



INFLUENCE OF PRINCIPALS' DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP STYLE ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN PUBLIC SENIOR SCHOOLS IN TANA RIVER SUB COUNTY, TANA RIVER COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

This study examined the influence of principals' democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Tana River County, Kenya. The objectives were to find out the influence of principals' shared decision-making practices on students' academic performance and to find out the influence of principals' open communication practices on students' academic performance. The study was anchored on the Democratic Leadership Theory and adopted a mixed-methods approach using a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Specifically, the study employed a descriptive survey research design for the quantitative component and a qualitative descriptive inquiry design for the qualitative component. The target population consisted of 13 schools, 13 principals, 220 teachers and 1 Sub-County Education Officer, acknowledging the heterogeneity of their roles. Stratified and simple random sampling was used to select 10 schools, while expert purposive sampling was used to select 10 principals and 1 Sub-County Education Officer. Proportionate stratified and simple random sampling was used to select 90 teachers. Data were collected using questionnaires for teachers and in-depth interview guides for principals and the Sub-County Education Officer. Quantitative instruments were validated through consultation with research experts with substantial knowledge and experience in educational leadership and management, while the reliability was determined using

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Cronbach's alpha. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) with SPSS version 25 and presented using tables, bar graphs, and pie charts. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically and presented through narratives and direct quotes, with trustworthiness ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed. The study revealed that principals' democratic leadership style, through shared decision-making, open communication, teamwork, and collective problem-solving, positively influenced students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County. These practices enhanced teacher participation, commitment, collaboration, and collective responsibility for academic achievement. However, student participation and data-driven decision-making were relatively weak. The study recommended strengthening democratic leadership practices, promoting greater stakeholder participation, and enhancing leadership training to improve academic performance.

Keywords: Kenya, principal, democratic, leadership, students, academic, performance

1. Introduction

Internationally, organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and Education International have emphasized the importance of democratic leadership in education. UNESCO (2021) highlights that effective school leadership should promote inclusive decision-making, collaboration, and shared accountability among stakeholders, which enhances the quality of education and supports the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. UNICEF (2020) emphasizes that child-friendly and effective schools adopt democratic leadership practices that engage teachers, learners, and the wider community, fostering supportive learning environments that improve student achievement and well-being. Education International (2022) advocates for collaborative leadership models, noting that teacher involvement in decision-making strengthens professional commitment, improves instructional quality, and promotes accountability, ultimately enhancing school performance.

Lewin *et al.* (2021) examined the effects of different leadership styles on group behavior. Their experimental study conducted at the University of Iowa demonstrated that democratic leadership, which allows group members to participate in decision-making, promotes cooperation, motivation, and productivity compared with authoritarian leadership (Lewin *et al.*, 2021). The study suggested that democratic leadership is more effective because it actively involves group members in decision-making processes, thereby enhancing cooperation, motivation, and productivity. It implies that when individuals feel included and valued in decision-making, they are more committed, engaged, and willing to contribute toward achieving group goals. Principals who adopt democratic leadership practices are likely to foster a positive school

climate, improve teacher participation, and ultimately enhance students' academic performance.

Similarly, studies conducted in the United States from Texas by Hoy and Miskel (2020) indicated that democratic leadership encourages teacher participation in decision-making, open communication, and collaborative problem-solving within schools. Their work showed that democratic leadership improves teacher commitment and promotes a positive school climate, which are essential for effective school management. This suggests that democratic leadership enhances school management by fostering active teacher involvement in decision-making processes, thereby strengthening their sense of responsibility and commitment to their work. Democratic leadership creates a supportive school climate that facilitates effective teaching and learning, contributing to improved students' academic performance.

According to Bush (2021), the study in Sweden indicated that it increasingly adopted a democratic leadership style that emphasizes collaboration, shared responsibility, and teacher autonomy. This leadership approach is believed to strengthen school governance and improve institutional effectiveness. The study suggested that the adoption of democratic leadership enhances school effectiveness by promoting collaboration, shared responsibility, and teacher autonomy. It implies that when teachers are given greater autonomy and are actively involved in decision-making processes, school governance becomes more effective and inclusive.

In African, democratic leadership has increasingly been associated with improved educational outcomes due to its strong emphasis on participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility among stakeholders. Democratic leadership, as a participatory approach, actively involves teachers, students, and other stakeholders in decision-making processes, thereby fostering a sense of ownership, commitment, and accountability within educational institutions. While leadership practices in many African education systems have historically been hierarchical and centralized, contemporary reforms have progressively shifted toward democratic leadership models that prioritize inclusivity, open communication, and collective problem-solving. This shift reflects a growing recognition that democratic leadership enhances teacher motivation, promotes innovation, and creates supportive learning environments, all of which contribute to improved students' academic performance (Northouse, 2022).

In Ghana, Oduro (2020) examined the relationship between democratic leadership and school performance and found that when teachers are involved in decision-making processes, they develop greater trust in school management and demonstrate higher levels of commitment to school goals. Teacher participation was also associated with improved school performance because it created a sense of ownership and responsibility among staff members. The study suggested that democratic leadership positively influences school performance by fostering teacher trust, commitment, and ownership of school goals. When teachers are actively involved in decision-making processes, they feel valued and responsible for the success of the school, which enhances their motivation

and engagement. Consequently, teacher participation under democratic leadership contributes to improved instructional practices and better overall school performance.

Similarly, in Uganda, Ssekamwa (2021) investigated leadership practices in educational institutions and reported that shared leadership promotes accountability and transparency in school management. The study found that democratic leadership reduces mismanagement because teachers and other stakeholders collectively participate in decision-making processes and monitor the implementation of school programs. This suggests that participatory (democratic) leadership enhances school management by fostering accountability and transparency. It implies that when teachers and other stakeholders are actively involved in decision-making and program monitoring, the risk of mismanagement is minimized. The study indicates that collective participation under democratic leadership strengthens oversight, encourages responsibility among staff, and contributes to more effective and transparent school governance.

Additionally, in South Africa, in KwaZulu-Natal province, Msila (2020) examined participatory leadership in schools within the context of post-apartheid educational reform. The study found that democratic leadership strengthens the culture of learning by promoting collaboration among teachers, learners, and school management. It emphasized that democratic governance encourages openness, dialogue, and shared responsibility for educational outcomes. According to the study, participatory leadership fosters a supportive and inclusive school environment in which stakeholders are actively involved in governance, enhancing engagement, collective problem-solving, and commitment to achieving school goals, ultimately improving educational outcomes.

In Tanzania, democratic leadership has been recognized as a key factor in improving the effectiveness of school operations and instructional delivery. A study by Mkumbo (2020) examined leadership practices in senior schools and found that democratic leadership significantly enhances teacher participation in curriculum implementation and school planning processes. The study revealed that when teachers are actively involved in planning school activities and contributing to curriculum decisions, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and responsibility toward their work. This participatory approach not only improves collaboration within the school but also increases teachers' motivation and commitment to their instructional responsibilities, ultimately contributing to better educational outcomes.

