

Barriers to Complaints Among Public Primary School Teachers in Tanzania: A Case of Dar es Salaam City Council

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Abstract

This study examined the factors underlying public primary school teachers' reluctance to voice complaints in their work environment, using the Dar es Salaam City Council as a case study. Drawing on the Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework, the study examined how fear of retaliation, perceived futility, and socio-cultural norms shape teachers' silence. Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 355 teachers across 103 public primary schools via a structured questionnaire. Quantitative analysis showed that fear of retaliation (19.2% of respondents) and the belief that complaints are futile (18.6% of respondents) are major deterrents to voicing concerns. Respect for authority and inadequate reporting mechanisms were also found to suppress teachers' voices. The findings highlight the interplay of personal apprehensions, organisational culture, and systemic barriers in producing a culture of silent endurance among public primary school teachers. This pattern of silence has potentially adverse implications for teacher well-being and the quality of education. The study recommends strengthening protections against retaliation, increasing awareness of complaint mechanisms, and promoting further research to deepen understanding of these dynamics. Addressing these barriers is essential to empowering teachers to speak up when they experience service failure.

Keywords: *Silence, complaints, fear of retaliation, perceived futility, public primary schools, Dar es Salaam City Council, Tanzania*

1.0 Introduction

Public primary school teachers in Tanzania operate within a public-sector environment characterised by bureaucratic structures, hierarchical authority, and strict adherence to formal rules and procedures. Such organisational features are widely associated with constraints on employee voice, as they create conditions where expressing concerns may be perceived as risky (Nitafan, 2024; Ro, 2015). Within this setting, teachers are expected to deliver quality education despite resource shortages, heavy workloads, and administrative pressures, making it essential for them to voice concerns for their well-being and school

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performance (Mwakalinga, 2021; Nitafan, 2024; Pakkanen, 2011). Existing literature indicates that silence is widespread in public sector institutions. Studies show that fear of retaliation, job insecurity, and perceptions of power asymmetry discourage employees from raising complaints (Gurung et al., 2017; Popelnukha et al., 2021). Research further suggests that public servants may fear demotion, transfer, denial of promotion and dismissal for voicing concerns, while limited access to complaint mechanisms and insufficient knowledge of entitlements further inhibit reporting (Iram et al., 2023). In Tanzania, socio-cultural norms that emphasise respect for authority and social harmony have also been shown to shape teachers' reluctance to express dissatisfaction (Mwakalinga, 2021; United Republic of Tanzania, 2023b).

Despite this body of literature, little is known about the extent to which fear of retaliation and perceived futility influence silence among public primary school teachers in large urban settings such as the Dar es Salaam City Council (DCC). Although previous studies acknowledge silence in the education sector, few have empirically examined how teachers interpret and navigate existing complaint mechanisms, including digital platforms such as the e-Mrejesho system (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023a). This study addresses the limited empirical understanding of the barriers that prevent public primary school teachers in DCC from voicing grievances, despite the availability of formal complaint-reporting mechanisms. This gap constrains policymakers' and education administrators' ability to design effective interventions that protect teachers and strengthen accountability. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which fear of retaliation and perceived futility influence silence among public primary school teachers in DCC, and to identify additional factors that contribute to their reluctance to lodge complaints. In the public sector, teacher voice is essential for improving school climate, strengthening accountability, and enhancing the quality of education (Simmons & Brennan, 2017). Understanding the barriers to complaint behaviour can support the development of policies that protect teachers, improve complaint-handling systems, and promote a culture in which complaints are treated as constructive feedback rather than acts of defiance (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023a; Simmons & Brennan, 2017). The findings also contribute to the broader literature on employee voice in public-sector contexts, particularly in African education systems.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (EVL) Theory offers a critical framework for analysing how institutional and cultural structures shape responses to dissatisfaction. While the model assumes individuals choose among exit, voice, and loyalty (Nitafan, 2024; Kim & Wang, 2024), public primary school teachers in Tanzania face restricted exit options, thereby making voice and silence theoretically central (Mwakalinga, 2021). The EVL Theory emphasises that voice is used only when individuals expect safety and responsiveness (Kim & Wang, 2024). In hierarchical public institutions, where power asymmetry and bureaucratic authority dominate, voice becomes risky and often irrational (Kim & Wang, 2024; Hao et al., 2022). Sociocultural norms that prioritise respect for authority and social

