

IMPACT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STYLE ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AT SECONDARY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the association between democratic school leadership styles and student academic achievement in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, focusing on the Mardan region. Acknowledging the crucial role of leadership in shaping educational outcomes, our mixed-methods study, involving surveys and data analysis, assesses the influence of democratic leadership on secondary-level student achievement. For this purpose, this study design a particular questionnaire and distribute it among 118 selected secondary schools in district Mardan. The sample data were collected adhering to all standard operating procedures and subjected to rigorous statistical analysis. Specifically, t-tests and correlation analyses were performed, revealing a significant difference in school leadership means based on gender, as well as a positive correlation between dependent and independent variables. Additionally, ANOVA and regression analyses were executed, uncovering a substantial and positive influence of school democratic leadership on students' academic achievement. The outcomes of this research study hold significance for enhancing educational practices, improving school leadership, and ultimately elevating the academic standards of students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study recommends that educational leaders should enhance effective democratic leadership approaches, ultimately contributing to the advancement of the region's education system and nurturing the academic growth of its students.

Keywords: Democratic School Leadership, Students' Academic Achievement, Secondary Level

INTRODUCTION

In the complicated fabric of societal and individual development, education emerges as a critical catalyst, with its quality contingent upon various factors, notably the efficacy of school leadership (Barth, 1990; Bell, 2001; Griffith, 1999). Acknowledged as a pivotal element, school leadership is specifically recognized for its role in creating an environment that nurtures student academic achievements. Effective school leaders, renowned for fostering excellence, promoting teacher well-being, and inspiring students to realize their full potential, become instrumental in addressing the persistent challenge of low student academic achievement in Khyber Pakhtun Khwa

(KPK) region. The quality of education in KPK has been a longstanding concern, and student achievement, a crucial measure of educational success, is clearly tied to various factors, where the effectiveness of school leadership stands out prominently. Despite the recognized importance of school leadership, there exists a notable research gap concerning its direct relationship with student academic achievement. This study aims to address this gap by examining the impact of democratic school leadership styles on student academic achievement, particularly focusing on the secondary level in Mardan district. Drawing insights from existing studies, this research seeks to contribute

substantively to the discourse on effective school leadership and its implications for elevating student outcomes in the unique context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Competent school leaders, particularly principals, demonstrate exceptional leadership capabilities. According to Barth (1990), the success of a school is significantly dependent on the effectiveness of its principal. Proficiency in school leadership requires a profound comprehension of the teaching and learning dynamics, coupled with the ability to motivate stakeholders for collaborative efforts towards common objectives. School leaders, in their role as educational administrators, are widely acknowledged as the primary driving force behind successful educational institutions. They formulate objectives, establish rigorous standards, allocate resources, arrange classroom settings, and cultivate a conducive and well-organized learning atmosphere (Bell, 2001; Griffith, 1999). Eberts and Stone (1988) underscore the positive influence of discussions and interactions between principals and teachers on the academic achievement of students. These interactions may involve locating specific objectives, spending time in classrooms, and providing support and guidance (Brewer, 1993). Principals take action on the process of manipulating students' achievement by strategically selecting and recruiting teachers, encouraging staff development, nurturing a culture of collegiality and teamwork, setting a helpful interactive example, and recognizing and rewarding teachers for their attainments (Huang, Hochbein & Simons, 2018).

A country's progress is tied to the quality of its educational system, exerting a direct influence on societal values, economic standing, political environment, and cultural background. Consequently, the presentation of a teacher becomes a crucial indicator of meeting educational objectives, with the correlation between a teacher's performance and school leadership emphasized (Iqbal, 2018). The significance of school administrators' leadership philosophies is underscored, revealing that a principal's unique style directly shapes how teachers present material to students, influencing their learning outcomes. Despite the acknowledged importance, the domain of school leadership in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is notably underexplored, with potential ramifications for the academic

advancement of students. This research addresses this gap by scrutinizing the influence of school democratic leadership in schools on the academic achievements of students at the secondary level in the Mardan district. This aspect is considered vital for the overall success of the research. The study bears considerable importance as it investigates the effect of local school democratic leadership on students' academic achievement, offering valuable insights and recommendations. The findings are poised to guide schools and leaders, facilitating effective enhancements in student performance. Furthermore, the study holds relevance for policymakers, informing the development of education policies aligned with the local perspective and contribute to enhance educational effects in the region.

