Principals' Leadership Styles and Student's Academic Achievement in Secondary Schools in South-East States, Nigeria

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Abstract- This study investigated principals' leadership styles, and student's academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east States, Nigeria. two research questions guided the study and two corresponding hypotheses was formulated and tested at 0.05 significance level. The study employed a correlational research design because the study sought to investigate the relationship between the variables of the study. The population was 12,444 in public secondary schools in South-east, while the sample comprised 1,244 teachers in the 61 public secondary schools in the south-east states of Nigeria. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed, while simple random sampling was used in the selection of the sample size. The instrument for data collection was a researcher-constructed questionnaire titled "Leadership Style and School Climate Questionnaire (LSSCQ)". Students' academic schedule was used in place of questionnaire items for academic achievement. The instrument was validated by three experts, one from the Department of Educational Administration and Planning, one from the Department of Curriculum and Teacher Education and one from Measurement and Evaluation, and subjected to reliability using a one short test reliability technique and the coefficient of 0.80 and 0.87 were realized, which implied that the instruments were considered adequate for the study. The instrument was administered with the help of research assistants who were briefed. Simple linear regression was used to answer research questions while t-test statistic associated with regression were used to test hypotheses at a 0.05 level of significance. The finding revealed that Servant-leadership style significantly relates to students' academic achievement, engagement/collaboration does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement, in South-East States, Nigeria.

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a critical component in educational management, with principals playing a pivotal role in shaping the learning environment and influencing student outcomes. In secondary schools, the leadership style adopted by principals significantly affects the attitudes, motivation, and performance of both teachers and students. Effective leadership provides direction, fosters a positive school climate, and ensures the implementation of policies aimed at improving academic achievement. In the context of Nigeria's South-East states, where educational challenges persist due to socio-economic and infrastructural disparities, understanding the influence of principals' leadership styles on students' academic achievement is essential for policy formulation and school improvement initiatives.

Leadership styles in educational settings are broadly categorized into transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire styles. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate staff and students to achieve higher performance levels through vision sharing and personal development initiatives (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). Transactional leaders focus on clear structures, rewards, and punishments to ensure compliance and performance (Bass, 1990), while laissez-faire leaders adopt a hands-off approach, granting autonomy but potentially leading to confusion and a lack of direction (Avolio & Bass, 2004). The adoption of any of these styles has implications for the learning environment and students' academic outcomes.

Servant leadership is a promising approach to managing people that focuses on giving service to others. Servant leadership is the key to a better world that people are in dire need of. One that is freer, healthier, more humane, and more prosperous. Given the current demand for more ethical, people-centered management, leadership inspired by the ideas from servant leadership theory may very well be what organizations need now. This is because it is a leadership style that is good for the leader as well as the leader because it is an ethical, practical and meaningful way to live and be led (Olesia, Namusonge, & Iravo, 2014). Servant Leadership can be most likely associated with the participative management style. The highest priority of a servant leader is to encourage, support, and enable subordinates to unfold their full potential and abilities. This leads to an obligation to delegate responsibility and engage in participative decision-making (Glacier point solution, 2015).

Effective leadership often involves collaborative efforts with other entities within the organization. Generically, building collaborative cultures helps in creating a useful network among academic collaborators. Overstreet, (2012) defined a leadership practice of building collaborative cultures as one that involves the followers in an attempt to transcend self-interest for the sake of the team. Building collaborative culture generally entails working as a team to achieve the objectives of an organization. According to Olufemi, Adediran, and Oyediran, (2018) students' academic achievement is affected by several factors which include students' learning skills, school environment, parental background, peer influence, teachers' quality, learning resources and infrastructure, among others. The school climate plays a significant role in students' performance and engagement and acquisition of knowledge.

