

School Principals' Strategic Planning Competences And Their Influence On Academic Performance In Public Secondary Schools In Makeni County, Kenya

Killian Muendo Sila^{1*}, Mukirae Njihia²

Kenyatta University, Kenya^{1,2}

*Email: mwikalingela@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of strategic planning competencies on the academic performance of public secondary schools in Makeni County, Kenya. Specifically, it examines how principals' competencies in human resource planning, technology integration, school culture alignment, and strategic direction-setting influence academic outcomes. Grounded in the contingency theory of leadership, the study employs a descriptive research design. The target population included 385 public secondary schools in Makeni County, with principals and teachers as key respondents. A 10% sampling threshold was applied, resulting in a sample of 39 schools. School principals were purposively selected, while 368 teachers were randomly sampled using a structured formula. Data were collected via questionnaires for teachers and interview guides for principals and analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings indicate that human capital development is a critical strategic competency among school principals that significantly enhances academic performance. Furthermore, principals' ability to leverage ICT positively affected academic outcomes. School culture alignment emerged as another essential competency, impacting the schools' overall performance. Additionally, the ability of school principals to set a clear strategic direction was found to play a significant role in achieving academic success. The study concludes that poor academic performance in Makeni County's secondary schools is closely associated with deficiencies in principals' strategic planning competencies, particularly in areas such as human capital development, ICT integration, strategic direction-setting, and school culture alignment. The study recommends that school principals enhance their strategic planning skills to improve academic performance.

Keywords: Strategic Planning, Principals' Competencies, Academic Performance, Human Resource Planning, ICT Integration

A. INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning is the structured process through which institutions set goals and objectives over a specified period and outline the steps to achieve them (Calabrò et al., 2021). This process is critical to institutional success, providing a clear pathway for implementing an organization's vision (Weston, 2022). Strategic planning is equally vital in educational settings, helping schools navigate their path toward sustainable improvement in academic outcomes (Bohanon et al., 2021). As the key decision-makers, school principals play a central role in overseeing the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of strategic plans (Ministry of Education, 2017). The competencies principals possess in strategic planning are crucial to the school's ability to utilize resources effectively to meet its goals, contributing significantly to delivering quality education (Calabrò et al., 2021). These competencies, including managing talent, aligning school culture with institutional objectives, demonstrating leadership commitment, and adopting modern technological practices, are foundational for school leaders to drive their institutions toward excellence (Baker et al., 2016; Ruiz & Moreno, 2015). According to (Calabrò et al., 2021), strategic planning competencies involve leading or participating in creating a comprehensive strategic plan, managing resources effectively, fostering a culture aligned with strategic goals, and integrating technology to adapt to changing educational environments. School principals with a strategic mindset are better positioned to execute their responsibilities and support the school's long-term objectives.

The lack of leaders skilled in strategic planning has been noted to contribute to poor academic performance in secondary education, as principals may lack the competencies required to implement plans effectively (Sorm & Gunbayi, 2018). School leaders who strengthen strategic planning through competencies such as technology integration, setting strategic direction, and developing human resources for strategic plan execution can positively impact institutional performance (Shareef & Atan, 2019). Research by (Sorm & Gunbayi, 2018; Singh, 2020)

* Corresponding author

highlights key strategic planning competencies, such as human resource development, technology integration, and strategic direction-setting, as essential to school success. According to (Donkoh & Quansah, 2021), strategic planning is fundamental to students' academic success in primary and secondary schools, defining it as setting institutional goals and vision to achieve both short- and long-term objectives. They emphasize that principals' strategic competencies, such as aligning school culture and setting strategic direction, are crucial for effective school leadership. Additionally, the ability of school principals to embrace technology, foster a results-oriented culture, and make data-driven decisions has been shown to contribute to sustained academic performance (Obiekwe & Ezeugbor, 2019; Khan et al., 2020).

In Uganda, (Khan et al., 2020) found that principals' competencies in decision-making, teacher involvement, and staff development significantly influenced students' academic success. Similarly, in Namibia, (Donkor and Zhou, 2020) reported that school performance was closely linked to leadership commitment and the supportive culture fostered by school administrators. (Barrichello et al., 2020) argue that strategic leaders must accept the need for technology, set a strong example, and maintain accountability. In contrast, (Hamiza & Francis, 2020) found that schools with limited leadership competencies in strategic planning struggled to achieve their strategic goals, leading to underperformance. Effective school strategic planning is directly tied to the principal's ability to design and implement plans that enhance academic outcomes, which are fundamental to secondary schools' mission to transform society through quality education. Academic performance, defined as students' ability to achieve desired examination results, reflects the competence and dedication of school leaders (Makau & Tanui, 2014; Kinyua, 2015). In Kenya, secondary education bridges specialized training and economic growth, making academic success essential. Research by (Mwangi, 2016) shows that principals' strategic planning competencies directly affect teacher productivity and academic outcomes.

