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Nexus between Principals' Leadership Styles and Teachers' Motivation in Secondary School: Case Study of Western Arsi Zone, Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT : The aim of this paper was to examine the relationship between school principals' leadership styles and teachers' motivation using qualitative and quantitative data collected through a Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) from 193 respondents. Data were also collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and linear regression. The study found that school principals predominantly exhibited a transactional leadership style. Furthermore, significant relationships between principal leadership styles and teacher motivation were identified. Transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant leadership styles correlated with teacher motivation at varying degrees, showing significant correlations with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Thus, principals' leadership styles have a substantial impact on teacher motivation and effort, suggesting that stakeholders should focus on the specific leadership styles practiced in the education sector to maximize teacher performance.

KEYWORDS: *Leadership Styles, Teachers Motivation, West Arsi Zone, Ethiopia*

I. INTRODUCTION

Education is a foundational process through which individuals acquire the physical, cognitive, and social capabilities required by the society into which they are born (Orobosa, 2010). The primary purpose of education is widely recognized: to cultivate the intellect, address social needs, drive economic growth, develop a skilled workforce, prepare students for professional careers, and promote shared social and political values. Consequently, education performs a vital and complex social function by serving as a primary instrument for societal development. Recognizing this dual role for both the individual and society, education involves deliberate, structured efforts by educators to foster a child's personality and prepare them for meaningful civic membership (Dienye, 2004). Over time, a robust educational framework creates self-reliant citizens.

In alignment with these principles, the Ethiopian Education and Training Policy explicitly outlines the goal of producing skilled manpower capable of driving national socio-economic development, as well as nurturing citizens who respect, defend, and uphold the Constitution, democratic values, human rights, and a strong work ethic (MoE, 1994). School principals play a paramount role in realizing these policy objectives. Supporting this view, Crum and Sherman (2008) emphasize that principals must offer valued insights into their daily practice to foster conducive work environments that enhance teacher performance. Furthermore, principals require a strong grasp of appropriate leadership styles, as their approach directly impacts how followers carry out their duties and responsibilities. Rue and Byars (2007) define leadership as the ability to influence others to enthusiastically work toward organizational goals. Similarly, Yukl (2009) describes leadership as a deliberate process of exerting strong influence to guide, structure, and facilitate group activities and relationships. Within the school context, a principal's leadership must effectively harness capability and influence to guide staff toward achieving overarching educational goals. Ultimately, the leadership style exhibited by a principal significantly affects teacher motivation (Ghazala et al., 2015); however, empirical evidence regarding the precise relationship between principal leadership styles and teacher motivation remains inconsistent.

Prior research indicates that teachers exhibit higher commitment when principals actively intervene, provide encouragement and recognition, and establish clear goals (Nguni, Sleegers, & Denessen, 2006). Subsequent studies have also reinforced the link between principal leadership styles and teacher work motivation (Adarkwah & Yu, 2023; Ahmed, 2025; Raman et al., 2015; Dou et al., 2016, Liu & Bellibas, 2018; Berkovich & Eyal, 2021). To address existing gaps and clarify these dynamics, this study was designed to examine the relationship between school principals' leadership styles and teachers' motivation in secondary schools within the West Arsi Zone of the Oromia Regional State.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study was to examine the relationship between school principals' leadership styles and teachers' motivation in secondary schools of the West Arsi Zone. Specifically, the study sought:

To identify the predominant leadership style practiced by school principals in the study area.

To examine the overall relationship between principals' leadership styles and teachers' motivation.

To measure the degree of relationship between specific principal leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire) and teacher motivation.

To determine the extent to which leadership styles influence teachers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

To examine the relationship between teachers' demographic variables and their level of motivation.

II. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

A comprehensive review of existing literature was conducted to gather theoretical insights and secondary data. Educational theories, policy documents, strategies, national initiatives, best-practice frameworks, scholarly articles, and evaluation reports served as secondary sources. Primary data were gathered primarily through structured questionnaires administered to key stakeholders, specifically classroom teachers.

