

Principals' Self-Management, School Climate, And Student Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools: Evidence from North Rift, Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between principals' self-management, a core dimension of emotional intelligence, and student academic performance in public secondary schools in North Rift, Kenya, and tested whether school climate moderates this relationship. Although instructional leadership is widely studied, principals' capacity to regulate their own emotions, time, stress, and behaviour remains poorly understood in African and Kenyan contexts, where large class sizes, resource constraints, and high-stress environments place particular demands on self-regulation. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study drew a sample of 100 principals and 407 teachers from public secondary schools across nine North Rift counties, selected using the Yamane (1967) formula and simple random sampling. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and hierarchical moderated regression via Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 1); interview data supplemented and explained the quantitative patterns. The self-management scale demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.850$). Principals' self-management showed a strong, statistically significant positive correlation with student academic performance ($r = 0.736$, $p < 0.01$) and remained a significant predictor in the multiple regression model ($\beta = 0.116$, $t = 2.012$, $p = 0.045$) after controlling for self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management. School climate significantly moderated this relationship (interaction effect = -0.1417 , $p = 0.0001$): the effect of self-management on performance was strongest in schools with weaker climates (effect = 0.5623 at the 16th percentile) and weakened, though remained significant, as climate improved (effect = 0.2100 at the 84th percentile). This compensatory pattern indicates that self-management is especially valuable in less favourable school environments, functioning as a stabilizing leadership resource where organisational conditions are weakest. The study recommends that teacher training institutions and the Ministry of Education institutionalize emotional self-regulation, stress management, and time management training for principals, prioritizing schools operating in constrained or high-stress climates.

1. Introduction

Educational leadership research has long grappled with an uncomfortable finding: the direct effects of principal leadership on student achievement are frequently weak or statistically non-significant (Bruggencate et al., 2012; Dutta & Sahney, 2016; Rodrigues & Lima, 2021). Rather than diminishing the importance of principals, this finding has pushed scholars toward a more sophisticated reading of how leadership operates, in particular through indirect pathways in which a principal's internal capacities shape the organisational and emotional climate of the school, which in turn drives teacher motivation and student outcomes.

Among the dimensions of emotional intelligence identified by Goleman (2011), self-management, the ability to regulate one's own emotions, behaviour, time, and stress, has emerged as particularly consequential for school leadership quality. Principals face continuous demands: disciplinary crises, resource shortages, staff conflicts, and administrative deadlines, all of which draw on their capacity for composure, adaptability, and disciplined follow-through. Yet despite its evident importance, self-management is rarely examined as a discrete, measurable competency in educational leadership research. It tends to be absorbed into broader leadership quality constructs, which dilutes the analytical precision needed to design targeted principal development interventions.

This gap is especially pronounced in Kenya, and more specifically in the North Rift region, where principals operate within a distinct socio-educational ecology shaped by large class sizes, limited professional development opportunities, ethnic heterogeneity, and chronic underfunding. Existing Kenyan studies have explored adjacent themes, such as human resource management (Wanjala et al., 2022), teacher management incentives (Kilwake et al., 2023), teaching culture (Ngare et al., 2023), and administrator stress levels (Kamunge et al., 2020), without directly testing the relationship between principals' self-management as an emotional intelligence competency and student academic performance. Notably, Musyoki et al. (2021) even reported a negative correlation between principals' intellectual stimulation and KCSE performance in Makueni County, a counterintuitive finding suggesting that context moderates leadership-performance relationships in ways the literature has yet to adequately explain.

This study addresses these gaps directly. It examined the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance in public secondary schools in North Rift, Kenya, and tested whether school climate moderates this relationship. The specific objective of the study was to examine the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance in public secondary schools in North Rift, Kenya, tested through the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance in North Rift, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance is well documented globally, yet characterized by important contradictions the literature has not fully resolved. The evidence consistently points toward an indirect pathway: principal self-management shapes school climate and teacher job satisfaction, which in turn drives student outcomes (Bruggencate et al., 2012; Dutta & Sahney, 2016). Self-management should therefore be understood not as a direct lever on academic performance but as a foundational enabling condition whose effects are real but mediated through the organisational fabric of the school.

