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COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE AND LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN MERU DISTRICT, TANZANIA

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ABSTRACT

Communication is central to how school leaders clarify expectations, involve teachers in decisions, and coordinate academic work. This study explores communication competence and leadership effectiveness in Uraki, Sing'isi and Uwiro secondary schools in Meru District, Arusha, Tanzania. Informed by interpersonal communication competence and distributed leadership, it presents an interpretivist qualitative multiple-case design involving a proposed purposive sample of 21 participants: three school heads, three academic coordinators, three department heads and twelve classroom teachers. Semi-structured interviews, staff-meeting observation, and document review constitute the selected data collection methods, with reflexive thematic analysis guiding interpretation within and across cases. Findings highlight five themes: clarity depended on opportunities for explanation; consultation required visible responsiveness; respectful feedback supported professional openness; communication channels required coordination; and follow-up connected decisions with action. The analysis distinguishes transmitting information from developing shared understanding, inviting contributions from responding to them, and announcing decisions from sustaining implementation. It proposes that communication competence involves adapting explanations to circumstances, acknowledging professional perspectives, providing actionable feedback, and maintaining coordinated follow-up. Recommendations prioritise structured dialogue, developmental feedback and manageable review arrangements.

Keywords: Communication Competence; Leadership Effectiveness; Secondary Schools; Teacher Participation; Distributed Leadership; Tanzania.

1 INTRODUCTION

School leadership takes shape through everyday communication about teaching, assessment, responsibilities and improvement priorities. School heads, academic coordinators and department heads communicate expectations, explain decisions, provide feedback and respond to concerns. Through these exchanges, teachers interpret what is required and determine how to organise their work. Leadership research identifies setting direction, developing people and improving organisational conditions as interconnected practices that support school improvement (Leithwood et al., 2020). Communication connects these practices because priorities require explanation, professional support involves dialogue, and coordinated action depends on shared understanding. Examining leadership therefore requires attention to how messages are conveyed, interpreted, and followed through. Communication competence refers in this article to the capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately within particular relationships and situations.

Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) provide a foundational account of interpersonal competence, while Spitzberg (1984) identifies knowledge, motivation and skills as relevant components of competent interaction. Applied to school leadership, these concepts direct attention to clarity, listening, adaptation to audiences, respectful feedback and responsiveness. A leader may communicate an instruction promptly while leaving its practical requirements unclear. Similarly, teachers may receive opportunities to speak without understanding how their contributions affect decisions. Competence consequently concerns the quality and consequences of interaction, including whether participants can clarify meanings, examine differences, and reach workable agreements.

Recent scholarship strengthens the case for examining professional conversations as a specific leadership practice. Adams and Adigun (2024) investigate the structure of principal–teacher conversations in relation to teacher trust, autonomy and vitality. Their work directs attention to differences between conversational approaches rather than treating all leader–teacher exchanges as equivalent. Chai et al. (2026), in a qualitative study of post-observation conversations in Chinese schools, found that principals' control over problem identification and resolution could restrict opportunities to examine teachers' perspectives. These studies suggest that delivering feedback and developing shared understanding are distinct processes. They also raise questions about how leaders combine professional authority with openness to information that challenges their initial interpretation. Their findings inform the present inquiry without establishing that similar practices occur in Tanzanian schools. Leadership effectiveness is understood here through experiences and practices involving coordination, responsiveness, conflict resolution and implementation. It is not inferred from examination results or treated as a fixed personal attribute of the school head. Hallinger (2018) emphasises the contextual conditions shaping leadership, while Liebowitz and Porter (2019) identify relationships between principal behaviours and school outcomes alongside limitations in the available evidence. These perspectives support examining how communication operates within school routines, professional relationships and administrative responsibilities. A qualitative approach can explain how participants experience these processes and identify circumstances in which communication facilitates or complicates action. It cannot, by itself, establish causal effects on student achievement.

