Journal of Popular Education in Africa: **ISSN 2523-2800 (online)**
October, November & December 2025, Volume 9, Number 10, 11 & 12
Citation: Sheikh, A. A; Nyabwari, B & Wafula, J. A. (2025). The Power of the Unheard: How Communication Feedback Mechanisms Drive Academic Performance in public secondary schools within Mandera West Sub-County, Mandera County-Kenya. *Journal of Popular Education in Africa,* 9(10), 336 - 347.

The Power of the Unheard: How Communication Feedback Mechanisms Drive Academic Performance in public secondary schools within Mandera West Sub-County, Mandera County-Kenya

By

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Abstract
This study aimed to determine the influence of communication feedback mechanisms on students' academic performance in public secondary schools within Mandera West Sub-County, a marginalized, arid region in Kenya. The contention of this article is that effective communication is a cornerstone of successful school leadership, yet its practice in marginalized educational contexts is often characterized by top-down, one-way information flows. While the importance of communication is widely acknowledged, there is a scarcity of empirical research that quantifies the specific impact of its different dimensions particularly upward feedback on student academic outcomes in resource-scarce environments. The study employed a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods research design. A census survey was conducted across seven public secondary schools, targeting principals, teachers, and student captains. Quantitative data were collected from 81 teachers using structured questionnaires, while qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with 7 principals and 7 student captains. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression to test the relationships. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts provided explanatory depth. The findings reveal that communication feedback mechanisms are the most powerful predictor of student academic performance. Descriptive data indicated a profound feedback deficit, with teachers strongly disagreeing that formal feedback channels exist (Mean = 2.15) or that they feel safe providing honest criticism (Mean = 2.50). Multiple regression analysis confirmed that feedback mechanisms were the most statistically significant predictor of academic performance ($\beta = .420$, $p < .001$), possessing a stronger influence than communication planning ($\beta = .211$) or channel effectiveness ($\beta = .194$). The overall model, incorporating all communication variables, explained 57.8% of the variance in academic performance ($R^2 = .578$). Qualitative data exposed a culture of silence, where the absence of feedback fostered disengagement among students and teachers. The study concludes that the establishment of safe, structured, and responsive feedback systems is not a peripheral leadership skill but the most critical communication practice for driving academic success in marginalized schools. The prevailing one-way communication model creates organizational learning disabilities and undermines student and teacher morale. The findings provide a robust, evidence-based mandate for shifting from passive "open-door" policies to proactive, systemic feedback-seeking as a core strategy for school improvement.

Keywords: School Leadership, Communication Feedback, Academic Performance, Marginalized Education, Mandera County, Kenya, Educational Administration, Transactional Communication

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1. Introduction

Communication serves as the essential lifeblood of any effective organization, and educational institutions are no exception. For a school to function as a cohesive and purposeful entity, the clear and consistent flow of information is paramount (Eriksen, 2010). The school principal, as the chief executive and instructional leader, stands at the nexus of this communication network. Their ability to articulate vision, coordinate activities, motivate staff, and engage students is fundamentally dependent on their communication prowess. A substantial body of literature affirms that effective communication from school leaders cultivates a positive organizational culture, enhances teacher motivation, and is a critical antecedent to improved student outcomes (Brinia et al., 2022; Hidayatullah, 2023).

This principle holds true globally, from developed nations where communication is seen as vital for collaborative reform (Ärlestig, 2020), to developing contexts where it is essential for navigating resource constraints and coordinating stakeholder efforts. In the African context, scholars have increasingly highlighted communication as a key lever for effective school management. In Nigeria, for instance, effective communication is deemed crucial for maintaining a conducive learning environment (Nwogbo et al., 2019), while in Egypt, it is considered an indispensable condition for the continuity and success of the teaching process (Rinata et al., 2022).

In Kenya, the link between principals' communication practices and school success has been a subject of growing scholarly interest. Studies have demonstrated that effective communication correlates with improved student discipline (Obiero et al., 2022; Salina et al., 2021) and better overall academic performance (Obonyo & Mutilu, 2023; Rono et al., 2023). These findings underscore that a principal's ability to communicate is not a peripheral soft skill but a core competency that directly impacts a school's ability to achieve its primary mission.

