Exploring Students' Perceptions of Administrators' Leadership Styles on Academic Performance in Selected Secondary Schools in Mukono District-Uganda

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Abstract: *This study explored students' perceptions of administrators' leadership styles and how these influence academic motivation and performance in selected secondary schools in Mukono District, Uganda. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected from 64 student leaders through Focus Group Discussions and 32 administrators (16 headteachers and 16 patrons/matrons) through semi-structured interviews. Using thematic analysis, three major themes emerged: (a) influence of administrators' leadership styles on students' motivation, (b) perceived administrative responsiveness to academic challenges, and (c) impact of administrators' approachability on students' academic performance. Findings revealed that supportive, democratic, and transformational leadership enhanced students' motivation, confidence, and academic engagement, whereas authoritarian approaches diminished motivation and discouraged help-seeking. Responsiveness to academic challenges varied, with timely interventions boosting performance and inconsistent responses deterring reporting of difficulties. Approachability was found to be a strong predictor of academic effort, with students more likely to seek assistance when administrators were friendly, available, and visible. The study concludes that administrator behavior significantly shapes academic outcomes and recommends leadership training, improved recognition systems, strengthened responsiveness protocols, and greater administrative visibility. Implications for policy and practice include enhancing student-centered leadership approaches to improve academic performance in Ugandan secondary schools.*

Keywords: *Perceptions of Administrators, Leadership Styles, Academic Performance. Mukono, Uganda*

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1. Introduction

In Uganda, the role of school administrators in shaping academic outcomes is underpinned by national education policies that emphasize both accountability and instructional leadership (Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act, 2008; Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2020). The 2008 Education Act mandates establishment of Boards of Governors in each secondary school, granting school heads significant responsibility for curriculum management and stakeholder engagement (Education-Profiles.org, 2025). Moreover, the 2020 MoES Performance Management Guidelines require school leaders to set and report on performance targets, thereby aligning leadership behaviours with measurable student learning outcomes (Education-Profiles.org, 2025). Despite

these policy provisions, gaps remain in understanding how students themselves perceive administrators' leadership styles particularly in terms of motivation, responsiveness, and approachability and how these perceptions influence their academic performance. This study therefore examines students' perceptions of administrators' leadership styles in selected secondary schools in Mukono District as a critical lens for evaluating the effectiveness of leadership within the Ugandan policy framework.

2. Literature Review

A systematic review of literature was made following the themes which were derived from the specific objectives of this study.

2.1 Influence of Administrators' Leadership Styles on Students' Motivation

Research worldwide has consistently shown that transformational leadership positively influences student motivation and outcomes. For example, Trigueros, Padilla, Aguilar-Parra, Mercader-López, and Rocamora (2020) found that transformational teacher leadership significantly increased students' academic motivation and resilience, and reduced burnout, which in turn improved performance. Leithwood and colleagues (2004) argued that effective educational leaders provide intellectual stimulation, individualized support, and model high expectations, thereby indirectly fostering students' intrinsic motivation, engagement, and learning conditions.

A systematic review of international literature (including some African contexts) reported similar findings: transformational leadership among school Principals enhances teacher commitment, which, through a motivated teaching workforce, benefits student learning outcomes. In Zambia, a study of 20 public schools showed that transformational leadership was more prevalent in high-performing schools than in low-performing ones; principals in those schools tended to articulate vision, empower teachers, and foster collaboration, correlating with better student achievement. In Kenya, Gatama, Otieno, and Waweru (2023) examined principals' instructional leadership in Nyeri and Nyandarua counties and found that principals who focused on curriculum delivery, teacher support, and supervision had a significant positive influence on students' academic performance. In Uganda, Sengendo and Eduan (2024) studied transformational leadership attributes (idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration) among headteachers in public secondary schools; they found these attributes significantly predicted students' Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) and Uganda Advanced Certificate (UACE) performance.

According to the study findings by Gbollie et al. (2017) argued that motivation and use of learning strategies by administrators and policy makers were key in helping students improve learning and academic performance. Additionally, As Gasco et al. also noted motivation plays a critical role in learning; thus, this explains academic performance as a significant construct that integrates feelings of students.

2.2 Perceived Administrative Responsiveness to Academic Challenges

Leithwood and colleagues (2004) argued that effective school leaders redesign organizational structures and provide support that helps teachers respond to academic challenges, indirectly improving student learning conditions and outcomes. In higher education settings, Onia and Dafaallah (2023) in Sudan found that transformational leadership behaviors (e.g., intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration) were practiced among university faculty, suggesting that responsive leadership contributes to a learning environment where academic challenges are addressed meaningfully.

A review of school leadership in Eastern Africa (Eritrea) demonstrated that democratic and situational leadership styles, which include listening to constituents and adapting to challenges, were positively correlated with school academic performance, while autocratic styles had negative effects. In Ghana, Owusu-Ansah, Okeyo, and Kwarteng (2024) found that strong supervisory and instructional leadership (elements of responsiveness) were positively associated with public senior high schools' academic performance (R = 0.669).