Trust provides an important connection between communication and leadership practice. Teachers' willingness to raise concerns, acknowledge difficulties or question an interpretation may depend partly on their expectations of the leader's response. Sun et al. (2023), in a meta-analysis of 83 studies, identify relationships among school leadership, teacher trust and student learning, with supportive and collegial leadership particularly relevant to trust. This evidence supports examining relational conditions alongside instructional responsibilities. In the present study, trust is approached through concrete experiences of listening, consistency, respectful treatment, and follow-through. These experiences can illuminate why teachers participate openly in some interactions while withholding concerns in others, without assuming that respectful communication alone guarantees effective implementation. Organisational communication research offers additional grounds for investigating dialogue and responsiveness. Men (2014) identifies relationships among transformational leadership, symmetrical internal communication, and employee satisfaction. Men et al. (2020) further examine executive leadership communication in relation to employee trust and support for organisational change. Although these studies concern corporate settings, they provide conceptual insights into how leadership communication can involve explanation, relational attention and reciprocal exchange. Their relevance to schools requires contextual examination because teachers' professional responsibilities, educational goals and institutional arrangements differ from those of corporate employees. School leadership scholarship addresses these organisational questions through distributed leadership, which emphasises interdependent practice and the contribution of multiple participants (Harris et al., 2022).

Teacher participation is especially relevant where improvement depends on knowledge distributed across subjects and departments. School heads may establish priorities, but teachers possess classroom experience needed to interpret learning difficulties and assess proposed responses. Communication can make this expertise available through questioning, discussion, and explanation of decisions. Distributed leadership provides a basis for examining whether such contributions shape action or remain confined to consultation (Harris et al., 2022). The distinction is important because attendance at meetings does not establish substantive influence. Participation can also involve understanding why a suggestion was modified or rejected, provided that the reasons are explained and teachers retain opportunities to contribute to implementation. Communication also forms part of professional learning. Discussions of student work, lesson difficulties and assessment results can help teachers examine assumptions and consider alternative approaches. Postholm (2018) and Hauge (2019) identify the importance of school-based and collective professional development, while de Jong et al. (2022) examine conditions that enable or constrain collaboration in secondary schools. These studies support investigating the substance of professional exchange: whether teachers explain problems, consider evidence, receive practical guidance, and revisit agreed changes. Chai et al. (2026) further highlight how apparently supportive feedback can leave important instructional questions insufficiently examined when leaders' interpretations dominate the conversation. Professional dialogue therefore requires attention to both relational respect and opportunities for inquiry.

The use of digital communication introduces further questions about accessibility, consistency and professional boundaries. Messaging applications can circulate reminders quickly, but their usefulness depends on how leaders organise messages, communicate revisions and manage expectations of availability. Toker Gökçe and Balcı (2023), drawing on interviews with teachers in primary and secondary schools in Turkey, found that excessive or inappropriate use of WhatsApp by some principals created pressure on teachers. Their study demonstrates why channel availability cannot be equated with communication effectiveness. In Tanzanian schools, the relevance of these concerns requires empirical investigation into how digital and face-to-face communication interact, who receives updated information, and whether staff have appropriate opportunities for clarification.

In Tanzania, leadership communication operates within arrangements for school management, instructional supervision and quality assurance. The *School Quality Assurance Handbook* provides an institutional framework for reviewing educational provision and supporting improvement (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MoEST], 2017). Communication matters within these processes because review findings and recommendations require interpretation, allocation of responsibility, and follow-up. Recent Tanzanian research also supports attention to school-level leadership practices. Mulokozi and Mwemezi (2024) examine leadership culture in high-performing public secondary schools, providing locally relevant evidence for considering how leadership relates to the organisation of academic work. However, their selected setting does not establish conditions in other schools or explain how teachers experience particular communication episodes. These questions are consistent with renewed international attention to educational leadership. UNESCO (2024) emphasises setting expectations, focusing on learning, promoting collaboration and developing people, while recognising the wider conditions under which leaders work. Communication links these responsibilities with implementation, but its contribution depends on more than individual skill. Workload, established hierarchies, opportunities for professional learning and access to communication channels may influence what leaders and teachers can sustain. These conditions are empirical questions for the selected schools rather than presumed characteristics of Tanzanian secondary education.