In education, good leadership is pivotal for shaping the learning environment and student academic outcomes, especially in secondary education. The leadership approach embraced by school leaders and educators emerges as a pivotal factor affecting student achievement. This research study embarks on a thorough investigation, specifically aiming to discern the attributes of democratic leadership styles at the secondary level. Moreover, it seeks to establish the relationship between democratic leadership and student academic achievement, and subsequently, evaluates the influence of democratic school leadership on academic outcomes at the secondary level.

This study is structured as follow. The next section reviews the existing literature. Third section discuss the data and methodology. Fourth section encounters the empirical findings along with discussions on results. Lastly, the fifth section concludes this study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explain the democratic school leadership and reviews current literature on school leadership's impact on student achievement, particularly in secondary education.

Democratic School Leadership

Leadership, viewed from various perspectives, involves inspiring and enhancing capabilities (Bass, 1990), motivating for consistent excellence (Cohen, 1990), dedicating energy to shared goals (Kouzes & Posner, 1995), identifying crucial objectives (McGuire, 2001), guiding groups toward common

goals (Northouse, 2004, 2010), and a fusion of traits and cultivated abilities (Bass & Bass, 2008). Abbasialiya (2010) sees leadership from an employee's perspective, influencing objective accomplishment, while Ololube (2013) adds that it entails responsibility, resource leverage, and fostering cohesion. Further, educational leadership guides schools toward goals, involving all stakeholders. Success depends on visionary leaders or cohesive teams (Nkata, 2005). The focus here is on democratic leadership, intricately linked to a leader's beliefs and values (Northouse, 2010a). In education, the principal acts as an architect, enhancing organizational success through activities and high student achievements (Kinyua, 2010). The principal, as the nucleus, provides steadfast leadership (Okoth, 2008), catalyzing enhancements in students' academic achievement.

Democratic leadership, outlined by Oyetunyi (2006), decentralizes power, distributing decision-making authority among stakeholders. Actively engaging workers, it encourages open communication to achieve educational objectives, fostering shared awareness and dialogue. In educational institutions, leaders practicing democratic leadership seek input on student concerns, discipline, and educational development from all stakeholders, allowing supportive individuals to vote on decisions (Dubrin, 2008). Research highlights that involving employees in decision-making strengthens the process; excluding them renders decisions challenging to implement (Dubrin, 2008). Democratic leadership, as advocated by Green & Etheridge (2001), involves fostering receptivity to create an empowered atmosphere where stakeholders feel accountable. This leadership style maintains foundational consistency while continually adapting decision-making processes. Explored in educational settings, it underscores attributes like human resources policies, rights equality, information sharing, teacher independence, and trust in staff (Dubrin, 2008). Institutions embracing this approach prioritize fair opportunities, staff involvement in decision-making, and easy access to information (Green & Etheridge, 2001).

School Leadership and Academic Achievement

In education, the emphasis on accountability for academic achievement has heightened, prompting

research into the impact of leadership on student success. A comprehensive 30-year study conducted by the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) has resulted in a stable context for leadership. This charter identifies twenty-one behaviors and practices closely associated with students' success. These behaviors include assertion, responsible incentives change management, cultural stewardship, communication, focus, discipline, beliefs, flexibility, contribution solicitation, intellectual inspiration, outreach, evaluation, optimization, relationship-building, situational adaptation, awareness and resource allocation (Dou, Devos & Valeke, 2016).