Democratic leadership in Kenyan senior schools has gained recognition over the past two decades, driven by educational reforms, decentralization, and the demand for improved academic performance. Democratic leadership fosters collaborative school cultures that enhance teaching and learning by promoting teacher participation, shared decision-making, and stakeholder involvement. Policies such as the Basic Education Act (2013) and Teachers Service Commission (TSC) guidelines reinforce principles of transparency, inclusivity, openness, and accountability in school governance. Empirical evidence suggests that principals who adopt participatory leadership improve teacher motivation, school discipline, and student academic performance (Ndiga, 2020).

Kamau (2021) explored the effect of leadership styles on teacher motivation and school effectiveness in public senior schools in Kiambu County. The study established that democratic leadership significantly improves teacher engagement and enhances school discipline. This suggests that democratic leadership positively influences teacher motivation and overall school effectiveness. It implies that when principals involve teachers in decision-making and encourage collaborative practices, teachers become more engaged, committed, and responsible in their work, contributing to a more effective and well-managed school environment.

Additionally, Muthoni (2020) investigated the influence of participatory leadership on school management in Machakos County and found that democratic approaches significantly enhance stakeholder involvement, promote transparency in decision-making, and strengthen institutional accountability. Democratic leadership improves school management by actively engaging stakeholders in governance processes, reinforcing trust in school leadership, and enabling schools to operate more effectively and responsibly. When principals adopt democratic approaches, they create an inclusive and accountable school environment that supports better teaching, learning, and overall school performance.

A study conducted in Migori County by Ochieng (2021) examined the relationship between instructional leadership and student performance and established that principals' active involvement in curriculum supervision and provision of support to teachers positively influenced school performance. This study suggested that principals' active involvement in instructional leadership has a positive effect on students' academic performance. Principals who supervise the curriculum and provide professional support to teachers create an enabling environment for effective teaching and learning. Consequently, democratic leadership practices enhance teacher performance, motivation, and commitment, which ultimately contribute to improved school outcomes and higher student performance.

Despite the extensive global, regional, and local evidence supporting democratic leadership, the relationship between principals' leadership practices and students' academic performance remains inconsistent and context-dependent, particularly in marginalized and resource-constrained areas. Empirical studies provide compelling lessons on both the success and limitations of leadership styles in education. For instance, in contexts such as Ghana (Oduro, 2020) and Tanzania (Mkumbo, 2020), democratic leadership has been associated with improved teacher commitment, enhanced instructional practices, and notable gains in students' academic performance due to increased participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility. These cases demonstrate that when teachers are actively involved in decision-making, schools experience improved morale, stronger accountability, and better academic outcomes.

Conversely, evidence from more hierarchical and autocratic school environments suggests negative implications for academic performance. For instance, in Nigeria, studies such as those by Adenike A. Adeyemi (2020) indicated that authoritarian

leadership styles, characterized by centralized decision-making and limited stakeholder involvement, often lead to low teacher motivation, poor communication, and resistance to school policies, ultimately undermining instructional effectiveness and student achievement. Similarly, in Uganda, Ssekamwa J. C. (2021) observed that overly centralized leadership approaches contributed to weak teacher participation and reduced accountability in school management. In such settings, teachers may feel excluded and undervalued, resulting in reduced commitment to teaching and weakened support for learners, which negatively affects academic outcomes.

These contrasting findings highlight that while democratic leadership has demonstrated significant potential to enhance school performance, its effectiveness is not automatic and may vary depending on contextual factors such as school environment, resource availability, and stakeholder engagement. Notably, there is a paucity of empirical studies examining how these leadership practices operate in geographically unique and underserved regions such as Tana River Sub-County, Kenya, where challenges such as limited resources, infrastructural constraints, and socio-economic disparities may influence both leadership practices and student outcomes.

Therefore, this study is not only necessary but timely, as it sought to provide context-specific evidence on how principals' democratic leadership practices—particularly shared decision-making and open communication—affect students' academic performance. By addressing this gap, the study contributed to a deeper understanding of effective school leadership in marginalized settings and informed policy, practice, and future research aimed at improving educational outcomes in similar contexts.

Given the global, regional, and local evidence, it is evident that democratic leadership has the potential to improve teaching and learning outcomes. However, there is limited empirical research linking principals' democratic leadership practices to students' academic performance in geographically unique and resource-constrained areas such as Tana River Sub-County, Kenya. This research intends to bridge this gap by investigating how principals' democratic leadership style influences student academic performance, thereby providing context-specific evidence that can inform educational policy and leadership practices aimed at enhancing academic performance in marginalized settings.

2. Statement of the Problem

Democratic leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of effective school performance as it promotes participation, collaboration, and shared decision-making among school stakeholders, which in turn enhances teaching and learning outcomes (Lewin *et al.*, 1939/2021; Oduro, 2020; Mkumbo, 2020). Ideally, schools led through democratic leadership are better positioned to respond effectively to institutional

challenges through collective responsibility, improved teacher motivation, and strengthened stakeholder engagement.

However, public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County continue to experience persistent educational challenges, including inadequate teaching and learning resources, shortages of teachers particularly in STEM subjects, insecurity, environmental disruptions such as floods and droughts, and limited parental involvement. While these challenges are often treated as external constraints, their impact on school performance may be intensified or mitigated by the nature of leadership practices adopted by principals, particularly the extent to which democratic or more centralized leadership styles are practiced in school management.

Despite this, existing studies in Kenya have largely focused on general leadership practices and school performance (Ochieng, 2019; Kamau, 2021; Muthoni, 2020), with limited empirical attention given to how principals' democratic leadership practices specifically—such as shared decision-making, open communication, teamwork, and collective problem-solving—influence students' academic achievement in marginalized contexts such as Tana River Sub-County.

This lack of context-specific evidence created a critical gap in understanding how leadership styles shape school responses to persistent educational challenges and ultimately influence academic outcomes. As a result, policymakers and education stakeholders lack sufficient empirical basis to design targeted leadership interventions that can strengthen school effectiveness in such resource-constrained and vulnerable environments.

Therefore, this study sought to examine the influence of principals' democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya, in order to generate evidence that can inform leadership practice and improve educational outcomes in marginalized settings.

2.1 Research Objectives

- 1) To determine the influence of principals' shared decision-making on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Tana River County, Kenya.
- 2) To determine the influence of principals' open communication on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Tana River County, Kenya.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study was primarily guided by the Democratic Leadership Theory, developed by Lewin *et al.* (1939). The theory emerged from experimental studies conducted at the University of Iowa under controlled conditions, where the researchers examined the effects of different leadership styles—democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire—on group

behavior and performance. The studies sought to understand how varying leadership approaches influenced group interaction, productivity, and overall effectiveness.

Democratic Leadership Theory posits that leadership effectiveness is enhanced when leaders involve group members in decision-making processes. The theory emphasizes participatory governance, shared responsibility, open communication, and collaboration between leaders and followers. According to the theory, democratic leaders encourage active involvement of members, facilitate the exchange of ideas, and promote collective problem-solving. This approach is associated with increased group cohesion, higher levels of motivation, and improved quality of decisions, as it integrates diverse perspectives within the group.