This study employed a mixed-methods research design utilizing the **QUAN-QUAL model** (Subedi, 2016). This design was selected to refine and contextualize the overall research problem by combining quantitative and qualitative data, with a primary emphasis on the quantitative approach. Qualitative data were used to validate, triangulate, and elaborate upon the quantitative findings.

This specific design was chosen under the premise that it would thoroughly elucidate the relationship between school principals' leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire) and teachers' motivation to work. Data were collected via a survey method, which is well-suited for examining correlational relationships between variables. Participating teachers evaluated their principals' leadership behaviors using items adapted from the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) alongside standard teacher motivation items.

Quantitative data were processed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) as well as inferential statistics (Pearson correlation and regression analysis coefficients) to describe the strength and direction of the relationships under investigation. Qualitative data obtained through focus group discussions (FGDs) were analyzed qualitatively and used to triangulate the quantitative results.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

This study was conducted in the West Arsi Zone focusing on the target population within the study area. A multi-stage sampling approach combining purposive and random techniques was employed. First, six woredas were purposely selected due to severe challenges related to school principal leadership styles. Second, one secondary school was randomly selected from each of the chosen woredas. Finally, a total of 193 secondary school teachers were selected as the primary respondents.

To ensure sample representativeness, the appropriate sample size was determined using Yamane's (1973) formula. This formula is well-suited for probability sampling and operates at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. The sample size was computed as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{(1+Ne^2)} = \frac{372}{(1+372e^2)} = 193$$

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The quantitative data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed alongside Pearson correlation and linear regression analysis to evaluate the relationships between the study variables.

III. Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile of Respondents

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of data gathered from the secondary school teacher sample (N = 193). Out of the distributed questionnaires, 175 were completed and returned (yielding a response rate of 90.67%), while 18 (9.33%) were unreturned.

The majority of respondents belonged to the 26–30 age bracket. Regarding marital status, most participants were married (77.1%). In terms of educational background, the majority held a Bachelor's degree (BA/BSc), satisfying the standard teaching qualifications established by the Ministry of Education of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia for secondary schools. Additionally, a substantial portion of the respondents had over ten years of teaching experience, indicating a high level of familiarity with the school environment in the West Arsi Zone.

Table 1: Unit Analysis of comparison of Leadership Styles in Practice

Schools	Scores	Styles of Leadership		
		Transformational	Transactional	Laissez Faire
Dodola (1)	N	38	38	38
	Mean	3.44	2.44	2.15
	St. deviation	.582	.516	.63(
Shashamane (2)	N	25	25	25
	Mean	*3.75*	3.54	2.2(
	St. deviation	.757	1.264	.797
Shala (3)	N	20	20	20
	Mean	2.12	3.11	2.1(
	St. deviation	.536	.511	.465
Beriti (4)	N	22	22	22
	Mean	3.2	2.19	2.54
	St. deviation	.436	.566	.65(
Waji Bilalo (5)	N	19	19	19
	Mean	3.35	2.24	2.17
	St. deviation	.555	.548	.608
Leta Bedaso Kuyera AC (6)	N	16	16	16
	Mean	2.87	*3.56*	2.51
	St. deviation	.542	.536	.489
Ifa Boru SBS (7)	N	17	17	17
	Mean	2.33	*3.56*	2.01
	St. deviation	.482	.512	.684
Kofale (8)	N	18	18	18
	Mean	2.34	3.23	2.12
	St. deviation	.656	.546	.487

Source: *Primary Survey Data, 2026*

As shown in the table above, the principals across the investigated schools exhibited varying degrees of leadership styles. Specifically, transformational leadership was dominant in School 1 (M = 3.44, SD = 0.582), School 2 (M = 3.75, SD = 1.264), School 4 (M = 2.44, SD = 0.436), and School 5 (M = 2.15, SD = 0.555). In contrast, transactional leadership was the primary style practiced in School 3 (M = 2.65, SD = 0.511), School 6 (M = 2.26, SD = 0.536), School 7 (M = 3.56, SD = 0.512), and School 8 (M = 3.23, SD = 0.546). Overall, transactional leadership emerged as the predominant style across the majority of schools, followed by transformational leadership, while laissez-faire leadership was the least utilized. These findings align with the summary provided in the table below.