Academic achievement refers to the outcome/performance of education. Thus, it indicates the extent to which a person has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of activities in instructional environments (Suvarna & Ganesha Bhata, 2015). As it includes the multifaceted abilities of the learners it should be considered as a multifaceted construct that comprises different domains of learning. Whatever may be the indicator used to measure academic achievement, the factors which have their influence on it are general intelligence, achievement motivation, recognition, interest, attitude, aptitude, and Personality of the person. Thus, an individual's orientation towards academic achievement depends on various factors. One such factor is the Personality (Suvarna & Ganesha Bhata, 2015)

Statement of the Problem

Despite various reforms and investments aimed at improving education in Nigeria, the academic achievement of secondary school students in the South-East states remains inconsistent and, in some cases, below national standards. Data from examination bodies such as the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) show fluctuating pass rates, raising concerns about factors influencing student performance. While curriculum content, teacher quality, and resource availability are often examined, less attention has been given to the leadership styles of principals as a potential determinant of academic success.

Studies such as those by Akpan (2017) and Okeke (2019) have established that effective leadership is crucial in improving school performance. Akpan (2017) found that transformational leadership positively correlates with higher student achievement in urban secondary schools in Lagos State. Similarly, Okeke (2019) reported that schools with transactional leaders experienced improved discipline and academic focus. However, these studies primarily focus on other regions of Nigeria, neglecting the unique socio-cultural and economic contexts of the South-East states. Moreover, existing research has not sufficiently addressed how varying leadership styles impact students' academic outcomes in rural versus urban school settings within the region.

Point of Departure

While previous research underscores the importance of leadership in education, there is a notable gap concerning how principals' leadership styles specifically influence students' academic achievement in the South-East states of Nigeria. Most studies concentrate on teacher performance or overall school management, leaving the direct relationship

between leadership styles and student outcomes underexplored. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining the distinct effects of transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles on academic performance across various socio-economic settings in the South-East region.

By focusing on this region, the research aims to provide context-specific insights that can guide policymakers, educational administrators, and stakeholders in adopting leadership strategies that promote academic excellence. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on educational leadership in developing countries, offering practical recommendations for enhancing student achievement through effective school leadership.

Research Questions
1. To what extent does servant-leadership style relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east States, Nigeria?
2. To what extent does engagement/collaboration relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east States, Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

H_{01} Servant-leadership style does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east States, Nigeria.
H_{o2} Engagement/collaboration does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east States, Nigeria.

Servant leadership is a style in which a leader aspires to serve. This is quite the opposite of the traditional relationship between leaders and followers. Servant leadership can be defined as an approach to leadership, with strong altruistic and ethical overtones that asks and requires leaders to be attentive to the needs of their followers and empathize with them; they should take care of them by making sure they become healthier, wiser, freer and more autonomous, so that they too can become servant leaders (Kim, 2016). Servant leadership prioritizes serving others. Le aders act as stewards, empowering followers and promoting their well-being. It emphasizes humility, empathy, and ethical decision-making. Servant leadership is a leadership

that places serving the needs of others first. The servant leader in the classroom serves their students through the high standards of servant leadership in the process of teaching and learning (McCann & Sparks, 2018).

Servant leadership is a philosophy and set of practices that enriches the lives of individuals, builds better organizations, and ultimately creates a more just and caring world. Servant leadership is a type of leadership that comes under the democratic style. Leader and servant are opposite terms but the practice of servant leadership takes place when the characters of these two opposite terms are used simultaneously in an individual's leadership style. In servant leadership, a leader is called to serve the group members or followers while leading them (Olesia, Namusonge, & Iravo, 2014). Servant leadership is a leadership concept that acts in the direction of not gathering power in one man but sharing power (Ucar, Alpkan, & Elci, 2021).

Servant leadership is a promising approach to managing people that focuses on giving service to others. Servant leaders place the needs of others at the highest priority and their main goal is to help people achieve their personal and professional objectives. It places, among other things, a special focus on the needs of the organization's employees. The servant leader is a 'servant first' – it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. Servant leadership assumes that if the followers are maximizing their potential, it will directly translate to the potential of the organization and its overall performance (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

Servant leaders are as proactive, ambitious, and driven as any other leader. They just have a different focus and set of motivation that guide their leadership and decision making. Servant leaders help their followers to grow and succeed, which in turn aids in accomplishing the organizational mission. A servant leader is someone who is a servant first, who has responsibility to be in the world, and so he contributes to the well-being of people and the community. A servant leader looks to the needs of the people and asks himself how he can help them solve problems and promote personal development.