Despite the importance of strategic planning, public secondary schools in Kenya have shown declining academic performance, as evidenced by the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) results over the past five years (MOE, 2018). The Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC, 2021) reports that although KCSE enrollment increased between 2018 and 2019, the percentage of students achieving high grades (C+ and above) has not kept pace. In Makueni County, only 6.3% of candidates in 2019 scored a mean grade of B or higher, below the national average of 7.1% (KNEC, 2021). The Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2020) also observed that Makueni County recorded no A-grade scores from 2016 to 2019. This trend raises questions about the role of principals' competencies in strategic planning and their potential impact on academic performance. Despite government and stakeholder emphasis on effective school leadership for academic improvement, academic outcomes in Makueni County's public secondary schools have remained low. This study, therefore, aims to evaluate the influence of school principals' strategic planning competencies on the academic performance of public secondary schools in Makueni County, Kenya.

The objectives of this study are to assess the influence of principals' competencies in human resource development on academic performance, determine the effect of principals' competencies in technology integration on academic outcomes, examine the impact of aligning school culture with strategy on academic performance, and investigate the role of principals' direction-setting competencies in enhancing academic success in Makueni County's public secondary schools.

Literature Review

This study is anchored in the contingency theory of leadership and planning, first introduced by (Woodward, 1958) and later refined to adapt to evolving strategic planning and leadership perspectives. Contingency theory, a well-established management framework, emphasizes the role of leaders—in this context, school principals—in driving their institutions toward achieving core objectives, such as academic performance. According to this theory, leaders must possess specific competencies that align with their institution's unique needs to facilitate effective planning and management (Robbins et al., 2010). This approach is particularly relevant for school leadership, where strategic planning demands competencies tailored to the educational sector rather than a corporate setting.

Contingency theory posits that each institution requires distinct leadership competencies to address its unique challenges effectively (Johnsen, 2018). For instance, strategic planning in secondary schools differs markedly from corporate planning, and successful academic performance may require school principals to demonstrate competencies that align with the contextual demands of their schools. Given the fluctuating and unpredictable nature of the educational environment, technological advancements, policy shifts, and variations in school size, principals need robust strategic planning skills to lead effectively in implementing strategic plans.

This theory is instrumental in elucidating the influence of principals' strategic planning competencies on the academic performance of secondary schools. As the central decision-makers, school principals are responsible for guiding strategic planning processes and require specialized competencies to do so successfully. In a review of contingency theory, the study by (Veysel, 2014) underscores that effective leaders must be committed to involving their staff to achieve institutional goals. Furthermore, contingency theory highlights the importance of technological proficiency among leaders, equipping them to navigate a rapidly evolving world and to implement cultural frameworks that align with organizational objectives (Kimiti & Mwinzi, 2016). The study by (Alam, 2017) observes that many secondary schools have struggled with inadequately developed strategic plans and inefficiencies in implementation, impeding their potential to leverage strategic planning for enhanced academic performance. The strategic planning competencies of school principals, tailored to their school's specific needs, play a crucial role in achieving both short-term and long-term educational objectives. Accordingly, this study adopts contingency theory to explore how principals' strategic planning competencies contribute to the academic performance of public secondary schools.

