



PRINCIPALS' LEADERSHIP STYLES AND DECISION-MAKING IN PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN BUEA

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Abstract:

This article investigates how principals' leadership styles shape decision-making processes in public secondary schools in Buea. A cross-sectional survey was completed by 629 staff (teachers and administrators) across 14 schools. Measures included a single best description of the principal's leadership style and Likert-type items on leadership practices, teacher involvement and consultation, process effectiveness, influence on school culture, perceived student outcomes, and professional development. Transformational (39.6%) and democratic (38.2%) styles predominated; authoritarian (9.5%) and laissez-faire (12.7%) were less common. On core practices promoting contribution, providing clear directives, stressing cooperation, and communicating vision, 78–79% agreed or strongly agreed (mean≈3.67/4). Teacher involvement and consultation averaged 3.48–3.49/4, with ~78% reporting 'Sometimes/Always'; risk-taking attracted 77.8% disagreement. Leadership style (35.0%) and teacher input (27.7%) emerged as the top decision drivers. Leadership was perceived to positively influence school culture (77.8% 'Sometimes/Always') and student outcomes (78.0% Positive/Very positive). The evidence is consistent with recent syntheses linking collaborative leadership with teacher engagement, organizational trust, and learning gains. Recommendations include institutionalizing professional learning communities, consultative forums, and short improvement cycles that de-risk innovation while protecting time for observation and coaching.

Keywords: principal leadership styles; decision-making; teacher involvement; school culture

1. Introduction

In secondary school administration, educational leadership is widely considered a pivotal determinant of school effectiveness. Although it is generally considered that classroom teaching directly influences student learning, principals' leadership

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approaches enable high-quality teaching, building capacity, redesigning structures, and ensuring coherence (Mbua, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2020). In our developing systems, principals in the execution of their duties navigate resource constraints, accountability pressures, and ambitious curriculum reforms; their leadership approach can accelerate or hinder improvement (Tambo, 2003; Bush, 2020; OECD, 2020).

At the national level, policy frameworks emphasize inclusive and quality education aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4) and the National Development Strategy 2020–2030. Yet, one can realise that evidence linking day-to-day leadership practice to decision-making and school outcomes remains comparatively sparse in the local context like Buea, which is under study.

In school administration, the leadership style of the principal plays an influential role in the decision-making process that impacts the school. Although effective leadership plays the role of seeing that the school environment is conducive, there is an inadequate understanding of how the different leadership styles, such as democratic, transformational, and autocratic, function in real schools, and how staff perceive their influence on decision-making and culture.

This lack of appropriate clarifications poses problems in choosing the actual leadership styles that can favour collaborative decision making, stimulate teachers' morale and ultimately improve the overall school culture.

2. General Objectives

The study aims to give a detailed description of patterns that can inform leadership development and school improvement strategies in schools.

2.1 Research Questions

- 1) To what extent are teachers involved in decision-making, and how does leadership practice support or hinder this?
- 2) What is the perceived effect of leadership style on the quality and outcomes of decisions?
- 3) How do staff perceive the relationship between leadership and school culture, professional development, and student outcomes?

2.2 Research Hypothesis

The following hypotheses were formulated to assist in guiding the study.

Ha1: Principals' leadership style significantly influences teachers' involvement in the decision-making process.

Ha2: Principals' leadership style has a significant effect on the quality and outcomes of decisions made in school.

Ha3: There is a significant relationship between principals' leadership style and the overall school culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From Traits to Practices: an Evolving View of Leadership

Early leadership theories placed their emphasis on innate leader traits. Today, scholars have shifted toward practices that are situated in a context. That is what leaders actually do to influence the teaching and learning process (Fonkeng and Tamajong, 2009; Hoy and Miskel, 2008; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Hallinger, 2018). There are recurring ideal forms of leadership styles that appear in school settings: authoritarian leadership, democratic or participatory leadership and transformational leadership. The balance among these reflects policy demands and principals' beliefs.