Globally, the significance of principal quality for student learning outcomes is well established (Dhuey & Smith, 2014; Jacobson, 2005; Kaplan et al., 2005; Rodrigues & Lima, 2021). Tang (2023) demonstrates that leadership practices can fundamentally alter a school's academic trajectory, while Luschei and Jeong (2020) establish that teacher decision-making autonomy, which principals' self-management can actively foster, is positively associated with student academic performance. These findings position self-management not merely as a personal attribute but as a structural force shaping the professional conditions under which teachers work and students learn. However, relatively few global studies disaggregate self-management as a discrete competency and test its specific effects on performance outcomes, a construct typically subsumed within broader leadership quality measures.

At the regional level, Almalki (2019) suggests that granting Saudi principals greater decision-making powers can improve school management and student achievement, though this finding is difficult to generalize given the distinct institutional conditions of the Gulf region. What regional evidence consistently confirms is that context matters: the enabling or constraining effect of self-management is not uniform across educational systems.

Among emotional intelligence competencies, self-management has emerged as particularly consequential for leadership quality and learner outcomes. Pretorius (2024), using a qualitative phenomenological design, finds that sub-skills including emotional self-management, optimism, adaptability, and stress management are decisive factors in principals' leadership quality and learner outcomes. Georgewill and Asagba (2024), in Nigerian secondary schools, similarly find that self-management enables principals to regulate their emotions and sustain active leadership engagement.

Wang (2025) establishes through structural equation modelling that resilience and self-efficacy, core elements of self-management, positively relate to principals' emotional wellbeing, which in turn supports healthy school environments. Tahir et al. (2025) add a cautionary note: principals lacking effective stress management struggle to meet the demands of teachers and students, with measurable consequences for academic performance. These studies, however, are drawn almost entirely from non-African contexts, raising legitimate questions about cross-cultural applicability.

Self-management does not operate in isolation from other organisational processes. Ughamadu et al. (2024), studying Anambra State, Nigeria, found a positive and significant relationship between principals' self-regulation and teachers' task performance, with principals skilled in stress management and informed decision-making cultivating environments conducive to improved instructional practice. Sasere and Matashu (2025), in a systematic review of 28 studies, confirm that high emotional intelligence principals positively affect teachers' emotional reframing, instructional delivery, and collective efficacy. Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) note that a principal's emotion recognition indirectly enhances teachers' ability to reframe professional challenges, while Tai and Kareem (2019) establish that principal emotional management positively shapes teacher attitudes toward change. What emerges is a coherent, if incompletely mapped, chain of influence: principal self-management, teacher motivation and instructional quality, and student academic outcomes.

In Kenya specifically, literature on principals' self-management remains sparse. Wanjala et al. (2022) demonstrate a positive link between principals' human resource management practices and academic achievement in Bungoma East Sub-County, while Kilwake et al. (2023) emphasize teacher management strategies in Kilifi Sub-County. Ngare et al. (2023) find a positive relationship between teaching culture and academic performance in Nakuru County, and Kamunge et al. (2020) draw attention to stress levels among Kenyan school administrators without explicitly testing the self-management-performance link. Musyoki et al. (2021) report a negative correlation between principals' intellectual stimulation and KCSE performance in Makueni County, a finding this study treats as a theoretical provocation rather than an anomaly to dismiss: it suggests that institutional, cultural, and geographic context moderates the leadership-performance relationship in complex, non-linear ways.

This review reveals three interconnected gaps. First, while global literature consistently establishes that principal self-management matters for student outcomes, the precise mechanisms remain underspecified in non-Western settings. Second, studies that explicitly examine self-management as a discrete emotional intelligence competency and test its relationship to academic performance in African secondary schools are virtually absent. Third, the structural, cultural, and resource conditions facing principals in Kenya's North Rift region represent a distinct socio-educational ecology that has received no dedicated empirical attention. This study addresses these gaps by examining how principals' self-management shapes student academic performance in North Rift, with school climate examined as a moderating variable.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, comprising a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase. Quantitative data were collected first, via structured questionnaires, to examine patterns and relationships between principals' self-management and student academic performance; qualitative data were then collected through in-depth interviews to further explain and contextualize the quantitative findings.

