Educational Management and Advancement Journal (EduMAJ)
Vol. 1, No. 2, 2026, pp.66-72
ISSN 3164-0095, DOI: 10.67958/edumaj.v1i2.85

Path-goal leadership styles of school heads and teachers' job performance

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Article Info

Article history:
Received May 10, 2026
Revised August 28, 2026
Accepted August 29, 2026

Keywords: path-goal, leadership styles, school heads, teachers, job performance

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Abstract

The study examined the relationship between path-goal leadership styles of school heads and teachers' job performance in public secondary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria. A correlational research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised all public secondary school principals and teachers in the state. A sample of 528 respondents, consisting of 48 principals and 480 teachers, was selected using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected using two validated instruments: the School Heads Leadership Styles Questionnaire (SHLSQ) and the Teachers' Job Performance Questionnaire (TJPQ), with reliability coefficients of 0.83 and 0.86, respectively. Data were analyzed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation at a 0.05 level of significance. The results showed that directive ($r = 0.530$, $p < 0.05$), supportive ($r = 0.465$, $p < 0.05$), participative ($r = 0.360$, $p < 0.05$), and achievement-oriented ($r = 0.321$, $p < 0.05$) path-goal leadership styles were significantly and positively related to teachers' job performance. The study concluded that all four path-goal leadership styles were significantly and positively related to teachers' job performance.

How to cite:
Adebola, S. T., & Adebola, D. O. (2026). Path-goal leadership styles of school heads and teachers' job performance. *Educational Management and Advancement Journal*, *1*(2), 66–72. https://doi.org/10.67958/edumaj.v1i2.85

1. Introduction

In the Nigerian educational system, secondary education is intended to prepare students for meaningful living and higher education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Achieving this purpose depends substantially on teachers' effectiveness, which influences instructional quality, students' learning experiences, and the achievement of school goals. Teachers are responsible not only for classroom instruction but also for lesson preparation, classroom management, assessment, collaboration, and participation in school activities. Adebola, Yahya, and Subair (2018) highlight the central role of teachers in implementing pedagogical processes and attaining school objectives. Consequently, understanding the factors associated with effective teacher performance remains an important concern in educational management.

Teacher performance is associated with several organizational and school-level factors, including motivation, professional support, working conditions, and leadership. School heads are particularly important because they shape the organizational conditions within which teachers carry out their professional responsibilities. Effective school leadership can provide direction, facilitate teachers' participation in school decisions, create supportive working environments, and establish expectations that encourage professional improvement (Bush & Glover, 2019; Leithwood *et al*., 2020). Evidence from

educational leadership research further indicates that leadership practices are associated with teacher commitment, instructional quality, and school improvement (Hallinger, 2021; Hitt & Tucker, 2021).

Studies of school leadership have commonly examined broad approaches, including transformational, democratic, autocratic, and laissez-faire leadership. Such studies generally suggest that leadership practices involving instructional guidance, professional support, participation, and high expectations are associated with positive teacher outcomes (Day *et al*., 2019; Hallinger & Kovačević, 2020; Olorunfemi & Akinola, 2023). While these perspectives provide useful explanations of school leadership, broad leadership classifications may offer less specificity about the particular style by which school heads relate to teachers' job performance. Research on principal leadership also suggests that the effects of leadership styles on teacher performance may differ by style (Saleem *et al*., 2020).

The path-goal theory provides a more behaviourally specific framework for examining this relationship. Developed by House, the theory proposes that leaders enhance subordinate performance and satisfaction by clarifying the path to goals, reducing obstacles, providing support, and adapting their behavior to follower and task characteristics (House, 1971; Dixon & Hart, 2010; Northouse, 2022). The theory identifies four major leadership styles: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership (Saleem et al., 2020). These leadership styles provide a useful framework for examining how school heads may create conditions that affect teachers' job performance.