The theory further argues that participatory leadership creates an environment where individuals feel valued and responsible for group outcomes. Through inclusive practices, leaders foster commitment, accountability, and mutual respect among members. In institutional settings such as schools, democratic leadership is characterized by consultation, teamwork, and transparent communication, which shape interactions among stakeholders and influence organizational processes.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Principals' Shared Decision-Making and Students' Academic Performance

Principals' shared decision-making refers to the extent to which school leaders involve teachers, students, and other stakeholders in making decisions regarding curriculum implementation, discipline policies, resource allocation, and instructional strategies (Bush, 2021). Shared decision-making is considered a fundamental component of democratic leadership because it promotes collaboration, trust, and collective responsibility within the school community. When teachers participate in decision-making processes, they develop a stronger sense of ownership and commitment to school goals, which improves instructional practices and ultimately enhances students' academic performance (Wang *et al.*, 2022). In schools where principals encourage participatory governance, teachers are more motivated to implement academic programs effectively, thereby contributing to improved learner performance.

Globally, several studies have emphasized the importance of shared decision-making in improving academic performance. Wang, Pollock, and Hauseman (2022) conducted a quantitative correlational study in Canada to examine the influence of democratic leadership on teacher collaboration and students' academic performance in senior schools. Using a sample of 412 teachers from 30 schools in Ontario, data were collected through structured questionnaires and school performance records, and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression techniques. The study found that principals' involvement of teachers in decision-making enhanced collaboration and collective responsibility, which in turn improved students' academic outcomes. Despite these important findings, the study presents several limitations that

justify further research. The use of a purely quantitative correlational design limits the ability to establish causality, and it focused only on teachers, excluding other stakeholders such as students and principals. The reliance on questionnaires may have introduced response bias, while partial dependence on teachers' perceptions to measure academic performance may affect accuracy. The study was conducted in Canada, a developed context, limiting its applicability to developing regions like Kenya, and it did not address marginalized or resource-constrained settings. Therefore, this study sought to address these gaps by focusing on public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya, to better examine the influence of principals' democratic leadership on students' academic performance.

Liu and Hallinger (2021) conducted a quantitative descriptive survey study in China to examine the relationship between participative leadership and school effectiveness in senior schools. Using a sample of 520 teachers selected through multistage sampling, data were collected through standardized questionnaires and school records, and analyzed using structural equation modeling. The findings showed that shared decision-making significantly improved teacher commitment and collaboration, which in turn enhanced student academic outcomes. However, the descriptive survey design limited the ability to establish causality, excluded other key stakeholders such as principals, students, and parents, used an inadequate sample size, relied only on questionnaires and the study was conducted in a different cultural and administrative context and did not address marginalized or resource-constrained settings. Therefore, need for a study in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya, to address these gaps by focusing specifically on students' academic performance while incorporating multiple stakeholders and diverse data collection methods to provide more context-specific and comprehensive findings.

Similarly, Sebastian *et al.* (2019) conducted a quantitative longitudinal study in the United States to examine the relationship between school leadership practices and student academic performance in public senior schools. Using a sample of 467 teachers and 62 principals, data were collected through teacher surveys and standardized test scores, and analyzed using hierarchical linear modeling. The findings showed that principals who promoted shared decision-making improved instructional coordination and teaching quality, which led to higher student academic achievement. Although the longitudinal design captured changes over time, it does not fully establish causality. The study focused only on teachers and principals, excluding other stakeholders such as students and parents. Its reliance on surveys may have introduced response bias and limited in-depth understanding, while the sample was restricted to the United States, limiting generalizability to contexts like Kenya. Additionally, the study emphasized instructional climate rather than democratic leadership as a distinct style and did not address marginalized or resource-constrained settings. Therefore, this study sought to address these gaps by focusing on democratic leadership style, particularly shared

decision-making using multiple stakeholders and data collection methods to provide more context-specific and comprehensive findings.

In Africa, many studies have also highlighted the role of democratic leadership in promoting academic performance. Tshabalala and Faremi (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study in Eswatini to examine how school leadership practices influence learner performance in senior schools. The study involved 150 teachers and 12 principals selected through purposive and random sampling, with data collected using teacher questionnaires, principal interviews, and student academic performance records. Findings revealed that principals who encouraged teacher participation in decision-making for academic programs and curriculum implementation improved coordination of instructional activities, resulting in enhanced learner performance. The study examined leadership practices broadly without isolating shared decision-making as an independent variable, limiting specificity regarding its direct influence on academic performance. The small sample size of principals (12) may reduce generalizability, and reliance on self-reported questionnaires and interviews introduces potential bias. Additionally, while students' performance records were included, the study did not comprehensively assess the direct link between shared decision-making and measurable academic performance. Therefore, the present study addressed these gaps by focusing specifically on principals' shared decision-making as a key dimension of democratic leadership style.

Similarly, Owusu-Afram and Kwarteng (2023) conducted a quantitative descriptive survey study in Ghana to examine the relationship between principals' participative leadership practices and students' academic performance in public senior high schools. The study involved a sample of 280 teachers selected through stratified random sampling, with data collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis. The findings indicated that schools where principals involved teachers in decision-making—such as academic planning, curriculum, and policy development—recorded higher academic performance. The study concluded that shared decision-making enhances teacher motivation and accountability, leading to improved instructional effectiveness and learner achievement. Therefore, there is a need for this study since the use of a descriptive survey design limits the ability to establish causality between participative leadership and academic performance. The study relied mainly on teacher perceptions without incorporating objective academic performance data, which may affect the accuracy of the findings. It also focused only on teachers, excluding other key stakeholders and the study was confined to the Ghanaian context, which differs from Kenya. Additionally, the reliance on questionnaires may introduce response bias and limit in-depth insights, as no multiple data collection methods were used.

In Kenya, several recent studies have examined the relationship between participative leadership and students' academic performance. For example Mwove *et al.* (2023) conducted a quantitative study in Mwala Sub-County, Kenya, to examine the

influence of principals' democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in public secondary schools. The study used a descriptive survey design and involved 72 public secondary schools, including 72 principals and 471 teachers. A sample of 36 schools and 216 teachers was selected through stratified random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to both teachers and principals and analyzed with descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The findings indicated that democratic leadership practices, including shared decision-making, positively influenced students' academic performance. The study examined democratic leadership broadly without isolating shared decision-making as a specific independent variable, limiting clarity on its direct effect on academic performance. The sample focused on a subset of schools and teachers, which may reduce generalizability. No triangulation with objective student performance data beyond teacher perceptions was reported. The present study addressed these gaps by specifically focusing on shared decision-making as a distinct component of democratic leadership, targeting public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, and incorporating multiple sources of data, including actual student academic performance records, to provide more robust and context-specific evidence on the relationship between principals' leadership practices and student outcomes.