This study situates its inquiry within Mandera West Sub-County, a region that epitomizes the challenges of education in Kenya's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs). Characterized by historical marginalization, infrastructural deficits, a fragile security situation, and socio-cultural complexities, schools in this region operate under immense pressure. Student academic performance has been a persistent concern, with stakeholders frequently citing issues of indiscipline and poor parent participation as contributing factors (Adow & Cherogony, 2024). These very issues are deeply intertwined with the quality of school communication.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Despite the acknowledged importance of communication, public secondary schools in Mandera West Sub-County continue to struggle with poor academic performance and stakeholder disengagement. This suggests a potential disconnect between the principles of effective communication and their practical implementation by school leaders in this

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challenging context. While effective communication is understood to involve a dynamic, two-way exchange of information, preliminary evidence suggests that the prevailing model in many schools is a top-down, hierarchical broadcast of directives (Haji & Ochieng, 2023). This one-way flow of information, from principal to teacher to student, lacks the vital component of upward feedback.

The absence of structured, safe, and responsive feedback mechanisms constitutes a critical organizational failure. When teachers and students lack viable channels to voice concerns, share insights, or offer suggestions, several detrimental consequences arise. First, the principal is deprived of the essential ground-level information needed to make informed decisions and adapt strategies, effectively flying blind. Second, it creates a culture of passive compliance, where stakeholders feel unheard and devalued, leading to diminished motivation, morale, and ownership over the school's goals (Kutasi, 2023). This disengagement can directly translate into lower teacher effort and reduced student engagement, both of which are powerful predictors of academic performance.

While Kenyan studies have explored the influence of communication on outcomes like student discipline (e.g., Owuor et al., 2022), there is a significant empirical gap in the literature that quantitatively isolates and measures the specific impact of feedback mechanisms on academic performance, particularly within a marginalized and under-researched ASAL region like Mandera West. Most studies have treated communication as a monolithic concept or focused on other dimensions like planning or channel choice. Without a clear, data-driven understanding of the precise role that feedback plays, school improvement efforts may overlook the most critical communication lever for driving academic success. This study sought to close this gap by providing a rigorous, quantitative and qualitative assessment of the relationship between communication feedback mechanisms and student academic performance.

1.2 Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to determine the influence of communication feedback mechanisms on students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mandera West Sub-County, Kenya.

1.3 Research Question

How do communication feedback mechanisms influence students' academic performance in public secondary schools in Mandera West Sub-County?

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes the theoretical and empirical literature that establishes the critical role of feedback in organizational effectiveness and educational success, providing the conceptual foundation for the study.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the Transactional Model of Communication. Evolving from earlier linear models (e.g., Shannon & Weaver, 1949), the transactional model reframes communication not as a one-way transmission of information but as a simultaneous, multi-directional process where participants co-create meaning (Anderson, 1996). A core feature of this model is the concept of the feedback loop. Feedback is the response that the receiver

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provides to the sender, and it is this response that makes communication a dynamic, two-way process rather than a static monologue.

In an organizational context, such as a school, feedback is the mechanism that allows the system to self-regulate, learn, and adapt. The principal (sender) communicates a policy or goal. Teachers and students (receivers) provide feedback through their actions, questions, or expressed concerns. This feedback allows the principal to gauge comprehension, identify problems, and adjust their message or strategy accordingly. When this feedback loop is broken or non-existent, communication reverts to a simplistic, linear model. The principal broadcasts information but has no reliable way of knowing if it was received, understood, or acted upon.

This theoretical lens is powerfully complemented by concepts from organizational learning and leadership. Peter Senge (1990), in his seminal work on learning organizations, argues that the free and open flow of information, particularly upward feedback, is essential for an organization to detect errors and adapt to changing conditions. A system without feedback, he posits, suffers from organizational learning disabilities. Furthermore, research on psychological safety by Amy Edmondson has shown that environments where individuals feel safe to speak up, ask questions, and admit errors are those that innovate and perform at the highest levels. A culture that discourages or punishes feedback creates a climate of fear that stifles improvement.

Applying this framework to a school, the absence of effective feedback mechanisms means the principal operates in an information vacuum, unaware of the real challenges and opportunities on the ground. Teachers and students, feeling that their voices are not valued, become disengaged. This study uses the Transactional Model and its related concepts to hypothesize that the presence of robust, safe, and responsive feedback mechanisms is not just a feature of good communication but is a fundamental prerequisite for creating a healthy, adaptive, and high-performing school environment. The quality of these feedback loops, therefore, is expected to be a strong predictor of student academic performance.