Table 2: Summarized Comparison of Leadership Styles in Practice

Mean Score of Variables			
Variables/Leadership Styles	**Number**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Transactional Leadership	175	3.3247	.67132
Transformational Leadership	175	2.5437	.43055
Laissez-Faire Leadership	175	2.1352	.3285

Source: *Primary Survey Data, 2026*

As shown in Table 2, the mean values for all research variables exceed the neutral midpoint of 3.0. Specifically, respondents reported that school principals most frequently demonstrated a transactional leadership style (M = 3.32, SD = 0.67), followed by a transformational leadership style (M = 2.54, SD = 0.43). Conversely, the laissez-faire leadership style was the least utilized (M = 2.13, SD = 0.33). Overall, these findings indicate that transactional leadership is the dominant style among school principals in this study.

Table 3: The Regression Analysis Result of Leadership Styles and Motivation

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.338	.261		1.297	.196
	Transformational Leadership	.746	.096	.634	7.769	.000
	Transactional Leadership	-.057	.080	-.058	-.714	.476
	Passive/Avoidant	.175	.071	.156	2.477	.064

Dependent Variable: Motivation: ***Source:*** *Primary Survey Data, 2026*

The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant, positive linear relationship between a principal's transformational leadership style and teacher motivation (beta = 0.634, t = 7.769, exceeding the critical t-value of 3.182). This indicates that higher engagement in transformational leadership by principals directly corresponds to higher levels of motivation among teachers. This finding aligns with Bass and Avolio (2000), who posited that transformational leadership fosters an emotional connection between leaders and employees, thereby inspiring followers beyond mere transactional expectations.

Conversely, transactional leadership demonstrated a weak, negative linear association with teacher motivation (beta = -0.058), though this relationship was not statistically significant. This outcome reflects the findings of Niguni et al. (2006), who noted that transactional leadership relies primarily on simple exchanges, such as monetary compensation for completed tasks.

Interestingly, passive/avoidant leadership also exhibited a statistically significant positive relationship with teacher motivation (beta = 0.156).

Overall, these results indicate that transformational leadership exerts a stronger motivational influence on teachers than transactional leadership. Consequently, increased reliance on transformational leadership strategies by school principals is likely to enhance teacher motivation.

Table 4: The Correlation Analysis Result of leadership Styles, and Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Variables

		Intrinsic Motivation	Extrinsic Motivation
Transformational leadership	Pearson Correlation	.572**	.612**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	175	175
Transactional Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.404**	.419**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	175	175
Passive/Avoidant Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.307**	.400**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000
	N	175	175

. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).* ***Source: *Primary Survey Data, 2026*
Dependent Variable: *Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation*

The study revealed significant relationships between teachers' sources of motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) and principals' leadership styles (transformational, transactional, and passive/avoidant). Specifically, a Pearson two-tailed correlation analysis demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between transformational leadership and teachers' intrinsic motivation ($r = 0.572$, $p < 0.001$). A principal's transactional leadership style also showed a significant positive correlation with teachers' intrinsic motivation ($r = 0.404$, $p < 0.001$), while a passive/avoidant style similarly exhibited a statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.307$, $p < 0.001$).

These findings align with Bass and Avolio's (2003) framework on transformational leadership, which posits that transformational leaders foster an emotional attachment with followers. By articulating an inspiring vision of the future, such leaders motivate subordinates and appeal to their ideals and moral values.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis result of Effect Size of Leadership styles on Motivation

	Chi-Square Tests				
Predictors		N	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Transformational	Pearson Chi-Square	175	8458.333	7350	.000
Transactional	Pearson Chi-Square	175	3558.698	3150	.000
Passive/Avoidant	Pearson Chi-Square	175	3615.832	3600	.423

		Motivation	Effect Size
Transformational leadership	Pearson Correlation	.654**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	0.477
	N	175	
Transactional Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.451**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	0.309
	N	175	
Passive/Avoidant Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.382**	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	0.312
	N	175	

. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed): **Source*: *Primary Survey Data, 2026*