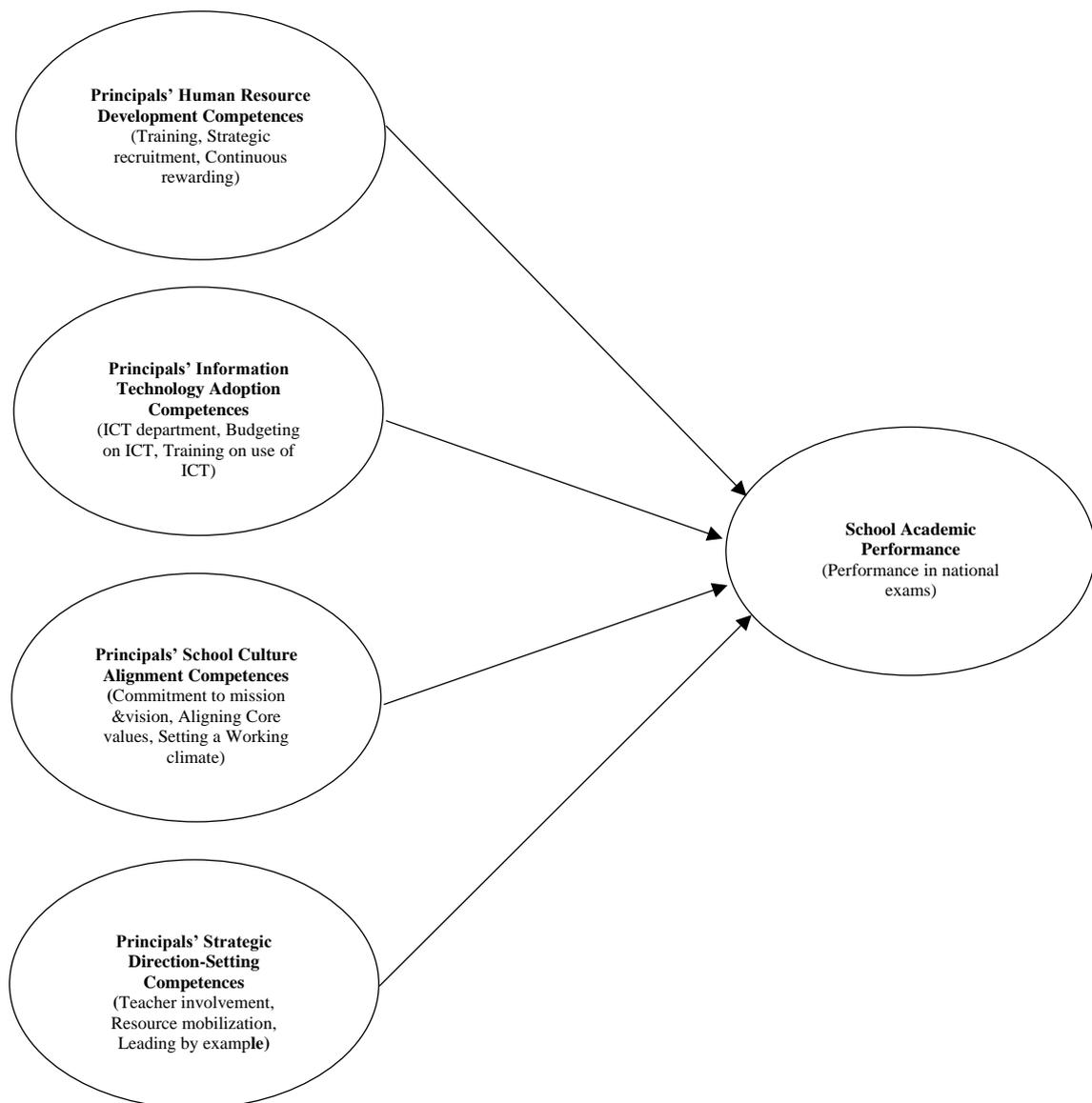


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive survey research design to examine the key characteristics of the research subject, allowing for an in-depth analysis to understand and address the research problem comprehensively. This design was chosen because it facilitates identifying underlying issues in the study phenomenon by addressing questions of what, where, when, and how. Through the descriptive survey approach, the study assessed how school principals' strategic planning competencies influenced academic performance in public secondary schools.

The target population for this study consisted of public secondary schools in Makueni County. According to the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2019), there are 385 public secondary schools in the county, comprising mixed day schools, mixed boarding schools, boys' boarding schools, and girls' boarding schools. Both teachers and school principals formed the study's target population. According to the (Teachers' Service Commission, 2021), 4,619 secondary school teachers are employed in Makueni County, in addition to 385 school principals, resulting in a total target population of 5,004 participants.

