

## **PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP STYLES AS DETERMINANT OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF VULNERABLE STUDENTS IN EBONYI STATE**

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### **Abstract**

The study investigated principal leadership styles as a determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. Three research questions guided this study. The population of the study was 120 identified vulnerable students (50 male and 70 female). The population was manageable, however, the 120 identified vulnerable students was used as the sample size for the study. The instrument for data collection was 17-item structured questionnaire titled “Principals’ Leadership Styles on Vulnerable Students Performance Questionnaire (PLSVSPQ)”. The Validation of the instrument was done by three (3) experts in the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. To ensure the reliability of the instrument using Cronbach Alpha, a trial-tested using 50 students outside the area of the study was conducted. The reliability coefficient index of 0.86 was obtained. The data collected was analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The findings among others revealed that principals’ democratic leadership style to a high extent determined academic performance of vulnerable students, principals’ autocratic leadership style to a high extent determined academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State. This therefore could not have been possible if the principals’ leadership style was not democratic oriented. Among other recommendations, the Ministry of Education Ebonyi State should maintain and intensify in-service training for school principals on the continuous use of democratic leadership styles which has proven to be effective in enhancing students’ academic performance.

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**Keyword:** Principal, leadership style, academic performance and vulnerable students.

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### **Introduction**

The management of secondary school system across the world has continue to receive research attention. The attention is necessary considering that successful nation cannot thrive without adequate commitment in promoting secondary education. One of the ways of showing commitment in promoting secondary school in Nigeria may be attributed to the leadership skill of the school administrators. Leadership is a widely studied variable, considering integral part to the performance of organizations, employees, students/studies, among others (Sudha, Shahnawaz & Farhat, 2016). Although the definition of leadership as a concept is disputed, in its broadest sense, leadership could be defined as a relationship through which an individual influences the behaviour and actions of others. Leadership involves authority and responsibility displayed for either the success or failure of achieving objectives (Okumbe, 2008). The interest in the context of this study is on the leadership styles and academic performance of the vulnerable students.

Vulnerability can be defined as “susceptibility to exploitation, attack, harm or injury, which may be either physical or emotional. It also refers to having one’s guard down, to be open to censure or criticism, and to being liable to succumb to “manipulation,

persuasion or temptation” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2012). The World Health Organization (2002) categorizes vulnerable individuals to include students or adults without the capacity (relative, absolute, or temporary) to give voluntary consent, and children, who are considered to lack the capacity to grant consent themselves. Vulnerability in academic is manifested in students’ reluctance to participate in class, poor attendance, failure to submit written tasks, and poor academic performance in their homework, tests, and examinations. Students in this group may find it difficult to learn appropriately especially when there is no interventions and proactive measures to inclusively engage them in academic activities (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). In this study, the researchers however defined vulnerable students to include those at a higher risk of experiencing academic and social challenges as result of hardships, communication barriers, disabilities, homelessness, exposure to violence, mental health distress, among others, of which without proactive leadership approach to address most of their educational problems may lead them to academic failures. Observations show that some critical issues affecting vulnerable students mostly in Ebonyi State exist. On this note, the leadership styles of principal may be of paramount importance to engage the vulnerable students in academically friendly environment. It is also glaring that some principals may not consider their styles of leadership as the determinants of students’ academic performance level. Hence, some principals seem to find it difficult to effectively lead their schools (Adeyemi 2004). The leadership style of the principal is demonstrated in the abilities to solve the multifaceted challenges facing the school. This is in tandem with the view of (Babayomi, 2006) that the leadership style of many leaders, including the principals has been identified as one of the major factors influencing the productivity of subordinates in any organization and the school system may not be an exception. In case, where the leadership style of the principal is ineffective, even the best school programme, the most adequate resources and the most motivational staff and students will be rendered unproductive. No wonder Luthans (2012) opines that the success or failure of any school is highly attributed to the principal’s leadership style. On this note, principal leadership that supports student learning is critically important in this study. The principal leadership when it is effective tends to be crucial for improving academic outcomes (Leithwood et al., 2010; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013).