Effective improvement in schools necessitates robust leadership, be it from principals, teachers, or collaborative teams. Empowered leadership in schools acts as a catalyst for effective educational improvement (Griffith, 1999). Purkey and Smith (1985) stress the significance of school leadership in elevating academic achievement of students. They suggest that school leadership ultimately affects student success by determining the school setting, set high principles, allocating resources, organizing classrooms, fostering a suitable learning environment, and engaging to different stakeholders (Dou *et al.*, 2016). National objectives and effective leadership are integral components of prosperous school development, evident in the nationwide curriculum and school materials (Leithwood *et al.*, 2006; Sun *et al.*, 2007). Sammons & Kington (2008) investigated the correlation between leadership pathways in secondary schools and coursework in elementary schools, enlightening two avenues for directing high school students' education. Competent leaders in private primary schools were found to be more active in encouraging academic achievement paralleled to their government and less skilled matching part (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Further, it is the duty of school principals to exercise educational leadership, forming the leadership style and ethos of the organization (Hollingsworth, 2004). A study that looked at leadership traits and how they affected children's development found that schools with more involved leaders had different traits from those that ran smoothly. Better-performing schools gave environmental upgrades a priority and made decisions in line with those priorities (Glover & Coleman, 2005). While another study did not find a

direct link between enhanced student talents and leadership, it did discover that leadership had an impact on the school climate by creating a welcoming and encouraging environment (Marks & Printy, 2003). The relationship between student's results and leadership was complicated and hard to manage successfully; it frequently took months or years for the relationship to fully develop. Regardless of the structure or the situation, student leadership has a big impact on learning, behaviour, and personality. This was especially clear in a variety of managerial positions where managers handled a range of duties. Organisers' workload was lessened by the capacity of leadership concepts to simplify heterogeneous organisational structures (Najjar, 2008). Students and teachers developed relationships that strengthened abilities to learn in culturally comparable communities, as well as comparable cultures promoted teamwork and solving problems together (Glover & Coleman, 2005). In order to improve schools, Sammons & Kington (2008) stressed the importance of both teacher and leadership, with main leadership having an impact on student learning through the learning environment. It was discovered that private, competent counterparts were more successful in fostering academic performance than the government and inexperienced high school administrators (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). In shaping the educational background, leadership proves pivotal, impacting students, teachers, and the broader school community. Essential for academic success and cultivating a positive learning environment, effective leadership strategies have been thoroughly examined, encompassing philosophical underpinnings to practical implications. However, existing literature predominantly originates from Europe, North America, and Africa, leaving a notable research gap in the Pakistani context. Despite Pakistan being a developing country with an education system in need of substantial improvements, limited research exists on how leadership styles influence student performance. This study addresses this gap through a comprehensive analysis of leadership styles and their impact on student academic achievements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, thereby contributing to a nuanced understanding of educational leadership in this specific region.

Data and Methods

Effective research requires a precise and organized approach to gather crucial data, ensuring accuracy and validity. This study focuses on exploring relationships between democratic leadership style and student academic achievement, providing an overview of tools, samples, statistical methodologies, data collection plans, and processing strategies. The nature of this descriptive study aligns with research that collects data about existing phenomena without altering the environment. Descriptive studies, using correlation or observation methodologies, form the foundation of our investigation. In the social sciences, the survey methodology is widely used and valuable, enabling systematic access, analysis, and conclusion drawing from the data. For our cross-sectional study in government secondary schools in the Mardan region, the survey approach is the most economical and efficient method due to its singular temporal focus (Creswell, 2012).

The study's sample is drawn from the Mardan region, defined as any group sharing characteristics related to the study (Papanastasiou & Zembylas, 2004). Mardan has 169 secondary schools (84 boys, 85 girls), with an equal number of high school principals (male and female) and 15,682 enrolled students (7,321 boys, 8,361 girls), based on 2020–21 census data. Due to the challenge of covering the entire population, the researcher opts for a sample, involving a multi-stage process and Yamane's formula (1967), $n = (N / (1 + N(e^2)))$, to determine the sample size of 118 schools. Accordingly, 1,200 questionnaires are randomly distributed, with a 69% response rate from teachers and 77% from students. From the total sample, 310 SSTs and 542 students contribute to the analysis in this study.

In shaping the research framework, variables are pivotal, representing quantities or characteristics subject to investigation (Baker & Michael, 2002). The primary independent variable is school democratic leadership, assessed through a Likert scale questionnaire that evaluates democratic principles in secondary educational institutions. The dependent variable, student academic achievement, is also measured through a structured Likert scale questionnaire capturing students' observations of academic enactment, educational experiences and study practices. Supplementary socio-economic

factors like age, gender, years of service, and qualification of School Teachers (SSTs) provide a holistic understanding. Through rigorous statistical analysis, the study aims to unravel complex interactions among these variables, offering valuable insights into the variation of student academic achievement and the influence of school democratic leadership in secondary level education (Baker & Michael, 2002).