The research problem concerns how communication competence becomes visible in the interactions through which school leadership is exercised. Existing scholarship establishes the relevance of leadership, trust, professional learning and conversational practices, but it does not explain how these processes operate in Uraki, Sing'isi and Uwiro secondary schools. The present inquiry therefore examines the relationship between leaders' intended messages, teachers' interpretations, and subsequent action. Its focus extends from whether information is communicated to how questions are handled, decisions explained, disagreements addressed, and responsibilities reviewed. This provides a specific basis for investigating communication within leadership practice without claiming an absence of previous research.

The study focuses on Uraki, Sing'isi and Uwiro secondary schools in Meru District, Arusha, Tanzania. A qualitative multiple-case approach permits examination of participants' experiences within each school and comparison across the three settings. The inquiry addresses three questions: How do school leaders communicate expectations, decisions, and feedback? How do teachers experience listening and participation in relation to leadership practice? What conditions enable or constrain communication that supports coordinated action? Its intended contribution is a contextual explanation of how communication connects leadership responsibilities with professional understanding, participation and implementation. Evidence from the selected cases can inform consideration of comparable settings, while remaining distinct from statistical generalisation or demonstrated effects on student achievement.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is guided by interpersonal communication competence and distributed leadership perspectives. These complementary approaches support examination of how school leaders communicate and how communication enables teachers to contribute to decisions and coordinate academic work. Interpersonal communication competence directs attention to the quality and contextual suitability of exchanges, while distributed leadership examines the interactions through which authority, expertise and responsibility are exercised across school roles (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Harris et al., 2022). The interpersonal communication competence perspective distinguishes effectiveness from appropriateness. Effectiveness concerns whether communication achieves its intended purpose, whereas appropriateness concerns whether it fits the expectations of the relationship and situation (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg, 1984). Both dimensions are relevant to school leadership. An instruction may secure compliance while discouraging teachers from raising concerns, and a courteous conversation may preserve relationships while leaving responsibilities unclear. Competent communication therefore involves achieving a workable understanding while maintaining conditions for respectful professional interaction. Knowledge, motivation and communication skills contribute to leaders' capacity to explain expectations, listen to responses and adapt their approach to different circumstances.

In this study, communication competence provides sensitising concepts for examining clarity, listening, checking understanding, audience adaptation and constructive feedback. These concepts guide interpretation of particular

communication episodes rather than operate as a scoring instrument. School leaders and teachers may interpret the same exchange differently because of their responsibilities, previous experiences and expectations. Such differences are analytically useful because they reveal how intended messages relate to their reception. The inquiry consequently examines when communication supports understanding and action, and when uncertainty or unresolved disagreement persists. Distributed leadership directs attention to leadership as an interdependent practice involving formal leaders, teachers and organisational situations (Harris et al., 2022). This perspective is relevant because communication about teaching, assessment and improvement often involves school heads, academic coordinators, department heads and classroom teachers. Leadership is examined through their interactions, including how classroom knowledge enters planning, how decisions are explained and how responsibilities are coordinated. Delegating tasks does not necessarily give teachers influence over priorities or implementation arrangements. Meaningful participation requires closer examination of whose contributions are considered and how those contributions inform action.

The distributed leadership perspective also supports attention to the organisational conditions enabling participation. Leithwood et al. (2020) emphasise leadership practices that develop people and strengthen the conditions surrounding their work. Applied here, this directs inquiry towards opportunities for dialogue, access to relevant information and support for carrying out agreed responsibilities. Teachers may be invited to contribute while lacking sufficient time or information to participate effectively. The analysis therefore considers both opportunities to express views and the arrangements through which those views receive a response.