In Mukono District, Ssembirige, Timothy, Kaggwa, and Moses (2025) conducted a mixed-methods study on administrators' leadership styles and school academic performance. They examined directive, participative, and supportive leadership styles and how students perceive them; they report that supportive leadership (i.e., responsive to teachers' and students' needs) is associated with better school performance. Another related study in Mukono (St. Peter's Secondary School) found that administrative strategies, including regular supervision of students, significantly influenced their academic performance.

2.3 Impact of Administrators' Approachability on Students' Academic Performance

Student-perceived approachability of school leaders has been linked to better academic outcomes. In a classic study, Gentilucci (2007) found that students identified principal approachability, interactive classroom presence, and instructional leadership as directly influencing their achievement. An ethnographic study by Shelton (2022) corroborated this: students valued principals' "approachable visibility" principals being present, visible, and accessible as positively influencing their learning, motivation, and academic success.

Day (2020), in a review of successful school leadership, noted that leadership effects often operate indirectly by enhancing conditions for teaching and learning, such as by fostering positive relational climates through visibility and approachability. Tshabalala (2024), in a case study in Eswatini, found that principals who are accessible and build trust via open communication contributed significantly to creating a school culture conducive to high learner achievement.

Relatedly, Anthony (2012) and Ssembirige, et al (2025), pointed out that the personal qualities of a principal such as their relationship with students is critical, for instance the ability to communicate effectively, being a good listener, fair, approachable, and empathetic were some of the most valued attributes that students appreciated and influenced their performance. It seems not surprising that the influence of the administrator's behaviour has overreaching consequences on students' academic performance. Additionally, leadership behaviour is influenced also by a variety of factors that impact students' performance. Leadership of students has been identified as important as that impacts on students' learning outcomes. This implies that leadership is part of what has a big influence on the academic performance of students (Allix & Gronn, 2005). Furthermore, Wallace Foundation (2012) asserted that Principals contribute about 25% of the low or high academic performance of students. They indirectly, influence the instructional practices which determine the learning outcomes.

To date, there is relatively little research in Uganda specifically on how students perceive administrators' approachability and how this is tied to their academic performance. The Mukono District study by Ssembirige et al. (2025) mentions "open communication system" as part of supportive leadership but does not isolate approachability/receptiveness as a discrete construct in relation to student perceptions.

Summary of Gaps in the Reviewed Literature

2.4 Gaps in the reviewed literature and Relevance to the Current Study

First and foremost, much of the global and regional research emphasizes teacher outcomes (motivation, job satisfaction) more than student motivation directly. At the same time, In Africa and East Africa, studies confirm that responsive leadership (democratic, instructional) predict better school performance (Owusu-Ansah et al., 2024; Eritrea review) and that in Uganda, transformational or supportive leadership matters (Sengendo & Eduan, 2024; Ssembirige et al., 2025). However, there is insufficient research in Uganda that centers on students' own perceptions of administrators' responsiveness, approachability, and the motivational climate created by these leadership behaviors, especially at district (e.g., Mukono) level. In another development, while the Mukono District study by Ssembirige et al. (2025) considers supportive leadership, it does not deeply probe students' perceptions of responsiveness to *academic challenges* (e.g., how administrators help when students struggle).

Relatedly, there is limited qualitative insight into how responsiveness is experienced by students, especially in terms of accessibility, feedback, and intervention when academic difficulties arise. While most existing studies in Uganda measure leadership styles and performance quantitatively, this current study, therefore, contributes by using students' voices to explore nuanced responsiveness and link these perceptions to motivation and academic outcomes. Therefore, by focusing on students' perceptions of administrators' leadership styles specifically under the lenses of motivation, responsiveness to challenges and approachability the current study in Mukono District can generate new, context-specific insights. This could inform school leadership development, policy, and practices tailored to enhance student motivation and academic performance in Ugandan secondary schools.

2.5 Justification

Research shows that leadership styles such as democratic, transformational, supportive, and authoritarian affect students and teachers differently. However, there is limited research focusing on students' own perceptions of how administrators' leadership shapes motivation. This study, therefore, explores students' lived experiences in the selected secondary schools under study.

3. Methodology

This section presents research approach, design, data collection tools, methods, sample size, sampling techniques, population, data collection procedure, analysis

and reporting strategies as indicated under the different subheadings.

3.1 Research Approach

In this study, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Qualitative research is an inquiry approach that emphasizes understanding phenomena in their natural settings through the meanings individuals assign to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). It prioritizes depth over breadth and uses flexible, interpretive, and context-sensitive methods to generate detailed, holistic accounts of social experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study investigated administrative leadership practices and their perceived impact on student leadership development phenomena that are inherently social, contextual, and experiential. The use of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews aligned with qualitative traditions that allowed participants to articulate their perspectives freely. The study's purposive sample (n = 126), drawn from individuals with direct involvement in school leadership systems, further supported the qualitative aim of obtaining rich, detailed, and diverse insights necessary for interpreting complex administrative relationships.

3.2 Research Design

This study adopted a Phenomenological Research Design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design that seeks to explore and interpret how individuals experience a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenological design was found suitable because the study aimed to understand how different stakeholders; student leaders, headteachers, and Prefects' Patrons/Matrons experience and perceive school leadership practices and their influence on student performance. These participants hold roles that immerse them in administrative processes; hence, their lived experiences offer rich insights into leadership dynamics across schools. Phenomenology enabled the researcher to capture those subjective meanings, which could not be quantified but could only be understood through detailed, experiential accounts.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

Two qualitative methods of data collection were used: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews.