A 10% sampling rate was applied, leading to a selection of 39 schools from which the sample was drawn. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representation from different school categories: 1 national school, two extra-county schools, eight county schools, and 31 sub-county schools. Each category was proportionately represented. All 39 principals from the selected schools were purposively sampled and given their leadership roles in strategic planning. For teachers, the (Yamane, 1967) formula was applied to determine the appropriate sample size:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N*e^2}$$

Where:

n is the sample size

N is the target population (4619)

e is the error margin (0.05)

Calculating yields:

$$n = \frac{4619}{1+4619*0.05^2}$$

n = 368

Thus, a sample of 368 teachers was deemed appropriate. These teachers were selected through stratified random sampling from the 39 schools, ensuring each school category was adequately represented.

Primary data were collected using a teacher questionnaire and an interview guide for school principals. Given that principals are knowledgeable about the strategic planning measures they implement, the interview guide was used to gain deeper insights into these leadership strategies and their influence on school performance. The structured interview guide contained pre-set questions directed systematically at the respondents. Teachers were surveyed using a structured questionnaire to capture their perceptions of the strategic planning competencies demonstrated by their principals and how these competencies impacted academic performance. The questionnaire used a Likert scale format, asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements reflecting positive or negative views on the study variables. The questionnaires for teachers were distributed via the drop-and-pick method. For the interview schedule, appointments with principals were arranged in advance. The researcher ensured that each interview was conducted in a quiet, organized environment on the scheduled day.

Data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data were processed through thematic content analysis, while quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS. Descriptive statistics included frequency distributions, percentages, measures of central tendency (mean scores), and standard deviation. Results were presented in tables. Inferential statistics, specifically regression analysis, were employed to test the statistical relationship between school principals' strategic planning competencies and academic performance in Makueni County's public secondary schools. The following regression model was utilized:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \beta_4X_4 + \varepsilon$$

Where:

Y = Academic Performance (dependent variable)

β_0 = Constant

X_1 = Principals' Human Resource Development Competencies

X_2 = Principals' Technology Adoption Competencies

X_3 = Principals' School Culture Alignment Competencies

X_4 = Principals' Strategic Direction-Setting Competencies

$\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3, \beta_4$ = Regression coefficients for the dependent variables
 ϵ = Error Term

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study sampled 407 respondents, 368 teachers, and 39 principals, to examine strategic competencies among school principals and their effect on academic performance in public secondary schools in Makueni County. Data were gathered using questionnaires for teachers and interview guides for principals. The response rate was 74.5% for teachers and 89.7% for principals, which was deemed adequate for analysis.

Table 1. Response Rate of the Research Instruments

Sampled		Response		Non-Response	
Teachers	Principals	Teachers	Principals	Teachers	Principals
368	39	274 (74.5%)	35 (89.7%)	94 (25.5%)	4 (10.3%)

Source: research data, 2024

Human Resource Development and Academic Performance

The first objective was to explore human resource development as a principal's strategic competency and its influence on academic performance. Effective human capital development ensures schools have skilled, motivated staff. Responses revealed that while teachers and principals recognized the importance of human resource development, its implementation faced challenges due to budget limitations. Table 2 indicates that key practices such as continuous training, rewards, and effective supervision were inadequately emphasized. One principal noted that although training is essential, limited budgets prevent regular skill enhancement for teachers, particularly those employed by school boards. Regression analysis results demonstrated that human resource development significantly influenced academic performance, with a beta coefficient of 0.801 and a p-value < 0.05. This finding aligns with (Heystek & Emekako, 2020; Kalkan et al., 2020), who emphasize that even limited human resource practices can strengthen commitment and contribute to school success.

Table 2. Teachers' Level of Agreement with Statements on Human Resource Development

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.
The school management frequently sponsors teachers to enhance their skills and competencies	2.12	1.33
Teachers are allowed to sponsor themselves to upgrade their skills and competencies	2.00	1.30
Level of experience and educational level are considered when recruiting new employees	1.93	1.14
The school management strives to retain the best talents among the employees through rewarding and motivation	1.92	1.22
The staff in the school are involved in learning based on shared knowledge through knowledge management	1.75	1.03
The management of the school frequently monitors the ability of the staff to utilize their skills for their positions	2.23	1.42
Continuous consultations and information are shared between the school management and the teachers	2.08	1.26
Opinions of the teachers are sought when making critical decisions for the school	1.88	1.07

Source: research data, 2024

Interviews with principals highlighted training and motivation as primary methods for enhancing human capital despite constraints such as limited training budgets.