He places his main focus on people because only content and motivated people are able to reach their targets and to fulfill the set expectations (Glacier point solution, 2015). Servant Leadership is a style of administration that emphasizes people principles. As result, servant leaders serve rather than impose. They empower rather than command. They consider their employment a vocation rather than a job (Heidari, Ghasemi, & Heidari, 2019).

Effective leadership often involves collaborative efforts with other entities within the organization. Although there is evidence that principal leadership is associated with teacher satisfaction and the professional commitment of teachers to their occupation, there has been little emphasis on how effective leadership trickles down to influence the academic achievement of students. Student engagement is an important aspect to any classroom. High engagement increases academic success for students (Youngren, 2021). Generically, building collaborative cultures helps in creating a useful network among academic collaborators. Overstreet (2012) defined a leadership practice of building collaborative cultures as one that involves the followers in an attempt to transcend self-interest for the sake of the team. Kelley and Peterson, (2019) defined building collaborative cultures as a practice that requires establishing a school culture, modifying the organizational structures, building productive relationship with teachers, students, parents, school management boards and communities linking the school to its wider environment.

Building collaborative culture generally entails working as a team to achieve the objectives of an organization. According to Foster and Young, (2019) this is where the principal and teachers work together, supporting each other, and dialoguing in case there is a problem. Building a collaborative culture is one of the practices of transformational leadership (Leithwood, Baker, McGaw, & Peterson, 2010). Principals should establish a comprehensive team work plan as it is their responsibility to build a working force that drives the school objectives forward. Principals should endeavor to build a collaborative culture with the teachers, parents and students if the school is to meet its academic targets.

According to Bolthouse, (2013) high school principals who foster effective collaboration among their staff elevate the level of their students' learning. This happens because the staff would support the principal in molding the students to achieve, the schools' objectives. In addition to this, Taylor, (2010) established that student achievement in school does improve as the school culture centers on student learning. When students are well cultured, they tend to concentrate in positive activities as enshrined in the school policies, rules and regulations. Most of their energies are therefore spent on activities that enhance and boost their learning.

Principals can collaborate to share knowledge to develop a curriculum that identifies the vital knowledge and skills relevant for the learners. They can also create common assessment methods to monitor students' progression during learning, collectively use the results to identify strengths and weaknesses; exchange ideas to assist one another to develop and thus improve the quality of students' learning. Principals' collaboration also affords participants to discuss theories and teaching methods that can ensure good instructional delivery (Saka, 2021).

Human Relations Theory

This theory emphasizes the basic problem in organizations which is the building and maintenance of good relationship that promotes healthy organizational climate and workers' productivity. It maintains that the human factor is important in the achievement of organizational goals. It also maintains that workers perform better if their personal welfare is taken into consideration. The work of Macgregor (1960), who emphasized employee participation in decision making, and Maslow (1954), who stressed the need to motivate workers, valued human relations. Those who worked on this theory were Mary Packer Follett (1868-1933), Felix Reocthlisherere and Dickson (1938) and Elton Mayo (1880-1959). The implication of this theory to the leadership in secondary schools is that the school organization is a complex social group. Therefore, it requires effective handling of its activities. Therefore, there is need for healthy relationship between administrative, teachers and institutional culture

Servant leadership, first conceptualized by Greenleaf (1977), emphasizes the leader's role as a servant, prioritizing the needs of followers, fostering personal development, and promoting community building. Unlike traditional leadership styles that focus on hierarchical authority and self-interest, servant leadership encourages leaders to put their subordinates first, empower them, and nurture a culture of collaboration. In educational settings, this leadership style has been linked to enhanced teacher engagement, improved student outcomes, and stronger school-community relationships (Spears, 1995; Laub, 1999). Engagement and collaboration are essential components of effective organizations, including schools, as they promote shared vision, collective responsibility, and improved productivity.

Greenleaf (1977) outlined servant leadership as a philosophy where leaders prioritize serving others to achieve organizational goals. Spears (1995) identified ten characteristics of servant leaders: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Laub (1999) further emphasized that servant leadership fosters an environment where collaboration and engagement are integral to organizational culture.