Some of the principal leadership styles are: democratic, transformational, transactional, autocratic, laissez-faire leadership, among others. According to Bello et al. (2016), principal’s leadership is democratic when it promote the practice, provides liberty for all to co-operate in the spirit of fairness toward goal attainment. It is transformational when the leaders, including the principals has the ability to inspire, motivate, and elevate followers or teachers to exceed self-interests in order to achieve performance goals of the organizations or schools (Ughulu, 2024). For the transactional leadership, the principals may engage the teachers or students into activities solely to promote compliance through both rewards and punishments. The autocratic leadership style which is also known as the authoritarian style of leadership could be regarded as where power and decision making reside in the autocratic principal. The autocratic principal tends to manage school or directs strictly the teachers and students on the way things should be done. Laissez-faire leadership could be seen as “I don’t care” attitude of leadership where critical decisions are allowed to be taken by the students or teachers with little or no direction from the principals. In contribution to the previous studies on principal leadership styles, this study will explore the democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles respectively.

Research has shown that principal's leadership style is a critical factor in shaping school culture and may likely affect academic achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Among others, Transformational leadership, transactional leadership, and laissez-faire leadership styles seem to distinct effects on teacher motivation, student engagement, and academic outcomes (Bass & Avolio, 1997). In Nigeria, studies have highlighted the importance of principal leadership styles in academic performance (Adeyemi, 2018). This may help to improve education in Nigeria which has been bedeviled with academic setbacks over the years (FRN, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Accordingly, several related studies established that the principals' democratic leadership styles seem to be useful in the stability of academic activities of learners (Obama, Akinyi & Orodho, 2015; Weli, & Eguzoroibe, 2022; ). In addition, Achimugu, and Obaka (2017) revealed that chemistry students under the leadership of democratic principals performed better than their counterparts under authoritative and laissez-faire principals. Contrary, (Igwe, Ndidiamaka and Chidi, (2017) revealed that autocratic leadership style instead of democratic leadership was positively correlated with students' academic performance. On the aspect of autocratic leadership style, school principal practicing autocratic leadership style mostly exercise power and make decisions without due consultations from teachers or even students. Evidenced based studies revealed that autocratic leadership styles negatively influenced students' academic performance to a high extent (Weli, & Eguzoroibe, 2022; Abdulhakeem, Hamza, & Suleman, 2021; Omeke & Onah, 2012). Further study by Ogalo (2013) found that principals who apply autocratic leadership have lower cooperation with their teachers in terms of lesson preparation, use of teaching aids, and effective classroom teaching and as such tend to produce lower students' achievement. It is also necessary to established that a contrary study (Igwe, Ndidiamaka & Chidi, 2017) to compares the leadership styles of principals in public and mission secondary schools on students' academic performance found that autocratic leadership style was positively correlated with students' academic performance. For the lesser faire leadership style, Okumba (1998) in Igwe et al. (2017) maintained that institutions where laissez-faire leadership style is practice, do not worry much that teachers and students may relax since they do what they want, and this will affect teaching and learning. This may, in turn, affect students' achievement negatively. Again, this kind of style predispose to unproductive activities and could be detrimental a tool affecting the whole of schools principals. However, a study (Achimugu, & Obaka (2017) found that chemistry students under the leadership of authoritative and laissez-faire principals did their best to perform well like those under the leadership of principals with democratic style. The academic performance could be as a result of the extra effort by the students who do not care about the laissez-faire leadership of their school principals. Under the condition of laissez-faire leadership of the school principals, students who are vulnerable may not succeed academically.

Again, many factors have been attributed to poor academic achievement, including the principals' leadership styles which may posed severe challenges to the academic performance of vulnerable students. It is necessary to note that some principals may not considered their styles of leadership as the determinants of students' academic performance. This situation however provoked the interest of this study. However, limited research seems to exist on the principal's leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State. Most studies previously reviewed did not captured the interest of the students with vulnerability. Again, to the best knowledge of the researchers, there remain a significant gap arising from the different socio-cultural background and methodology in the previous studies which posit the need for further