As a school, we uphold training as one of the main ways to enhance and develop our human capital. Training the employees, including the teachers and other non-teaching staff, would strengthen their skills and competencies. As a school principal, I know it is my duty to develop the staff and make them more capable of achieving the school's agenda. However, most of the time, we are tied since we have a very limited budget to sponsor our teachers for training. The teachers employed by the Board of Management especially require these skills, and it is our sole mandate as the school to train them. However, since our budget is constrained, we go for quite some time without training our teachers. (Principal 11)

One principal explained that budget limitations hinder their ability to consistently provide training, especially for Board of Management (BOM)-employed teachers. While teachers and principals acknowledge the importance of human capital development, their responses suggest it is inadequately addressed. This underscores the need for ongoing dialogue to align perceptions and enhance human resource development. A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that human resource development does not significantly

influence academic performance. The results in Table 3 indicate a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.801, P < 0.05$), supporting studies by (Heystek and Emekako, 2020; Kalkan et al., 2020), who emphasize that even with limited resources, simple development initiatives like recognition and motivation can build a committed workforce.

Table 3. Regression Coefficients Human Resource Development and Academic Performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.398	.081		4.940	.000
Human Resource Development	.801	.026	.874	30.710	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Academic Performance

Source: research data, 2024

Adoption of Information Technology and Academic Performance

The study's second objective was to examine the impact of principals' technology integration competencies on academic performance. Integrating ICT in education is widely recognized as essential for modernizing teaching and learning processes. Principals are tasked with promoting ICT usage through policies and frameworks that guide teachers and students in effective technology use. Table 5 summarizes teacher responses on ICT integration.

Table 5. Teachers' Level of Agreement with Statements on Technology Integration Competencies and Academic Performance

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.
There are adequate ICT hardware tools, such as computers, to aid teaching and learning in the school	2.44	1.17
The school has the right ICT software, such as network connectivity and operating systems, to aid teaching and learning	2.45	1.21
The school principals have set timelines to allow the teachers and students to interact with the available ICT tools for learning	1.76	1.04
The school, through the principal, has a set budget for acquiring and maintaining ICT tools in the school	1.75	1.06
The teachers are equipped with ICT skills in order to apply them in teaching	1.96	1.19
The majority of the teachers in our school have general knowledge of the use of IT in teaching	1.77	0.98
There is a dedicated ICT department to address technology-related issues in the school	1.74	0.98
The school management is at the forefront of encouraging the teachers to embrace technology in teaching and learning	1.71	1.00

Source: research data, 2024

The principals were asked to comment about adopting information technology in their respective schools and their role in ensuring they utilized modern technology in teaching and learning. From the thematic content analysis, two key themes were established, including the provision of ICT equipment and skills and competencies on the use of technology in teaching and learning. The principals interviewed mainly addressed their concerns with the unavailability of the right ICT tools and how their role as principals was to only push for ICT policies within their schools. However, most of the schools lacked dedicated ICT departments, indicating that the principals did not effectively provide leadership regarding ICT adoption. One of the respondents noted the following:

While I agree that ICT is instrumental in running schools in the modern world, I strongly feel that we lack the right capacity to integrate ICT. As the principal, I can lead others into being technologically averse, but again, my job as a leader is difficult without the required resources to bring in the necessary hardware and software to aid the embrace of ICT (Principal 32).

Another principal thought the available ICT tools were ineffective because their schools lacked other supportive infrastructure and skills to run the ICT. The principal noted the following:

Our school has some ICT tools such as computers and networks. However, we need additional support infrastructure that could make teaching and learning through ICT more effective. Again, I agree that our teachers may not have the much-needed skills to use ICT in teaching and learning. However, training them would not be very demanding without proper infrastructure and resources (Principal 15).

The findings imply that although technology remains ineffectively integrated into the school's strategic planning, the principals recognise the essence of technology in successfully running the school's strategic plans. Comparing the school principals' opinions with the teacher's views on the integration of ICT, it is clear that the teachers perceive the school principals not to keenly embrace ICT integration, thus showing their limited ICT integration competencies. On the other hand, the principals feel unable to implement key ICT integration plans and frameworks due to a lack of internal capacity.

The study's second hypothesis, which was that adoption of information technology has no significant influence on academic performance among public secondary schools in Makueni County, was tested using a simple linear regression model. The results were captured using the regression coefficients, as shown in Table 6. Regression coefficients tell how a unit change in the predictor variable (in this case, the adoption of information technology) would influence the dependent variable (academic performance).

