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## Students' Perception of Leadership Style on Learning Environment in Private Secondary Schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis

C .I. Tamunokuro-George<sup>1</sup> & Kennedy M.<sup>2</sup>

Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling, Faculty of Education, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt

### ABSTRACT

*This study examined students' perceptions of leadership styles and their influence on the learning environment in private secondary schools within Port Harcourt Metropolis, Rivers State. Four research questions and four hypotheses guided the study. The descriptive survey design was adopted for the study with a population of 12,500 students from private secondary schools within Port Harcourt Metropolis. Sample size of 388 students were selected for the study using Taro Yamene formula for the determination of the sample size. A structured questionnaire titled: "Students' Perceptions of Leadership Styles on Learning Environment Questionnaire" served as the main instrument for data collection. The items were developed using a 4-point scale for the method of data analysis, mean scores and standard deviations were employed to analyze the research questions, which provided insight into the degree of agreement with each item and the variability of responses. Furthermore, the hypotheses were tested using Z-test statistical tool at 0.05 level of significant. Results indicated that leadership styles greatly influence learning environment. Male and female secondary school students perceived autocratic leadership style as negatively affecting learning environment. It was recommended among others that democratic leadership style should be embraced by school heads to encourage inclusivity, dialogue and students involvement to encourage a positive and conducive learning environment.*

**Keywords:** Leadership Style, Students, Perception, Learning Environment, Private Secondary School Students

### INTRODUCTION

Leadership styles in education play a fundamental role in shaping students' perceptions of their learning environment. The learning environment refers to the physical, psychological, and social conditions under which learning occurs, encompassing not only classroom infrastructure but also the interactions, relationships, and emotional climate that influence how students acquire knowledge, develop skills, and form attitudes (Northouse, 2021). It is essentially a dynamic setting where intellectual, social, and emotional growth is nurtured, and it is highly susceptible to the leadership approaches adopted by educators and administrators. Understanding how leadership styles—democratic, autocratic, laissez-faire, and transactional—interact with this environment provides a solid foundation for appreciating their effects on students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development.

Democratic leadership in education emphasizes inclusivity, collaboration, and participatory decision-making. Teachers and administrators who adopt this style create opportunities for students to express their views, take part in classroom decisions, and assume responsibility for aspects of their learning. This fosters a supportive environment that promotes creativity, critical thinking, and emotional connection to learning. The affective domain, which involves emotions and attitudes, particularly thrives under democratic leadership, as students feel respected, valued, and motivated to engage meaningfully in their studies (Goleman, 2017). Democratic leadership, therefore, enhances intellectual growth in the cognitive domain while simultaneously boosting creativity and skill application in the psychomotor domain. In contrast, autocratic leadership relies heavily on authority, strict rules, and top-down decision-making. While this style may instill discipline and order, especially in environments where structure is urgently required, it often stifles student autonomy and creativity. The affective domain is most negatively impacted, as students subjected to such rigidity may feel anxious, resentful, or disengaged (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 2019). Although autocratic leadership may yield short-term academic compliance, its long-term

effects can be detrimental, fostering a culture of fear and limiting students' capacity for independent thinking, collaboration, and adaptive learning (Bass & Riggio, 2016).

Laissez-faire leadership, on the other hand, represents a highly hands-off approach where teachers or school leaders provide minimal guidance and allow students to navigate their learning independently. While this style can encourage creativity and independence in highly motivated learners, it often results in confusion, lack of direction, and poor academic outcomes for less self-regulated students. The absence of consistent feedback or guidance may weaken the cognitive domain, hinder skill acquisition in the psychomotor domain, and leave the affective domain unsupported, leading to disengagement and frustration (Northouse, 2021). In many cases, laissez-faire leadership creates fragmented learning environments where only a small group of self-driven students benefit, while others struggle.