Similarly, Cherotich *et al.* (2023) conducted a correlational study in Uasin Gishu County to examine the influence of teachers' participation in decision-making on conflict management and students' academic performance in private senior schools. The study employed a quantitative approach using a correlational research design. The target population consisted of teachers in private senior schools, and a sample of 210 teachers was selected through random sampling. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and school academic performance records. The findings revealed that teacher participation in decision-making significantly improved conflict management and was positively associated with students' academic performance. However, the study was limited to private senior schools and focused on decision-making rather than examining shared decision-making as a broader leadership practice. The study had a limited sample size and target population and relied on structured questionnaires, which may introduce bias. Additionally, while academic records were analyzed, the study did not isolate the impact of shared decision-making from other leadership factors. This study addressed these gaps by examining shared decision-making as a specific dimension of democratic leadership in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya.

4.2 Principals' Open Communication and Students' Academic Performance

Open communication is an essential component of democratic leadership in schools. It refers to the extent to which principals encourage transparency, dialogue, feedback, and the sharing of information among teachers, students, and other stakeholders. When principals communicate clearly about academic expectations, instructional goals, and school policies, teachers are better able to coordinate their instructional practices, which

ultimately enhances students' academic performance. Effective communication also promotes trust, collaboration, and shared responsibility among members of the school community (Bush, 2021; Northouse, 2022).

Globally, several studies have emphasized the importance of principals' communication practices in improving school effectiveness and student performance. For instance, Mincu *et al.* (2024) conducted a global study reviewing research on successful school leadership in England to identify practices that support sustained school improvement and learner performance. Using a systematic review approach, the study synthesized findings from multiple empirical studies, including the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP). The findings indicated that effective school leaders prioritize open communication, engage in dialogue with teachers, and clearly articulate academic goals, all of which enhance school performance and student learning outcomes.

However, the study was largely conceptual and relied on synthesizing existing research rather than collecting primary data, which limited its ability to directly measure the impact of communication practices on students' academic performance. Additionally, the study did not target a specific population, sample, or educational context comparable to Tana River Sub-County, Kenya. Instruments used in the reviewed studies varied, and no direct data from teachers or students were analyzed, limiting context-specific insights. This study addressed these gaps by collecting primary data from both teachers and principals in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County.

Tshabalala and Faremi (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study in Eswatini to examine how principals' leadership practices influence learner performance in secondary schools. The study combined quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, targeting principals, teachers, and students selected through purposive and random sampling. Data were collected using teacher questionnaires, principal interviews, and school performance records. The findings indicated that principals who maintained open communication with teachers and encouraged dialogue about academic goals were better able to coordinate instructional programs, resulting in improved learner performance.

However, the study examined leadership practices broadly rather than isolating open communication as a specific component of democratic leadership. The mixed-methods design, while comprehensive, may not have fully quantified the direct effect of communication on student performance. Additionally, details about sample size adequacy, instrument standardization, and the representativeness of the target population were limited, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. This study addressed these gaps by focusing specifically on principals' open communication practices and their direct influence on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya.

Al Alawi *et al.* (2025) conducted a qualitative study in Muscat Governorate, Oman, to explore how interactions between principals and teachers influence school improvement and academic performance. Using a multiple-case study design, the

researchers selected a purposive sample of eight principals and twelve teachers from eight public schools. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with principals and focus group discussions with teachers, and thematic analysis was used to analyze the findings. The study revealed that principals who promoted open communication and collaborative dialogue with teachers created a supportive school environment, enhanced teacher leadership, improved classroom practices, and contributed to better student outcomes.

The study focused mainly on teacher leadership and general school improvement rather than directly measuring students' academic performance. The qualitative design limited the ability to establish statistical relationships between communication practices and student performance. The small sample size and purposive sampling also reduce generalizability to wider school populations. Additionally, the instruments—interviews and focus groups—relied on participants' perceptions, which may introduce bias. This study addressed these gaps by employing a quantitative design to examine the relationship between principals' open communication and students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya.

Neiroukh *et al.* (2024) conducted a quantitative study in Palestine to examine organizational communication competence among principals of public senior schools, focusing on how communication tools facilitate information sharing in school management. The study used a descriptive survey design, targeting principals in government senior schools. Data were collected through structured questionnaires assessing communication competence and information-sharing practices, and analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings revealed that effective communication channels, including digital platforms such as WhatsApp, enhanced misunderstandings among teachers. The study concluded that open communication promotes cooperation, maintains a positive school climate, and improves organizational effectiveness.

However, the study focused primarily on communication tools and organizational communication competence rather than the direct influence of principals' communication practices on students' academic performance. The study targeted only principals, excluding teachers and other stakeholders who contribute to instructional outcomes. The sample size was not specified, limiting assessment of representativeness. Additionally, reliance solely on questionnaires may have introduced self-report bias, and the study did not incorporate objective measures of student academic performance. This study addressed these gaps by examining the direct relationship between principals' open communication practices and students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya. It collected data from both teachers and principals and used students' academic performance records to provide context-specific, measurable evidence of the impact of communication practices on learning outcomes.

In Africa, several studies have also examined the role of principals' leadership practices in promoting academic performance. For example, Owusu-Ansah Owusu

Afram *et al.* (2024) conducted a quantitative study in Ghana to examine the effect of school leadership on academic performance in public senior high schools. Using a descriptive survey design, the study targeted principals and teachers, collecting data through questionnaires and school academic records. The findings revealed that leadership practices involving clear communication of school goals, regular feedback, and teacher participation in decision-making were associated with improved academic performance.

However, the study examined leadership practices broadly without isolating open communication as a distinct variable. The quantitative design and reliance on self-reported questionnaires may have limited the depth of understanding of communication dynamics. Details on sample size justification, representativeness of the target population, and instrument validation were not fully addressed, which could affect the reliability and generalizability of the findings. This study addressed these gaps by focusing specifically on open communication as a key component of democratic leadership and examining its direct influence on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya

In Kenya, several studies have explored the relationship between principals' leadership practices and academic performance. For example, Ekal and Mungai (2024) conducted a descriptive survey study in Turkana County to examine the influence of principals' communication and decision-making practices on students' academic performance in public senior schools. The study targeted principals and teachers, using questionnaires and school performance records to collect data. Findings indicated that effective communication among principals, teachers, students, and parents improved coordination of academic activities and monitoring of student progress, which contributed to enhanced students' academic performance.

However, the study presented several gaps. First, communication and decision-making practices were combined, making it difficult to isolate the specific impact of open communication on academic performance. The study also lacked clarity on sample size determination, representativeness of the target population, and validation of the instruments used, which may limit the reliability and generalizability of the results. The descriptive survey design restricted the ability to establish causal relationships between open communication and student performance. This study addressed these gaps by focusing specifically on principals' open communication on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya.

Kawinzi and Nzina (2025) conducted a quantitative descriptive survey study in Machakos County to examine the influence of strategic leadership practices on students' academic performance in public senior schools. The study targeted principals and teachers, and data were collected using questionnaires and school academic performance records. Findings indicated that leadership practices involving clear communication of academic goals and collaborative planning contributed to improved student performance.

The study focused broadly on strategic leadership rather than isolating open communication as a dimension of democratic leadership. Additionally, the study did not provide detailed information on sample size determination, representativeness of the target population, or the reliability and validity of the data collection instruments. The descriptive survey design also limited the ability to establish causal relationships between principals' open communication and student academic performance. This study addressed these gaps by specifically examining principals' open communication practices as an independent variable and analyzing their direct influence on students' academic performance.