These perspectives connect the quality of communication with the organisation of leadership practice. Interpersonal communication competence helps explain how messages are conveyed, interpreted and negotiated, while distributed leadership examines whose expertise informs decisions and how collective action is organised. Their combined application supports analysis of instructions that leave little room for questions, consultation without visible responsiveness and delegated responsibilities without adequate support. Workload and resource availability are treated as contextual conditions shaping these interactions. The framework thus provides an interpretive basis for examining communication and leadership effectiveness without assuming that clear messages, respectful relationships or shared responsibilities automatically produce improved teaching or student achievement.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research orientation and design

The study adopts an interpretivist orientation and a qualitative multiple-case study design. The interpretivist perspective supports examination of how school leaders and teachers understand communication within their professional relationships and everyday work. Qualitative inquiry attends to participants' meanings and the contexts in which experiences occur (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each school constitutes a case, enabling detailed examination of communication practices within its organisational setting and comparison across the three schools (Yin, 2018). Semi-structured interviews provide the primary source of evidence, supplemented by staff-meeting observation and document review. Combining these sources supports examination of participants' accounts alongside observed interactions and recorded decisions (Yin, 2018). The design seeks contextual understanding of communication and leadership practice rather than estimates of prevalence or causal effects on educational outcomes.

3.2 Study setting and case selection

The selected study settings are Uraki, Sing'isi and Uwiro secondary schools in Meru District, Arusha Region, Tanzania. The schools are purposively selected to examine communication among school leaders and teachers across three organisational settings. Purposive selection prioritises cases relevant to the research questions and capable of supporting detailed inquiry (Patton, 2015). Their inclusion enables investigation of how expectations are explained, concerns addressed, decisions communicated, and academic responsibilities coordinated. Each school is examined within its particular organisational context. Comparisons focus on similarities and differences in communication experiences and practices, supported by contextual evidence. This approach preserves the relationship between a case and its setting rather than treating accounts as detached observations (Yin, 2018). School characteristics, including staffing, enrolment, ownership, and academic performance, require verification before they inform interpretation. The selection does not provide statistical representation of secondary schools in Meru District.

3.3 Participants and sampling

The study involved 21 participants, with seven from each school: one school head, one academic master or mistress, one department head and four classroom teachers. Across the three schools, the sample comprised three school heads, three academic coordinators, three department heads, and twelve classroom teachers. Participants in the classroom teacher category were distinct from those included in leadership roles. Purposive sampling was used to select participants whose responsibilities and direct experiences were relevant to leadership communication. This approach

prioritised information-rich accounts rather than statistical representation (Patton, 2015). School heads provided perspectives on priorities, decisions and organisational coordination; academic coordinators contributed accounts of assessment and instructional communication; and department heads explained communication within subject departments. Classroom teachers provided complementary perspectives on how leadership messages were received, interpreted and acted upon. Selection sought variation in teaching experience, subject departments and involvement in school activities.

Recruitment was organised to preserve voluntary participation and reduce managerial influence over teachers' decisions to participate. Sample adequacy was considered through participant relevance, the specificity of the research questions, the quality of interview dialogue and the depth of analysis within and across cases. These considerations drew on Malterud et al.'s (2016) concept of information power.

3.4 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews explored participants' experiences of communication concerning expectations, decisions, feedback and implementation. The method combined a focused interview guide with flexibility to explore participants' meanings and pursue relevant issues emerging during conversation (Kallio et al., 2016). The guide prioritised concrete episodes, including instructions, improvement decisions, supervision conversations and disagreements requiring resolution. Follow-up questions examined what was communicated, how participants understood it, whether clarification was possible, and what action followed. Leaders discussed their intentions and responses. At the same time, teachers described their understanding and opportunities to contribute.

Interviews were conducted in English or Kiswahili according to participants' preferences and lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. Separate consent was obtained for audio recording. Where recording was declined, written notes were taken with participants' agreement. Recorded interviews were transcribed, and selected Kiswahili extracts were translated into English for reporting. Translation attended to contextual meaning, recognising its interpretive role in cross-language qualitative research (Squires, 2009). Original-language extracts were retained to support checking of translated quotations.

Staff-meeting observation examined opportunities for questioning, responses to differing views and arrangements for recording decisions. Document review covered relevant agendas, minutes, notices and follow-up records where access was authorised. These documents provided contextual information and helped trace formal decisions. Their interpretation considered their purpose, authorship and circumstances of production (Bowen, 2009). Recorded decisions were distinguished from evidence of agreement or completed implementation.