3.3.1 Focus Group Discussions

Eight FGD sessions of eight students each were conducted with student leaders (n = 64). This method was selected because student leaders often share collective experiences shaped by similar administrative engagements. FGDs encouraged interaction, allowing participants to build on each other's ideas, revealed group norms, and collectively reflected on the leadership practices within their schools. Such interactions generated rich, complex data, particularly suitable for understanding shared perceptions and dynamics of student leadership structures across the district.

3.3.2 Interviews

Thirty two face-to- face interview sessions were conducted to collect data from headteachers and Patrons/Matrons (n=32). Interviews were appropriate because those participants held administrative responsibilities that required individualized, detailed narratives that could not surface in group settings to their expectations. The semi-structured format of the interview protocol provided flexibility for probing unique experiences, while ensuring consistency across all the interview sessions. This approach enabled the researchers to capture diverse administrative perspectives, leadership practices, and interpretations of how such practices influenced student performance and leadership development.

3.4 Population

This section presents the sample size and selection, sampling techniques, data collection tools and sampling procedure as indicated under the different subheadings:

3.4.1 Sample Size and Selection

Altogether, 96 participants were purposively selected to take part in this qualitative study. The sample was drawn from 32 senior secondary schools in Mukono District. Purposive sampling was adopted to ensure that participants with direct experience and insight into school administration and leadership practices were included. The sample comprised three key categories:

3.4.2 Student Leaders (n= 64)

From each of the 32 schools, two student leaders were purposively selected:

    i.   Head Prefect
    ii. Education Minister

These student leaders were included in the study because their roles placed them in close interaction with the school administration, particularly the headteacher, enabling them to have informed perceptions of leadership styles and administrative practices.

3.4.3 Headteachers and Students' Patrons/Matrons (n= 32)

The arrangement was that in a school where a student's Patron/Matron was purposively selected, a Headteacher was left out and the reverse was also true. Headteachers and students' Patrons/Matrons were chosen because they were the primary custodians of administrative leadership and were directly responsible for setting the tone of school management and influencing academic performance. Under this category, the total was 32 participants. Prefects' Patrons or Matrons were responsible for supervising the students' leadership body and serving as a liaison between student leaders and school administration. Their involvement provided a balanced perspective on how administrative styles influenced both leadership structures and student outcomes.

Table 1: Overall Sample Size

Participant Category	Number Selected	Sampling Technique	Data Collection Tool
Student Leaders	64	Purposive	Focus Group Discussion Guide
Headteachers	16	Purposive	Interview Guide
Prefects' Patrons/Matrons	16	Purposive	Interview Guide
Total Sample Size	**96 participants**		

Source: Primary Data, October, 2025

3.5 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants who possessed direct experience with school administration and student leadership. Thirty-two senior secondary schools in Mukono District were selected based on accessibility and the presence of established student leadership structures. From each school, two student leaders (Head Prefect and Education Minister), one Headteacher, or one Prefects' Patron/Matron (in an alternate manner) were approached because of their strategic roles in administrative and academic processes. Participants were contacted through the school administration, informed about the purpose of the study, and invited to voluntarily participate. A thorough briefing was done to all participants with an assurance of confidentiality of information and flexibility for anyone to withdraw from participation under circumstances deemed necessary.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the relevant institutional review authorities. Permission to access schools was obtained from the district education office and individual headteachers. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Informed consent (and assent for student leaders) was put into consideration and obtained. Confidentiality was assured by anonymizing participants' identities and schools. Data were stored securely and used solely for academic research. No harm or risk was posed to participants, FGDs and interviews were conducted in safe settings.

3.7 Justification for Purposive Sampling

Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study required participants who possessed specialized knowledge and direct experience with school leadership dynamics. Student leaders, headteachers, and Patrons/ Matrons were uniquely positioned to provide informed insights into administrators' leadership styles and their influence on academic performance. This method ensured the inclusion of information-rich cases, facilitated triangulation across participant groups, and supported the generation of in-depth qualitative data necessary for interpreting complex administrative and academic relationships.

3.8 Data Analysis Strategies

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach under the following considerations:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Development of initial themes and subthemes
3. Reviewing themes
4. Defining and naming themes
5. Producing the final narrative

Across the write up, data were clustered and refined into subthemes and major themes. Sample narratives and verbatim quotations were captured and used to substantiate findings.

4. Results and Discussion

Below are well organized qualitative results based on the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) data. The results section is written in the narrative thematic style commonly used in qualitative studies and follows standards for reporting qualitative findings, including use of thematic headings, integrated quotations and clear analytical interpretations as presented under the different themes and subthemes.

4.1 Theme 1: Administrators' Leadership Styles as Determinants of Student Motivation

Across the 8 focus group discussion sessions involving 64 student leaders, participants consistently reported that administrators' leadership styles significantly shaped their motivation toward academic work. Students generally described their headteachers and patrons/matrons as either *democratic and supportive* or *authoritarian and distant*, with each yielding different motivational outcome. Based on those results, available data communicated clearly to the researchers that students were able to connect their headteachers' leadership styles with their motivation to factors that affected learning and performance either directly or indirectly.