Ahmed and Ochieng (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study in Mandera East Sub-County, Kenya, to examine the influence of principals' supportive leadership on students' academic performance in secondary schools. The study targeted principals and teachers in 14 schools, selecting a sample of 75 respondents through random sampling. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews, and findings revealed that supportive leadership practices, including clear communication and teacher empowerment, positively influenced KCSE performance.

However, the study had notable gaps. It focused on supportive leadership broadly rather than specifically on democratic leadership, and it did not isolate open communication as a key leadership practice affecting student performance. The small sample size and limited target population may reduce the generalizability of the findings. The study also relied on self-reported data from questionnaires and interviews, which may introduce respondent bias. This study addressed these gaps by focusing specifically on principals' open communication practices as an independent dimension of democratic leadership and examining its direct influence on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County.

5. Research Methodology

Research design refers to the overall plan, structure, and strategy of an investigation that guides how data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted in order to answer research questions and control variance (Hussain, 2021). This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, specifically the convergent parallel mixed methods design. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then merged during interpretation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

This design was appropriate for the study because it allowed the researcher to integrate numerical data on students' academic performance with in-depth qualitative insights on principals' democratic leadership practices. Unlike purely quantitative or qualitative designs, the convergent parallel design enabled triangulation of findings, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the results. It also provided a more complete explanation of the relationship between principals' leadership styles and

students' academic outcomes by capturing both measurable trends and contextual experiences within schools (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021).

The design was implemented by collecting quantitative data from teachers using structured questionnaires to measure aspects such as shared decision-making, communication, teamwork, and collective problem-solving, as well as academic performance indicators. At the same time, qualitative data were gathered through interviews with principals and sub-county education officers to obtain deeper explanations of how democratic leadership practices are applied in schools and how they influence teaching and learning. The two datasets were analyzed independently—quantitative data using statistical techniques and qualitative data using thematic analysis—and then compared and integrated during interpretation to determine areas of convergence or divergence. This integration provides a holistic understanding of how principals' democratic leadership style influences students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County.

6. Research Findings

The quantitative data for this enquiry were obtained through a questionnaire administered to the teachers, while qualitative data were obtained through an interview with school principals and the Sub-County Education Officer. It was found that out of the targeted 153 respondents, 141 participated in the study, giving an overall response rate of 92.2%. Specifically, 132 out of 142 teachers returned their questionnaires, representing a response rate of 93.0%. In addition, 8 out of 10 principals were available for interviews, giving a response rate of 80.0%. The study also interviewed 1 Sub-County Education Officer, representing a 100.0% response rate.

According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), a response rate of 50% is adequate for analysis and reporting, 60% is good, while 70% and above is considered excellent. Methodological literature also emphasizes that response rates are important because they influence the validity and reliability of research findings (Taherdoost & Madanchian, 2024). Therefore, the high response rate achieved in this study enhanced the reliability of the findings on the influence of principals' democratic leadership style on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County, Kenya.

The high response rate of 92.2% was achieved because the study used appropriate data collection strategies that encouraged participation from the targeted respondents. For example, the researcher personally administered the questionnaires to teachers and made follow-ups to ensure that most of them were completed and returned. This helped to reduce non-response and ensured that respondents clearly understood the purpose of the study.

6.1 Influence of Principals' Shared Decision-Making Practices and Students' Academic Performance

Teachers were required to show their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements about the influence of principals' shared decision-making practices and students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County. The scale used by teachers to respond to the questions was: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Not Sure, Agree, Strongly Agree. The findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Principals' Shared Decision-Making Practices and Students' Academic Performance (n = 132)

Statement	SD	D	NS	A	SA
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
My principal involves teachers in making academic decisions.	6 (4.5)	11 (8.3)	14 (10.6)	61 (46.2)	40 (30.3)
My principal consults teachers when setting academic targets.	5 (3.8)	13 (9.8)	16 (12.1)	58 (43.9)	40 (30.3)
My principal allows teachers to participate in curriculum planning.	7 (5.3)	12 (9.1)	18 (13.6)	57 (43.2)	38 (28.8)
My principal involves students in decision-making affecting learning.	10 (7.6)	18 (13.6)	24 (18.2)	52 (39.4)	28 (21.2)
My principal seeks teachers' views before implementing academic policies.	6 (4.5)	14 (10.6)	17 (12.9)	59 (44.7)	36 (27.3)
Shared decision-making improves students' academic performance in my school.	4 (3.0)	9 (6.8)	13 (9.8)	60 (45.5)	46 (34.8)

Source: Researcher's Field Data (2026).

The first statement sought to establish whether principals involved teachers in making academic decisions. The findings showed that 6 (4.5%) teachers strongly disagreed, 11 (8.3%) disagreed, 14 (10.6%) were not sure, 61 (46.2%) agreed, while 40 (30.3%) strongly agreed. This means that 101 (76.5%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed that principals involved teachers in academic decision-making. The finding indicates that most principals in the sampled schools practiced consultative leadership by involving teachers in academic matters such as examination planning, syllabus coverage, remedial teaching, learner assessment, and academic improvement strategies.

The small proportion of teachers who disagreed, 17 (12.8%), suggests that in some schools, academic decisions may still have been made mainly by the principal or senior management team. The 14 (10.6%) teachers who were not sure may have been those who were not directly involved in academic committees or staff decision-making forums. This finding is supported by OECD's TALIS 2024 results, which show that teacher participation in school decisions is an important aspect of teacher leadership and school autonomy. The report notes that, on average, nearly eight out of ten teachers reported that their schools provided staff with opportunities to participate actively in school decisions (OECD, 2025). UNESCO also emphasizes that sharing leadership throughout

the school creates a collaborative learning environment and empowers teachers and students to contribute to learning improvement (UNESCO, 2024).

These findings were supported by principals during the interviews. One principal stated, *"Teachers must be involved because they understand the learners better at the classroom level."* Another principal explained:

"In our school, academic decisions are discussed in staff meetings and departmental meetings. We look at previous examination results, identify weak subjects, and agree on what should be done. When teachers participate in this process, they become more committed because they know that the decisions were not simply imposed by the principal." (Principal 5, 15th May 2026)

This finding shows that teachers were not only consulted as employees but were treated as professional partners in academic improvement. It also confirms that shared decision-making encouraged ownership and commitment among teachers.

The second statement examined whether principals consulted teachers when setting academic targets. The findings showed that 5 (3.8%) teachers strongly disagreed, 13 (9.8%) disagreed, 16 (12.1%) were not sure, 58 (43.9%) agreed, and 40 (30.3%) strongly agreed. Therefore, 98 (74.2%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed that principals consulted them when setting academic targets. This finding suggests that most schools used a participatory approach in target setting. Since teachers understand learners' strengths, weaknesses, subject performance trends, and classroom realities, their involvement in target setting makes academic targets more realistic and achievable. The 18 (13.6%) teachers who disagreed or strongly disagreed suggest that in some schools, targets may still have been set by principals, boards, or senior management without sufficient consultation. The 16 (12.1%) who were not sure may indicate that target setting was handled mainly by heads of departments and not all teachers were involved directly. This finding agrees with a recent Kenyan study in public senior schools in Mwala Sub-County, which found that principals' democratic leadership style had a statistically significant relationship with students' academic performance (Mwove, 2023).