3.5 Data analysis and methodological quality

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The process involved familiarisation with the material, coding, development of candidate themes, review, definition and preparation of the analytical account. Interpersonal communication competence and distributed leadership provided sensitising concepts, including clarity, listening, responsiveness, participation and coordination. Analysis also remained open to meanings and experiences extending beyond these initial concepts.

Analysis began within each school to preserve the context of communication episodes before examining patterns across cases (Yin, 2018). Differences between leaders' and teachers' accounts received particular attention, alongside accounts that challenged emerging interpretations. Observations and documents contextualised interviews, while distinctions between reported experiences, observed behaviour and formal records were maintained.

Methodological quality was supported through documentation of sampling and analytical decisions, contextual description and careful selection of extracts. Reflexive notes examined how the researcher's assumptions and relationship to the setting shaped interpretation. These practices supported methodological coherence and transparency in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes were developed through interpretive engagement with the material rather than established through coding agreement.

3.6 Ethical considerations and limitations

The study prioritised informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, privacy and secure data handling throughout recruitment, data collection, analysis and reporting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants received information about the study's purpose, activities, recording options and agreed conditions for withdrawal. Informed consent was obtained before participation, and institutional permission to access schools was distinguished from individual consent. Recruitment and interviewing arrangements sought to minimise pressure on teachers when discussing leadership within their workplaces.

Participants' identities were protected through codes and careful treatment of role descriptions and contextual details. Particular attention was given to the possibility of identification through distinctive positions or recognisable events, because removing names alone does not ensure confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009). Electronic records were stored in password-protected files, with access restricted to authorised researchers. Data retention and disposal followed the applicable research protocol.

The study had several limitations. Participants' accounts were potentially influenced by recall, social desirability, and reluctance to criticise school leadership. Observation captured particular interactions and could have been affected by the researcher's presence. Purposive selection of three schools limited statistical generalisation, although contextual description supported assessment of relevance to comparable settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Student achievement was not directly measured, and the design did not establish causal relationships between communication competence and leadership effectiveness.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Clarity depended on opportunities for explanation

This theme highlights the distinction between receiving an instruction and understanding how to carry it out. Communicating a deadline may establish when a task is due while leaving its requirements unclear. Opportunities for explanation and questioning can clarify the task's purpose, expected output, and allocation of responsibility. The following quotation shows this distinction:

"We may receive the date for submitting the assessment report, but the difficult part is knowing which information is required. When someone explains the format and allows questions, we can prepare it with more confidence."

The insight suggests that clarity develops through interaction. The uncertainty concerns the information required and how to present it, indicating a need for practical guidance. Checking understanding can reveal differing interpretations before teachers prepare their reports. Leadership communication therefore involves explaining requirements and providing opportunities to resolve questions arising during implementation.

The second \quotation shows how the amount of explanation can vary with task familiarity:

"Sometimes a short instruction is enough because everyone knows the routine. For a new task, I need to explain why we are doing it and ask what is unclear before we finish the meeting."

This insight suggests that communication competence involves adapting explanations to the situation and participants' existing knowledge. Familiar activities may require brief reminders, whereas new responsibilities may require discussion of their purpose and procedures. The analytical interpretation is that clarity depends on relevant explanation and opportunities to check understanding.

4.2 Consultation required visible responsiveness

This theme examines how leaders respond to teachers' contributions during consultation. Invitations to express views can create opportunities for participation, but teachers may remain uncertain about their influence when subsequent decisions are communicated without explanation. The following quotation highlights this concern:

"We are asked for suggestions, but after the meeting we do not always know which ideas were accepted. Even when our suggestion cannot be used, an explanation helps us understand the decision."

It suggests that meaningful consultation involves acknowledging contributions and explaining how they were considered. Responsiveness may include accepting a suggestion, adapting it, or providing reasons for its rejection. Teachers' influence therefore does not depend on every proposal being adopted. Explaining the decision allows staff to understand the constraints involved and assess whether their knowledge informed the process. Without this response, an invitation to contribute may leave the substance of participation unclear.

