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Influence of head teachers' democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Marakwet sub-county, Kenya

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Abstract

Quality leadership is an important attribute in the general running of a school and hence its performance in national examinations. It is the task of stakeholders, particularly head teachers, to create and sustain an environment conducive for learning to improve students' academic and behaviour standards. To a large extent, the head teacher, as an individual occupying the highest official position in the school, determines how the school is run. His/her expectation, values, beliefs, relationship with teachers and students as well as the examples he/she sets for the whole school shape the school. This paper examines the connectedness between head teachers' democratic leadership styles and students' academic achievement in public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population for the study comprised all secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County, their respective head teachers, teachers and students. All the 13 secondary schools in the sub-County and hence 13 head teachers, 35 teachers and 351 students formed the sample of the study. Teachers and students from Forms Three and Four were selected using simple random sampling technique. Questionnaire, structured interview schedule and document analysis were the main instruments of data collection for the study. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Quantitative data was analyzed descriptively using cumulative frequency counts and percentages. Chi-square analysis was computed to establish the relationship between head teachers' leadership styles and students' academic achievement. The study found out that head teachers who employed democratic leadership style had their schools perform much better in national examinations (KCSE). The study recommended that educational administrators should ensure that head teachers are given appropriate orientation in leadership skills before being appointed as school heads.

Keywords: Head Teachers, Democratic Leadership Style, Students Academic Performance, Public Secondary Schools, Marakwet Sub-County, Kenya.

1. Introduction

For more than half a century the concept of leadership has been discussed with accompanying research work, especially in the field of management and organizational development. More often than not, such discussions and/or research works have focused on the issue of quality of leadership, ability of the leader or leadership effectiveness or leadership styles (Adlam, 2008) ^[1]. According to Adlam (2008) ^[1], leadership is a rather complex concept. This is especially true because several approaches have been employed to provide define leadership and effectiveness. The traditional perspectives view the concept of leadership as inducing compliance, respect and cooperation. In other words, the leader exercises power over the followers to obtain their cooperation (Anderson, Ford & Hamilton, 1998) ^[2]. In addition, the old leadership perspectives are based on a leader's role of formulating goals and ensuring their efficient accomplishment. Schermerhorn, Hunt and Osborn (2009) ^[11] also define leadership as a case of interpersonal influence that gets individuals or groups of people to do what the leader wants to be done. By implication, the leader's focus is on what he/she wants from people; therefore, followers' input is not encouraged with regard to what it is to be done.

However, Maxwell (2009) argues that a leader's attention is on what he/she can put into people rather than what he/she can get out of them, so as to build the kind of relationship that promotes and increases productivity in the organization. As the focus shifts from bureaucracy (in which the leader tends to direct others and make decisions for others to implement) to non-bureaucracy, the perception of leadership appears to emphasize motivation, inclusion and empowerment of followers. For example, Jaques and Clement (1991) ^[5] define leadership as a process in which an individual sets direction for other people and carries them along in that

direction with competence and full commitment. Therefore, leadership is a responsibility characterized by commitment and competence; and it takes place in a role relationship within a social structure. In essence, a leader functions by interacting with other people within a social structure.

There are other views which differ from the more traditional perspectives. Sergiovanni (2009) ^[12], for example, perceives leadership as a personal thing comprising one's heart, head and hand. He says that the heart of leadership deals with one's beliefs, values and vision. The head of leadership is the experiences one has accumulated over time and the ability to perceive present situations in the light of these experiences. The hand of leadership, according to him, is the actions and decisions that one takes. In essence, leadership is the act of leading, which reflects the leader's values, vision, experiences, personality and ability to use past experiences to tackle the situation at hand. It may be argued that leadership is a display of a whole person with regard to intelligence, perceptions, ideas, values and knowledge coming into play, causing necessary changes in the organization.