research. This however, provoke the interest of this study to ascertain the extent principal's leadership styles tend to determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The principal's leadership styles as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students is a critical issue of concern to all educational stakeholders in Nigeria. The ideal situation in this study recognizes that when the principals' leadership styles is democratic for example, the students especially the vulnerable one tend to excel academically. This may not be possible in a situation where the leadership styles of the school principal pose a serious challenge to the academic performance of the students. Again, the current global upsurge towards the academic performance of the students has created worries in the hearts of stakeholders in the education sector mostly on the types of leadership styles which principals should adopt for effective school management towards achieving high educational output. This become necessary considering that in Ebonyi State, the continuous and rampant rate of poor academic performance of vulnerable students is so alarming and disheartening. The closely observed setbacks experienced in secondary schools especially for the vulnerable students could be managed when principals' ability to identify the leadership styles that will help vulnerable students to be more engaging in their studies is promoted. However, to the best knowledge of the researchers, past related studies supporting this study remains largely unexplored with different socio-cultural background. Hence, the need for this presents research.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to ascertain the principals' leadership styles as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. ascertain the extent to which principals' democratic leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State
2. ascertain the extent to which principals' autocratic leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State.
3. find out the extent to which principals' laissez-faire leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent does principals' democratic leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State?
2. To what extent does principals' autocratic leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State?
3. To what extent does principals' laissez-faire leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State?

### **Methods**

This study adopted a descriptive survey design and was carried out in public secondary schools with vulnerable students in Ebonyi State of Nigeria. The researchers used purposive sampling to draw 120 vulnerable students in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State. The instrument used for data collection was a 17item structured questionnaire titled "Principals' Leadership Styles on Vulnerable Students Performance Questionnaire (PLSVSPQ)" The questionnaire was divided into two sections, A and B. Section A elicited

responses on the demographic data of the respondents while section B has items based on the research questions of the study. The Questionnaire adopted a 4-point Likert type rating scale of Very High Extent (VHE) =4 points, High Extent (HE) =3 points, Low Extent (LE) =2 points and very Low Extent (VLE)-1 point respectively. The face and content validity of the developed instrument (PLSVSPQ) of this study was determined by two experts from the departments of Educational Management and Foundational Studies, and Science Education. Their necessary suggestions and scrutiny lend credence to the suitability of the instruments. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the questionnaire was trial-tested using 50 students outside the area of the study. The data collected from the students were computed through the use of Cronbach Alpha Reliability. The overall reliability coefficient obtained were 0.86. Data collected from the respondents were analyzed using arithmetic mean, and standard deviation. The mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions. The arithmetic mean was determined using the bench mark of 2.50.

## Results

**Research Question 1:** To what extent does principals' democratic leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State?

**Table 1: mean and standard deviation of the extent to which Principals' Democratic Leadership Style determine Academic Performance of vulnerable students scale**

S/N	Items	Mean	Std	Decision
1	Principals who involve students in decision making that concern them come up with policies that improves students learning.	2.63	.49	HE
2	Principal who let staff members know what is expected of them enhance teachers teaching which impacts positively on students' learning.	2.79	.45	HE
3	Staff meetings in this school are periodically conducted and teachers give opinions on effective and efficient modalities of handling students which improve students' performance in learning.	3.43	.49	HE
4	Principal sees to it that work of staff members on the interest of the vulnerable students' academic performance is coordinated.	3.02	.49	HE
5	Principals' involvement of students in the school administration motivates vulnerable students to learn better with improved academic performance.	2.81	.45	HE
6	When principals allow vulnerable students to have freedom of speech to communicate their concerns, they are able to deal with issues that hinder their learning and performance.	3.19	.45	HE
7	The principal organizing meeting with teachers to see how to improve quality of teaching which improves academic performance of vulnerable students.	2.58	.45	HE
<b>Cluster mean and standard deviation</b>		2.92	0.47	<b>HE</b>
Very High Extent (3.50-4.00), High Extent (2.50-3.49), Low Extent (1.50-2.49) and Very Low Extent (1.00-1.49)				

Data in Table 1 indicate that items with serial numbers 1 to 7 have mean values above the criterion mean of 2.50. The cluster mean of 2.92 suggests that the democratic leadership style of the principal, to a high extent, is a strong determinant of the academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State.