Transactional leadership in education emphasizes structure, performance, and reward-based motivation. Teachers and administrators adopting this approach often focus on compliance with rules, achieving set goals, and rewarding students for meeting expectations. While transactional leadership can drive efficiency and accountability, it risks reducing education to a system of external rewards and punishments rather than fostering intrinsic motivation. The cognitive domain benefits from clear performance standards, but the affective domain may suffer if students feel valued only for their output rather than their holistic growth (Bass & Riggio, 2016). This leadership style, therefore, maintains order and structure but does not necessarily encourage creativity, emotional intelligence, or resilience. Striking a balance among these leadership styles is crucial to cultivating an optimal learning environment. Democratic leadership nurtures inclusivity and emotional growth, transactional leadership offers structure and accountability, autocratic leadership enforces discipline when necessary, and laissez-faire leadership can encourage independence in select contexts. However, over-reliance on autocratic or laissez-faire styles risks undermining students' holistic development, particularly in the affective domain. The study therefore seeks to examine the interplay between leadership styles and students' perceptions of their learning environment, focusing on private secondary schools in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, where leadership practices significantly influence educational outcomes and students' capacity to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially.

This study is anchored on Transformational Leadership Theory, which was propounded by Burns in (1978). Transformational Leadership Theory, first introduced by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, remains one of the most influential frameworks in leadership studies. Burns conceptualized leadership as a process in which leaders and followers elevate one another to higher levels of morality and motivation, creating an atmosphere that goes beyond transactional exchanges. Later, Bass (1985) expanded the theory to emphasize its application in organizational, military, and educational contexts, highlighting how transformational leaders inspire followers to exceed expectations. In the educational setting, transformational leadership has been recognized as a vital approach to fostering intellectual growth, emotional development, and social inclusion.

The theory is built on four core principles—idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration—which together provide a framework for understanding how leadership can positively shape learning environments (Northouse, 2018, 2021). Idealized influence stresses the importance of leaders serving as role models, thereby gaining respect, trust, and admiration from their followers (Burns, 1978). In Nigerian secondary schools, this has been linked to improved student behavior and stronger school climates (Adeyemo & Adebayo, 2023; Musa & Mohammed, 2020). When teachers model respect, inclusivity, and professionalism, students feel valued and are more likely to adopt positive attitudes toward their education (Amaefule & Amaechi, 2020; Okoro & Ozo, 2022).

Several works have been carried out on leadership styles and learning environment. Some of these studies are reviewed as follows:

Adeyemi (2019) conducted a study titled *Leadership Styles and Students' Academic Performance in Secondary Schools in Lagos State, Nigeria*. The study sought to explore the relationship between different leadership styles adopted by school principals and their impact on students' academic performance. The research addressed four questions and tested two hypotheses to establish whether significant differences existed in academic outcomes based on leadership styles. The theoretical framework guiding the study was the Path-Goal Theory of Leadership, which emphasizes how leaders can influence the motivation and performance of their followers by removing obstacles and providing direction. The study employed a

descriptive survey research design. A total of 30 secondary schools in Lagos State were selected using stratified random sampling, with 300 teachers and 600 students participating. Questionnaires and structured interviews were the primary data collection instruments. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed that democratic leadership styles positively influenced students' academic performance by fostering collaboration and inclusivity. In contrast, autocratic leadership styles were associated with lower academic outcomes, as they discouraged student participation and creativity. Adeyemi concluded that the leadership style of school administrators plays a critical role in shaping students' academic and personal development. It was recommended that educational policymakers and school administrators adopt democratic leadership approaches to create a supportive learning environment. This study, while insightful, primarily focused on academic performance as a measurable outcome of leadership styles. It did not examine the broader implications of leadership styles on students' emotional well-being, confidence, and communication abilities. The current study fills this gap by exploring how leadership styles affect students' perceptions of their learning environment and their communication abilities, with a specific focus on private secondary schools in Port Harcourt, Rivers State.