4.1.1 Supportive and Democratic Leadership Enhances Motivation

Majority of students shared that democratic and supportive administrators fostered a positive academic climate. Students frequently described such leaders as *"open,"* *"encouraging,"* and *"willing to listen."* Participants reported that when administrators involved them in decision-making such as planning academic competitions,

welfare strategies or discussing remedial programs they felt valued and more willing to put in academic effort.

For example, one student explained that when the headteacher sought students' views on exam preparation strategies, *"we felt like our ideas mattered, so we worked harder because we were part of the plan."* Students added that supportive administrators who celebrated academic achievements publicly contributed to increased confidence and motivation among both high-achieving and struggling learners. According to the researchers, the obtained results clearly indicated that administrators' supportive initiatives had the magic to even time-taker learners to pull up their stocks through positive motivation.

4.1.2 Authoritarian Leadership Reduces Motivation

Conversely, many participants described instances where authoritarian leadership styles diminished motivation. Students noted that when administrators used harsh language, strict directives, or unilateral decisions without explanation, their academic enthusiasm reduced. In one the focus groups a participant shared that after being reprimanded for poor performance without constructive guidance, *"some students just gave up because they felt nothing they did would please the administration."*

In addition, students also expressed that authoritarian approaches particularly affected struggling learners, who often interpreted such leadership as a lack of belief in their ability to improve. In other words, authoritarian leadership styles have influenced majority of headtachers to contribute greatly to the frustrations some students face in their day-to-day learning experiences, thence, leading some of them to drop out of school.

4.1.3 Impact of Administrator Behavior on Specific Academic Situations

Across all the 8 FGD sessions for the student leaders, students recalled instances where supportive actions such as administrators attending club meetings, providing extra learning materials, or encouraging classroom participation boosted morale. Conversely, unsupportive behaviors, including ignoring student concerns or dismissing suggestions, discouraged academic engagement.

In a nutshell, majority of the students described feeling more motivated when administrators recognized their efforts publicly. However, a minority number of students also reported that recognition was often inconsistent, which left some feelings *"invisible."* As one student commented, *"Only the top students are noticed; the rest of us feel left out!"* Given the opinion of the minority, it is important to

base on the results of the minority and realize that even in instances where headteachers performed positively in their leadership styles, there were still some gaps which caused some dissatisfaction which required attention.

4.1.4 Leadership Style and Learning Climate

Students widely agreed that administrators' communication styles shaped the school's overall learning climate. Respectful, engaging communication made classrooms feel *"safe"* and *"motivating,"* whereas abrupt or punitive communication created an atmosphere of *"fear,"* *"silence,"* and *"reluctance to participate."* Basing on the results, whereas the headteachers' leadership styles impacted on students' learning climate generally, it was worse with students whose emotions were still just developing.

4.2 Theme 2: Perceived Administrative Responsiveness to Academic Challenges

This section presents the mixed perceptions of responsiveness, barriers to reporting academic challenges, Feedback and Student Confidence as indicated under the subsequent subheadings.

4.2.1 Mixed Perceptions of Responsiveness

In the first place, students expressed varying views on how responsive administrators were when academic challenges arose. While some described administrators as quick to intervene especially in resolving teacher absenteeism related issues, or providing learning materials timely, others reported delays or inadequate responses.

In addition, students who viewed administrators as responsive shared that they received academic counseling, follow-up meetings, and guidance on improving performance. One participant explained, *"When I failed math, the headteacher called me and my teacher; as a result, that meeting helped me improve."* Following the student leader's statement, it is indicative that even when some headteachers may not necessarily participate directly in classroom instruction, their leadership styles have a significant bearing on students' learning and academic performance.

4.2.2 Barriers to Reporting Academic Challenges

Despite positive experiences, majority of the students reported that peers often felt reluctant to report academic difficulties due to fear of being blamed or misunderstood. The perceived lack of confidentiality also deterred some from approaching administrators.

In another development, students highlighted that although administrators occasionally provided resources or intervention, some challenges especially inconsistent teacher attendance, overcrowded classes, and insufficient materials often remained unaddressed. Reasons given included administrative workload, poor communication, or limited school resources.

4.2.3 Feedback and Student Confidence

Across the 8 Focus Group Discussion sessions, majority of the students reported that the nature of feedback from administrators significantly influenced their confidence. Supportive, constructive feedback for example, boosted morale, whereas harsh or dismissive feedback diminished self-esteem. Students felt more motivated when administrators consulted them before implementing academic decisions, although many reported that such consultation was rare.

4.3 Theme 3: Administrators' Approachability and its Influence on Academic Performance

This section focuses on approachability as a motivational factor, factors which make administrators approachable, Consequences of Low Approachability and Overall Student Reflections on Administrative Leadership and Academic Success as explained under the subsequent subheadings.