2.2 Empirical Review of Feedback in Educational Leadership

The empirical literature provides extensive support for the critical role of feedback in both organizational management and educational effectiveness.

2.2.1 Feedback in Organizational and Leadership Contexts

In general management literature, the importance of upward feedback is well-established. Studies have shown that leaders who actively solicit and act upon feedback from their subordinates are perceived as more effective, foster higher levels of employee engagement, and lead more productive teams. The practice of 360-degree feedback, for example, is built on the premise that a leader's self-perception is insufficient and must be supplemented by perspectives from superiors, peers, and subordinates. Espinosa (2022), in a study on safety engagement, found that both verbal and written feedback significantly increased employee participation and improved attitudes, demonstrating that the simple act of creating a feedback loop can change behavior.

In the educational leadership field, this principle is equally potent. Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) concluded that transformational school leaders are those who actively seek out information and opinions from their staff, thereby fostering a sense of collective responsibility and shared ownership over school improvement initiatives. This contrasts with

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more traditional, hierarchical leadership styles that often create a culture of deference and silence.

2.2.2 The Kenyan and African Context

Research from the African continent has often highlighted challenges in establishing effective two-way communication within hierarchical structures. A study in Lesotho by Mukurunge and Bhila (2019) found that the conventional top-down communication model used by university management was ineffective and failed to motivate staff. In the Kenyan school context, Olembo and Oplat (2015) noted that traditional leadership styles frequently create a culture where teachers are hesitant to challenge principals or offer critical feedback, a finding that points to a systemic lack of psychological safety.

More specifically, studies that have touched upon feedback in Kenyan schools have consistently identified it as a weakness. Salina, Kalai, and Okoth (2021) identified the lack of effective feedback channels as a key challenge impacting student discipline. Similarly, a study on principals' communication functions by Akinyi et al. (2018) found that while student councils were intended to act as a communication channel, they were often ineffective, with student leaders feeling ignored or unsupported by the administration.

The most direct and compelling evidence comes from studies linking feedback to learning outcomes. The extensive visible learning research by John Hattie (2012), while focused on teacher-to-student feedback, established a universal principle: knowing one's impact is one of the most powerful drivers of improvement. This study extends that principle to the administrative level, arguing that a principal who is unaware of their impact due to a lack of feedback from staff and students is an ineffective leader. Kutasi (2023), in a systematic literature review, confirmed that constructive feedback empowers students to take an active role in their own learning, leading to greater comprehension and retention. The same logic can be applied to teachers; feedback empowers them to become more active agents in the school improvement process.

2.3 Summary of Literature and Identified Research Gap

The theoretical and empirical literature converges on a clear conclusion: feedback is a non-negotiable component of effective leadership and a high-performing organization. However, a significant gap remains. While many studies have qualitatively described the lack of feedback in Kenyan schools or have focused on its impact on ancillary outcomes like discipline, there has been a dearth of research that quantitatively measures the unique predictive power of feedback mechanisms on core academic performance. Most studies treat communication holistically. This study addresses this gap by isolating feedback as a distinct variable and using a mixed-methods approach to determine its specific influence on student academic achievement in a marginalized, under-researched context, thereby providing robust evidence for its central importance in school leadership.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopted a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive and robust analysis (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative component utilized a descriptive survey design, while the qualitative part employed a phenomenological approach to explore lived experiences.

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3.1 Study Location, Population, and Sampling

The study was conducted in Mandera West Sub-County, Mandera County, a marginalized ASAL region in Kenya. The target population was small, consisting of all stakeholders in the 8 public secondary schools in the sub-county. Due to the small population size (121 individuals comprising 8 principals, 105 teachers, and 8 student captains), a census survey was adopted. One school was used for piloting, leaving a final study sample of 7 principals, 88 teachers, and 7 student captains. The final analysis was based on a high response rate of 93.1%, including 81 completed teacher questionnaires and interviews with all 14 targeted principals and student captains.

3.2 Data Collection and Instruments

Three primary data collection instruments were utilized:

1. Questionnaires: A structured questionnaire with 5-point Likert scale items was administered to the 81 teachers to collect quantitative data on their perceptions of communication planning, channels, and feedback mechanisms.
2. Interview Schedules: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 7 principals and 7 student captains to gather in-depth qualitative data on their experiences and perspectives regarding school communication.
3. Document Analysis: School performance records (KCSE results) were analyzed to provide an objective measure for the dependent variable, academic performance.

