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Challenges Affecting Teachers' Autonomy in Promoting Pupils' Discipline in Primary Schools in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania

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Abstract: **This study examined the challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline in primary schools in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania. Guided by Teacher Professional Autonomy Theory, the study employed a convergent mixed-methods design involving 100 participants from 13 selected primary schools. The participants comprised 87 teachers selected through simple random sampling and 13 head teachers purposively selected. Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, in SPSS, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The findings from both data sources were integrated during interpretation. The questionnaire demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.853). The findings identified institutional, professional, and contextual challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in the selected schools. These included strict government regulations and unclear school policies (mean = 4.41), parental complaints and community expectations (mean = 4.36), large classes and inadequate professional training (mean = 4.32), child-rights reforms and inadequate resources (mean = 4.25), and administrative interference and excessive accountability (mean = 4.25). These findings suggest that teachers' ability to exercise professional judgement in promoting pupils' discipline is shaped by institutional support, professional preparation, clear disciplinary procedures, working conditions, and relationships with parents and communities. The study recommends clarifying teachers' disciplinary responsibilities, strengthening professional development in positive discipline, improving school resources, and promoting collaboration between schools, parents, and communities while safeguarding pupils' rights.**

Keywords: **teacher autonomy, pupil discipline, classroom management, primary schools, Tanzania.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Pupil discipline is an important component of effective teaching and learning because it contributes to an arranged classroom environment, pupils' engagement and achievement of educational objectives. Teachers play a central role in promoting discipline through classroom management, guidance, counselling and appropriate disciplinary practices. Recent evidence shows that teachers' classroom-management approaches are closely related to pupils' behavioral and learning outcomes (Clark et al., 2023)

In recent years, pupils' discipline has shifted from punitive approaches towards positive, rights-based and supportive practices. Teachers must use appropriate and policy-compliant disciplinary techniques while maintaining classroom order as a result of this change. Teachers are crucial in enforcing school discipline in Tanzania and research indicates that improving their skills might lessen detrimental disciplinary actions (Masath et al., 2023). For teachers to effectively address students' behavioral issues, they must have sufficient professional autonomy and institutional support.

The ability of teachers to use professional judgment and make choices about instruction, classroom management and student behavior is referred to as teacher autonomy. Teachers respond to students' behavioral requirements based on their professional knowledge and classroom conditions when they have autonomy, which helps to promote discipline. Institutional, professional influences teachers' autonomy and policy contexts and their professional experiences may be adversely affected by a lack of autonomy (Jerrim et al., 2023; Lin & Gao, 2023).

Teachers encounter obstacles that limit their independence in encouraging student discipline, such as stringent school policies, little administrative assistance, insufficient professional training, big class sizes and family expectations. Teachers' capacity to make prompt and appropriate decisions regarding students' behavior be impacted by these difficulties. In Tanzania, recent evidence from public primary schools shows the importance of improving teachers' competencies and reducing harmful disciplinary practices in schools (Masath et al., 2023).

While prior research has looked at student discipline, classroom management and teacher autonomy, little focus has been placed on the particular difficulties that hinder teachers' autonomy in fostering discipline in Tanzanian primary schools. Specifically, less is known about how teachers' professional decision-making is limited by administrative, regulatory, professional and parental concerns. Thus, this study investigates the obstacles to instructors' autonomy in fostering students' discipline in Tanzania's Morogoro Municipality's primary schools. It is anticipated that the study would offer proof for enhancing elementary school disciplinary procedures and teachers' professional decision-making.The aim of the study is to examine the challenges affecting teaches' autonomy in promoting pupils discipline in primary schools in Morogoro Municipality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the study was Teacher Professional Autonomy Theory, informed by the work of Eliot Freidson (1970) which conceptualizes teacher autonomy as the professional freedom and discretion teachers have to make decisions concerning teaching, classroom management and pupils' behavioral needs. According to the hypothesis (Jerrim et al., 2023; Keddie et al., 2023), instructors need a fair amount of professional space to use their judgment while adhering to institutional norms, professional standards and accountability requirements. The theory was suitable for this study because it offers a foundation for analyzing how teachers' autonomy in encouraging students' discipline be limited by administrative constraints, school rules, workload, limited professional development, parental expectations and insufficient institutional support. The study examined the obstacles that limit teachers' capacity to use professional judgment while upholding accountability and defending students' rights in elementary schools in Tanzania's Morogoro Municipality.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a convergent mixed-methods design to examine challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline in selected public and private primary schools in Morogoro Municipality, Tanzania. The convergent design enabled the collection of quantitative and qualitative data within the same phase of the study. The two sets of data were analyzed separately and integrated. The findings were compared according to the study objectives and the main challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated through narrative integration during the interpretation of results. Quantitative findings from teachers' questionnaires were presented alongside qualitative themes and illustrative quotations from head teachers' interviews. The findings were compared according to the study objectives to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and divergence. Qualitative explanations were used to contextualize and elaborate on the quantitative patterns, while differences between the two data sources were considered in developing the overall interpretation of the challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline. (Younas et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024).