The principals' interviews confirmed the importance of consultation in target setting. One principal retorted:

"At the beginning of the year, we do not simply announce targets to teachers. We sit with departments and look at the previous KCSE results, internal examination results, subject mean scores, and the ability of the current candidates. After that, each department proposes its target. This helps us to avoid unrealistic targets and also helps teachers to commit themselves to what they have proposed." (Principal 2, 16th May 2026)

This finding shows that consultation in target setting promotes ownership, responsibility, and accountability among teachers. It also suggests that democratic

leadership helps schools to set academic goals based on evidence rather than administrative pressure alone.

The third statement assessed whether principals allowed teachers to participate in curriculum planning. The findings revealed that 7 (5.3%) teachers strongly disagreed, 12 (9.1%) disagreed, 18 (13.6%) were not sure, 57 (43.2%) agreed, and 38 (28.8%) strongly agreed. This means that 95 (72.0%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they participated in curriculum planning. The finding suggests that teachers were involved in preparing schemes of work, lesson planning, syllabus coverage schedules, revision programs, remedial classes, internal examinations, and departmental academic plans. Since teachers are the actual implementers of the curriculum, their participation in curriculum planning is essential for effective teaching and learning. The 19 (14.4%) teachers who disagreed or strongly disagreed may indicate that some schools had limited teacher participation in curriculum planning, while the 18 (13.6%) who were not sure may not have been directly involved in departmental planning structures. OECD (2025) supports this finding by identifying teacher involvement in curriculum, school resources, and instructional decisions as an important dimension of teacher leadership and professional autonomy. The interviews further supported the finding. One principal stated, *"Curriculum planning begins with the subject teachers."* Another principal explained:

"The principal supervises curriculum implementation, but the actual planning is done by teachers. They prepare schemes of work, lesson plans, testing schedules, revision programs, and departmental plans. As principal, I only coordinate and ensure that the plans are implemented. Without teachers, curriculum planning cannot succeed." (Principal 8, 17th May 2026)

This finding indicates that principals recognized teachers as central actors in curriculum implementation. It also confirms that democratic leadership enables teachers to use their professional knowledge in planning teaching and learning activities. By involving teachers in decision-making, principals create a sense of ownership, responsibility, and commitment among staff members. Teachers are more likely to support and implement school programs effectively when they feel that their views, experiences, and classroom realities are respected.

The statement on whether principals involved students in decision-making affecting learning showed that 10 (7.6%) teachers strongly disagreed, 18 (13.6%) disagreed, 24 (18.2%) were not sure, 52 (39.4%) agreed, and 28 (21.2%) strongly agreed. The combined positive response was 80 (60.6%), which was the lowest among all the statements. This finding suggests that while student participation existed, it was weaker compared with teacher participation. The 28 (21.2%) teachers who disagreed or strongly disagreed may have felt that students were not adequately involved in academic matters. The 24 (18.2%) who were not sure may indicate that student participation occurred through indirect structures such as student councils, class representatives, suggestion

boxes, or barazas, which may not have been visible to all teachers. This finding partly supports UNESCO's view that shared leadership should empower teachers and students to contribute to learning improvement, while also revealing that student voice in academic decision-making still needs strengthening in the sampled schools (UNESCO, 2024). The interview findings helped to explain this lower rating. One principal stated, *"Students speak through their leaders."* Another principal explained:

"We involve students through the student council, class representatives, suggestion boxes, and sometimes through open barazas. Students tell us about issues affecting learning, such as teacher absenteeism, lack of textbooks, congestion in classrooms, difficult subjects, and challenges in boarding. However, we do not involve them in every academic decision because some decisions require professional judgment from teachers." (Principal 1, 16th May 2026)

The Sub-County Education Officer (SCEO) also emphasized the importance of student participation:

"Students should not be ignored in matters affecting learning. They may not make professional decisions like teachers, but they can give useful feedback about what is happening in the classroom. A good principal listens to students because they are the direct beneficiaries of teaching and learning." (SCEO, 18th May 2026).

The finding shows that principals valued teachers as key participants in curriculum implementation. Democratic leadership allowed teachers to contribute their professional knowledge in planning, teaching, assessment, and curriculum improvement. By involving teachers in decision-making, principals promoted ownership, commitment, teamwork, and motivation among staff. The findings also suggest that participatory leadership builds trust, improves communication, and makes school planning more realistic because teachers understand classroom needs and learner challenges. Overall, democratic leadership strengthens curriculum delivery by empowering teachers and encouraging shared responsibility for school success.

The fifth statement examined whether principals sought teachers' views before implementing academic policies. The findings showed that 6 (4.5%) teachers strongly disagreed, 14 (10.6%) disagreed, 17 (12.9%) were not sure, 59 (44.7%) agreed, and 36 (27.3%) strongly agreed. Therefore, 95 (72.0%) teachers agreed or strongly agreed that principals sought their views before implementing academic policies. This suggests that most principals consulted teachers before introducing academic policies related to internal examinations, remedial lessons, syllabus coverage, academic monitoring, discipline, and learner support. The 20 (15.1%) teachers who disagreed or strongly disagreed suggest that some principals may still have introduced policies with limited consultation. The 17 (12.9%) who were not sure may indicate that consultation happened

at departmental or senior management level, leaving some teachers unaware of the process.

The findings from the Sub-County Education Officer further supported the teachers' responses. The officer observed that principals who involve teachers in academic policy decisions usually experience smoother implementation because teachers understand the practical classroom realities affecting learners. According to the officer, consultation enables teachers to raise concerns about workload, syllabus coverage, learner discipline, assessment schedules, and the availability of teaching and learning resources before policies are introduced. This makes academic policies more realistic, acceptable, and easier to implement.

The Sub-County Education Officer also noted that schools where principals consult teachers tend to have stronger teamwork and better coordination of academic programs. Teachers are more committed to policies when they feel that their professional views have been considered. However, the officer also acknowledged that in some schools, consultation is limited to senior teachers, heads of departments, or board-level decisions, which may leave ordinary classroom teachers feeling excluded from the process. This explains why some teachers disagreed or were unsure whether consultation took place.

The statement sought to establish whether shared decision-making improves students' academic performance. The findings revealed that 4 teachers (3.0%) strongly disagreed, 9 teachers (6.8%) disagreed, 13 teachers (9.8%) were not sure, 60 teachers (45.5%) agreed, and 46 teachers (34.8%) strongly agreed. This means that 106 teachers, representing 80.3%, gave a positive response.

These findings show that a large majority of teachers believed that shared decision-making contributes to improved academic performance because a high number of teachers gave a positive response. This may be because shared decision-making encourages teamwork, strengthens teacher commitment, promotes ownership of school programs, improves academic planning, and enhances collective responsibility for learner achievement. When teachers are involved in academic decisions, they are more likely to support the implementation of strategies aimed at improving performance.