Employee engagement refers to the emotional commitment and involvement individuals have towards their organization's goals (Kahn, 1990). Numerous studies have explored the link between servant leadership and increased engagement among employees. Liden et al. (2008) found that servant leaders significantly enhance employees' psychological empowerment, leading to higher engagement levels. Similarly, Hunter et al. (2013) demonstrated that servant leadership fosters trust, which mediates the relationship between leadership style and employee engagement.

In the educational sector, Eva et al. (2019) reported that servant leadership among school principals leads to greater teacher engagement through supportive communication, participatory decision-making, and professional development opportunities. Farooq et al. (2020) conducted a study in Pakistani secondary schools, revealing that servant leadership practices improved teachers' commitment and engagement, positively affecting students' academic performance. Collaboration involves working together to achieve common goals, a critical element in educational institutions where teamwork among teachers, administrators, and the community is essential. Servant leadership promotes collaboration by creating a culture of openness, trust, and shared responsibility (Dennis & Bocarnea, 2005). Van Dierendonck (2011) noted that servant leaders facilitate a collaborative environment by actively listening to team members and valuing their input.

Empirical evidence supports the positive association between servant leadership and collaboration. Schaubroeck et al. (2011) found that servant leaders enhance team collaboration by fostering psychological safety and encouraging open communication. In a study of educational institutions in South Africa, Du Plessis and Van Niekerk (2017) highlighted that servant leadership improved teacher collaboration, resulting in better instructional practices and student outcomes.

Educational leadership literature consistently underscores the importance of leadership styles in shaping school culture, teacher satisfaction, and student achievement. Servant leadership, with its focus on serving others and promoting a supportive environment, has gained traction in schools worldwide (Black, 2010). A study by Cerit (2009) in Turkish schools found that principals practicing servant leadership positively influenced teachers' job satisfaction and collaborative efforts. Similarly, Taylor et al. (2007) reported that schools led by servant leaders experienced higher levels of teacher collaboration and student engagement.

In Nigeria, research on servant leadership in education remains limited. However, studies like those by Oladipo et al. (2013) have shown that servant leadership enhances organizational commitment and teamwork in Nigerian public institutions. Eze and Okeke (2018) examined leadership styles in Nigerian secondary schools, noting that servant leadership improved teacher-student relationships and fostered a collaborative school climate.

To what extent does servant-leadership style relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-East States, Nigeria?The result is presented in table 4.3;

Table 1: Linear Regression to Explore Relationship Between Servant-Leadership and Students' Academic Achievement in Secondary schools

Model	r	r Square	r square x 100	Adjusted r Square	Remarks
1	.380 a	.114	11.4 %	.143	Low Extent
	a. Predictors: (Constant), Servant-Leadership				

Table 1 presents the simple linear regression analysis of the extent of relationship between servant leadership and students' academic achievement of students in secondary schools in south-east Nigeria. The result showed that there is a low extent positive relationship with an r value of .380. The result also showed the coefficient of determination to be r^2=.114 x 100 which implies that 11.4% of students' academic achievement is contributed by servant-leadership. The result indicated that servant-leadership relates positively to a low extent with students' academic achievement in secondary schools in south-east, Nigeria.

Research Question two
To what extent does engagement/collaboration relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-East States, Nigeria?

The result is presented in table 2;

Table 2: Linear Regression to Explore Relationship Between engagement/collaboration and Academic Achievement

Model	R	r Square	r square x 100	Adjusted r Square	Remarks
1	.469 a	.220	22.0 %	.219	Low Extent
	a. Predictors: (Constant), engagement/collaboration				

Table 2 presents the simple linear regression analysis of relationship between engagement/collaboration and students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east Nigeria. The result showed that there is a low positive relationship with an r value of .469. The result also showed the coefficient of determination to be r^2 x 100 = 22.0% which implies that 22.0% of students' academic achievement is contributed by engagement and collaboration. The result indicated that engagement and collaboration relate positively to a low extent with students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-east, Nigeria.

Hypothesis One
Servant-leadership style does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-East States, Nigeria.