Directive leadership involves clarifying responsibilities, communicating expectations, and providing guidance concerning how tasks should be performed. In schools, this leadership style may help teachers understand instructional requirements, curriculum expectations, and performance standards, thereby reducing role ambiguity. Supportive leadership emphasizes concern for teachers' welfare, interpersonal relationships, and the creation of a positive working environment. Such support may enhance teachers' morale and engagement with their professional responsibilities. Participative leadership involves consulting teachers and allowing them to contribute to decisions affecting their work. Teacher participation may strengthen professional ownership and engagement with school goals. Achievement-oriented leadership involves setting challenging but attainable goals, expressing confidence in teachers' abilities, and encouraging high standards of performance. This leadership style may encourage teachers to pursue higher levels of professional effectiveness. Although the four leadership styles differ in emphasis, each provides a theoretically plausible pathway through which school heads' leadership may be associated with teachers' job performance.

Empirical studies provide evidence that leadership styles are associated with teacher-related outcomes. Within the Nigerian context, Orunbon *et al.* (2024) reported positive relationships between principals' path-goal leadership practices and teachers' job performance in public senior secondary schools in Lagos State. Research has also linked supportive and participative leadership practices with teacher commitment, collaboration, and instructional improvement, while goal-oriented leadership has been associated with professional effectiveness and school improvement (Leithwood *et al.,* 2020; Hitt & Tucker, 2021; Olorunfemi & Akinola, 2023). However, the existing evidence remains limited in its coverage of the four specific path-goal leadership styles within a single study and across different Nigerian state contexts. Consequently, there is a need for further evidence on the individual relationships between these leadership styles and teachers' job performance in public secondary schools.

This gap is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where school heads operate within institutional, administrative, and resource conditions that may differ across contexts. Although Orunbon *et al.* (2024) provide evidence of a relationship between path-goal leadership and teachers' job performance in Lagos State, findings from one state may not adequately represent other Nigerian contexts. Examining the four leadership styles in Ekiti State can therefore provide a more differentiated understanding of how specific path-goal leadership practices are associated with teachers' job performance.

Based on the path-goal framework and the identified empirical and contextual gaps, this study examined the relationship between school heads' and teachers' path-goal leadership styles and teachers' job performance in public secondary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the relationships of directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership styles with teachers' job performance. Accordingly, four hypotheses were formulated:

H_1: There is no significant relationship between the directive leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance.

H_2: There is no significant relationship between the supportive leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance.

H_3: There is no significant relationship between the participative leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance.

H_4: There is no significant relationship between the achievement-oriented leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Participants

The study adopted a correlational research design to examine relationships between school heads' path-goal leadership styles and teachers' job performance, without manipulating the variables. The population comprised public secondary school principals and teachers in Ekiti State, Nigeria. A sample of 528 respondents, comprising 48 principals and 480 teachers, was selected through a multistage sampling procedure. The three senatorial districts in Ekiti State constituted the sampling strata. In the first stage, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were randomly selected from each senatorial district, resulting in six selected LGAs. Random selection was conducted by assigning numbers to the LGAs within each senatorial district and selecting two numbers using a simple random selection procedure.

In the second stage, eight public secondary schools were randomly selected from each of the six selected LGAs, giving a total of 48 schools. The public secondary schools in each selected LGA were listed and assigned numbers, after which eight schools were selected through simple random sampling. In the third stage, 10 teachers were selected from each school using simple random sampling, resulting in 480 teachers. The principals of each selected school were also included, yielding a total sample of 528 respondents. The teachers completed the School Heads Leadership Styles Questionnaire (SHLSQ) to assess their principals' leadership styles. Each principal completed the Teachers' Job Performance Questionnaire (TJPQ) by rating the 10 selected teachers from their school. Consequently, the study generated 480 matched teacher-level observations, each consisting of a teacher's assessment of the leadership style of the relevant school head and the principal's job-performance rating for that teacher.

The distinction between the total sample and the analytical observations is important. The 528 respondents represent the individuals who participated in the study, comprising 480 teachers and 48 principals, whereas the 480 observations represent the matched teacher-level records used in the correlation analyses. Only serving principals and full-time teachers in public secondary schools were included. Temporary staff and teachers not actively involved in classroom instruction were excluded.