For this research, a survey methodology using structured questionnaires was chosen as the most suitable method (Roy & Macchiette, 2005). The questionnaires, designed to collect statistically significant data on the study's objectives (Saunders & Thornhill, 2003), were developed. The first questionnaire assesses school democratic leadership style, gauging the extent of democratic principles in secondary educational institutions. The second questionnaire focuses on gathering insights into students' academic achievement. A reliability test, crucial for robust data, was conducted through a pilot test in 5 secondary schools. The obtained Cronbach's Alpha values (0.903 for the questionnaire of school leadership and 0.856 for the questionnaire of academic achievement) surpass the accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency and reliability (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2019; Field, 2009).

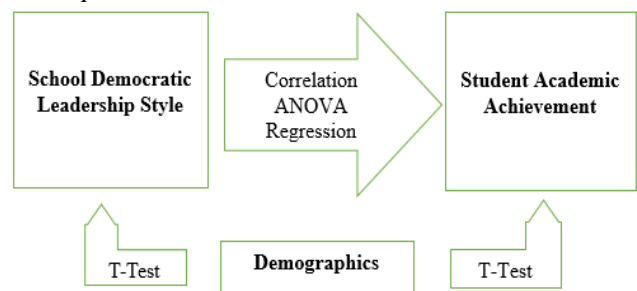
The data collection began with a pilot test in five randomly nominated secondary schools. A representative sample of 118 government secondary schools in District Mardan was then selected using a systematic random sampling method, with data collected from 310 SSTs and 542 students. The surveys were distributed by qualified research assistants, ensuring confidentiality and obtaining informed consent. The research practitioner personally visited sample schools to ensure survey protocols were followed. The collected data was carefully coded, stored securely, and subjected to stringent accuracy checks. Data analysis followed a systematic approach, with responses scored using predefined keys. The latest available SPSS version was utilized for the research, utilising basic descriptive statistics like Mean, Median, and Standard Deviation to ascertain the characteristics of the variables and give a summary of central

tendencies and dispersion. (Kimberlin & Winterstein, 2008; Bryman & Bell, 2019).

In the analysis, a suite of statistical tests is employed to address specific research objectives. The T-student test is initially used to evaluate Mean differences between school leadership styles and student achievement across gender groups, revealing potential disparities among respondents. Subsequently, correlation analysis, utilizing Pearson correlation coefficients, explores relationships between school leadership styles and student academic achievement, revealing potential dependencies. ANOVA tests are applied to scrutinize mean differences among various variables, offering insights into potential distinctions. Finally, regression analysis is employed to establish a causal relationship between democratic leadership styles and student academic achievement, assessing whether variations in leadership styles effect variations in student academic achievement. These orderly data analysis form a robust charter for stemming significant intuitions and comprehensively addressing study research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2019).

This study explores the link between democratic leadership style and secondary-level student academic achievement, using key theoretical standpoints. The conceptual framework highlights the possible influence of leadership on student outcomes.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Source: Authors' construction

Ethical considerations in this study were paramount. The author prioritized transparency, obtaining meticulous informed consent and ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Measures were taken to minimize harm, and questionnaires were designed with respect and non-intrusiveness. Data handling

followed protection regulations, and findings were reported objectively. Necessary permissions were obtained from relevant authorities, aligning with institutional and ethical guidelines.