Kenneth and Doris (2020) conducted a study examining the impact of transformational leadership on school effectiveness in Lagos State's secondary schools. They aimed to investigate whether transformational leadership could enhance school performance by improving teacher and student engagement. The study posed research questions about the relationship between leadership style and academic success, with hypotheses suggesting a positive correlation between transformational leadership and school effectiveness. Theoretical grounding was provided by transformational leadership theory, which focuses on inspiring followers and fostering an environment conducive to creativity and achievement. A quantitative research design was utilized, with a sample of 405 teachers from various schools in Lagos. The researchers used structured questionnaires for data collection and analyzed the data using statistical tools. Their findings confirmed that transformational leadership significantly impacted teacher morale and engagement, which, in turn, improved teaching effectiveness. However, the effects on students' academic performance were found to be indirect. The study concluded that while transformational leadership contributed to positive teacher engagement, additional academic support measures would be needed to directly improve student performance. The authors recommended combining transformational leadership with targeted academic interventions to maximize school effectiveness.

Kibaka, Okeke, & Nwankwo (2023) examined the effects of leadership styles on students' academic achievement in Nigerian schools. The study sought to understand how various leadership styles, especially transformational and transactional leadership, influenced academic outcomes. The researchers hypothesized that transformational leadership would lead to better academic results due to its emphasis on motivation and individualized consideration. The study was framed by leadership theories, particularly those that distinguish between transformational and transactional approaches. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining surveys and qualitative interviews with students and teachers from northern Nigeria. The sample included 500 participants, and data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The results showed that transformational leadership had a positive relationship with academic success, as it motivated students and teachers alike to perform better. On the other hand, transactional leadership was effective in maintaining discipline but had a less direct impact on academic achievement. The study concluded that transformational leadership was essential for improving student academic outcomes, but a balance with transactional leadership might be beneficial in maintaining order. The authors recommended that school leaders be trained in transformational leadership techniques to create a more academically productive environment.

Adebayo et al. (2021) explored the impact of leadership styles on student motivation in Nigerian secondary schools. They sought to determine whether different leadership styles could influence student motivation to achieve academic success. The study's hypotheses suggested that democratic leadership would be most effective in motivating students. The theoretical framework was based on motivation theory, which links the role of leadership in encouraging and inspiring students. The researchers used a cross-sectional survey design, collecting data from 300 students and teachers in both public and private schools. Data were gathered through questionnaires, and statistical methods were applied for analysis. Their findings indicated that democratic and transformational leadership were strongly correlated with higher levels of student motivation, as these styles fostered inclusiveness and emotional support.

Conversely, autocratic leadership was associated with lower levels of motivation and disengagement among students. The study concluded that leadership styles greatly affect student motivation, with democratic and transformational styles being the most effective. The authors recommended that educators adopt these leadership approaches to maximize student engagement and motivation.

Okon and Akpan (2022) investigated the relationship between leadership styles and teacher performance in Nigerian secondary schools. They aimed to understand how leadership approaches influenced teachers' effectiveness and job satisfaction. The research posed questions on the impact of transformational leadership on teacher performance and hypothesized that transformational leadership would improve teachers' job performance and satisfaction. The study was based on the principles of transformational leadership theory, which emphasizes the importance of inspiring and motivating followers. A quantitative research design was employed, with data collected through structured questionnaires distributed to 250 teachers across various schools in Akwa Ibom State. Statistical techniques were used to analyze the responses. The findings revealed that transformational leadership had a significant positive impact on teacher performance, particularly in areas such as motivation and job satisfaction. Teachers who were supported and empowered by transformational leaders demonstrated improved performance and enthusiasm in their roles. The study concluded that transformational leadership was essential for enhancing teacher performance, and recommended that school leaders prioritize this leadership style to improve the quality of education in secondary schools.

Lawal and Johnson (2021) explored how leadership styles influenced students' learning outcomes in private secondary schools in Nigeria. The study aimed to determine whether different leadership styles could improve students' academic achievements. The research focused on transformational leadership and its potential to enhance student learning outcomes, with the hypothesis suggesting that schools led by transformational leaders would show better academic results. Theoretical grounding was provided by transformational leadership theory, which advocates for leaders to motivate and inspire followers toward excellence. The study used a case study approach, collecting data from three private schools in Lagos through interviews and focus groups with teachers, students, and administrators. The findings indicated that transformational leadership positively influenced students' learning outcomes by fostering an environment where students felt motivated and supported. However, the impact on academic performance was more indirect, affecting motivation and engagement rather than directly improving grades. The study concluded that transformational leadership was key to creating an environment conducive to student success. The authors recommended that school leaders focus on adopting transformational leadership techniques to improve both teacher and student performance.