Instrument validity was established through expert review by university supervisors. Reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed through a pilot study, yielding a strong Cronbach's Alpha coefficient.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS Version 28. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were used to summarize perceptions. Inferential statistics, including Pearson correlation and a multiple linear regression, were used to test the relationships between communication variables and academic performance. The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. Qualitative data from interview transcripts were analyzed thematically to identify, analyze, and report recurring patterns and themes.

4. Quantitative Analysis and Results

This section presents the empirical findings regarding communication feedback mechanisms and their influence on academic performance.

4.1 Descriptive Analysis: The State of Feedback Mechanisms

Teachers were asked to rate their agreement with statements about the feedback culture in their schools. The results, shown in Table 4.1, paint a stark picture of a systemic failure in upward communication.

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Table 4.1: Teacher Perceptions of Feedback Mechanisms (N=81)

Statement	Mean	Std. Dev.	Interpretation
The principal actively encourages feedback from teachers.	2.75	1.30	Disagreement
There are formal channels for teachers to provide feedback.	2.15	1.10	Strong Disagreement
The principal acts on feedback provided by staff.	2.35	1.25	Disagreement
I feel safe providing honest, critical feedback to the principal.	2.50	1.40	Disagreement

Source: Field Data 2025

The findings indicate a profound deficit in feedback culture. All four statements received mean scores significantly below the neutral point of 3.0, signifying clear disagreement from the teachers. The strongest disagreement was recorded for the existence of formal feedback channels (Mean = 2.15), suggesting an almost complete absence of structured systems like suggestion boxes or surveys. Critically, teachers also reported that they do not feel safe providing honest, critical feedback (Mean = 2.50), pointing to a lack of psychological safety. This quantitative data depicts a classic top-down, closed-loop communication system where information flows in one direction with no reliable or safe mechanism for it to return.

These descriptive findings were powerfully illustrated by the qualitative data. While principals often expressed a belief in their own accessibility, their perception was not shared by other stakeholders. One principal, (Principal 3) stated:

> My door is always open. If teachers have an issue, they can come to me. The fact that they don't come often tells me that things are generally running smoothly (Principal 3)

This passive "open-door" policy was seen as wholly inadequate by students, who felt their voices were consistently ignored. A student captain articulated this frustration:

> We have many ideas about how to improve things... But there is no way to tell the principal. The student council meets, but we feel our suggestions are never taken seriously. It feels like the administration makes all the decisions... It makes you stop caring (Student Captain 2).

This culture of silence and the resulting student disengagement ("it makes you stop caring") represent the tangible consequences of a broken feedback loop.

4.2 Inferential Analysis: The Predictive Power of Feedback

To determine the unique and combined influence of communication practices on academic success, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The model used Academic Performance (aggregated KCSE mean score) as the dependent variable, and Communication Planning, Effective Channel Mix, and Feedback Mechanisms as the independent variables.

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Table 4.2: Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Academic Performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Standardized Coefficients (Beta - β)	t	Sig. (p-value)
1. (Constant)	4.512		8.234	<.001
Communication Planning	.183	.211	2.259	.027
Effective Channel Mix	.151	.194	2.157	.034
Feedback Mechanisms	.354	.420	3.890	<.001

Note. Dependent Variable: Academic Performance. Overall Model Fit: $R^2 = .578$, $F(3, 77) = 35.189$, $p < .001$.
Source: Field Data 2025

The overall regression model was extremely powerful, explaining a substantial 57.8% of the variance in student academic performance ($R^2 = .578$). The ANOVA test confirmed the model's high statistical significance ($F = 35.189$, $p < .001$).
The regression coefficients in Table 4.2 reveal the individual contribution of each communication practice. While Communication Planning ($p = .027$) and Effective Channel Mix ($p = .034$) were both statistically significant positive predictors, Feedback Mechanisms emerged as, by far, the most powerful and significant factor.