In the contemporary context, Dubrin (2010) ^[4] defines leadership as the ability to inspire confidence and support among followers who are expected to achieve organizational goals. This has to do with change, inspiration and motivation. It can be inferred that the leader's task is to build followers' confidence in their job so as to be effective on their job. In addition, it is the leader's responsibility to communicate the picture of what the organization should be, convince followers and channel all activities towards accomplishing it. Sashkin and Sashkin's (2003) ^[10] and Hoy and Miskel's (2001) ^[4] definitions of leadership seem to take more recent perspectives. They define leadership as the art of transforming people and organizations with the aim of improving the organizations.

Leaders in this perspective define tasks and explain why the job is being done; they oversee followers' activities and ensure that they have what they need in terms of skills and resources to do the job. Through these kinds of relationships between themselves, leaders develop their followers; they align, motivate and inspire the followers to foster productivity. The emphasis of this approach is on transformation that brings positive change in the organization, groups, interpersonal relationships and the environment. Both the old and new concepts of leadership seem to agree on some characteristics of leadership. For example, both agree that leadership does not exist in isolation. Rather, it exists in the process of two or more people interacting and the leader seeks to influence the behaviour of other people.

However, to a large extent, the old concept of leadership is based on exercising power over followers to maintain the status quo, while the new perspective is based on continuous improvement and power sharing with the followers. The old concept of leadership is based on downward exercise of power and authority while the new seeks to develop respect and concern for the followers and see them as a powerful source of knowledge, creativity and energy for improving the organization.

1.1. Democratic Leadership and Academic Performance

Decentralization of authority, participatory planning and mutual communication are some of the main features of democratic leadership. However, as Oyetunyi (2006) ^[8] points out, the major point of focus is sharing; the manager shares decision-making with the subordinates. Even though he/she invites contributions from the subordinates before making a

decision, the manager/leader retains the final authority to make decisions (consultative). The manager may also seek discussion and consensus with teachers over an issue before a decision is made (consensus). He/she may allow the subordinates to take a vote on an issue before a decision is made (democratic). He/she coaches the subordinates and negotiates their demands (Dubrin, 1998, p. 109-110) ^[3].

This type of leadership is viewed as an important aspect of empowerment, teamwork and collaboration. It has been observed that a school is more effective when those who are affected by the organization's decisions are fully involved in the decision-making process. Good as it is, the concern expressed by Dubrin (1998) ^[3] is that the participative style of leadership wastes time due to endless meetings and may lead to confusion and lack of direction. By implication, it is not appropriate for use in times of crisis when the situation demands on-the-spot decision (Oyetunyi, 2006) ^[8]. However, unlike the laissez-faire style, the leader adopting this style maintains the final decision-making authority. Using this style is not a sign of weakness; rather it is a sign of strength that one respects the employees' ways of doing things. Using this style is of mutual benefit as it allows staff to become part of the team and allows one to make better decisions.

David and Gamage (2007) argue that effective democratic and participatory school administration, leadership and management affect the trust levels of stakeholders. Their surveyed of the effectiveness of democratic and participatory school administration and management in one school division in the Philippines. Indicators of participatory school administration, leadership and management effectiveness, according to their study, correlated with the stakeholders' level of trust. The study suggests that school leaders wishing to enhance the levels of trust among the stakeholders in their schools should consider these indicators pertaining to the participatory or democratic leadership approach, in carrying out their leadership duties and responsibilities.

Just like in the Philippines, school heads in Kenya who favour the use of the democratic style of leadership attach the same level of trust to their stakeholders in the management of schools. They engage subordinates, parents, students and the community in the decision-making process. As pointed out by Kouzes and Posner (2003) ^[6], school heads know that no one does his/her best when feeling weak, incompetent or alienated; they know that those who are expected to produce the results must feel a sense of ownership. In order for a school to provide quality education, those who have been empowered to lead the transformation of the schools, to address the contemporary challenges of teaching and learning, should carefully nurture democratic leadership. Democratic leadership can be effectively utilized to extract the best from people and the most effective and efficient educational climate can be created in a school when democracy is employed. The democratic leadership practices in secondary schools outline procedures to develop and use the potential of all the stakeholders of a school to create and foster quality education.