As detailed in the table above, the findings indicate that transformational leadership (\beta = 0.477) has a greater impact on teachers' motivation than transactional leadership (beta = 0.309) or passive/avoidant leadership (beta = 0.312). These results align with prior research by Burns (1978), who emphasized the critical role of motivation in human resource leadership, demonstrating that leaders exhibiting transformational behaviors are more effective at driving higher commitment levels than those using transactional or passive/avoidant styles. Consequently, transformational leadership emerges as the most significant driver of teacher motivation among the evaluated styles. Regarding the magnitude of influence, transformational leadership shares a moderate relationship with motivation (0.477), as its effect size exceeds 0.3 (modest) and approaches 0.5 (moderate). In contrast, the relationships between motivation and both transactional (0.309) and passive/avoidant (0.312) leadership styles remain modest.

IV. COMPARISON OF LEADERSHIP STYLES IN PRACTICE

A central objective of this study was to identify the dominant leadership style practiced in secondary schools. Focus group discussions were conducted to gather participants' observations on whether transformational, transactional, or laissez-faire leadership was most prevalent among their respective principals. The qualitative evidence confirmed that a majority of school principals predominantly practiced a transactional leadership model, aligning closely with the quantitative findings.

However, focus group participants highlighted a crucial context not captured by the quantitative data: principals often lack the complete autonomy needed to exercise their preferred leadership style due to external interventions, particularly from local woreda and town administration political leaders. Participants emphasized that these external pressures serve as a major obstacle, eroding principals' confidence and preventing them from consistently adhering to a specific leadership philosophy.

Three null hypotheses were tested to examine the relationship between principals' leadership styles and teachers' motivation:

H01: There is no significant positive relationship between transformational leadership style and teachers' motivation.

H02: There is no significant relationship between transactional leadership style and teachers' motivation.

H03: There is no significant relationship between passive/avoidant leadership style and teachers' motivation.

Participants from focus groups across five sample secondary schools reflected on these assumptions based on their practical observations. Qualitative findings from these sessions showed that teachers working under principals with transformational leadership styles were highly motivated and demonstrated greater self-regulation, thereby confirming the quantitative analysis. Conversely, participants from three sample schools reported higher motivation under transactional leadership. They argued that economic factors exert a stronger influence on teacher motivation than the inspirational motivation characteristic of transformational leadership. Consequently, feedback from these three schools diverged from the quantitative results, indicating that the approaches motivating teachers vary between institutions despite operating within the same administrative system.

V. Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal a significant predictive relationship between principals' leadership styles and teachers' motivation, supported by a statistically significant regression model. Thus, school principals' leadership styles directly influence teacher motivation. However, dynamic situational factors such as school climate and culture also play substantial roles.

Extensive literature demonstrates that principal leadership behaviors shape the overall work environment and directly impact teacher motivation. For motivation to improve, teachers must perceive their principal's behaviors as encouraging. Principals who understand leadership styles and motivational theories are better equipped to align their behaviors with strategies that effectively inspire teachers. Ultimately, a principal's ability to select and execute the appropriate leadership style is critical to enhancing teacher motivation and performance.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance teacher motivation through effective leadership practices in secondary schools:

- ✓ To succeed in today's rapidly changing educational environment, principals should transition toward a transformational leadership style—rather than relying on transactional or laissez-faire approaches—to consistently enhance teacher motivation and engagement.
- ✓ Governing authorities, including the Ministry of Education, Regional Education Bureaus, and Zonal/Woreda Education Offices, must work systematically toward establishing standardized principalship criteria. Furthermore, principals must receive targeted professional development in educational leadership to help them select appropriate styles, manage administrative responsibilities, and foster motivating work environments.
- ✓ Given the impact of economic conditions on motivation, educational governing bodies should establish merit-based promotions, increase salary scales, and regularly review compensation relative to living standards and workload. Addressing these extrinsic motivational needs will better align teacher incentives with broader organizational goals.
- ✓ Because transformational leadership demonstrated a strong, positive correlation with teacher motivation, school principals should be systematically trained on its benefits and encouraged to integrate transformational behaviors into their daily management practices.

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