A small proportion of teachers, 13, representing 9.8%, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. This may suggest that these teachers believed academic performance is influenced more directly by other factors such as learners' ability, availability of resources, parental support, adequacy of teachers, learner discipline, and general school environment. Similarly, the 13 teachers, also representing 9.8%, who were not sure may have found it difficult to establish a direct connection between leadership style and examination outcomes.

The high positive response, however, supports Kenyan evidence showing that democratic leadership is statistically related to academic performance in public senior schools (Mwove, 2023). This implies that when decision-making is shared, schools are

more likely to benefit from cooperation, better planning, and stronger implementation of academic programs.

The findings from the Sub-County Education Officer further confirmed this view. The officer observed that better-performing schools are often those where principals do not work alone, but collaborate with teachers, heads of departments, boards of management, parents, and student leaders. According to the officer, when academic problems are discussed collectively, each stakeholder understands their role, making it easier to follow up on learners and improve academic results. This observation shows that shared decision-making improves academic performance indirectly by strengthening coordination, responsibility, and follow-up. It also confirms that democratic leadership creates a sense of collective responsibility for students' academic achievement.

6.2 Influence of Principals' Promotion of Open Communication and Students' Academic Performance

Teachers were required to show their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements about the influence of principals' promotion of open communication and students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County. The scale used by teachers to respond to the questions was: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Not Sure, Agree, Strongly Agree. The findings are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Principals' Promotion of Open Communication
and Students' Academic Performance (n = 132)

Statement	SD	D	NS	A	SA
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)
My principal communicates academic expectations clearly to teachers.	5 (3.8)	10 (7.6)	13 (9.8)	64 (48.5)	40 (30.3)
My principal encourages teachers to express their views on academic matters.	6 (4.5)	12 (9.1)	15 (11.4)	61 (46.2)	38 (28.8)
My principal maintains open channels of communication with teachers.	5 (3.8)	11 (8.3)	14 (10.6)	62 (47.0)	40 (30.3)
My principal allows students to communicate issues affecting their learning.	9 (6.8)	17 (12.9)	23 (17.4)	55 (41.7)	28 (21.2)
My principal gives teachers feedback on academic performance.	6 (4.5)	13 (9.8)	16 (12.1)	60 (45.5)	37 (28.0)
Open communication improves students' academic performance in my school.	4 (3.0)	8 (6.1)	12 (9.1)	63 (47.7)	45 (34.1)

Source: Researcher's Field Data (2026).

The study sought to establish how principals' promotion of open communication influenced students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County. The first statement examined whether principals communicated academic expectations clearly to teachers. The findings showed that 5 teachers (3.8%) strongly

disagreed, 10 teachers (7.6%) disagreed, 13 teachers (9.8%) were not sure, 64 teachers (48.5%) agreed, and 40 teachers (30.3%) strongly agreed. Therefore, 104 teachers, representing 78.8%, agreed or strongly agreed that principals communicated academic expectations clearly.

This finding indicates that most principals made teachers aware of what was expected of them in relation to syllabus coverage, lesson attendance, examination preparation, remedial teaching, learner support, and academic targets. The 15 teachers (11.4%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed may suggest that in some schools, communication on academic expectations was either unclear, irregular, or did not reach all teachers equally. The 13 teachers (9.8%) who were not sure may represent teachers who were not directly involved in academic planning or who received information mainly through heads of departments.

Interview findings supported this result. One principal stated, *"Teachers need to know clearly what the school expects academically."* Another principal explained:

"At the beginning of the term, we communicate our academic expectations through staff meetings and departmental meetings. We discuss syllabus coverage, internal examinations, remedial lessons, and performance targets. When teachers understand the expectations early, they are able to organize their work better and support learners more effectively." (Principal 3, 17th May 2026)

These views show that open communication gives teachers a clear academic direction. It also confirms that communication of expectations is not only an administrative practice, but also an instructional leadership strategy because it guides teaching, monitoring, and academic follow-up. This finding is supported by UNESCO's 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report, which emphasizes that effective school leadership should focus on learning, expectation management, collaboration, and staff development. It is also consistent with Ekal and Mungai (2024), who found that principals' communication and decision-making practices influenced students' academic performance in public senior schools in Turkana County, Kenya.

The second statement examined whether principals encouraged teachers to express their views on academic matters. The findings showed that 6 teachers (4.5%) strongly disagreed, 12 teachers (9.1%) disagreed, 15 teachers (11.4%) were not sure, 61 teachers (46.2%) agreed, and 38 teachers (28.8%) strongly agreed. This means that 99 teachers, representing 75.0%, agreed or strongly agreed that principals encouraged teachers to express their views on academic matters. The findings suggest that most principals created space for teachers to raise academic concerns, suggest interventions, and discuss issues affecting teaching and learning. The 18 teachers (13.6%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed may indicate that some teachers did not feel free to speak openly or that communication was still controlled mainly by administrators. The 15 teachers

(11.4%) who were not sure may suggest that some teachers were either less involved in academic forums or hesitant to express their opinions.

The principals' interviews confirmed the importance of teacher voice. One principal said, *"Teachers must be allowed to speak because they know what happens in class."* Another principal explained:

"When teachers are given a chance to express their views, they bring very practical ideas. Sometimes the administration may think that the problem is poor student discipline, while teachers may show that the real problem is lack of textbooks, poor attendance, or slow syllabus coverage. Listening to teachers helps the school to make better academic decisions."
(Principal 2, 16th May, 2026)

Another principal observed, *"When teachers are involved in academic discussions, they become more committed to the decisions made because they feel that they are part of the process."* Similarly, another principal noted, *"Teachers interact with learners every day, so their opinions help the school understand the real challenges affecting teaching and learning."*

This finding shows that open communication helps schools identify academic challenges more accurately. It also suggests that teacher voice contributes to better planning and more realistic academic interventions. OECD's TALIS 2024 report supports this finding by showing that teacher participation in school decision-making is a major aspect of teacher leadership and autonomy. However, TALIS also shows that teacher participation varies across education systems, meaning that open communication should not be assumed to exist equally in all schools.

The third statement assessed whether principals maintained open channels of communication with teachers. The findings showed that 5 teachers (3.8%) strongly disagreed, 11 teachers (8.3%) disagreed, 14 teachers (10.6%) were not sure, 62 teachers (47.0%) agreed, and 40 teachers (30.3%) strongly agreed. This produced a combined positive response of 102 teachers, representing 77.3%. This finding indicates that most teachers perceived communication channels in their schools as open. These channels may include staff meetings, departmental meetings, academic committee meetings, circulars, notice boards, WhatsApp groups, one-on-one consultations, and official memos. The 16 teachers (12.1%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed may indicate that some teachers experienced limited access to the principal or felt that communication was mainly top-down. The 14 teachers (10.6%) who were not sure may suggest that communication structures existed but were not consistently used or were more accessible to certain teachers than others.