The principles of democratic leadership are flexibly applied in order to create a climate in which all stakeholders are able to express themselves freely and hence feel that they are part of the democratic decision-making process. Stakeholders need to feel that they have an influence over what should or should not happen at school rather than to be imposed with decisions of those placed in positions of hierarchical power (Rowan, 1993) ^[9].

1.2. Statement of the Problem

The major concern of any school organization is the success or effectiveness of teaching and learning process. Experiences and records have shown that head teachers' leadership styles have a direct bearing on the overall effectiveness of a school because both the teacher and the student are to perform under the leadership. The aggregate mean academic performance of public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County in Kenya Certificate of Secondary School (KCSE) examinations has been fluctuating over the past five years.

Incidentally, academic performance in most of these public secondary schools has been fluctuating with turnover of head teachers. During the tenure of some head teachers, academic performance in national examinations in some schools improved while it dropped in some. However, the general performance of most public secondary schools in KCSE examinations has been dismal if not average. This scenario begs two vital questions: could it be that the leadership styles employed by head teachers determine the performance of their respective schools in national examinations? Does the head teacher's leadership style influence school climate and the subsequent performance of a school in national examinations? The above questions motivated the author to seek establish the nexus that exists between head teachers' leadership styles, prevailing school environment and the subsequent students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations. The aim of this paper is to present the findings and discussion on the influence of democratic leadership on academic performance of students in schools.

1.3. Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to exploring head teachers' leadership styles in enhancing students' academic achievement in KCSE in public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County. The study was delimited to public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County which have consistently recorded dismal performance in KCSE examinations. The respondents for the study were head teachers, teachers and students of public secondary schools in Marakwet sub-County. Only students in Form Three and Form Four participated in the study because they were considered more mature than their counterparts in Form One and Form Two. They were, therefore, deemed to have a better chance to more easily comprehend the purpose of the study. Besides, this group of students had been in secondary school longer and had most probably experienced leadership styles of various head teachers, especially if there had been change-over of head teachers in their respective schools.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was adopted a descriptive survey design since the author sought to explore the nature of relationship between head teachers' leadership styles and students' academic achievement in KCSE in public secondary schools. The design was appropriate because it allows for the use of quantitative and qualitative data. For data collection, the research used qualitative data collection instruments, namely the interview guide for head teachers, and questionnaires for quantitative data. The target population for the study comprised all head teachers, teachers and students in the thirteen (13) public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County. There were a total of 1170 students, 115 teachers and 13 head teachers in public secondary schools in Marakwet East sub-County at the time of the study (Marakwet East

Education office, 2013). All the 13 public secondary schools participated in the study. All the 13 head teachers, therefore, automatically formed part of the entire sample of the study. Thirty percent of the teachers were also included in the sample of respondents. Therefore, 35 teachers participated in the study. These teachers were randomly selected. A total of 351(30%) of the students' population was selected using stratified random sampling technique. The basis of stratification was their form level. Only Form Three and Form Four students were used in the study. Therefore, a total of 399 respondents participated in the study.

The data obtained was organized, coded and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies and standard deviations were used to summarize data. Inferential statistics (Chi-square) was used to establish relationships between the independent and dependent variables.