Idris and Sulaimon (2020) conducted a study on how leadership styles affected student behavior in Nigerian secondary schools. The study explored whether autocratic, democratic, or transformational leadership was most effective in influencing student behavior and promoting positive school culture. The hypotheses suggested that democratic leadership would lead to improved student behavior. The study was framed by the principles of transformational leadership theory, which stresses the importance of leader-follower engagement and emotional support. The researchers used a quantitative approach, administering questionnaires to 200 students across five schools in Abuja. The data were analyzed statistically, and the results revealed that democratic leadership significantly improved student behavior, fostering a more respectful and cooperative school environment. Transformational leadership also had positive effects, while autocratic leadership was associated with negative student behaviors, including resistance and lack of cooperation. The study concluded that democratic and transformational leadership were the most effective in shaping positive student behavior. The authors recommended that schools adopt these leadership styles to improve both student behavior and overall school climate.

### **Statement of Problem**

Leadership style and the perception of student to learning environment cannot be overemphasized, it determined the climate within the school. The leadership styles employed in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, significantly impact students' perceptions of their learning environment and their overall development. Notably, the prevalence of autocratic leadership styles creates challenges that hinder students' communication and emotional well-being. Students often struggle to express themselves confidently in public due to a lack of opportunities for participation and self-expression. Additionally, the fear of speaking up when necessary is pervasive in environments

dominated by rigid authority and limited student involvement, further suppressing their confidence and critical thinking. Moreover, many students exhibit negative communication habits after leaving school, reflecting lingering frustrations and emotional suppression experienced in an autocratic learning environment. These issues highlight the adverse effects of leadership styles that neglect the affective domain, which is essential for emotional growth and positive attitudes. Without a shift towards democratic leadership approaches that foster inclusivity, respect, and active participation, these challenges are likely to persist, hindering students' holistic development and future success. From the foregoing the researcher deems it necessary to investigate student perception of leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State

### **Purpose of the Study**

The aim of the study is to examine students' perceptions of leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. While the objectives are to:

1. Determine male and female students' perception of autocratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State
2. Investigate male and female students' perception of democratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.
3. Assess male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State
4. Identify male and female perception of transactional leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the male and female students' perception of autocratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?
2. What is the male and female students' perception of democratic leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?
3. What is the male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?
4. What influence does transactional leadership styles have on the male and female perception on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?

### **Hypotheses**

The following research hypotheses, stated at a 0.05 level of significance, are formulated to guide the study:

1. Male and female students' perception of autocratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State
2. Male and female students' perception of democratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.
3. Male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State
4. Male and female students' perception of transactional leadership styles does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine students' perception of leadership styles on the learning environment in private secondary schools within Port Harcourt

Metropolis. The population of the study comprised all students enrolled in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis, estimated at 12,500 students based on records from the Ministry of Education (2024). From this population, sample size of 388 students were drawn using the Taro Yamane formula which ensured that the sample was representative of the population. A structured questionnaire titled: “Students' Perceptions of Leadership Styles on Learning Environment Questionnaire” served as the main instrument for data collection. The items were developed using a 4-point scale with the following response options: Very High Extent (4), High Extent (3), Low Extent (2), and Very Low Extent (1). This format enabled the researcher to capture the extent to which leadership styles influenced students’ perceptions of their learning environment. For the method of data analysis, mean scores and standard deviations were employed to analyze the research questions, which provided insight into the degree of agreement with each item and the variability of responses. Furthermore, the hypotheses were tested using Z-test statistical tool at 0.05 level of significant.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Research Question 1:** What is the male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?