The findings from interviews supported this interpretation. One principal stated, *"My office is open for teachers who want to raise academic issues."* Another principal explained:

"We use different channels to communicate with teachers. Some matters are handled in staff meetings, others in departmental meetings, and urgent issues are communicated through official school platforms. I also encourage heads of departments to keep communication active because academic matters cannot wait until the end of the term."
(Principal 8, 16th May 2026)

These findings show that open communication depends on both the principal's personal openness and functional school structures. Regular communication helps schools respond quickly to academic issues before they become serious barriers to learning. This finding is supported by the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2024/5, which states that sharing leadership throughout the school creates a collaborative learning environment by empowering teachers, students, parents, and community members to contribute to school improvement (UNESCO, 2024).

The fourth statement focused on whether principals allowed students to communicate issues affecting their learning. The findings revealed that 9 teachers (6.8%) strongly disagreed, 17 teachers (12.9%) disagreed, 23 teachers (17.4%) were not sure, 55 teachers (41.7%) agreed, and 28 teachers (21.2%) strongly agreed. This suggests that students were allowed to communicate learning-related issues, although student voice appeared weaker compared with teacher communication. The 26 teachers (19.7%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed may indicate that in some schools, students had limited opportunities to raise academic concerns directly. The 23 teachers (17.4%) who were not sure may suggest that student communication occurred through student councils, class representatives, suggestion boxes, or barazas, which may not have been visible to all teachers.

The interview findings helped explain this result. One principal stated, *"Students speak mostly through their leaders."* Another principal said, *"Students are allowed to communicate issues affecting learning through class representatives, student council meetings, suggestion boxes, and school barazas."* The Sub-County Education Officer added, *"Students are the direct beneficiaries of teaching and learning. A principal who listens to students can identify problems early. Sometimes students give information that teachers or administrators may not see immediately."*

These findings show that student communication was present, but largely structured and indirect. The lower positive response suggests that schools need to strengthen learner feedback systems so that students can safely and constructively communicate academic concerns. UNESCO supports this interpretation by emphasizing that shared leadership should empower members of the school community, including students, to contribute to learning improvement. At the same time, the finding also shows that student participation may still be weaker than teacher participation in many schools (UNESCO, 2025).

The fifth statement examined whether principals gave teachers feedback on academic performance. The findings showed that 6 teachers (4.5%) strongly disagreed,

13 teachers (9.8%) disagreed, 16 teachers (12.1%) were not sure, 60 teachers (45.5%) agreed, and 37 teachers (28.0%) strongly agreed. This means that 97 teachers, representing 73.5%, agreed or strongly agreed that principals gave feedback on academic performance.

This finding indicates that most principals communicated academic results and progress to teachers through staff meetings, departmental reviews, examination analysis meetings, and performance reports. The 19 teachers (14.3%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed may suggest that in some schools, feedback was irregular, delayed, or limited to heads of departments. The 16 teachers (12.1%) who were not sure may represent teachers who were not directly involved in performance review meetings.

The principals' interviews supported the importance of feedback. One principal stated that after every examination, they analyze the results with teachers. The principal continued to say that they look at subject mean scores, improvement, decline, weak classes, and learners who need support. According to the principal, feedback helps teachers to know where they are doing well and where they need to improve. This shows that feedback is a key part of academic communication. It helps teachers reflect on performance, adjust teaching strategies, identify weak learners, and provide targeted support. This finding is supported by Obonyo and Mutilu (2023), whose study in Matuga Sub-County, Kwale County, found that communication practices such as setting performance targets, communicating goals and standards, and conducting feedback forums influenced academic performance in public senior schools.

The last statement on whether open communication improves students' academic performance in school showed that, 4 teachers (3.0%) strongly disagreed, 8 teachers (6.1%) disagreed, 12 teachers (9.1%) were not sure, 63 teachers (47.7%) agreed, and 45 teachers (34.1%) strongly agreed. This produced a high positive response of 108 teachers, representing 81.8%. This finding shows that most teachers believed open communication improves academic performance. This may be because open communication promotes clarity, teamwork, quick problem-solving, teacher motivation, student feedback, and coordination of academic programs. The 12 teachers (9.1%) who disagreed or strongly disagreed may have believed that performance is influenced more by other factors such as resources, student discipline, parental involvement, learner ability, or teacher shortage. The 12 teachers (9.1%) who were not sure may have found it difficult to directly link communication with examination performance.

The Sub-County Education Officer strongly supported this finding by stating:

"Open communication improves performance because it reduces confusion in the school. When teachers know what is expected, students know where to seek help, and the principal listens to academic concerns, problems are addressed earlier. A school that communicates well is more organized academically." (SCEO, 18th May 2026)

This finding confirms that open communication supports academic performance by improving coordination and reducing delays in addressing learning challenges. The finding is supported by Ekal and Mungai (2024), who found that principals' communication and decision-making practices influenced students' academic performance in public senior schools in Turkana County. It is also supported by UNESCO's 2024/5 leadership report, which identifies collaboration and focus on learning as important dimensions of effective educational leadership.

However, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Open communication may create conditions for improved academic performance, but it may not be sufficient on its own. Academic performance is also influenced by other factors such as teaching and learning resources, teacher adequacy, learner discipline, parental involvement, school infrastructure, and the socio-economic context of learners. This means that open communication should be understood as an important enabling factor rather than the only determinant of students' academic achievement.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and guided by the research objectives, it is reasonable to conclude that principals' democratic leadership style positively influences students' academic performance in public senior schools in Tana River Sub-County. Specifically, principals' shared decision-making practices enhance teachers' commitment, responsibility, and ownership of school academic programs by involving them in academic planning, target setting, curriculum implementation, policy formulation, and academic committees. Such collaborative practices strengthen collective responsibility for achieving school academic goals and contribute to improved students' academic performance.

The study also concludes that principals' promotion of open communication positively influences students' academic performance. Open communication enables teachers to understand academic expectations, receive timely feedback, express their views, and participate in addressing academic challenges. Effective communication strengthens trust, improves coordination, enhances collaboration, and supports timely decision-making, thereby creating a conducive environment for improved teaching and learning outcomes.

The study recommends that principals strengthen shared decision-making by consistently involving teachers in academic planning, target setting, curriculum implementation, policy formulation, and school improvement initiatives through regular staff meetings, departmental meetings, academic committees, and academic review forums. This will enhance teachers' commitment, accountability, and collective responsibility for improving students' academic performance.

The study also recommends that principals promote open communication by clearly communicating academic expectations, providing regular feedback on students'

academic progress, encouraging teachers to express their views, and maintaining reliable, timely, inclusive, and respectful communication channels. The Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission should strengthen capacity-building programs on democratic leadership practices to equip school principals with effective participatory leadership and communication skills that enhance students' academic performance.

The study suggests further research on the influence of other dimensions of principals' democratic leadership style, including teamwork and collective problem-solving, on students' academic performance in public senior schools in Kenya.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

As authors of this journal article entitled *Influence of Principals' Democratic Leadership Style on Students' Academic Performance in Public Senior Schools in Tana River Sub County, Tana River County, Kenya*, we have no conflicts of interest to declare. We have all seen and agreed with the contents of the manuscript, and there is no financial interest to report. We certify that the submission is original work and is not under review by any other publication.

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