bias. Likewise, Shakeshaft et al. (2014) argue for the necessity of structural reforms to dismantle systemic disadvantages in educational institutions. Ross and Berger (2009) advocate for leadership strategies explicitly designed to ensure inclusive representation across school governance structures. Mareque et al. (2022) further emphasize that female leaders often function as role models and transformative agents within schools, promoting inclusivity and equity. Nevertheless, Cubillo and Brown (2003) maintain that gender disparities in leadership persist due to entrenched sociocultural norms and unequal support systems. These findings underscore the need for inclusive leadership practices that guarantee equitable participation regardless of gender, essential for promoting fairness and enhancing school quality (Crisol Moya et al., 2020; Rayner, 2009).

About school culture, the results also indicate that principals play a critical role in fostering environments where teachers feel empowered, respected, and professionally supported. Prior research has demonstrated that involving teachers in decision-making processes significantly enhances their job satisfaction, sense of ownership, and organizational commitment (Sarafidou & Chatziioannidis, 2013; Gonley, Schmidle, & Shedd, 1988). This participatory approach not only strengthens motivation but also improves instructional effectiveness (Eyal & Roth, 2011; Nachshoni, 2024). According to Muijs and Harris (2006), distributed leadership and teacher-led initiatives are instrumental in school improvement, particularly through the mobilization of professional expertise and shared responsibility. Similarly, collaborative governance models, when facilitated effectively by principals, have been found to support innovation and sustain reform efforts (Weiss & Cambone, 1994; Finnigan, 2010). However, these models depend heavily on clear communication and conflict resolution mechanisms to function optimally (Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992; Griffin, 1995). When school staff are genuinely included in shaping policy and institutional direction, their engagement and performance will likely increase, resulting in a more cohesive and productive educational environment.

Lastly, the study highlights the growing need for leadership development programs that adequately prepare school leaders for the complexities of modern educational contexts. Evidence suggests that such programs represent strategic investments in improving school effectiveness (Tingle, Corrales, & Peters, 2019). Johnson and Snyder (1986) argue that these initiatives must cultivate instructional leadership, decision-making, and human resource management competencies. Similarly, Shantal et al. (2014) call for leadership training that addresses relational, contextual, and strategic domains. Transformational leadership remains a particularly vital focus, with multiple studies linking it to enhanced teacher efficacy and student achievement (Yang, 2014; Barnett, McCormick, & Conners, 2001). Fields, Kenny, and Mueller (2019) further highlight the importance of conceptual clarity and institutional coherence in developing educational leaders. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Reyes et al. (2019) supports the long-term value of such programs in strengthening leadership capacity and organizational outcomes. As noted by Tingle, Corrales, and Peters (2019), these programs are likely to produce leaders who are effective managers and visionary agents of change capable of enhancing staff morale and student success.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how school principals' leadership styles influence secondary school academic success and school climate. The findings provide compelling evidence that leadership style plays a critical role in shaping the internal dynamics of schools and contributes significantly to staff morale and student outcomes. The analysis revealed that participative and democratic leadership practices foster positive school environments. Schools led by principals who encouraged collaboration, transparency, and shared decision-making were likelier to report improvements in academic performance and staff engagement. In contrast, more directive or top-down approaches were less effective in sustaining motivation and collective ownership. Another key finding is the importance of inclusive leadership in addressing structural inequities within school systems. The study highlights the need for more equitable representation in leadership roles, particularly in gender, and underscores how inclusive practices contribute to more balanced and responsive school governance. Moreover, the research identified several core leadership competencies—such as communication, trust-building, and motivation—essential to creating high-performing educational environments. These competencies were consistently associated with stronger institutional cohesion and improved academic results. The study also emphasizes the need for continuous investment in leadership development programs. Equipping school leaders with pedagogical and managerial skills is essential for navigating the evolving challenges of contemporary education and driving long-term improvement. While the findings offer valuable insights, the scope and sample size limit this research. The results reflect experiences within a specific geographical and institutional context and may not fully capture broader systemic patterns. Future studies should consider expanding the sample across regions and incorporating longitudinal or quantitative methods to validate and enrich these conclusions. In conclusion, effective school leadership is a strategic instrument for institutional success. By adopting inclusive, collaborative, and competency-based approaches, principals can significantly enhance the quality of education, foster a positive school culture, and drive academic achievement across diverse contexts.

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