Findings and Discussions

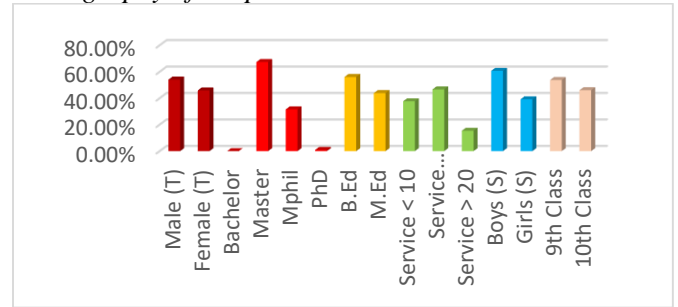
Before data analysis, demographics were explored comprehensively (see Table 1 and Fig. 2). All respondents hold postgraduate qualifications, with approximately 67% having master's degrees, 32% holding MPhil degrees, and 1% possessing Ph.D. degrees. Regarding professional experience, 47% have a decade to two decades, 37% have less than a decade, and about 15% have over two decades of service. In terms of professional qualifications, 56% have B.Ed degrees, while 44% have M.Ed degrees. The study sample includes 60% male and 40% female students, with males primarily distributed between the 9th (54%) and 10th (44%) grades. For visual representation, refer to the accompanying graph.

Table 1
Demographics of Respondent

Demographics	Categories	Sample Size	Percentage
Gender of Teachers	Male	168	54.1%
	Female	142	45.9%
Education	Bachelor	0	0
	Master	209	67.4%
	M. Phil	98	31.6%
	Ph. D	3	0.9%
Professional Education	B. Ed	174	56.1%
	M. Ed	136	43.9%
Years in Service	Less than 10	117	37.7%
	10-20	145	46.7%
	More than 20	48	15.4%
Gender of Students	Boys	329	60.7%
	Girls	213	39.2%
Class	9 th	292	53.8%
	10 th	250	46.1%

Source: Authors' computation

Figure 2
Demography of Respondents



Source: Authors' construction

The t-test assesses mean differences between the Male and Female groups, revealing a significant dissimilarity. In the Male group, the mean was 2.834, and in the Female group, it was slightly lower at 2.678. A higher male leadership mean, as p-value is equal to 0.021, indicates superior leadership abilities compared to females. This supports Abbaszadeh and Gharaeini's (2009) study, highlighting major gender-based leadership differences. Conversely, it contradicts Affshari et al.'s (2017) findings, suggesting similarity in male and female leadership. The contrasting results may be due to differing education systems in the respective countries.

Table 2
Gender wise comparison of school democratic leadership

Group	Sample Size	Mean	Std. Dev	t-test	df	P-value
Male	168	2.834	0.944	2.259	308	0.021
Female	142	2.678	0.932			

Source: Authors' computation

To explore potential gender-based differences in academic achievements, a t-test compares Boys and Girls groups, revealing no significant difference, as p-value equal to 0.259. In the Boys group, the mean academic achievement was 2.754, and in the Girls group, it was slightly lower at 2.713. The small difference observed is likely within the bounds of random variation. These findings differ from prior studies, like those by Idrees, Farooq, and Tabassum (2016) and Paul and Jefferson (2019), which indicated substantial disparities favoring female students. In contrast, our results favor male students,

contradicting established trends in academic achievement.

Table 3
Gender wise comparison of student academic achievement

Group	Sample Size	Mean	Std. Dev	t-test	df	P-value
Boys	329	2.754	0.893	1.164	540	0.259
Girls	213	2.713	0.934			

Source: Authors' computation

Pearson correlation between "School Democratic Leadership" and "Student Academic Achievement" in Table 4 indicates a robust positive association. As school leadership quality improves, there is a notable tendency for increased academic achievement (p-value=0.000), highlighting the statistical significance of this correlation. In summary, this study establishes a highly significant positive correlation between school leadership quality and student academic achievement, emphasizing the pivotal role of effective school leadership in fostering higher levels of academic success.

Table 4
Relationship between school leadership and student academic achievements

Variable	School Leadership	Academic Achievement
School Leadership	1.000	0.713 (0.000)
Academic Achievement	0.713 (0.000)	1.000

Source: Authors' computation

To gain deeper insights into factors influencing student academic achievement, this study utilizes ANOVA and regression analysis, reported in table 5. The upper part of the table displays ANOVA test results. The regression model, with an SSR of 7.042679, explains observed variation in the dependent variable. However, the Residual Sum of Squares (SSE) of 67.14948 indicates some unexplained variability. The high statistical significance of the F-statistic (26.01039, p-value near zero) suggests a substantial influence of independent variable on the dependent variable. In summary, these ANOVA results affirm the model's robust explanatory power and strong fit with the data, supporting its significance for further investigation.