4.3.1 Approachability as a Motivational Factor

Out rightly, majority of the students stated that approachable administrators contributed positively to their academic performance. Approachability was associated with traits such as being *"friendly,"* *"available,"* *"non-judgmental,"* and *"willing to listen."* Students felt more confident seeking guidance and discussing academic fears when administrators interacted with them both informally and formally during assemblies, classroom visits, or extracurricular activities.

A case in point, students described instances where an approachable administrator helped them overcome academic challenges, such as providing advice on study habits or linking them to teachers for extra support. In other words, even in instances where a headteacher advised a student to seek guidance from another person, it was

enough to build confidence in such a student as expressed by one student in a quoted statement:

> …one day when I was almost thinking of dropping out of school, I didn't know how my headteacher realized such signs on my face. She called me to her office, started with some stories about her school life and engaged me to open up to her the kind of school life I was facing. At the end of the interaction, she guided me on what to do and advised me to continuously seek guidance from the Senior Woman Teacher and Patron. I left her office highly energized and refreshed… (FGD session, 2025).

Indeed, the foregoing statement indicates one other important role that headteachers ought to perform without any delay across all schools, given the attributes students attach to them.

4.3.2 Factors that make Administrators Unapproachable

In the subsequent interactions, majority of the students also identified behaviors that made administrators difficult to approach: frequent scolding, limited visibility around the school, and a formal communication style that created psychological distance. One student leader remarked;

> …Some administrators are always in the office and look too busy. Every time one thought of approaching them over something, you feel like you're disturbing them…! (FGD with student leaders, 2025)

Following the foregoing statement, participants based on a number of factors including those that were situational in nature, for example, looking ever busy in office, thereby showing no sign for attending to students was enough indicator of an administrator who was distant, hence unapproachable.

Consequently, majority of the students also noted differences in approachability across administrative roles. Many described the Deputy Headteacher and Patron as more approachable than the Headteacher, who was perceived as authoritative and busy. These differences influenced which administrators displayed visible attributes for students to easily seek academic guidance.

4.3.3 Consequences of Low Approachability

Majority of the students explained that when administrators appeared unapproachable, they avoided reporting academic challenges, even when they needed support. This avoidance sometimes led to declining performance among students who lacked timely assistance.

4.3.4 Overall Student Reflections on Administrative Leadership and Academic Success

In the concluding discussions across the 8 FGDs, majority of participants agreed that administrative leadership styles, responsiveness, and approachability collectively shaped students' academic success. Supportive, democratic, responsive, and approachable administrators were consistently linked to higher motivation, improved participation, and better performance. In contrast, authoritarian, unresponsive, or unapproachable administrators contributed to disengagement, discouragement, and diminished academic confidence.

4.4 Results obtained using interview guides

Data from the 32 interviews face-to-face sessions (16 headteachers and 16 patrons/matrons) were analyzed using thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged aligned with the interview guide:

1. Influence of Administrators' Leadership Styles on Students' Motivation
2. Perceived Administrative Responsiveness to Academic Challenges
3. Impact of Administrators' Approachability on Students' Academic Performance

Across the different categories of participants, a lot of ideas, experiences and opinions were shared in line with leadership roles and interactions shaping school academic environments.

4.4.1 Participant Characteristics

Participants included 16 headteachers (50%) and 16 patrons/matrons (50%). The duration in service ranged from 2 to 23 years. All participants reported daily interaction with students through supervision, guidance, and academic follow-up. Majority noted frequent collaboration with teachers, senior management teams, and student leaders.

In majority of the face-to-face interview sessions with headteachers and students' patrons/ matrons a lot of experiences were shared around how student leaders are supported to execute their work. In one of the sessions, a patron shared as quoted;

My work involves monitoring academic progress, guiding teachers, supporting student leaders and ensuring students feel supported whenever they face challenges. In addition, students come to me with personal and academic concerns almost every day… (Interview session with a patron, 2025).

By analysis, results revealed that students found Patrons more approachable than the headteachers across the 32 secondary schools.

4.4.2 Theme 1: Influence of Administrators' Leadership Styles on Students' Motivation

Under this theme, the focus was on democratic and transformational tendencies, effect on academic motivation, Instances of Supportive and Unsupportive Leadership, Encouraging Participation and Recognition, Communication and Decision-Making and Observed Emotional Responses as indicated under the different subheadings.

4.4.3 Democratic and Transformational Tendencies

Most participants (71%) described their leadership as democratic, emphasizing open communication, shared decision-making, and encouragement. Several also identified aspects of transformational leadership, such as inspiring students and staff through vision and motivation.

During the interview sessions, a lot of experiences were shared in which some headteachers gave an opinion that the student leaders would work more under the guidance of the Patrons, whereas some insisted that it was the responsibility of the headteacher to do so since patrons also played their roles on behalf of the headteacher. In one of the interview sessions, a headteacher noted,

> …I try to lead by example and involve students in decisions affecting their learning because it boosts their confidence…(Interview session with a headteacher, 2025).

By analysis, whereas some headteachers expressed that it was their core function to guide the student leaders, some of them indicated that it was the role of the patrons/matrons to do so. The results projected a picture of some headteachers lacking knowledge regarding some of their roles and how such roles impacted on students' motivation and academic performance.