**Research question 2:** To what extent does principals' autocratic leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State?

**Extent to which Principals' Autocratic Leadership Style determine Academic Performance of vulnerable students scale**

S/N	Items	Mean	Std	Decision
1	Principals who do not seek vulnerable students' opinion on matters affecting them often take decisions that affect the way learners learn.	2.91	.45	HE
2	When principals do not explain the action plan of the school to teachers, they under-perform and this leads to poor academic performance of vulnerable students.	2.43	.49	LE
3	When principals are reluctant to accept constructive ideas from other staff members it affects the teaching and learning process of vulnerable students.	2.03	.49	LE
4	Principals who do not listen to students' concerns end up killing students' morale for learning which invariably affect their academic performance.	2.57	.49	HE
5	Vulnerable students' views are not considered in staff the meetings.	3.29	.45	HE
<b>Cluster mean and standard deviation</b>		<b>2.65</b>	<b>0.47</b>	<b>HE</b>

Very High Extent (3.50-4.00), High Extent (2.50-3.49), Low Extent (1.50-2.49) and Very Low Extent (1.00-1.49)

Data in table 2 shows that items with serial numbers 1 to 5 have their various mean values above the criterion mean value of 2.50. The cluster mean value of 2.65 shows that principals' autocratic leadership style to a high extent determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State.

**Research Question 3:** To what extent does principals' laissez-faire leadership style determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State?

**Extent to which Principals' laissez-faire Leadership Style determine Academic Performance of vulnerable students scale**

S/N	Items	Mean	Std	Decision
1	My principal does not care about what the vulnerable students do regarding their academic activities.	2.33	.49	LE
2	My principal does not have any proactive action plan of enhancing academic performance of vulnerable students.	2.29	.45	LE
3	My principal does not discipline teachers when they fail severally to teach and such can leads to poor academic performance of vulnerable students.	2.43	.49	LE
4	Critical decisions are allowed to be taken by the	2.23	.49	LE

	vulnerable students or teachers with little or no direction from the principals.			
5	My principal easily considered certain issues that ought not to be in during school meetings.	2.14	.35	LE
<b>Cluster mean and standard deviation</b>		<b>2.28</b>	<b>0.45</b>	<b>LE</b>

Very High Extent (3.50-4.00), High Extent (2.50-3.49), Low Extent (1.50-2.49) and Very Low Extent (1.00-1.49)

Data in table 3 shows that items with serial numbers 1 to 5 have their various mean values above the criterion mean value of 2.50. The cluster mean value of 2.28 shows that principals' laissez-faire leadership style to a low extent determine academic performance of vulnerable students in Ebonyi State.

### Discussions

The finding from table 1 shows that the principals' democratic leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students was to a high extent. The high extent is commendable considering that democratic leadership style promotes an exemplary school leadership. A school principal who practices democratic leadership style is always transformative in setting new standards in school administration and students achievement. Principals' democratic leadership style creates an environment where creativity flourishes, making vulnerable students inclusively engage in learning to reach their full potential. However, principals using democratic leadership style have the prowess to inspire both teachers/staff and students towards achieving exceptional results especially in academic endeavor. This supported the finding of Obama, Akinyi and Orodho (2015) whose study on the effect of principals' leadership styles on students' academic performances revealed that the schools that embraced more democratic and participatory leadership styles that encouraged group work and team spirit performed significantly better than those that used more autocratic leadership styles that were largely dictatorial. The finding of this study is also in tandem with the result of Weli, and Eguzoroibe, (2022) which found that democratic leadership styles influenced students' academic performance to a high extent. In further support of this study, Achimugu, and Obaka (2017) explored the influence of principals' leadership styles on senior secondary school students' achievement in chemistry which revealed that chemistry students under the leadership of democratic principles performed better than their counterparts under authoritative and laissez-faire principals. Contrary, the finding of this study disagreed with (Igwe, Ndidiamaka and Chidi, (2017) which revealed that autocratic leadership style instead of democratic leadership was positively correlated with students' academic performance.