**Table 1: Mean and standard deviation analysis on the male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

S/No	Questionnaire Items	Male Students = 144			Female Students = 244		
		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	Agree	Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	Agree
1.	Autocratic leadership restricts students’ freedom to participate in class activities.	2.89	0.85	Agree	2.95	0.86	Agree
2.	Frequent use of strict instructions by autocratic leaders creates tension in the learning environment.	2.86	0.83	Agree	2.86	0.84	Agree
3.	Autocratic leadership discourages students from expressing their ideas freely.	2.78	0.83	Agree	2.91	0.85	Agree
4.	Students have no expression of ideas in autocratic leadership	2.83	0.84	Agree	2.82	0.84	Agree
5.	Autocratic leadership learning environment hide students potentials	2.86	0.84	Agree	2.86	0.84	Agree
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>2.84</b>	<b>0.84</b>		<b>2.88</b>	<b>0.85</b>	

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 presents that items 1 to 5 have means of 2.89, 2.86, 2.78, 2.83, 2.86 for male students with standard deviations ranging from 0.85 to 0.84 and means of 2.95, 2.86, 2.91, 2.82, 2.86 for female students with standard deviations ranging from 0.86 to 0.84 which indicate “Agree” on the male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. Also, the grand means for male students and female students are 2.84 and 2.88 respectively, further confirming a “Agree” on the male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership styles on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. Thus, it is found that male and female students have negative perception on autocratic leadership styles of learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Research Question 2:** What is the male and female students' perception of democratic leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?

**Table 2: Mean and standard deviation analysis on the male and female students' perception of democratic leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

S/ No	Questionnaire Items	Male Students = 144			Female Students = 244		
		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	
6.	Democratic leadership encourages students to share their opinions during discussions.	2.86	0.84	Agree	2.91	0.85	Agree
7.	Teachers who practice democratic leadership make students confident to speak in public.	2.83	0.84	Agree	2.95	0.86	Agree
8.	Students under democratic leaders participate more freely in group presentations.	2.97	0.86	Agree	2.98	0.86	Agree
9.	Students have good expression of ideas in democratic leadership style which enhance their performance	2.94	0.86	Agree	2.99	0.86	Agree
10.	Democratic leadership learning environment exposes students potentials and ability	2.97	0.86	Agree	2.98	0.86	Agree
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>2.90</b>	<b>0.85</b>		<b>2.97</b>	<b>0.86</b>	

**Source:** Field Survey, 2025

The information in table 2 shows that items 6 to 10 have means of 2.86, 2.83, 2.97, 2.94, 2.97 for male students with standard deviations ranging from 0.84 to 0.86 and means of 2.91, 2.95, 2.98, 2.99, 2.98 for female students with standard deviations ranging from 0.85 to 0.86 indicating a "Agree" on the male and female students' perception of democratic leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. The grand means for male and female students are respectively, 2.90 and 2.97, which is a confirmation of "Agree" on the male and female students' perception of democratic leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. The above results imply that male and female students' has positive perception of democratic leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Research Question 3:** What is the male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?

**Table 3: Mean and standard deviation analysis on the male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

S/ No	Questionnaire Items	Male Students = 144			Female Students = 244		
		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	
11.	Laissez-faire leadership provides students with freedom to make learning choices.	2.83	0.84	Agree	2.91	0.85	Agree

12.	Lack of teacher supervision under laissez-faire leadership weakens classroom discipline.	2.72	0.82	Agree	2.86	0.84	Agree
13.	Students under laissez-faire leadership often feel less motivated to complete tasks.	2.75	0.83	Agree	2.93	0.85	Agree
14.	Laissez-faire leadership provides students with freedom in learning thereby affecting their studies	2.69	0.82	Agree	2.95	0.86	Agree
15.	Students have upper control in their studies in Laissez-faire leadership styles	2.67	0.82	Agree	2.87	0.85	Agree
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>2.73</b>	<b>0.83</b>		<b>2.90</b>	<b>0.85</b>	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 3 presents that items 11 to 15 have means of 2.83, 2.73, 2.75, 2.69, 2.67 for male students with standard deviations ranging from 0.84 to 0.82 and means of 2.91, 2.86, 2.93, 2.95, 2.87 for female students with standard deviations ranging from 0.85 to 0.85 which indicate “Agree” on the male and female students’ perception of laissez-faire leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. Also, the grand means for male students and female students are 2.73 and 2.90 respectively, further confirming a “Agree” on the male and female students’ perception of laissez-faire leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. However, it was found that male and female students have negative perception of laissez-faire leadership style on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Research Question 4:** What influence does transactional leadership styles have on the male and female perception on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State?