3.2 Study Area, Population and Sample

The study was conducted in public secondary schools across nine North Rift counties: Bomet, Bungoma, Elgeyo-Marakwet's, Nandi, Uasin Gishu, Kericho, Nakuru, West Pokot, and Trans Nzoia. The target population comprised principals and Teachers Service Commission (TSC)-employed teachers, an estimated 1,350 principals and 27,000 teachers based on TSC staffing norms. Using the Yamane (1967) formula for sample size determination, the study drew a sample of 100 principals and 395 teachers through simple random sampling. Private schools, parents, and students were excluded, as the study centred on the leadership dimension of principal emotional intelligence and its perceived effects on academic performance, which teachers are best positioned to report on given their direct working relationship with principals.

3.3 Instrumentation and Reliability

Data on principals' self-management were collected using a 10-item structured questionnaire administered on a 5-point Likert scale, alongside a parallel instrument measuring student academic performance. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The self-management scale returned a coefficient of 0.850, exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70 and indicating good reliability (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

3.4 Response Rate

Of the questionnaires distributed, 407 (82.22%) were successfully completed and returned, while 88 (17.78%) were not returned. This response rate exceeds the minimum threshold of 75% recommended for survey research (Babbie, 2010; Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016) and was therefore considered adequate for analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), Pearson product-moment correlation, and multiple linear regression to establish the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance while controlling for the other emotional intelligence dimensions. Hierarchical moderated regression was conducted using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 1) to test whether school climate moderates the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance, employing bootstrapping with 5,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically to support and explain the quantitative findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Findings on Principals' Self-Management

Teachers' perceptions of principals' self-management were assessed across ten statements. A majority of respondents agreed that principals effectively manage their time, leading to better coordination of academic programs (65.6% agreement; $M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.33$), consistent with Sunaengsih et al. (2019), who found principal leadership to be a key factor in effective school management.

Respondents further agreed that principals' ability to control their emotions during crises positively impacts the student learning environment (73.2% agreement; $M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.20$), echoing Stephen (2024), whose qualitative study of U.S. secondary principals identified resilience and coping strategies as central to effective crisis leadership. Similarly, 67.1% agreed that students perform better academically when principals demonstrate self-discipline in decision-making ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.38$), aligning with Chepkwony et al. (2024), who found principals' decision-making skills significantly affect student discipline management.

Stress management emerged as a strongly endorsed item, with 75.7% of respondents agreeing that principals' stress management skills contribute to a stable learning environment ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.25$), corroborating Mahfouz (2020), who documented the toll of work, relational, and time-related stressors on school administrators. Adaptability to change was similarly well endorsed (76.2% agreement; $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.18$), consistent with Tonich (2021), who found principal leadership ability shapes school performance both directly and through organisational culture.

Workload management (75.2% agreement; $M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.22$) and self-control during conflict (77.2% agreement; $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.26$) were also strongly endorsed, aligning respectively with Ayeni and Amanekwe (2018) on the performance costs of poor workload management, and Li et al. (2022) on the role of emotional regulation in academic achievement. Goal-setting and achievement behaviours (70.2% agreement) and consistent self-management (69.3% agreement; $M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.41$) were likewise positively rated, the latter aligning with Yu et al. (2024), who found structured self-management activities improve students' own self-regulatory capacities. Finally, 71.5% of respondents agreed that principals' ability to prioritise tasks ensures smooth academic program delivery.

Collectively, these descriptive results indicate that time management, emotional regulation, stress management, adaptability, and goal-directed consistency are the key facets of self-management that teachers associate with improved student outcomes.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, statistically significant positive relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance ($r = 0.736$, $p < 0.01$), as shown in Table 1.