harmony further suppress dissent (Mwakalinga, 2021). Loyalty, traditionally viewed as stabilising, may instead function as a mechanism of compliance, encouraging endurance rather than constructive engagement. Thus, EVL not only explains silence but also exposes how organisational culture and weak complaint systems systematically limit teachers' ability to speak up.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 The Education Sector and Teacher Voice

Across public services, a range of interventions has been introduced to improve existing complaint-reporting mechanisms and to develop new ones (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023a; Hee et al., 2018; Aziz, 2015). To amplify service users' voices, complaint channels such as suggestion boxes, dedicated offices and forms, meetings, hotlines, emails, and online reporting systems have been established (Amos, 2016; Ngetich, 2019; Sengat, 2019; Paul & Unnithan, 2022; Maduhu, 2023; United Republic of Tanzania, 2023a; Hossain et al., 2024; Sikika, 2013). These mechanisms are intended to enable service users to express dissatisfaction with a service, product, service delivery process, guideline, or service provider.

Despite the availability of these mechanisms, researchers continue to report a lack of discussion of teacher complaints (Popelnukha et al., 2021; Iram et al., 2023). This raises concerns that issues such as unfair treatment, poor working conditions, and institutional inefficiencies may remain unaddressed (Popelnukha et al., 2021). Teachers frequently face demanding workloads, emotional labour, and accountability pressures (Mwakalinga, 2021). Therefore, their capacity to voice concerns about resources, curriculum, student behaviour, and administrative support is essential to their well-being and professional effectiveness (Nitafan, 2024). Studies further suggest that empowering teachers to articulate their concerns can improve school climate, strengthen collaboration, and enhance student outcomes (Pakkanen, 2011; Coştu, 2023).

Nonetheless, factors such as hierarchical school leadership, a culture of compliance, and apprehension about evaluations may deter teachers from openly voicing their challenges (Nitafan, 2024; Morrison, 2014). Morrison (2014) argues that the absence of overt complaints does not necessarily indicate the absence of underlying issues. Teachers might resort to passive resistance, experience burnout, or silently bear the burden of their challenges (Mwakalinga, 2021). Investigating silence among primary school teachers is essential to a comprehensive understanding of their experiences. Identifying barriers to complaining can inform policy interventions to improve teacher support and morale.

2.2.2 The Teaching-Learning Environments in Public Primary Schools in Tanzania

Public primary school teachers in Tanzania work within a complex environment marked by resource constraints, large class sizes, and often demanding working conditions (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023b). Research has reported inadequate teaching materials and infrastructure (Njozi, 2019; Mwakalinga, 2021). Teachers may remain silent and develop various coping strategies to overcome these limitations, such as creating their own resources, such as tuition, working extra hours, or seeking support from colleagues (Njozi, 2019; Mwakalinga, 2021). Njozi (2019) notes that Tanzania's cultural context may influence

how teachers voice dissatisfaction. Specifically, hierarchical structures and cultural norms regarding respect for authority have been reported to shape how teachers communicate their needs to school administrators or government bodies (Mwakalinga, 2021).

2.2.3 Voicing in Public Primary Schools in Tanzania

Researchers have found that the socio-cultural context in Tanzania may shape voicing behaviour (Mwakalinga, 2021). Mwakalinga (2021) argues that cultural norms emphasising respect for elders and authority figures, together with a collectivist orientation that prioritises group harmony over individual dissent, may discourage teachers from voicing complaints. While the literature discussed above provides a general framework for understanding socio-cultural norms, there is relatively little research examining the extent to which fear of retaliation and perceived futility inhibit complaints among public primary school teachers in Tanzania, particularly in large cities such as Dar es Salaam.