2.2 Democratic Leadership Style

Democratic leadership is an action in which leaders carry out consultations with subordinates in decision-making, giving greater importance to individual or group participation (Mbua, 2003). This leadership style permits personal dignity and self-respect, self-expression to followers, creativity and group interaction (Robinson *et al.*, 2008). Since schools are professional institutions, the head teacher should adopt a democratic leadership style through the collegial model, where teachers are directly involved in the school administration. He maintains good human relationships realizing that human beings are the most important assets of any organization (Mintzberg, 1983).

2.3 Transformational Leadership Style

Transformational Leadership focuses on communicating a compelling purpose, modelling values, and developing people (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Seltzer & Bass 1990)). Heads of organizations where the school is not left out, practice this type of leadership style. Principals who use this type of leadership style centre their interest in innovations that will affect their decision-making, leading to the realisation of school goals and outcomes. These kinds of school leaders look at the school values and how they could manipulate them so as to bring about their different vision.

Leaders who carry out transformational leadership are more effective, have better work outcomes, and play a very strong role in encouraging their subordinates through creativity and motivation to become committed to decision-making (Akpan, 2016; Arya, 2015).

2.4 Authoritarian Leadership

In authoritarian leadership, power runs from a top-down approach, and leaders dictate or impose tasks to subordinates, giving prominence to the organizational demands (Onyali, & Akinfolarin, 2017, 2003; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). A principal is found making decisions independently and may not want to receive any input from staff. It favours speed, efficiency, and achievement of results through quick decision-making and compels teachers against their will (Braun and Anastasopoulos, 2015; Shra'ah, 2015). Although some people consider it too rigid and simplified, it is action-oriented, strong,

and reliable. Individuals with decisive styles have the idea that being quick is good and being slow and hesitant is faulty (Arya, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020;).

2.5 Decision-Making, Teacher Agency, and Organizational Learning

Decision-making in schools ranges from routine operational matters to strategic planning. Participatory structures include professional learning communities, subject committees, and consultative forums (meetings and conferences) (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). Inclusive decision-making is linked to greater involvement and implementation fidelity, particularly during reforms (Fullan, 2014). Conversely, authoritarian patterns are associated with weaker collaboration and lower perceived fairness.

2.6 Leadership, Culture, and Outcomes

School culture is shared beliefs, norms, and routines that usually act as a mediating layer between leadership and teaching practice. Leaders influence culture by communicating and clarifying expectations, recognizing effective practice, and matching available resources with goals (Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Hallinger, 2018). We should not fail to bear in mind that principals have measurable, though indirect, effects on student achievement and attainment through their different manners of organisation of the institution (Grissom *et al.*, 2021; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020). Studies across diverse contexts also connect leadership to teacher retention, collaboration, and professional growth (Onyali, & Akinfolarin, 2017; Kraft, Marinell, & Yee, 2016; Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

2.7 Decision-making and Leadership Styles of the School Principal during Administration

Decision-making is one of the most important responsibilities of administrators, but it differs on the basis of individual differences because every person has a different thinking and information processing style, and this makes a difference in their leadership styles. Leadership styles could be seen as the pattern adopted by superior officers in directing and relating with subordinates in the execution of different aspects of organizational functioning (Kumur & Shilpa, 2013; Akinwumi & Jayeoba, 2004). It is also described as a process of influencing people so that they will strive willingly and enthusiastically toward the achievement of group goals (Ejimabo, 2015; Aja-Okorie, & Usulor, 2016).

Since no one's philosophy about leadership would apply during decision-making to all problems faced by administrators, a number of concepts should be useful for formulating guidelines for any individual problem faced by administrators. Despite the above, some principals of institutions, during the process of decision-making, do not deem it necessary to collaborate with others. Research affirms that the leadership style that the principal uses in certain situations greatly influences and shapes his or her decisions (Yambo and Tuitoek, 2014; Fullan, 2014). They hold that the principal's role must change from that of a dictator to that of a leader of leaders, since this will even assist the principal to be able to facilitate the implementation process of these decisions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Setting

A descriptive, cross-sectional survey study was conducted in 14 public secondary schools in Buea. Descriptive research is the process of examining multiple steps, such as quantitative data collection and analysis, to increase prior knowledge about a certain problem or subject (Creswell, 2014).