Table 6. Regression Coefficients on Adoption of Information Technology and Academic Performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.242	.086		2.822	.005
Adoption of Information Technology	.884	.029	.873	30.493	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Academic Performance

Source: research data, 2024

School Culture Alignment and Academic Performance

The third objective was to assess the influence of school culture alignment on academic performance. School culture, reflected in mission statements, core values, and daily interactions, is critical in shaping academic outcomes. As shown in Table 7, teacher responses indicate that cultural alignment is insufficient, potentially impacting academic performance.

Table 7. Teachers' Level of Agreement with Statements on School Culture Alignment and Academic Performance

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.
The school has sound mission and vision statements set for the school fraternity	3.67	0.96
The mission and vision for the school resonates with the key goals of the school	1.76	0.95
The school management has been at the forefront of embracing the set vision and mission for the school	1.78	1.02
There are core values set within the school for the staff to abide by them	1.65	0.83
The school management monitors frequently to ensure the core values are upheld among the staff	1.74	1.08
The working climate of the school supports self-commitment among the staff	1.65	0.80
The school management encourages the staff to be result-oriented and focus on the key goals of the school	1.68	0.87
The management of the school has always shown its concern about how staff members relate amongst themselves	1.57	0.90

Source: research data, 2024

The principals were asked to comment on their role in setting and influencing the organizational culture in their respective schools. The thematic content analysis revealed that 92% of the principals recognized their role in setting and aligning the school culture towards the strategic goals of the schools. Communication of the school's mission and vision and setting the school's core values were the main themes portrayed in their responses. One of the principals said the following:

The school culture is instrumental in shaping how things are done and ensuring that the school works as a community towards achieving its goals. As the principal, I embrace and actively communicate the vision and mission of the school to not only the teachers but the entire workforce. Ensuring everyone abides by the school mission and setting core values has brought us here (Principal 31).

The responses further revealed that the focus on the school culture and ensuring that the culture and way of doing things aligned with the strategic goals was ineffective. Most principals commented that they had not taken the initiative to enhance their school's culture, although they had not found any issues. According to Obiekwe and Ezeugbor (2019), institutional culture depends highly on the leaders of such institutions, and while

from afar, culture may seem okay, a keen review can show varied results. This was confirmed by one of the principals, who noted the following:

When I first came to this school around three years ago, everything seemed to run smoothly, but there were no results. After taking time to internalize and understand the staff, I realized that most of them lacked self-motivation and had too many wrangles. Then, I made deliberate efforts to ensure a cohesive and properly aligned culture with a good working environment. This has transformed the school's performance and dedication to our strategic plan (Principal 17).

Most principals indicated their role in aligning culture to strategic goals, emphasizing communication of vision and mission. However, many acknowledged a need for improvement. One principal shared that efforts to build a cohesive culture have improved staff motivation and school performance. The regression analysis in Table 8 confirms that school culture alignment significantly impacts academic performance ($\beta = 0.837, P < 0.05$). These findings support research by (Singh, 2020; Heystek and Emekako, 2020), highlighting the role of aligned culture in promoting academic success.

Table 8: Regression Coefficients on School Culture Alignment and Academic Performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.575	.084		6.851	.000
School Culture Alignment	.837	.030	.849	27.466	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Academic Performance

Source: research data, 2024

The results presented in Table 8 indicate that school culture alignment significantly influences academic performance among public secondary schools in Makueni County ($\beta = 0.837; p = 0.000 < 0.05$). These findings suggest that the academic performance of these schools is strongly associated with the ability of school principals to align the school culture with their strategic plans. This observation is consistent with the work of (Singh, 2020), who emphasized that effective strategic planning requires a supportive organizational culture where team collaboration drives the achievement of strategic goals. School principals, as leaders and key decision-makers, play a pivotal role in ensuring that the school's culture aligns with its strategic objectives. This aligns with the recommendations of (Heystek and Emekako, 2020), who argue that principals must possess the necessary competencies to foster culture alignment, thereby enabling the successful implementation of strategic plans.

The responses from teachers in the study resonate with the findings by (Melesse and Molla, 2018), which highlighted that teachers often struggle to collaborate effectively in the absence of strong guidance from school principals. These authors posited that a well-aligned school culture significantly contributes to academic success, particularly through fostering collaboration and cohesion among teachers. Furthermore, (Khan et al., 2020) underscore the critical role of school principals as custodians of school culture. They assert that principals must ensure that the prevailing culture supports a conducive learning environment and aligns with the schools' core mandates. By doing so, principals create an organizational climate that facilitates both individual and collective success in achieving academic objectives.