Guided by the Exit, Voice, and Loyalty theory (Hirschman, 1970), this study seeks to identify the perceived barriers that prevent public primary school teachers from voicing their concerns. The theory posits that when products or services decline in quality, customers may respond by leaving the deteriorating option (exit), providing feedback to improve it (voice), or remaining passive, expecting conditions to improve over time (loyalty). In some cases, individuals may also neglect the situation and remain silent (Hirschman, 1970). In the present study, the Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework provides a useful lens for understanding how fear of retaliation and perceived futility shape voicing behaviour among public primary school teachers in DCC, beyond the socio-cultural norms identified by Mwakalinga (2021). Understanding the extent to which fear of retaliation and perceived futility underpin teachers' silence is essential for developing effective support systems. Such insight can inform policies that enhance teacher welfare and improve the quality of primary education in Tanzania. This study, therefore, seeks to provide empirical evidence on additional factors that influence silence among public primary school teachers.

The objectives of this study were, first, to examine the extent to which fear of retaliation and perceived futility influence silence among public primary school teachers, and, second, to identify other factors that contribute to silence. To address these objectives, the study was guided by three research questions focused on the degree to which fear of retaliation prevents teachers from expressing complaints, the extent to which the belief that complaints will not lead to positive change contributes to reluctance to speak up, and the additional factors that influence silence among public primary school teachers. Together, these questions were intended to provide a deeper understanding of the barriers that hinder teachers from seeking redress for their concerns.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey (Creswell, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2018) design to examine the factors influencing complaint behaviour among public primary school teachers in DCC. The target population comprised 3,982 teachers from 139 public primary schools (DCC, 2025). A two-stage sampling procedure was used: 43 schools were systematically selected, and teachers were subsequently sampled by simple random

sampling. Using Cochran's sample size formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a sample size of 355 teachers was determined. Referencing Kothari (2004), Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) and Sekaran and Bougie (2025), a proportional allocation was applied across schools and administrative divisions to minimise sampling bias and ensure representativeness.

Data were collected between June and July 2025 using a structured questionnaire comprising closed- and open-ended items designed to assess the influence of fear of retaliation, perceived futility of complaints, and other factors associated with teachers' silence. To ensure validity and clarity, the instrument was reviewed by experts and pilot-tested (Cohen et al., 2018), while reliability was enhanced through standardised administration procedures across all participating schools (Kombo & Tromp, 2006). Based on Israel and Hay (2006), ethical approval was obtained from the Tanzania Public Service College and the Dar es Salaam City Council. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all respondents, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

4.0 Results and Discussion

4.1 The Extent of Fear of Retaliation in Preventing Expression of Grievances

Survey results reveal a prevalence of both fear of retaliation and a sense of futility among public primary school teachers in DCC. Nearly one in five teachers, 68 individuals (19.2%) of the total surveyed respondents, reported that apprehension about possible retaliation was a central reason for remaining silent. The figure rises to 23.3%, underscoring the depth of concern regarding negative consequences. Furthermore, 117 teachers (33.0%) agreed that voicing complaints could harm their professional advancement, and 107 (30.1%) specifically feared demotion or forced transfer. An additional 106 teachers (29.9%) worried about being treated differently by supervisors or colleagues, reinforcing the widespread perception that speaking out carries real risks. Compounding this reluctance is a pervasive belief in the futility of complaining. Sixty-six teachers (18.6% of all respondents and 22.6% of valid responses) identified the expectation that complaints would not result in positive change as a major deterrent to raising concerns. When asked, 127 teachers (35.8%) stated they did not believe their complaints would lead to meaningful improvements, while 105 (29.6%) remained neutral, reflecting scepticism or uncertainty about the effectiveness of existing mechanisms. This deep-rooted expectation of inaction by authorities significantly dampens teachers' willingness to voice grievances, further perpetuating a cycle of silence within the school system.

4.2. The Extent of Perceived Futility on Teachers' Willingness to Voice Concerns

Another important finding is the impact of perceived futility on teachers' willingness to raise concerns. Sixty-six respondents (18.6% of all teachers and 22.6% of valid responses) indicated that the belief that complaining would not lead to positive changes was a major reason for their silence. When asked in the questionnaire, 127 teachers (35.8%) agreed that their complaints would not lead to meaningful improvements, and an additional 105 (29.6%) remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty about the effectiveness of existing

complaint mechanisms. This widespread sense of perceived futility illustrates how the expectation of inaction from authorities can dramatically dampen teachers' motivation to report issues.