The estimated regression model, in the middle section, reveals insights into the relationship between student academic achievement and the independent variable 'School democratic leadership.' The constant term is highly statistically significant, with a t-statistic of 10.2536 and a p-value of 0.00, estimated at 2.548941. The coefficient for 'School democratic leadership' is 0.665938, with a standard error of 0.086066, indicating that each unit increase corresponds to a 0.665938-unit increase in student academic achievement. This relationship is statistically significant (t-statistic = 7.73753, p-value = 0.00). In summary, the regression model shows that school democratic leadership significantly and positively impacts student academic achievement. As school leadership quality improves, there is a corresponding increase in predicted student academic achievement, emphasizing its statistical significance in the model.

In diagnostic tests, the value of R-squared is 0.574, indicates moderate effectiveness in explaining outcomes, and the adjusted R-square value is 0.572, ensuring a precise model representation. A standard error of the estimate at 0.732, a lower value, signifies a stronger model fit to the dataset.

Table 5
Effect of School democratic leadership on student academic achievement

ANOVA					
	Sum of Square	d.f	Mean Square	F	P-value
Regression	7.042679	1	7.042679	26.01039	0.00
Residual	67.14948	308	0.270764		
Total	74.19216	309			

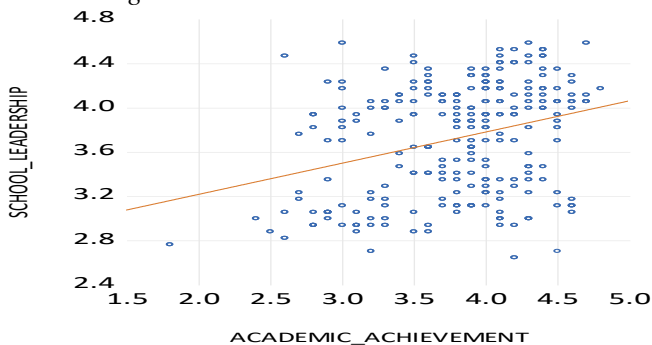
Regression				
Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-statistic	P-value
Constant	2.548941	0.24859	10.2536	0.00
School Leadership	0.665938	0.086066	7.73753	0.00

Diagnostic Tests			
R	0.758	Adjusted R-Square	0.572
R-Square	0.574	Standard Error of the Estimate	0.732

Source: Authors' computation

In Figure 3, the scatter diagram visually shows a positive linear relationship between school democratic leadership and student academic achievement. Points cluster moderately around the line of best fit, indicating a reasonably strong relationship.

Figure 3
Scatter diagram



Source: Authors' construction

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study investigated the impact of school democratic leadership on student academic achievement in secondary education in district Mardan. Guided by three objectives, it aimed to unveil leadership characteristics, analyze its relationship with academic achievement, and assess broader impacts. Rigorous testing of questions and hypotheses utilized two questionnaires: one for democratic leadership and the other for students. The sample involved 118 schools, with 310 teachers and 542 students participating. T-tests revealed gender-based differences in leadership but not in academic achievement. Various statistical analyses, including Pearson correlation, ANOVA, and regression, contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the intricate dynamics between democratic leadership and student academic achievement. The empirical analysis revealed significant insights into the educational system's dynamics. The results highlight a positive and statistically significant relationship between school democratic leadership and student academic achievement. Improved school leadership corresponds to higher academic performance, emphasizing the crucial role of effective democratic leadership. The study also delves into the impact of implementing democratic leadership on student academic achievement, revealing substantial benefits. These findings stress the importance of fostering democratic leadership practices among educators and administrators in secondary education, offering practical implications for enhancing student achievement and overall educational quality in our context.

Based on the findings, the study recommends developing policies and practices supporting democratic leadership in secondary education. This involves providing training for school leaders to enhance their skills and promoting gender equity in leadership roles. Educational policies should prioritize a democratic leadership approach that actively engages students in decision-making processes, leading to improved student engagement and enhanced academic achievement.

This research acknowledges limitations and encourages future exploration, delving deeper into the phenomenon of democratic leadership in secondary education and considering additional variables influencing student academic achievement.

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