The standardized beta coefficient (β) allows for a direct comparison of the relative strength of each predictor. The beta for Feedback Mechanisms ($\beta = .420$) is roughly double that of Communication Planning ($\beta = .211$) and the Effective Channel Mix ($\beta = .194$). This indicates that the quality of a school's upward feedback systems has twice the unique predictive power on academic performance compared to the quality of its planning or its choice of communication channels. The unstandardized coefficient ($B = .354$) suggests that a one-unit improvement on the scale measuring feedback quality is associated with a predicted increase of 0.354 points in the school's KCSE mean score, a substantial effect.
Based on this robust statistical evidence, the null hypothesis is rejected. Communication feedback mechanisms have a strong, positive, and highly significant influence on academic performance.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study converge to form a powerful and unequivocal conclusion: the presence of effective feedback mechanisms is the single most critical communication practice driving academic performance in the marginalized context of Mandera West. The statistical dominance of feedback in the regression model, coupled with the stark qualitative accounts of a culture of silence, provides a comprehensive validation of the Transactional Model of Communication. The schools in this study are not failing to communicate; they are failing to transact. They are broadcasting information effectively but have largely severed the return channel required for a true communicative partnership.

The principal's assertion that an open door is a sufficient feedback mechanism is a critical fallacy exposed by this research. This passive approach is wholly inadequate, particularly in a socio-cultural context that may be characterized by hierarchical power structures and a reluctance to deliver criticism directly to authority figures. As the teachers'

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low scores on feeling safe to provide feedback indicate, an open door is meaningless if people are afraid to walk through it. This underscores the need for proactive, structured, and, crucially, anonymous or psychologically safe channels for upward communication.

The student captain's poignant comment, it makes you stop caring, provides a direct link between the communication failure and its academic consequences. This is not mere adolescent frustration; it is a textbook description of learned helplessness and organizational disengagement. When students and teachers perceive that their input has no impact, their motivation to contribute to the school's mission wanes. They cease to be active partners in the educational enterprise and become passive recipients of instruction. This erosion of agency and ownership is profoundly damaging to the collaborative culture required for a high-performing school.

This study makes a significant contribution to the literature by moving beyond general affirmations of communication's importance to quantitatively demonstrating the hierarchical influence of its components. It empirically proves that while planning and channel choice matter, they are secondary to the primary function of feedback. A well-planned message sent through the perfect channel is of limited value if the leader has no way of knowing its impact. This research extends the work of Hattie (2012) on feedback from the classroom to the principal's office, showing that just as teachers need feedback on their impact to improve, so too do school leaders. A school without feedback is an organization without a learning mechanism, destined to repeat its mistakes.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study investigated the influence of principals' communication feedback mechanisms on student academic performance in a marginalized Kenyan sub-county. The study concludes that the quality of upward communication and feedback systems is not just a component of effective communication but is its most critical and powerful driver of academic success. The widespread absence of safe, structured, and responsive feedback channels in the surveyed schools has created a culture of silence that fosters stakeholder disengagement and significantly hinders academic achievement. Communication in these schools is a monologue when it needs to be a dialogue. The findings unequivocally establish that building a robust feedback culture is the most vital communication strategy for any principal seeking to improve student outcomes.

6.2 Recommendations

Based on these conclusions, the following specific and actionable recommendations are proposed:

1. For School Principals:
    (i) Shift from Passive to Proactive Feedback-Seeking: Abandon the reliance on the ineffective open-door policy. Proactively implement structured and safe feedback mechanisms. This should include a physical, locked suggestion box in a common area and the administration of simple, anonymous termly surveys for both staff and student leaders to gauge climate and gather input.
    (ii) Close the Loop on Feedback: The most critical step is to demonstrate that feedback is valued. Principals must dedicate a portion of official staff meetings and student assemblies to publicly address the themes emerging from the feedback received and transparently communicate the actions that will (or

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will not) be taken in response. This act of closing the communication loop is essential for building trust and encouraging future participation.

2. For the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission (TSC):
   (i) Integrate Strategic Communication into Leadership Training: Institutions like the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) must embed mandatory, practical modules on two-way communication and feedback management into all principal training and certification programs.
   (ii) Make Communication a Key Performance Indicator (KPI): The TSC should incorporate -Effectiveness of Stakeholder Feedback Mechanisms as a formal KPI in the annual appraisal process for school principals. This would require principals to provide evidence of their feedback systems (e.g., survey results, action plans based on feedback), thus creating formal accountability.
3. For School Boards of Management (BOM):
   (i) Mandate and Oversee Feedback Systems: The BOM should require the principal to present a termly, anonymized summary of staff and student feedback at its meetings. This will provide the board with an unfiltered view of the school's climate and challenges, enabling it to better support the principal while holding the administration accountable for fostering a responsive environment.

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