The second quotation highlights a practical adjustment arising from consultation:

"A teacher proposed a different time for departmental discussions because some colleagues were teaching during the original period. Changing the time made it possible for more people to contribute."

This connects responsiveness with the conditions enabling participation. Adjusting the meeting time addresses an obstacle raised by teachers and makes the consequence of their contribution visible. It also suggests that participation

depends partly on organisational arrangements, including whether staff have time to attend and contribute. The analytical interpretation is that consultation gains credibility when leaders acknowledge suggestions, explain decisions and communicate resulting changes.

4.3 Respectful feedback supported professional openness

This theme explores how the delivery and content of feedback relate to teachers' willingness to discuss teaching difficulties. Feedback may identify a concern while leaving the teacher uncertain about how to address it. The manner in which the concern is raised can also influence whether the teacher feels able to explain the situation or seek further support. The following quotation shows this relationship:

"If a difficulty is raised in front of everyone as a personal failure, I become careful about what I say next time. A private discussion about what happened and what I can try makes it easier to ask for help."

This suggests that feedback experienced as personal criticism may discourage subsequent openness. A private discussion can provide space to explain difficulties and consider possible responses while preserving professional dignity. Collective feedback can also be useful when it addresses shared instructional issues respectfully. The relevant consideration is whether the exchange enables teachers to discuss concerns without fear of humiliation.

The second quotation highlights the importance of specific guidance:

"Useful feedback tells me which part of the lesson needs attention. It is easier to work on the change when we agree on an example or a practical step, rather than only hearing that the lesson was not good."

This insight suggests that feedback becomes actionable when it identifies a particular issue and supports agreement on a practical response. General criticism offers limited direction, whereas a focused discussion can clarify what requires attention and how the teacher might proceed. The analytical interpretation connects respectful treatment with useful instructional guidance. Respect creates conditions for teachers to explain difficulties, while specificity helps translate discussion into action.

4.4 Communication channels required coordination

This theme examines how different communication channels affect the consistency and accessibility of information. Written notices, digital messages and face-to-face exchanges can support school coordination. Still, uncertainty may arise when updates reach only some staff or when several versions of an instruction remain in circulation. The following quotation shows this difficulty:

"A message may be sent to the group, then changed during a conversation with one department. If the change is not shared with everyone, we arrive with different understandings of what was agreed."

It highlights the importance of communicating revisions through channels accessible to all affected staff. Informal clarification may resolve an immediate question while creating uneven access to updated information. A written or digital record is useful only when staff can identify whether it remains current. Coordination therefore includes communicating changes and clarifying which instruction applies.

Another quotation shows how channel preferences can vary according to the purpose of communication:

"For an urgent reminder, the phone message helps. For a concern that needs discussion, I prefer speaking directly because I can explain the situation and ask questions immediately."

This suggests that brief reminders and matters requiring discussion place different demands on communication. Digital messages may facilitate timely notification, while direct conversation can provide opportunities to explain circumstances and resolve questions. Sensitive matters also require attention to privacy and the appropriateness of the audience. The analytical interpretation is that communication competence involves selecting suitable channels and coordinating information across them. Purpose, accessibility, confidentiality, and opportunities for clarification all matter.

4.5 Follow-up connected decisions with action

This theme examines how communication sustains implementation after a decision has been made. Meetings may establish priorities while leaving responsibility, required support and review arrangements unclear. Follow-up provides opportunities to assess progress, discuss difficulties and adjust activities when circumstances change. The following quotation shows the importance of these arrangements:

"We may agree that a department will support students who are struggling, but unless someone is named and we decide when to review it, the discussion can disappear as other work becomes urgent."

This suggests that agreement on a priority does not necessarily establish how it will be implemented. Identifying a responsible person and a review date can clarify coordination and maintain attention as other demands arise. However, assigning responsibility also requires consideration of the time, resources, and assistance needed to complete the activity. Follow-up can make these needs visible and provide a basis for responding to them.