4.4.4 Effect on Academic Motivation

Regarding academics, participants reported that democratic and supportive leadership fostered enthusiasm, persistence, and willingness to participate in academic activities. Students reportedly demonstrated higher motivation when they felt valued.

One Matron explained;

> When students feel heard, they push themselves forward with interest, courage and vigor. You see majority attending preps willingly, asking questions, and seeking guidance… (Interview session with a Matron, 2025)

Following the foregoing statement, it was clearly found out that students' voices can speak millions in terms of positive motivation and esteem which consequently impact on their academic performance. Accordingly, the interview sessions revealed a lot of related information with the data obtained using the FGDs.

4.4.5 Instances of Supportive and Unsupportive Leadership

Majority of the participants cited moments when leadership influenced motivation positively or negatively. Some of the examples included those in top leadership sharing a meal with the student leaders, student leaders mixing with school leaders at the pavilion during an assembly, and other moments including joint meetings as well as some informal moments like during co-curricular activities. In one of the face-to-face interview sessions, a matron stated;

> …when I recognized a struggling girl in Biology and requested the subject head to provide individual assistance to her, she later told me it pushed her to work harder, surprisingly, the girl confessed that may be her hard work in Biology was waiting for the interaction she had with me … (Interview session with a matron, 2025).

By analysis and interpretation, results revealed that alongside the physical teaching and learning in the classroom, there is a lot of support that students require from those in authority to motivate them improve on their academic performance.

During further interview sessions, on the contrary some headteachers also shared some experiences which were inclined on negative reinforcement such as providing warning letters, making weak students repeat classes, conducting warning meetings, suspending some students with an aim of making them change positively. In one of

the interview sessions, one headteacher expressed as quoted;

> One time I conducted a very serious academic meeting with weak performing students who also doubled as student leaders. In that meeting, their parents were also invited. During that meeting, student leaders were told to keep silent but parents talked a lot and promised to stop paying fees if no improvement in academic performance could happen. After one term, all those students had their academic performance improved… (Interview session with a headteacher, 2025)

By analysis, results revealed that participants had mixed ideas on how student leaders would be motivated to execute their administrative roles and also improve academically. While some participants believed in strategies which promoted positive motivation, some believed in strategies which targeted negative reinforcement but still bragged over positive results. By interpretation, headteachers require a lot of enlightenment on the best scientific strategies that can help them to support student leaders in their schools.

4.4.6 Encouraging Participation and Recognition

Consequently, both headteachers and patrons/matrons reported using praise, academic awards, warnings, and verbal encouragement to promote engagement. Recognition was described as a powerful motivator as compared to threats.

A patron said, *"Even a small 'well done' lifts them. Some students work hard just to hear those words."* By analysis, even verbal praises can mean a lot in motivating students to work harder than before as long as the appraisal is done on a student by a school leader.

4.4.7 Communication and Decision-Making

Participants highlighted that clear communication and transparent decision-making created a more supportive learning environment.

One headteacher noted, *"When decisions seem imposed, students resist. But when we explain the reasons, they accept and cooperate."* By analysis, involving learners in decision-making is another way of empowering them to own whatever goes on in the school across all learning programmes.

4.4.8 Observed Emotional Responses

Majority of the participants believed students under supportive leadership experienced confidence, trust, and security, while authoritarian approaches evoked fear or withdrawal.

A patron shared, *"Strictness without explanation scares them; they shut down."* Following the Patron's statement, it is clear that for every decision made in a school, it is important for students to be notified and explained to because at the end of it all, those decisions eventually affect their academics. Surprisingly, these results have a lot of relationship with those which were obtained using the FGDs.

4.5 Theme 2: Perceived Administrative Responsiveness to Academic Challenges

Under this theme, a number of subthemes emerged in order to generate relevant information from the participants as presented under the subsequent subheadings:

4.5.1 Intervention in Academic Difficulties

Most administrators described responding promptly to academic challenges through counseling, remedial lessons, teacher consultations, or resource provision. A headteacher recounted as quoted;

> …When senior two performed poorly, we organized weekend revision and guided them personally with the support of student leaders and arrangement yielded positive results." (Interview session with a headteacher, 2025)

Following the statement of the headteacher, it is really evident that the leadership style of the headteacher counts greatly on the academic performance of students.

4.5.2 Comfort in Reporting Concerns

While many administrators believed students felt comfortable approaching them, others reported that some learners feared judgment or punishment. That was an observation made by majority of the participants (Patrons). In the subsequent interview insights, one of the Patrons shared an experience as quoted;

> … Our student leaders are in categories. In terms of making consultations, the confident ones come freely, but the shy ones hesitate until the problem

is severe… (Face-to-face interview interaction with a Patron, 2025)

Based on the foregoing statement of the Patron, it seems that an environment which attracts students should be created to enable them approach their Patrons without fear or favor.

4.5.3 Feedback and Student Confidence

Constructive and timely feedback was described as boosting confidence, whereas harsh or delayed feedback discouraged learners. A patron said, *"If you correct kindly, they try again. If you shout, they avoid the subject."* By analysis and interpretation, the Patron's statement indicates that students' needs a lot of encouragement and positive reinforcement by the school leaders to motivate their learning and performance.