Strategic Direction Setting Competence and Academic Performance of Schools in Makueni County

The fourth objective of this study was to investigate the role of strategic direction setting as one of the strategic management competencies of school principals in influencing academic performance among secondary schools in Makueni County. Strategic direction setting is a fundamental competency of school principals, enabling them to guide the school community toward a unified vision focused on achieving institutional objectives, particularly improving academic performance. As highlighted by (Singphen et al., 2019), effective school leadership necessitates the ability to establish a clear strategic direction and to mobilize all stakeholders to align with this vision. This competency ensures that the efforts of all members of the school community are channelled toward achieving shared academic goals. The study findings regarding the impact of strategic direction setting on academic performance are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Teachers' Level of Agreement with Statements on Setting Strategic Direction and Schools' Academic Performance

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.
The school leadership has shown us a clear, compelling and realistic map to the right destination	1.63	0.88

Statements	Mean	Std. Dev.
Every staff member in the school is aware of what the school seeks to achieve and how it seeks to achieve it	2.08	1.31
Our decisions are inclusive, informed and bold at all levels of the institution	1.97	1.33
The school principal and other leaders in our school lead by example	1.76	1.08
There are frequent consultative meetings with key stakeholders such as government officials, students, parents and staff	1.84	1.09
The school leadership frequently consults teachers and other staff before making key decisions	1.74	0.92
The decisions and positions taken by the school take into consideration the opinions and views of the stakeholders	1.73	0.93
Decisions are communicated among staff members, students and other key stakeholders	1.66	0.82
The school leadership outsources reliable sources of alternative financing for the school's financial needs	1.89	1.11

Source: research data, 2024

The study aimed to explore the perceptions of school principals regarding their competencies in strategic direction-setting and its influence on the academic performance of their respective schools. The findings revealed that most principals recognized their role as pace-setters in strategic planning for their schools. They acknowledged their mandate to provide strategic direction, particularly in relation to school planning, yet noted that competing responsibilities often hindered their ability to focus on this crucial aspect of leadership.

One of the principals highlighted these challenges, stating:

Since strategic plans were introduced in schools, we have seen efforts to come up with strategic plans on where the school intends to be in a given period. I have been in the lead when it comes to planning for the strategic focus of the school. While I agree that I should endeavour to show strategic direction to the rest of the team, I may not have effectively done this as we are preoccupied with so many other duties. However, I think there is still time to improve, especially now that things are easing up and our mandates are aligned (Principal 33).

However, some principals admitted to having limited competencies in strategic direction-setting due to their professional backgrounds. For instance, one principal remarked:

We are required to lead in strategic planning for the schools, but remember, most of us come from academic and teaching backgrounds; thus we require some training also in order to be good managers and show the required strategic direction (Principal 27).

These findings suggest that while many school principals recognise the importance of strategic direction-setting, their competencies in this area may not be fully developed. The results underscore the need for targeted training programs on strategic planning to equip principals with the necessary skills for effective leadership.

The study also compared the opinions of teachers and principals on strategic direction-setting. Both groups agreed on the need for effective strategic direction-setting to ensure that schools maintain a unified focus on achieving their strategic goals and objectives. However, teachers reported feeling excluded from activities related to defining the strategic direction of their schools. Principals, on the other hand, acknowledged their shortcomings in strategic leadership, attributing these to a lack of adequate training and knowledge. The fourth hypothesis posited that strategic direction-setting competencies had no significant influence on academic performance among public secondary schools in Makueni County. This hypothesis was tested using a regression model, with regression coefficients capturing the influence of strategic direction-setting on academic performance. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 10.