The second quotation shows how reviewing previous agreements can maintain continuity:

"When the next meeting begins with a review of the previous agreement, we can explain what we managed and what delayed us. That makes the decision feel like continuing work rather than something said once."

This presents review as an opportunity to account for progress and explain obstacles. Constructive discussion of delays can help leaders and teachers identify whether an activity requires additional support, a revised timetable or a different approach. Repeated requests for progress reports may offer limited value when the difficulties raised remain unresolved. This further means that follow-up connects decision-making with continuing responsibility and support. Its usefulness depends on whether communication prompts practical responses to implementation difficulties.

5 DISCUSSION

The analysis positions communication competence as part of the everyday practice of school leadership. Clarity, listening, feedback, and follow-up provide ways through which academic priorities become understood and translated into action. Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) distinction between effectiveness and appropriateness helps explain why successful message delivery alone is insufficient: communication also requires attention to its relational consequences and suitability for the situation. Leithwood et al. (2020) similarly connect leadership with developing people and strengthening organisational conditions. These perspectives suggest examining whether communication enables staff to understand responsibilities, contribute professional knowledge, and coordinate their work.

The clarity theme suggests that understanding develops through opportunities for explanation and questioning. Communicating a deadline may establish urgency while leaving the expected output or procedure uncertain. Hallinger's (2018) emphasis on context supports adapting communication to task familiarity, participants' responsibilities, and available resources. Adams and Adigun (2024) further direct attention to the structure of principal–teacher conversations, reinforcing the value of examining how exchanges are conducted. In this interpretation, checking understanding allows leaders to identify differences between intended and received meanings. The practical issue is whether explanations address the questions staff encounter when carrying out a task. Brief instructions may be sufficient for familiar routines, whereas unfamiliar responsibilities may require more sustained discussion.

The consultation theme highlights responsiveness as a condition for meaningful participation. Invitations to speak provide an opportunity for contribution, but their value depends partly on how leaders consider suggestions and explain subsequent decisions. Harris et al. (2022) conceptualise distributed leadership through interdependent practice, offering a basis for distinguishing consultation from substantive influence. Teachers do not need every proposal to be accepted to recognise that their knowledge has been considered. Explaining why a suggestion was adopted, modified or rejected can make the decision-making process more understandable. This interpretation places participation within continuing dialogue rather than treating meeting attendance as sufficient evidence of shared leadership. It also preserves the distinction between teachers' professional influence and school heads' formal decision-making responsibilities.

The feedback theme connects professional dignity with opportunities for instructional learning. Respectful exchanges can enable teachers to explain difficulties, while specific guidance helps identify a manageable response. Liu and Hallinger (2018) identify relationships among instructional leadership, teacher self-efficacy and professional learning, while Kraft et al. (2018) demonstrate the potential benefits of teacher coaching under particular implementation conditions. More recent qualitative research by Chai et al. (2026) shows how leaders' control over the interpretation of instructional problems can restrict examination of teachers' perspectives. Read together, these studies suggest that feedback involves both clear guidance and openness to alternative explanations. A supportive manner can facilitate dialogue, but its developmental contribution depends on the substance of the discussion, opportunities to act and subsequent review.

Professional openness also requires attention to the conditions supporting collaboration. De Jong et al. (2022) identify factors that enable or constrain teacher collaboration in secondary schools, while Admiraal et al. (2021) connect professional learning communities with shared vision, collaborative work and organisational arrangements. These

perspectives suggest that willingness to discuss difficulties becomes more useful when staff have time and support to investigate them collectively. Postholm (2018) and Hauge (2019) similarly emphasise school-based and collective professional development. Sun et al. (2023) identify relationships between supportive leadership and teacher trust, strengthening the case for examining relational conditions alongside learning opportunities. Trust may encourage teachers to seek assistance, while scheduled collaboration and practical guidance help sustain the professional work that follows.