4.6 Theme 3: Impact of Administrators' Approachability on Students' Academic Performance

4.6.1 Perceptions of Approachability

Most participants rated themselves as approachable, citing an open-door policy, visibility around campus, and friendliness. A matron commented, *"I make sure students know they can talk to me anytime."*

4.6.2 Factors Influencing Approachability

Participants identified personality, communication tone, physical presence, and perceived authority levels as major determinants. One headteacher noted, *"If you only sit in the office, students think you're unapproachable."* By analysis, following the headteacher's observation, related information was also revealed during one of the FGD sessions with student leaders where students observed that approaching a headteacher who looked too busy in the office would be like interrupting or inconveniencing!

4.6.3 Student Avoidance of Administrators

Some participants observed students avoiding administrators due to fear, previous negative interactions, or assumptions about strictness. A patron shared, *"Some students say, 'headteacher/patron/matron will not understand,' so they hide their challenges."*

4.6.4 Role of Leadership in Academic Success

Almost all participants agreed that leadership style significantly shapes academic success. Supportive, democratic, and transparent leadership was consistently associated with better academic engagement and performance.

4.7 Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how administrators' leadership styles influence students' motivation, responsiveness to academic challenges, and approachability within secondary schools in Mukono District. Findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 64 student leaders and face-to-face interviews with 32 headteachers and patrons/matrons revealed three major themes that align strongly with existing literature on educational leadership and student outcomes.

4.7.1 Theme 1: Influence of Administrators' Leadership Styles on Students' Motivation

Findings showed that students consistently associated administrators' leadership styles particularly democratic, transformational, and supportive styles with higher academic motivation. At the same time, students described democratic administrators as open, encouraging, and willing to involve them in decision-making. In brief, students shared their experiences that participation in planning academic activities, receiving recognition, and being listened to; contributed to increased confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

These findings resonate with transformational leadership theory, which posits that leaders motivate students by offering intellectual stimulation, individualized support, and shared vision (Leithwood et al., 2004). Similarly, Trigueros et al. (2020) demonstrated that transformational behaviors strengthen students' academic motivation and resilience. The current study echoes these insights: students reported feeling valued and motivated when administrators celebrated achievements or sought their views on academic matters.

Conversely, authoritarian leadership was widely perceived to diminish motivation. Students described strict directives, punitive communication, and lack of explanation as demoralizing, often leading to withdrawal from academic activities. This is consistent with studies in Sub-Saharan Africa showing that autocratic or directive leadership correlates negatively with school performance (e.g., Eritrea review; Owusu-Ansah et al., 2024).

Both headteachers and patrons acknowledged that supportive leadership fosters student engagement. Patrons in particular demonstrated stronger relational connections

with students, consistent with findings by Gbollie et al. (2017) that students thrive when leadership enhances motivation, feedback, and emotional support.

4.7.2 Theme 2: Perceived Administrative Responsiveness to Academic Challenges

Students reported mixed perceptions regarding how responsive administrators were when academic challenges emerged. Some described timely support counseling, remedial lessons, and resource provision while others noted delays which attributed to heavy workloads or limited resources. These mixed perceptions mirror the broader literature, which highlights the importance of responsive, democratic, and instructional leadership in addressing learning barriers (Leithwood et al., 2004; Onia & Dafaallah, 2023).

Participants who perceived administrators as responsive emphasized the value of follow-up meetings, guidance on subject difficulties, and intervention in teacher absenteeism. Such responsiveness aligns with findings from Ghana (Owusu-Ansah et al., 2024) and Uganda (Ssembirige et al., 2025), which found that supportive leadership contributes to improved school performance by ensuring timely academic support and supervision.

Despite positive experiences, many students feared reporting academic challenges due to perceived judgment, lack of confidentiality, or the administrators' busy schedules. These concerns highlight gaps in communication and psychological safety areas often cited as crucial in leadership research. The literature in Eastern Africa similarly indicates that students and teachers respond better when school leaders demonstrate empathy, transparency, and consistent follow-through (Eritrea review; Gatama et al., 2023).

Consistent with existing evidence, this study found that constructive feedback bolstered student confidence, whereas harsh or dismissive responses contributed to fear, avoidance, and reduced performance. This supports findings by As Gasco et al. (2020), who argued that motivation and emotional support are essential in promoting effective learning strategies.

4.7.3 Theme 3: Administrators' Approachability and Students' Academic Performance

Approachability emerged as a powerful predictor of academic performance. Students reported feeling more motivated and academically secure when administrators particularly patrons and matrons demonstrated friendliness, availability, and non-judgmental communication. These findings align with Gentilucci (2007) and Shelton (2022), who emphasized Principal visibility and relational presence as foundational to academic success.

Students valued administrators who engaged informally during assemblies, classroom visits, and extracurricular activities. Such presence created a supportive learning environment, consistent with Day's (2020) assertion that leadership influences performance indirectly by enhancing relational climates.

However, low approachability characterized by administrators' limited visibility, frequent scolding, or overly formal communication discouraged students from seeking help. This avoidance often led to worsening academic problems. The literature supports this pattern: Tshabalala (2024) found that trust and accessibility of school leaders significantly shape learner achievement.