Based on the data collection instruments, data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Open-ended items were analyzed through coding themes and quotas that emerged. The themes emerging from secondary data were identified to augment the primary data. Qualitative data was transcribed and organized into themes in order to check on their frequencies based on the research questions. Karl Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was computed to establish the level of significance of correlation between the study variables. The level of significance was set at 95% or at a p-value of 0.05.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Relationship between Democratic Leadership Style and Students' Academic Performance in KCSE

Responses on this attribute were obtained based on a five-point Likert scale. Respondents were required to indicate their views on the extent to which democratic leadership style influenced students' academic performance in KCSE. Of the 48 teachers and head teachers, 66.7% affirmed to a very large extent that democratic leadership style had a positive influence on students' academic performance, 20.8% to a large extent, 6.3% to a low extent, 2.1% to a very low extent and 24.2% were undecided. The results were as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

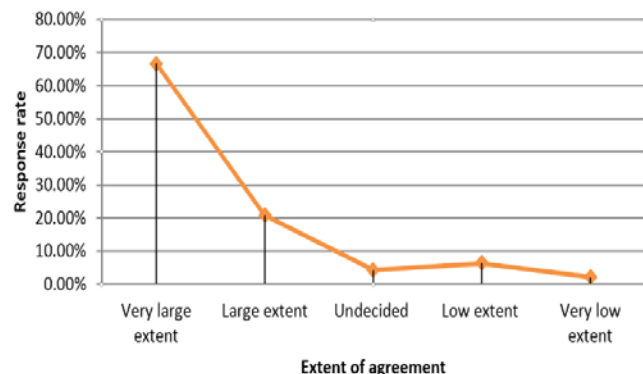


Fig 1: Level of positive influence of democratic leadership style on academic achievement cited by teachers.

Source: Field data, 2014

The findings showed that over 60% of the students affirmed the fact that democratic leadership style had a positive influence on their academic performance; 37.3% affirmed this attribute to a very large extent, 36.8% to a large extent, 9.1% were undecided, 11.1% to a low extent and 5.7% agreed with

this statement to a very low extent. This is illustrated in Table 1. Teachers, like all other employees, like to be given space to work and recognition in matters administration. They prefer to be consulted before decisions are made since those decisions

may directly affect them. This explains the large proportion of teachers who preferred democratic leadership style of their heads.

Table 1: Level of Positive Influence of Democratic Leadership Style on Academic Achievement cited by students.

Level of Agreement	Frequency	Percentage
Very large extent	131	37.3%
Large extent	129	36.8%
Undecided	32	9.1%
Low extent	39	11.1%
Very low extent	20	5.7%
Total	351	100.0%

Source: Field data, 2014

A Pearson Chi-square test of independence was calculated to establish the relationship between democratic leadership style

and students’ academic achievement. A significant relationship was found ($X^2(398) = .023, p < .02$).

Table 2: Chi-Square Test of Independence between democratic leadership style and Students’ academic achievement.

	Value	df	asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	85.56 ^a	397	.023
Likelihood Ratio	81.242	397	0.059
Linear-by-Linear Association	.002	2	.007
N of Valid Cases	399		

a. 399 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is. 02.

Source: Field data, 2013

These results established that head teachers’ democratic leadership styles influenced students’ academic achievement. Chi-square value of 85.560 was significant at 0.007 level. The likelihood ratio was also significant at 0.059 levels. Running a linear by linear association also revealed that it was significant. This implies that there is a positive influence of democratic leadership style on students’ academic achievement.

Therefore, democratic leadership style positively influences students’ academic achievement. This finding supports the findings of Mumbe (2005) that democratic leadership styles positively affect students’ academic achievement and general school performance because they motivate teachers to work with principals to achieve school objectives. James and Connolly (2000) also note that head teachers who employ this leadership style allow teachers to take initiatives so as to improve student academic achievement.

Democratic leadership supports and encourages team work, good cooperation, good remuneration of all staff, motivation of staff and students. Mumbe (2005) further says that for a democratic oriented head teacher to perform better there must be a collaborative arrangement in decision-making across all levels in the school which should be made available.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of the study point to the fact head teachers who employ democratic leadership styles in their administration had their schools perform above average in national examinations. This is because such schools had favourable school environment for teaching and learning. Besides, such head teachers were supportive of all school programmed that, in the view of other stakeholders, would bring about a turnaround in academic performance.

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