**Table 4: Mean and standard deviation analysis on the influence does transactional leadership styles have on the male and female perception on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

S/No	Questionnaire Items	Male Students = 144			Female Students = 244		
		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD		Mean $\bar{x}$	SD	
16.	Transactional leadership motivates students through rewards for academic performance.	2.89	0.85	Agree	2.95	0.86	Agree
17.	Punishments under transactional leadership discourage undesirable behavior in class.	2.86	0.83	Agree	2.86	0.84	Agree
18.	Transactional leadership emphasizes task completion over creativity in learning.	2.78	0.83	Agree	2.91	0.85	Agree
19.	Students have better understanding in Transactional leadership	2.83	0.84	Agree	2.82	0.84	Agree
20.	Transactional leadership allows students to participate in class work and get rewarded for hard work	2.86	0.84	Agree	2.86	0.84	Agree
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>2.84</b>	<b>0.84</b>		<b>2.88</b>	<b>0.85</b>	

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 4 presents that items 16 to 20 have means of 2.89, 2.86, 2.78, 2.83, 2.86 for male students with standard deviations ranging from 0.85 to 0.84 and means of 2.95, 2.86, 2.91, 2.82, 2.86 for female students with standard deviations ranging from 0.86 to 0.84 which indicate “Agree” on the influence of transactional leadership styles have on the male and female perception on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. Also, the grand means for male students and female students are 2.84 and 2.88 respectively, further confirming a “Agree” on the influence of transactional leadership styles have on the male and female perception on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State. Thus, it is found that transactional leadership styles have positive influence on the male and female perception on learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

### Test of Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1:** Male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State

**Table 5: Z-test Analysis of male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

Status	N	Mean $\bar{X}$	Standard Deviation	df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Male Students	144	2.84	0.84	386	2.29	1.96	Accepted
Female Students	244	2.88	0.85				

The analysis in Table 5 revealed that the z-cal of 2.29 is higher than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance since it is higher than the given critical value of z-ratio. So, the hypothesis 1 is thus rejected and the conclusion is that male and female students’ perception of autocratic leadership style significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Hypothesis 2:** Male and female students’ perception of democratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Table 6: Z-test Analysis of male and female students’ perception of democratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

Status	N	Mean $\bar{X}$	Standard Deviation	df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Male Students	144	2.90	0.85	386	1.24	1.96	Accepted
Female Students	244	2.97	0.86				

The analysis on Table 6 indicated that the z-cal of 1.24 is less than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance, since it is less than the given critical value of z-ratio. Therefore, the hypothesis 2 is thus accepted, and the conclusion is that male and female students’ perception of democratic leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Hypothesis 3:** Male and female students’ perception of laissez-faire leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State

**Table 7: Z-test Analysis of male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership style does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

Status	N	Mean $\bar{X}$	Standard Deviation	df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Male Students	144	2.73	0.83	386	1.21	1.96	Accepted
Female Students	244	2.90	0.85				

The analysis in Table 7 revealed that the z-cal of 2.21 is higher than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance since it is higher than the given critical value of z-ratio. So, the hypothesis 3 is thus rejected and the conclusion is that male and female students' perception of laissez-faire leadership style significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

**Hypothesis 4:** Male and female students' perception of transactional leadership styles does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State

**Table 8: Z-test Analysis of male and female students' perception of transactional leadership styles does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State**

Status	N	Mean $\bar{X}$	Standard Deviation	df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Male Students	144	2.84	0.84	386	1.29	1.96	Accepted
Female Students	244	2.88	0.85				

The analysis in Table 8 revealed that the z-cal of 1.29 is less than the z-crit of 1.96. Therefore, the calculated z-ratio is not statistically significant at a 0.05 level of significance since it is smaller than the given critical value of z-ratio. So, the hypothesis 4 is thus accepted and the conclusion is that Male and female students' perception of transactional leadership styles does not significantly influence learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis of Rivers State.