4.3 Other Factors Influencing Silence Among Public Primary School Teachers

Beyond fear and futility, several additional factors contribute to the silence observed among public primary school teachers in DCC. Respect for authority emerged as the most frequently cited reason, with 115 teachers (32.4% of all participants and 39.4% of valid responses) indicating that they refrained from complaining out of deference to their superiors. In a conversation with head teachers, the researcher was asked, *"How could an employee complain against the appointing authority? We still need our jobs, and we have to keep silent."* These findings are consistent with Mwakalinga (2021), who highlighted the role of Tanzania's socio-cultural context in shaping voicing behaviour. Cultural norms continue to emphasise respect for elders and authority figures. The perceived ineffectiveness of complaint mechanisms was also evident: 16 teachers (4.5%) cited inadequate physical avenues for lodging complaints, while 25 teachers (7.0%) cited problems with the e-Mrejesho system. In a small number of cases, teachers suggested that harmony within the school environment rendered complaints unnecessary. At the same time, 119 teachers (33.5%) agreed that their concerns would simply be dismissed, and 110 (31.0%) believed that school administration does not take complaints seriously. Many teachers also expressed concern about the potential effects of speaking out on their careers and collegial relationships, with a substantial share reporting negative perceptions. Overall, the findings suggest that many public primary school teachers in DCC are insufficiently aware of the e-Mrejesho system, which was developed in part to protect complainants by providing anonymity (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023a).

5.0 Implications and Limitations

Taken together, the descriptive findings indicate that public primary school teachers' reluctance to express grievances stems from a complex interaction of fear of retaliation, scepticism about the effectiveness of complaints, organisational culture, and the perceived inadequacy of e-Mrejesho reporting systems. These findings point to the need for systemic reforms, including stronger protections for those who voice concerns, more effective orientation to complaint-management channels, and the promotion of a school culture that values complaints as constructive feedback (United Republic of Tanzania, 2023a). The findings should, however, be interpreted with caution because some categories contained up to 17.7% missing data, which may mean that certain nuances were not fully captured. Further qualitative research would be valuable in deepening the understanding of these dynamics.

6.0 Conclusion

This study has illuminated the multiple factors underlying the persistent silence of public primary school teachers in the Dar es Salaam City Council. The findings demonstrate that fear of retaliation, perceived futility, respect for authority, and inadequate reporting mechanisms constitute significant barriers to teachers' willingness to voice grievances. Nearly one in five teachers reported apprehension about negative repercussions, while more than one-third believed that their complaints would not lead to meaningful change. Cultural norms that favour hierarchy and harmony further reinforce this silence, and weaknesses in existing complaint systems intensify the problem. Collectively, these factors create a challenging environment in which teachers often quietly endure difficulties, potentially with negative consequences for both teacher well-being and the quality of education. By identifying these barriers, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of employee voice in public sector education and provides evidence to inform more responsive complaint-management policies and support systems.

7.0 Recommendations

This study offers three principal recommendations. First, the government should strengthen protections against retaliation. Government and educational authorities should establish and enforce robust policies that protect teachers who express concerns from any form of reprisal. Clear guidelines and transparent procedures for handling complaints should be developed and widely publicised in all schools. Second, public primary school teachers should be educated about their rights to voice concerns and the available complaint channels. Greater awareness may reduce feelings of futility and hesitation associated with lodging complaints. Third, further qualitative studies are recommended to explore the nuanced dynamics of silence and voice among teachers, particularly in other regions and contexts. Such research would support the design of more targeted interventions and support mechanisms.

In summary, addressing the barriers to teacher voice requires a holistic approach that combines institutional reform, cultural change, and ongoing research. By empowering teachers to speak openly, Tanzania's education sector can move toward greater transparency, improved morale, and enhanced outcomes for both educators and students.

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