The study's population consisted of selected teachers and administrative staff of some secondary schools, so as to have a broad view of leadership practice and decision-making processes in schools.

3.2 Participants, Measures and Sampling

A sample of 629 teachers was selected from sampled schools in the Buea Sub Division using a simple random selection technique. The data was collected using a self-administered questionnaire on leadership styles (Autocratic, Democratic, and Laissez-faire), which comprised 21 items about leadership styles, teacher involvement in the decision-making process, and student achievement. The tool's reliability was calculated to be 0.79. A five-point Likert scale was used in the questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected from the respondents to explore the differences in the demographics of teachers. The study's population consisted of selected teachers and administrative staff members of some secondary schools.

3.3 Measures

The questionnaire that was used for the study included: (i) demographics (gender, role, years of experience); (ii) a single-choice descriptor of the principal's dominant leadership style (transformational, democratic, authoritarian, or laissez-faire); (iii) Likert-type items (1=Strongly disagree to 4=Strongly agree) covering leadership practices (promoting contribution, providing clear directives, encouraging risk-taking, stressing cooperation, communicating vision/goals); (iv) frequency-type items (Never to Always) on involvement, consultation, and process effectiveness; (v) perceived influence of leadership on school culture and student outcomes; and (vi) the extent to which leadership influences teachers' professional development. A multiple-response item captured perceived decision drivers (leadership style, teacher input, student needs, district policies).

4. Results

Table 1 summarizes key sample characteristics; Table 2 shows the distribution of leadership styles; Table 3 presents leadership practice indicators; Table 4 consolidates decision-making, culture, and outcome measures.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N=629)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	177	28.1
	Female	452	71.9
Role	Teacher	545	86.6
	Administrator	84	13.4
Experience	<1 year	74	11.8
	1–5 years	100	15.9
	6–10 years	175	27.8
	>10 years	280	44.5

The results demonstrated in Table 1 show the demographic statistics of the respondents. The demographic variables include: gender, locality, academic qualification, professional qualification, teaching experience and role played in school. The results show that most of the respondents in this study are female, living in the urban areas and having a first degree as the highest academic qualification and with DIPLEX II as the highest professional qualification. Most of the respondents have teaching experience of over 10 years, and most of the respondents are teachers.

The respondents were predominantly female (71.9%). Teachers account for 86.6% of respondents, with administrators comprising 13.4%. Experience levels are broad: 44.5% report more than ten years in education, and 27.8% report 6–10 years, indicating a relatively experienced staff across the participating schools.

Table 2: Principals' leadership styles (single best description)

Leadership style	n	%
Transformational	249	39.6
Democratic	240	38.2
Laissez-faire	80	12.7
Authoritarian	60	9.5

Transformational (39.6%) and democratic (38.2%) styles dominate the landscape. Laissez-faire (12.7%) and authoritarian (9.5%) are comparatively low. This composition suggests that many staff perceive their principals as vision-oriented and collaborative rather than directive.

Table 3: Leadership practices – summary of responses

Item	Mean (1–4)	% positive
Promotes contribution in decision-making	3.05	77.7
Provides clear directives	3.05	77.7
Encourage risk-taking	1.95	22.3
Stress cooperation	3.05	77.7
Communicates vision/goals	3.05	77.7

Four of the five indicators – promoting contribution, providing clear directives, stressing cooperation, and communicating vision/goals – attracted high positive responses (~78–

79% positive; mean $\approx$ 3.67/4). In contrast, ‘encouraging risk-taking’ shows a low mean and low positive share (mean $\approx$ 2.02/4), suggesting care toward experimentation. The pattern is consistent with systems where high-stakes accountability and limited resourcing raise the costs of failed initiatives (Bush, 2020).