Variable	Correlation with Student Academic Performance	Sig. (2-tailed)
Principals' self-management	$r = .736^{**}$	$p = .000$
Principals' self-awareness	$r = .736^{**}$	$p = .000$
Principals' social awareness	$r = .772^{**}$	$p = .000$
Principals' relationship management	$r = .724^{**}$	$p = .000$
School climate	$r = .317^{**}$	$p = .000$

Table 1: Correlation between principals' emotional intelligence dimensions and student academic performance. ******Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. Source: Field Data (2025).

Notably, the self-management correlation ($r = 0.736$) is equivalent in magnitude to that of self-awareness, indicating that both dimensions contribute similarly to academic performance at the bivariate level. This differs from patterns in broader leadership literature, where self-management is often positioned as secondary to interpersonal dimensions, suggesting that in the North Rift context, principals' internal regulatory capacity may carry greater weight than in other settings, plausibly due to the high-stress, resource-constrained nature of the school environment.

4.3 Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression model was estimated with student academic performance as the outcome and the four emotional intelligence dimensions as predictors. The model confirmed that principals' self-management remained a statistically significant predictor of student academic performance even after controlling for self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management ($\beta = 0.116$, $t = 2.012$, $p = 0.045$), indicating that a one-unit increase in self-management is associated with a 0.116-unit increase in student academic performance, holding the other predictors constant.

Predictor	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.745	.086	—	8.612	.000
Level of emotional intelligence	.226	.051	.233	4.386	.000
Self-awareness	.126	.056	.129	2.231	.026
Self-management	.116	.057	.118	2.012	.045
Social awareness	.273	.058	.298	4.708	.000
Relationship management	.105	.051	.114	2.049	.041

Table 2: Multiple regression coefficients. Source: Field Data (2025).

This finding supports Pervez et al. (2023), who found that principals who effectively regulate their emotions are better equipped to handle stress, maintain focus, and lead with consistency, a competency particularly vital in navigating crises and maintaining instructional continuity. On the basis of the regression results, the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance in North Rift, Kenya was rejected.

4.4 Moderating Effect of School Climate

Hierarchical moderated regression, using Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro (Model 1), tested whether school climate moderates the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance. The overall model was statistically significant, explaining 29.05% of the variance in student academic performance ($R^2 = 0.2905$, $F(3, 403) = 55.0039$, $p < 0.001$).

Term	Coeff.	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	-.0445	.4476	-.0995	.9208	-.9244	.8354
Self-management (X)	.8761	.1364	6.4246	.0000	.6080	1.1442
School climate (M)	.7046	.1281	5.4991	.0000	.4527	.9565
Interaction (X × M)	-.1417	.0366	-3.8720	.0001	-.2137	-.0698

Table 3: Moderated regression coefficients (Product term: Self-management × School climate). Source: Field Data (2025).

The interaction term was negative and statistically significant ($b = -0.1417$, $p = 0.0001$), and the test of the highest-order unconditional interaction confirmed a significant change in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.0264$, $F(1, 403) = 14.9920$, $p = 0.0001$), establishing that school climate significantly moderates the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance. Conditional effects analysis clarified the nature of this moderation, as shown in Table 4.

School Climate Level	Effect	SE	t	p
16th percentile (M = 2.2140)	.5623	.0676	8.3189	.0000
Median (M = 4.0000)	.3092	.0532	5.8169	.0000
84th percentile (M = 4.7000)	.2100	.0669	3.1396	.0018

Table 4: Conditional effects of principals' self-management on student academic performance at levels of school climate. Source: Field Data (2025).

The pattern is one of compensatory moderation: principals' self-management exerted its strongest effect on student academic performance in schools with weaker climates (effect = 0.5623 at the 16th percentile) and a progressively weaker, though still statistically significant, effect as school climate improved (effect = 0.3092 at the median; effect = 0.2100 at the 84th percentile). Rather than indicating that self-management is unimportant in well-functioning schools, this pattern indicates that principals' capacity for emotional regulation, stress management, and disciplined decision-making functions as a compensatory leadership resource, one that is most consequential precisely where organisational and climatic conditions are least supportive. In schools where the climate is already positive, structural and collegial supports may partially substitute for individual regulatory effort, whereas in weaker-climate schools, students' academic outcomes depend more heavily on the principal's own capacity to remain composed, consistent, and adaptive under pressure.