In table 2, the finding of the study showed that the principals' autocratic leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students was to a high extent. School principal practicing autocratic leadership style which is also known as the authoritarian style of leadership mostly exercise power and make decisions anyhow without due consultations or accept transformative ideas from teachers or even students . This may not be surprise because the style of the leadership is mostly not inclusively based. This is because autocratic leader/principal tends to manage school or directs strictly the teachers and students on the way things should be done. Consequently, the vulnerable students who are under the control of autocratic leadership style tend to lack the ability to create an environment where creativity in learning flourishes, thereby, making the students not to reach their full potential in achieving a good academic performance. Evidence (Achimugu,& Obaka ,2017) shows that authoritarian or autocratic leadership was the

dominant leadership style used by the senior secondary school principals in Kogi State, Nigeria. However, study (Weli, & Eguzoroibe, 2022) revealed that autocratic leadership styles negatively influenced students' academic performance to a high extent. Again, the finding of this study agreed with Abdulhakeem, Hamza, and Suleman, (2021) that autocratic leadership style was found out to be associated with harshness and leaders who practice this style of leadership are always distant from teachers and students. In tandem with the finding of this study, Omeke and Onah (2012) studied the influence of principals' leadership styles in teachers' job satisfaction and they found that the principals adopted pre-dominantly autocratic leadership style which affects effective teaching and learning. This also concurs with Ogalo (2013) study that principals who apply autocratic leadership have lower cooperation with their teachers in terms of lesson preparation, use of teaching aids, and effective classroom teaching and as such tend to produce lower students' achievement. It is also necessary to established that the finding of this study disagrees with a study to compares the leadership styles of principals in public and mission secondary schools on students' academic performance (Igwe, Ndidiamaka & Chidi, 2017) which found that autocratic leadership style was positively correlated with students' academic performance.

The findings in table 3 revealed that the principals' laissez-faire leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students was to a low extent. This indicates that the teachers and students under the laissez-faire leadership of school principals even when they are free to do whatever they like has nothing to do with the academic performance of students. The low extent of principals' laissez-faire leadership style on students' academic performance could be that many teachers even at this condition of laissez faire leadership however supported the students to attend classes regularly without waiting for the principal to monitor or supervise them before learning. The finding of this study disagreed with Okumba (1998) in Igwe et al. (2017) who pointed out that institutions where laissez-faire leadership style is practice, it is feared that teachers and students may relax since they do what they want, and this will affect teaching and learning. This may, in turn, affect students' achievement negatively. Again, Obi (2003) argues that such style predispose to unproductive activities very often and could be detrimental tool and welfare on the whole of schools principals. However, the finding of this study is in line with the study by (Achimugu, &Obaka (2017) who found that chemistry students under the leadership of authoritative and laissez-faire principals did their best to perform well like those under the leadership of principals with democratic style. The academic performance could be as a result of the extra effort by the students who do not care about the laissez-faire leadership of their school principals. The students may have chosen to remain focus in their academic pursuits and such behavior is capable of enhancing their academic performance.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the result of this study, it is important to note that the principals' democratic leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students was to a high extent. This therefore could not have been possible if the principals' leadership style was not democratic oriented. The study has proved that the principals' autocratic leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students was to a high extent. Therefore the high extent on students' academic performance would not have happened if not that the school principal was proactive and to an extent committed without using excessive autocratic leadership style. Finding also shows that principals' laissez-



faire leadership style as determinant of academic performance of vulnerable students was to a low extent.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. The Ministry of Education, Ebonyi State, in collaboration with corporate organizations and non-governmental organizations, should maintain and intensify in-service training for school principals on the use of democratic leadership styles.
2. Principals should create a conducive learning environment through the consistent application of democratic leadership practices.
3. Awareness campaigns should be organized for school administrators to understand the appropriate application of different leadership styles.
4. The Ministry of Education should carry out regular inspections in secondary schools to monitor leadership practices and ensure they support students' academic performance.
5. Reward and motivation packages should be provided to school administrators to sustain effective leadership styles.
6. Principals should apply a mix of leadership styles as situations demand, rather than relying solely on one approach.
7. A cordial and respectful relationship should be maintained among principals, teachers, and students to foster a positive school climate.
8. Principals should lead by example through punctuality and showing respect for the views and feelings of both teachers and students.

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