Interestingly, majority of the students reported that patrons and matrons were perceived as more approachable than headteachers. This finding reflects Anthony (2012) and Ssembirige et al. (2025), who noted that students value administrators with strong interpersonal qualities such as empathy, fairness, and active listening.

Overall, approachability shaped early identification of academic struggles, frequency of student consultations, and timely support ultimately influencing learning outcomes. The Wallace Foundation (2012) estimated that Principals account for roughly 25% of the variation in student performance through their influence on school climate and instructional practices, a finding similarly reflected in this study's results.

4.7.4 Synthesis of Findings with Literature and identification of Gaps

The findings of this study align closely with global and regional literature which emphasizes the central role of supportive, democratic, and transformational leadership in improving student motivation, teacher commitment, and academic performance. However, gaps remain in the Ugandan context, particularly concerning:

i.   Students' perceptions of leadership behaviors, approachability, and responsiveness areas largely understudied compared to teacher perceptions.
ii. The qualitative distinctions of leadership and student relationships, such as emotional safety, confidentiality, and communication tone.
iii. The differentiated roles of headteachers versus patrons/matrons, where this study found

significant variations in approachability and perceived support.

By foregrounding student voices in Mukono District, the current study contributes context-specific insights into how leadership behaviors shape motivation, responsiveness, and academic performance. These findings underscore the need for school leadership development programs which strengthen relational, communicative, and student-centered competencies.

4.7.5 Summary of Discussion and Implications

The findings demonstrate that students perceive administrator behaviors particularly leadership style, responsiveness, and approachability as central to their academic motivation and performance. Supportive and democratic leadership fosters intrinsic motivation, aligning with transformational leadership theories that emphasize emotional encouragement, inclusivity, and shared decision-making.

Conversely, authoritarian leadership was consistently linked to reduced motivation, especially among struggling learners. This confirms prior studies indicating that punitive or harsh administrative environments suppress student engagement and limit help-seeking behaviors.

Administrative responsiveness to academic challenges emerged as both a source of empowerment and frustration. When administrators intervened promptly, students felt valued and confident. However, delayed or absent responsiveness undermined trust and discouraged reporting of academic concerns.

Furthermore, approachability stood out as a strong predictor of academic effort. Students who felt comfortable approaching administrators described improvements in academic performance, decision-making, and confidence.

4.8 Implications for Practice

In terms of adopting more democratic leadership approaches, administrators ought to increase students' involvement in academic decision-making processes. In addition, there is strengthening recognition systems; recognition should include both high and moderate achievers to boost morale across performance levels. At the same time, it is critical to improve administrative responsiveness; Schools should develop clear procedures for responding to student concerns. More still, enhancing approachability is very important; administrators can increase visibility through classroom visits, open-door policies, and participation in student activities. Finally, what cannot wait is providing training for administrators;

Workshops, seminars, symposia and conferences on communication, empathetic leadership, and student psychology may help shift from authoritarian to supportive leadership styles.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study explored students' perceptions of administrators' leadership styles and how these influence academic motivation and performance in secondary schools in Mukono District. Findings from FGDs and interviews revealed that administrator behavior particularly leadership style, responsiveness, and approachability play a decisive role in shaping the academic environment. Supportive, democratic, and transformational leadership enhanced students' confidence, engagement, and willingness to seek academic assistance. Conversely, authoritarian leadership, inconsistent responsiveness, and low approachability undermined motivation and discouraged help-seeking mechanisms, especially among vulnerably emotional students. The study affirms existing literature that effective, student-centered leadership fosters positive learning conditions, while punitive or distant leadership creates psychological barriers that hinder academic success. Overall, the results underscore that strengthening relational and responsive leadership practices is critical for improving student motivation and performance in Ugandan secondary schools.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings and consistent with the reviewed literature, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Adopt student-centered and democratic leadership practices.**

   Administrators should involve students in academic decision-making, promote shared responsibility, and model supportive communication to foster motivation and ownership of learning.

2. **Enhance recognition and motivation systems.**

   Schools should implement consistent recognition frameworks that acknowledge not only high achievers but also moderate and

improving students to build confidence across all performance levels.

a. Strengthen responsiveness protocols.

Clear procedures for handling academic concerns such as timely follow-up, confidential reporting channels, and structured feedback should be institutionalized to improve trust and ensure early intervention.

b. Increase administrative approachability and visibility.

Administrators should adopt open-door policies, increase classroom presence, and engage more frequently in co-curricular activities to reduce psychological distance and encourage student help-seeking.

c. Provide professional development in transformational and relational leadership.

Targeted training on effective communication, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and student psychology can help shift administrators from authoritarian tendencies toward more supportive and empowering leadership.

5.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This study offers a novel contribution by showing how approachability directly influences students' academic trajectories in the Ugandan context. It demonstrates that approachability is not merely relational but an academic determinant, shaping confidence, engagement, and access to support. This focuses on students' voices significantly advances leadership research in the region.

5.4 Suggestion for Further Research

Future research could quantify the extent to which leadership style, responsiveness, and approachability predict academic performance across different school contexts.

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