This finding refines, rather than contradicts, the broader literature. It is consistent with Pretorius (2024) and Wang (2025) in affirming self-management as a decisive leadership competency, while extending this literature by showing empirically, in an African and specifically Kenyan context, that the practical value of this competency is contingent on organisational climate. It also offers a plausible, context-sensitive interpretation of Musyoki et al.'s (2021) anomalous negative finding on leadership effects in Makueni County: leadership competencies may express themselves differently, or even counterintuitively, depending on the climatic conditions in which they operate.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study was geographically limited to public secondary schools in selected counties of the North Rift region of Kenya, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other regions or educational contexts with different socio-economic and administrative conditions.

Second, the data relied predominantly on self-reported perceptions from principals and teachers, gathered through structured questionnaires. Self-reported measures of this kind are susceptible to social desirability bias and common method variance, particularly given that teachers were reporting on the behaviour of their own supervising principals, which may have influenced the accuracy of some responses.

Third, principals' self-management was measured using a teacher-perception questionnaire rather than an objective, ability-based assessment of emotional intelligence. While the instrument demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.850$), perception-based measures may not fully

capture the complexity of self-management as a psychological construct, potentially limiting the precision of the study's conclusions about principals' actual regulatory capacity.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design of the quantitative phase means that the relationships identified, including the moderating role of school climate, are correlational rather than causal. The compensatory moderation pattern observed is consistent with, but does not definitively establish, a causal mechanism through which self-management operates differently across school climates.

Finally, the study's measure of student academic performance was limited to KCSE outcomes, which, while a widely used and policy-relevant indicator in Kenya, does not capture the full range of academic and non-academic outcomes that principal leadership may influence. These limitations do not undermine the study's core findings but indicate specific directions along which future research, using multi-regional samples, objective emotional intelligence instruments, and longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs, could extend and strengthen the evidence base.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the relationship between principals' self-management and student academic performance in public secondary schools in North Rift, Kenya, and to test whether school climate moderates this relationship. The evidence is unambiguous on the first count: principals' self-management is strongly and significantly associated with student academic performance, both at the bivariate level ($r = 0.736$) and as an independent predictor in a multiple regression model that accounts for the other emotional intelligence dimensions ($\beta = 0.116$, $p = 0.045$). The null hypothesis of no relationship is rejected.

On the second count, the study establishes that this relationship is not uniform but conditional: school climate significantly moderates the effect of self-management on student outcomes, with the effect strongest where school climate is weakest and diminishing, though never disappearing, as climate improves. This compensatory pattern positions principals' self-management as a stabilizing leadership resource of particular value in the constrained, high-stress conditions that characterize many North Rift schools, rather than a competency whose value is confined to already well-functioning institutions.

7. Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that:

- i. Teacher training institutions and county education offices should design and deliver targeted capacity-building programs for principals focused on emotional self-regulation, stress management, time management, and adaptive decision-making under pressure.
- ii. The Ministry of Education and Teachers Service Commission should prioritise self-management-focused leadership development for principals posted to schools with weaker school climates, given the compensatory role self-management plays in such settings.
- iii. School Boards of Management should institutionalize routine school climate assessment as part of school quality monitoring, recognizing climate as an active force that conditions how effectively principals' self-management translates into improved student outcomes.
- iv. Future research should test the compensatory moderation pattern identified here through quasi-experimental or longitudinal designs, tracking whether targeted self-management training produces measurably greater academic performance gains in low-climate schools than in high-climate schools.
- v. Future studies should complement teacher-perception measures of principal self-management with objective, validated instruments such as the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT), to reduce common method variance and strengthen construct validity.

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