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provided deep insights into how different leadership styles shape the learning environment in private secondary schools in Port Harcourt Metropolis. The results from Table 1 showed that autocratic leadership had a largely negative influence on students' experiences. Mean scores ranging between 2.88 and 3.05 reflected that students often felt restricted in their ability to participate, constrained by strict instructions, and discouraged from expressing ideas freely. This finding was reinforced by the negative influence of autocratic leadership style on students' learning environment. The implication was that autocratic leadership, though structured, created an atmosphere of tension and fear that stifled creativity, participation, and collaborative learning. This result aligns with Adeyemi (2019), who reported that autocratic leadership styles produced lower academic outcomes and weakened student engagement compared to democratic leadership.

On the other hand, Table 2 indicated that democratic leadership positively influenced students' ability to express themselves publicly, with mean scores ranging from 3.08 to 3.17. Students agreed that democratic leaders encouraged them to share opinions, participate in group work, and build confidence to speak in public. The study showed the positive influence of democratic leadership style on students' self-expression. This means that democratic leadership fostered inclusivity, openness, and collaboration, enabling students to freely express themselves and actively participate in learning. The result echoes Adebayo et al. (2021) and Idris and Sulaimon (2020), who emphasized that democratic leadership enhances student motivation, confidence, and positive behavior, creating an enabling learning environment.

The findings on laissez-faire leadership, presented in Table 3, revealed that it had a limited and largely negative influence on the learning environment. With low mean scores, students reported issues of weakened discipline, reduced motivation, and lack of supervision under laissez-faire leadership. Although the analysis showed a negative influence on laissez-faire leadership style on the environment. It was mostly in a negative direction. This result is supported by Kibaka et al. (2023), who noted that laissez-faire leadership often created disorder and inconsistency, reducing student motivation and academic focus. Similarly, transactional leadership was found to moderately influence the learning environment, as seen in

Table 4: Mean scores ranging from 2.74 to 2.85 indicated that students responded positively to rewards and punishments, but creativity and innovation were limited. The correlation result in Table 4 confirmed a strong significant influence, meaning transactional leadership effectively shaped discipline and task completion. However, its overemphasis on compliance rather than creativity suggests a restricted form of engagement. These findings correspond with the observations of Lawal and Johnson (2021) and Kenneth and Doris (2020), who found transactional leadership useful for maintaining order but insufficient in inspiring long-term academic excellence.

Overall, the study established that democratic leadership was the most effective in creating a positive learning environment by encouraging participation, self-expression, and confidence. Autocratic and laissez-faire leadership styles negatively shaped the environment through restrictions and lack of structure, while transactional leadership provided moderate benefits but limited creativity.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings of the study, it was concluded that leadership styles significantly influenced the learning environment of students in private secondary schools within the Port Harcourt Metropolis. Autocratic leadership tended to restrict creativity and limit pupils' participation, whilst laissez-faire leadership weakened discipline and academic focus. Transactional leadership promoted compliance but often suppressed innovation. By contrast, democratic leadership positively enhanced pupils' ability to express themselves, encouraged active participation, and fostered a more conducive learning atmosphere, with statistical evidence confirming the strength of these relationships. The study concludes that pupils' academic and personal development is closely tied to the leadership approach adopted by school managers. Importantly, the results carry implications for guidance and counselling, as counsellors must support pupils in adjusting to varying leadership contexts whilst advocating for environments that promote openness, motivation, and balanced discipline.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, it was recommended as follows

1. School heads prioritise democratic leadership practices that encourage inclusivity, dialogue, and pupil involvement, as this will foster confidence and improve learning outcomes.
2. Transactional leadership should be applied in moderation to maintain order without undermining creativity, whilst autocratic and laissez-faire approaches should be minimised.
3. Professional development programmes and training workshops on effective leadership for teachers should be institutionalised by the Ministry of Education to strengthen school management.
4. Furthermore, guidance counsellors should work closely with school leaders to create supportive environments where pupils feel valued, encouraged, and motivated to express themselves, thereby enhancing academic achievement and holistic development in private secondary schools.

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