Table 10: Regression Coefficients on Strategic Direction Setting and Academic Performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.330	.086		3.842	.000
Strategic Direction Setting Competence	.852	.029	.866	29.517	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Academic Performance

Source: research data, 2024

The results presented in Table 10 indicate that strategic direction-setting has a significant influence on academic performance among public secondary schools in Makueni County ($\beta = 0.852$; $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). These findings align with the study by (Kimiti and Mwinzi, 2016), who identified the absence of a strategic direction, typically set by school leaders, as a critical factor hindering academic success in schools. The study underscores the importance of strategic direction-setting as a foundational leadership competency in driving academic outcomes. Furthermore, (Zafar et al., 2023) emphasized that school principals hold the primary responsibility for ensuring that their schools remain focused on a defined strategic direction. However, to effectively fulfil this role, principals require adequate skills and competencies in strategic planning and management. Without these competencies, achieving sustained academic success may prove challenging. These results also resonate with the findings of (Hamiza and Francis, 2020), who noted that school principals are charged with providing visionary leadership by outlining and enforcing a strategic direction. According to their study, schools lacking this strategic focus often struggle to achieve their intended objectives, including fostering improved academic performance. This highlights the critical role of strategic direction-setting in aligning resources, activities, and personnel toward achieving common educational goals.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that school principals play a pivotal role in the successful planning and implementation of schools' strategic plans. Through the application of critical strategic planning competencies—such as human resource development, strategic direction-setting, school culture alignment, and the integration of information technology—principals are better positioned to implement effective strategies that significantly enhance academic performance. Human resource development emerged as an essential strategic planning competency that substantially contributes to academic performance. The findings indicated that school principals, as leaders, are responsible for aligning their schools' human capital with adopted strategic plans. Ineffectiveness in human capital development by the principals was identified as a key factor leading to poor performance in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations in many schools. This underscores the need for principals to prioritize the professional growth and capacity building of their staff to achieve academic success.

The study also highlighted the critical role of school principals in integrating information technology (IT) into their schools. Effective IT integration facilitates the implementation of strategic plans and enhances teaching and learning processes, thereby improving academic performance. However, many schools underperformed in national examinations due to inadequate adoption of technology, which was closely linked to principals' failure to prioritize IT in their strategic plans. The study emphasized that principals must ensure their schools are equipped with the necessary technological tools to support both learning and administration.

Another conclusion drawn from the study was the significance of aligning school culture with strategic goals. Principals, as the primary leaders, have a key responsibility to foster a supportive and collaborative culture that aligns with their schools' strategic plans. Schools that failed to align their culture with their strategic objectives struggled to meet academic performance targets. This finding highlights the importance of cultural alignment as a determinant of successful strategy implementation and improved academic outcomes. Strategic direction-setting was identified as a fundamental competency for school principals in steering their schools toward better academic performance. By providing a clear and unified direction, principals can mobilize their teams to implement strategic plans effectively. However, the study found that many schools failed to perform as expected in national examinations due to principals' insufficient focus on strategic direction-setting. This gap often resulted in fragmented efforts by teachers and other stakeholders, ultimately undermining the schools' ability to achieve their strategic objectives.

Recommendations

The study provides several recommendations for practice and policy aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of school leadership in improving academic performance. For practice, the study emphasizes the importance of strategic leadership competencies among school principals. Principals must ensure adequate staffing and professional development of teachers by either mobilizing internal resources or recommending training to the Teachers' Service Commission (TSC) through appropriate channels. Human resource development, as a critical strategic competency, ensures that schools have well-equipped

teachers to meet academic goals. Additionally, school principals should take a leading role in integrating information and communication technology (ICT) within their schools. This involves mobilizing resources to provide necessary ICT tools, encouraging teachers to adopt ICT in their teaching practices, and fostering a supportive environment for teachers to acquire additional technological skills. Teachers, in turn, should adhere to ICT policies and actively seek to enhance their competencies in this area.

Moreover, principals are responsible for aligning school culture with strategic goals. As strategic leaders, they must ensure that the values, norms, and beliefs within their schools reflect the broader objectives of the institution. Teachers also play a key role by upholding a positive culture that aligns with the school's strategic vision. Furthermore, principals are tasked with setting a clear strategic direction for their schools by defining and communicating goals, involving teachers in decision-making, and fostering a collaborative environment. Effective communication and inclusive leadership help create a unified team that is focused on achieving shared academic objectives.

For policy, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education establish clear guidelines that define the strategic leadership competencies required of school principals. Such policies would ensure that principals lead schools with the necessary skills to drive academic success. Additionally, the government, through the TSC, should institutionalize in-service training programs for school principals to enhance their strategic management capabilities. These programs should focus on critical areas such as human resource development, ICT integration, cultural alignment, and strategic direction-setting. To further support school leadership, management training similar to that provided to other public sector leaders should also be extended to school principals. By adopting these recommendations, the Ministry of Education and TSC can empower school principals to strategically manage their schools strategically, leading to improved academic outcomes in public institutions.

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