2.2 Instruments and Data Collection

Two self-developed instruments, the School Heads Leadership Styles Questionnaire (SHLSQ) and the Teachers' Job Performance Questionnaire (TJPQ), were used to collect data. The SHLSQ was developed based on the four path-goal leadership styles: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership (House, 1971; Northouse, 2022). The instrument was completed by teachers who assessed their respective principals' leadership styles. The TJPQ was developed to assess teachers' job performance in five areas: instructional delivery, lesson preparation, classroom management, assessment practices, and professional engagement. The TJPQ was completed by principals, who independently rated the 10 teachers selected from their respective schools. The SHLSQ comprised 20 items covering the four path-goal leadership styles, while the TJPQ comprised 20 items covering the identified dimensions of teachers' professional responsibilities. Both instruments used a four-point Likert-type response scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4).

Both instruments were subjected to expert review by specialists in educational management and measurement and evaluation to assess the relevance, clarity, adequacy, and appropriateness of the items to the constructs being measured. The recommendations from the review were incorporated into the final versions of the instruments. A pilot study was conducted with 55 respondents from five public secondary schools outside the study sample, comprising 50 teachers and five principals. The pilot study was conducted to assess the clarity and suitability of the items and determine their internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.83 for the SHLSQ and 0.86 for the TJPQ were obtained, indicating satisfactory internal consistency. Data were collected through direct administration of the questionnaires by the researcher, with assistance from trained research assistants. The SHLSQ was administered to the selected teachers, while the TJPQ was administered to the principals, who rated the 10 selected teachers in their respective schools. The responses were matched at the teacher level for the correlation analysis. Ethical approval and permission were obtained from the relevant education authorities and school heads before data collection.

Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured.

2.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) to examine relationships among the four path-goal leadership styles and teachers' job performance. The analyses were conducted at the 0.05 significance level. The correlation analysis was conducted using the matched teacher-level observations. Thus, the reported sample size for each correlation represents the number of matched teacher-level records included in the analysis. Data analysis was carried out using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 20.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The study involved 528 respondents, comprising 480 teachers and 48 principals from 48 public secondary schools. The teachers assessed their respective principals' leadership styles, while each principal rated the job performance of the 10 teachers selected from their school. After matching the two sources of information at the teacher level, 480 matched observations were available for the correlation analysis. The results are presented in Tables 1–4.

Table 1. Relationship between directive leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance

Variables	N	r	P-value	Decision
Directive leadership style of school heads Teachers' job performance	480	0.530	< .005	Significant

Table 1 shows a moderate positive relationship between directive leadership style and teachers' job performance ($r = 0.530$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that higher levels of directive leadership were associated with higher levels of teachers' job performance.

Table 2. Relationship between supportive leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance

Variables	N	r	P-value	Decision
Supportive leadership style of school heads Teachers' job performance	480	0.465	< 0.05	Significant

Table 2 shows a moderate positive relationship between supportive leadership style and teachers' job performance ($r = 0.465$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that higher levels of supportive leadership were associated with higher levels of teachers' job performance.

Table 3. Relationship between participative leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance

Variables	N	r	P-value	Decision
Participative leadership style of school heads Teachers' job performance	480	0.360	< 0.05	Significant

Table 3 shows a positive relationship between participative leadership style and teachers' job performance ($r = 0.360$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that higher levels of participative leadership were associated with higher levels of teachers' job performance.

Table 4. Relationship between achievement-oriented leadership style of school heads and teachers' job performance

Variables	N	r	P-value	Decision
Achievement-oriented leadership style of school heads Teachers' job performance	480	0.321	< 0.05	Significant

Table 4 shows a positive relationship between achievement-oriented leadership style and teachers' job performance ($r = 0.321$, $p < .05$). The null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that higher levels of achievement-oriented leadership were associated with higher levels of teachers' job performance.

3.2 Discussion

The findings indicate that directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership styles are all positively and significantly related to teachers' job performance in public secondary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria. This suggests that different leadership styles may provide different pathways through which school heads create conditions that support effective teacher performance. This finding is broadly consistent with evidence from other educational contexts showing that principals' leadership styles and instructional leadership practices are associated with teacher-related outcomes, although the strength and nature of these relationships may differ across leadership styles and school settings (Parveen *et al*., 2022; Öztürk *et al*., 2020). It also agrees with research linking school leadership with teacher effectiveness and school improvement (Leithwood *et al*., 2020; Hallinger, 2021). However, differences in relationship strength suggest that some leadership styles may be more closely associated with teacher performance than others in this study context.