Table 3: t-test Statistic Associated with Regression Analysis of Significant Relationship Between Servant-leadership style and Academic Achievement

(Constant)	B	Std. Error	Df	β	t-cal	t-crit	Sig.
1	2.930	.083				1.96	
Servant-leadership style	-.294	.029	1236	-.380	35.482		0.000

		a. Dependent Variable: Students' Academic Achievement						

Data presented in Table 3 shows the summary of Analysis which assumed that servant-leadership style does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-East States, Nigeria. The result indicated df to be 1236 (β, -.380 and calculated t-value of 35.482 and a t-crit of 1.96 with a p-value of 0.00, which is the result of the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level. Since the p-value is less than the criterion significance level, this therefore leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis, and an alternate hypothesis is established thus; servant-leadership style significantly relates to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in Southeast states, Nigeria.

Hypothesis Two
Engagement/collaboration does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-East States, Nigeria.

Table 4: t-test Statistic Associated with Regression Analysis of Significant Relationship Between Engagement/Collaboration and Students' Academic Achievement

(Constant)		B	Std. Error	Df	β	t-cal	t-crit	Sig.
1		1.256	.083				1.96	
	Engagement/ Collaboration	.363	.028	1236	.469	15.172		0.00
		a. Dependent Variable: Students' Academic Achievement						

Data presented in Table 4 shows the summary of Analysis which assumed that engagement/collaboration does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in South-East States, Nigeria. The result indicated df to be 1236 (β, .469 and calculated

t-value of 15.172 and a t-crit of 1.96 with a p-value of 0.00, which is the result of the null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. Since the p-value is less than the criterion significance level; this therefore leads to the rejection of the null hypothesis, and an alternate hypothesis is established thus; Engagement/collaboration does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in Southeast states, Nigeria.

Servant-leadership relates positively to a low extentwith students' academic achievement
The finding from research question three shows that Servant-leadership relates positively to a low extent with students' academic achievement. The corresponding hypothesis reveals that servant-leadership style significantly relates to students' academic achievement in secondary schools in Southeast states, Nigeria. The finding is in disagreement with that of Ucar, Alpkan, and Elci (2021) whose study focused on the effect of servant leadership on employee creative behaviour and the moderating role of authentic leadership in these relationships. The study found that servant leadership was positively related to employee creative behaviour and that these effects increased if moderated by authentic leadership. Thus, authentic leadership strengthens the positive impact of servant and transformational leadership on employee creative behaviour. It is predicted that leaders should be servants or transformational leaders to increase employee creative behaviour in their organizations. The finding from the study is in agreement with that of Sarwar, Cavaliere, Ammar, and Afzal (2021) who investigated the role of different dimensions of servant leadership like love, altruism, empowerment, trust and service for employees' performance. The study found that dimensions of servant leadership love, altruism, trust and service show a positive significant contribution to improving employees' performance. In furtherance, the study agrees with that of Black, (2010) who determined the extent the which servant leadership was correlated with perceptions of school climate to identify whether there was a relationship between principals' and teachers' perceived practice of servant leadership and school climate. The study reveals that there is a significant positive correlation between servant leadership and school climate.

Engagement and collaboration relate positively to a low extent with students' academic achievement

The finding from the research question four reveals that engagement and collaboration relate positively to a low extent with students' academic achievement. The corresponding hypothesis also shows that engagement/collaboration does not significantly relate to students' academic achievement in Southeast states and Nigeria secondary schools. The finding from the study agrees with that of Afolabi (2024) who examined the relationship between principals' collaboration skills and the academic achievement of secondary school students in Southwest, Nigeria. The study revealed that there was a significant relationship between principal collaboration skill and academic achievement of secondary school students. The finding is also in agreement with that of Isah and Agbe (2019) who investigated the 'Impact of Collaborative Instructional Leadership of Principals and Teachers on Students' Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in North Central Nigeria'. The study found that jointly providing incentives for teachers, providing incentives for learning, and promoting professional development for teachers had an impact on students' academic performance in secondary schools in North Central Nigeria. Hence, the principals having a collaborative atmosphere may help all be up and doing their duties.

CONCLUSION

1. Servant leadership may have some positive impact on students' academic performance; its influence is relatively limited.
2. Promoting engagement and collaboration among students does have a beneficial impact on academic outcomes, the effect is relatively modest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Schools could incorporate servant leadership as a complement to other leadership styles, especially to support the social and emotional needs of students, even if the direct impact on academic achievement is low.

2. Educators could create learning activities that promote collaboration without compromising individual academic goals, maximizing both social and academic benefits.

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