The communication channel theme draws attention to consistency, accessibility and suitability. Digital messages can circulate information quickly, but revisions communicated through separate conversations may leave staff working from different instructions. Men (2014) provides a conceptual basis for considering leadership, channel use and reciprocal communication together. Toker Gökçe and Balcı (2023) additionally show that the use of WhatsApp by school principals can create pressure when communication becomes excessive or inappropriate. These studies suggest that channel selection involves more than speed. Leaders also need to consider the purpose of the message, who can access it, whether clarification is possible, and how changes are communicated. In the selected schools, connectivity, privacy and expectations of availability remain matters for empirical examination rather than assumed conditions.

Follow-up connects communication with the implementation of decisions. Schildkamp (2019) describes improvement as an iterative process involving goals, evidence, interpretation, action and evaluation. Schildkamp et al. (2019) further identify leadership practices supporting collaborative data use, including clear goals, professional support, and a climate focused on improvement. These perspectives help explain why announcing an action differs from sustaining it. Assigning responsibility and scheduling review can maintain attention, while discussion of obstacles can prompt assistance or adjustment. Within Tanzania's quality assurance context, this interpretation connects communication with the improvement purposes of school review (MoEST, 2017). However, recording a decision or requesting a progress report does not establish that an activity was completed or that it improved teaching.

Workload and resource availability qualify the relationship between communication and leadership effectiveness. Clear instructions cannot, by themselves, provide missing materials or create time within an overloaded timetable. Daniëls et al. (2019) examine leadership and leadership development, while UNESCO (2024) situates educational leadership within wider systems of responsibility and support. These perspectives suggest examining whether leaders acknowledge implementation conditions and use communication to coordinate assistance, revise priorities, or raise needs beyond the school. Failure to complete an activity may reflect several interacting constraints. Its explanation therefore requires evidence about both communication practices and the practical means available to carry out agreed responsibilities.

The combined framework explains communication through the relationship between interaction quality and the organisation of leadership. Interpersonal communication competence directs attention to clarity, appropriateness and responsiveness, while distributed leadership examines how expertise, voice and responsibility enter collective action. Their combined application suggests that leadership effectiveness involves continuing exchanges through which priorities are interpreted, questioned and implemented. Liebowitz and Porter (2019) identify relationships between principal behaviours and educational outcomes while highlighting limitations in the supporting evidence.

6 CONCLUSION

The analysis suggests that communication competence supports leadership through the interactions that help staff understand expectations, contribute to decisions, and sustain agreed actions. Clarity depends on relevant explanations and opportunities for questioning; meaningful consultation involves acknowledging contributions and explaining decisions; and developmental feedback combines professional respect with practical guidance. Coordinated communication channels and continuing follow-up provide further support for implementation. The central interpretation is that leadership effectiveness depends partly on how communication connects professional understanding with organisational action. These processes also require time, resources and arrangements for reviewing progress. The multiple-case design offers a basis for examining leaders' intentions alongside teachers' experiences in Uraki, Sing'isi and Uwiro secondary schools.

Recommendations

(i) **Establish clear explanations and responsive dialogue.** School leaders can communicate each significant task's purpose, expected output, responsible person, and deadline, while providing opportunities for clarification. Brief decision records can explain how teachers' suggestions were considered and communicate subsequent changes through an agreed channel accessible to affected staff.

(ii) **Strengthen developmental feedback.** School heads, academic coordinators and department heads can organise respectful feedback discussions that identify a specific instructional concern, invite the teacher's

perspective and agree on a practical response. Peer assistance or coaching can support implementation, followed by a scheduled review of progress and remaining difficulties.

(iii) **Maintain manageable follow-up arrangements.** Each improvement activity can specify a coordinator, required resources, and review date. Regular reviews can examine progress, address obstacles and adjust unrealistic plans. Unresolved needs can be communicated to district education authorities, with subsequent responses shared with responsible staff.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Statement of Ethical Approval

The study was conducted in accordance with established ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Ethical approval and institutional authorisation were obtained from the Tengeru Institute of Community Development and Meru District Council before the commencement of data collection. Further administrative permission was obtained from the relevant authorities of all participating secondary schools in Meru District, Tanzania.

Statement of Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their involvement in the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw in accordance with the research protocol. Separate consent was obtained for audio recording of interviews.

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