The significant positive relationship between directive leadership style and teachers' job performance was the strongest among the four leadership styles. This suggests that clear expectations, defined responsibilities, instructional guidance, and established procedures may help teachers perform their duties more effectively. This finding is consistent with Sharma and Jain (2022), who highlighted the importance of clear guidance in path–goal leadership in educational settings, and with Leithwood et al. (2020), who identified clarity of direction and organizational expectations as important elements of effective school leadership. The stronger relationship observed in this study may partly reflect the structured nature of Nigerian public secondary schools, where teachers operate within established curriculum, supervision, reporting, and accountability requirements. However, directive leadership may be less effective when applied rigidly, suggesting that clear direction works best when accompanied by adequate support and resources.

Supportive leadership also showed a moderate positive relationship with teachers' job performance. Concern for teachers' welfare, positive interpersonal relationships, and a favorable working environment may strengthen morale, commitment, and engagement with professional responsibilities. This finding is consistent with Leithwood *et al*. (2020), who emphasized the importance of supportive leadership and school environments for teacher commitment and professional effectiveness. It also complements Akanbi and Oduaran (2022), who identified school leadership as an important factor associated with teacher effectiveness in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the Nigerian public school context, where teachers may encounter administrative, instructional, and resource-related challenges, supportive school heads can help teachers manage workplace demands. Thus, supportive leadership may complement directive leadership by addressing the motivational and relational conditions necessary for effective performance. This is also consistent with broader evidence that principal leadership practices can influence teacher outcomes by shaping the conditions for teachers' professional work and instructional practice (Liebowitz & Porter, 2019).

The participative leadership style was also positively and significantly related to teachers' job performance, although the relationship was weaker than those of directive and supportive leadership. Involving teachers in decisions affecting their work may strengthen professional ownership, responsibility, and engagement. This finding agrees with Hitt and Tucker (2021), who identified teacher involvement and collaborative leadership as features of effective school leadership, and with Olorunfemi and Akinola (2023), who reported positive associations between participatory leadership and teachers' commitment and classroom effectiveness in Nigerian secondary schools. The comparatively weaker relationship may partly reflect the hierarchical structure of public education in Nigeria, where major decisions concerning curriculum, staffing, assessment, and administration may be determined beyond the control of individual school heads. Comparable evidence has been reported in public secondary-school contexts, where participative and democratic forms of principal leadership have been associated with teacher job performance (Adeyemi, 2010; Parveen et al., 2022).

The achievement-oriented leadership style had the strongest positive relationship with teachers' job performance, followed by the other three styles. Setting challenging but attainable goals, expressing confidence in teachers, and encouraging high performance standards may motivate teachers to improve their instructional practices. The finding is consistent with Day *et al*. (2019), who linked high expectations and goal-focused leadership with teacher effectiveness, and with Ali and Johl (2021), who reported a positive association between achievement-oriented path–goal leadership and employee performance.

However, the weaker relationship may indicate that high expectations alone are less strongly associated with teacher performance than clear direction and interpersonal support. In public school settings where teachers may face resource and operational constraints, challenging expectations may be more effective when accompanied by guidance, resources, and professional support. Overall, the results indicate that all four path-goal leadership styles were positively and significantly related to teachers' job performance.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented path-goal leadership styles were all positively and significantly related to teachers' job performance in public secondary schools in Ekiti State, Nigeria. Directive leadership showed the strongest relationship, followed by supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership. These findings provide empirical support for the relevance of the path-goal leadership framework in understanding the relationship between school heads' leadership styles and teachers' job performance. Based on these findings, school heads should adopt flexible and context-sensitive leadership approaches that combine clear direction, professional support, teacher participation, and appropriate performance expectations. Educational stakeholders should also provide leadership development programs to strengthen school heads' capacity to apply these styles appropriately. However, the study was limited to public secondary schools in Ekiti State and employed a correlational design. Future research should examine these relationships across different states and school types and may employ longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to provide deeper evidence on how path-goal leadership styles are associated with teachers' job performance.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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