Table 4: Decision-making, culture & outcomes—summary indicators

Item	Mean (1–4)	% Always	% Sometimes/ Always	% Positive/ Very positive	% Large/ Very large
Feel involved in decisions	3.05	39.6	77.7	nan	nan
Consulted for important decisions	3.05	39.6	77.7	nan	nan
Decision-making process is effective	3.05	39.6	77.7	nan	nan
Leadership positively influences school culture	3.05	39.6	77.7	nan	nan
Leadership impact on student outcomes	3.05	nan	nan	77.7	nan
Leadership influence on teachers’ professional development	Nan	nan	nan	nan	77.7

Teacher involvement and consultation average 3.48–3.49/4, with roughly 78% reporting ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Always’. Perceived process effectiveness mirrors this profile. Leadership is judged to positively influence school culture (77.8% Sometimes/Always), and the perceived impact on student outcomes skews positive (78.0% Positive/Very positive). Most respondents indicate that leadership meaningfully supports professional development (large/very large for a majority). When asked to identify decision drivers (multiple responses allowed), staff most frequently selected leadership style (35.0%), followed by teacher input (27.7%), student needs (24.6%), and district policies (12.7%).

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the Leadership Profile

The predominance of transformational and democratic leadership reported in these schools under study ties with the general view that collaborative school climates enable teacher engagement, collective effort, and instructional consistency (Mbua, 2003; Leithwood *et al.*, 2020; Hallinger, 2018).

High positive ratings on contribution, clarity, cooperation, and vision point to leadership routines that bring people together around shared priorities as an essential precondition for sustained improvement (Fullan, 2014). At the same time, the low rating for risk-taking indicates a low appetite for innovation. This may reflect test-driven cultures and a problem of limited resources (Bryk *et al.*, 2015). We therefore maintained that the school principal should work with the teachers in a sense of mutual respect, trust,

autonomy and friendliness during decision making, which will go to favour school growth. In a democratic organisation, the leader allows freedom of communication between himself and workers during decision-making.

5.2 Decision-making, Participation, and Process Quality

The idea of involvement and consulting teachers suggests that many schools engage teachers in meaningful ways, though a small minority still reported infrequent participation. Research indicates that inclusive decision-making processes improve implementation and staff morale, and principals' practices such as problem-solving and transparent feedback (Hitt & Tucker, 2016), given the importance that is always associated with teacher collaboration and student achievement (Ronfeldt *et al.*, 2015; Kraft & Papay, 2014).

5.3 Culture and Professional Development

The findings that leadership style positively shapes school culture and professional development are in accordance with the mediational model (Grissom *et al.* 2021; Leithwood *et al.* 2020). In practical terms, principals should cultivate a culture by communicating a clear instructional vision, recognizing effective practice, and modelling learning. To change some practices, professional learning should be collaborative, job-rooted, and focus on concrete instructional problems (Timperley, 2011). Principals will be consistent in their duties when this learning is applied within the decision-making process.

5.4 General Policy Implications and Practice

At the level of the government, leadership development could focus on; Building principals' capacity to facilitate collaborative problem solving. Providing principals with simple tools for observation and guidance in accordance with curriculum expectations. Supporting more short improvement trainings that can link teacher inquiry to school priorities and student needs. Ensuring that principals support classroom learning, and not only end-of-year results

At the school level, principals should schedule regular consultative forums with clear decision records. Use quick data reviews to inform decisions (attendance trends, assessment samples, student voice). Pilot instructional innovations at a small scale before wider adoption. Documenting lessons learned. and ensure that new teachers receive mentoring and guidance.

Principals should institutionalize participation by implementing monthly departmental meetings, staff consultative forums, and concise moments that show how input shaped decisions. Protect instructional leadership through observation and coaching with short feedback using rubrics that relate to the curriculum. Communicate vision and progress through the use of brief, regular updates that match priorities to actions, resources, and interim impact indicators. Build teacher leadership by giving roles and facilitating their rotation through mentorship of those emerging as leaders.

6. Conclusion

From 14 public secondary schools in Buea, staff perceive principals' leadership as predominantly transformational and democratic, with strong marks for participation, clarity, cooperation, and vision. Decision-making processes are generally inclusive and effective, leadership is seen to strengthen culture and professional growth, and perceived student outcomes move in a positive direction. The main developmental opportunity is to enable one to acquire evidence with informed experimentation and standards while introducing innovation. Investments in collaborative routines, coaching, and short improvement training can help schools translate leadership vision into consistent, high-quality teaching and learning.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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