The study population consisted of 3,157 individuals, comprising 3,029 teachers and 128 head teachers. The sample size was initially estimated using Yamane's (1967) formula, which yielded approximately 97 participants at a 10% margin of error and 13 head teachers. Therefore, the planned sample were 110 respondents while actual study involved 100 participants, comprising 87 teachers and 13 head teachers. The study was conducted in 13 selected primary schools in Morogoro Municipality, including 11 public primary schools and 2 private primary schools.

The study employed simple random sampling using the lottery method to select teachers from the 13 selected primary schools. The schools comprised 11 public primary schools and 2 private primary schools. Seven teachers were selected from each public primary school, resulting in 77 teachers, while five teachers were selected from each private primary

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school, resulting in 10 teachers. Therefore, a total of 87 teachers participated in the questionnaire survey. The lottery method involved writing the names or identification numbers of eligible teachers on separate pieces of paper, folding them, placing them in a container, and randomly drawing the required number without replacement from each school. This procedure ensured that each eligible teacher within the respective school had an equal chance of selection. In addition, 13 head teachers were purposively selected based on their management responsibilities and involvement in school disciplinary procedures, bringing the total sample to 100 participants.

Data were collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Questionnaires were administered to the 87 teachers to obtain quantitative information on perceived challenges affecting disciplinary autonomy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the 13 head teachers to obtain further explanations of school policies, administrative practices, professional support, workload, resource constraints, and relationships with parents and communities. The use of both questionnaires and interviews enabled the study to obtain numerical information alongside detailed explanations of the challenges experienced in school disciplinary practices.

The research instruments were pre-tested and validated before the main data collection. Educational leadership experts reviewed the instruments to ensure their relevance and clarity. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.853. According to Hayes and Coutts (2020), Cronbach's alpha is commonly used to assess the internal consistency of a scale. The obtained coefficient indicated satisfactory internal consistency among the questionnaire items.

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, were used to summarize participants' responses and identify the main challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline. Qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed thematically. This involved familiarization with the data, coding relevant information, identifying recurring patterns, and developing themes related to the research objectives. Following the separate analyses, the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation to identify areas of convergence, complementarity, and differences between teachers' responses and head teachers' explanations (Younas et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT on 12 May 2026. Ref No. AB.210/249/01/63. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the relevant educational authorities. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to decline participation or withdraw in accordance with the approved study procedures. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and the collected data were used solely for academic purposes.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Challenges Affecting Teachers' Autonomy in Promoting Pupils' Discipline

The study examined the challenges affecting teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline in primary schools in Morogoro Municipality. The study required to identify institutional, professional, contextual and resource-related factors that constrain teachers' ability to exercise professional judgement and make autonomous decisions concerning pupils' discipline. The findings of the study are presented in the Table below.

Responses of teachers on the Challenges Affecting Teachers' Autonomy in Promoting Pupils' Discipline (n=87).

SN	STATEMENT	SD		D		U		A		SA		MEAN
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	Strict government regulations and unclear school policies constrain teachers' disciplinary autonomy.	1	1.1	2	2.3	2	2.3	37	42.5	45	51.7	**4.41**
2	Administrative interference and excessive accountability limit teachers' disciplinary independence.	1	1.1	3	3.4	4	4.6	44	50.6	35	40.2	**4.25**

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3	Large classes and inadequate training limit teachers' effective disciplinary practices.	1	1.1	3	3.4	4	4.6	38	43.7	41	47.1	**4.32**
4	Parental complaints and community expectations restrict teachers' disciplinary authority.	1	1.1	3	3.4	1	1.1	41	47.1	41	47.1	**4.36**
5	Child-rights reforms and inadequate resources limit teachers' disciplinary flexibility	3	3.4	2	2.3	5	5.7	37	42.5	40	46.0	**4.25**

Key: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, U = Uncertain, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree

***Source*:** Field Data, 2026

Note: Percentages may not total exactly 100% due to rounding to one decimal place.

The findings in table indicate that 94.3% of teachers agreed that strict government regulations and unclear school policies constrain teachers' disciplinary autonomy, while 3.4% disagreed and 2.3% were undecided. The mean score of 4.41 indicates a high level of agreement. This finding suggests that government regulations and school policies influence the extent to which teachers exercise professional judgement in dealing with pupils' disciplinary problems. From the perspective of the Teacher Professional Autonomy Theory, teachers require reasonable professional discretion to make decisions concerning their professional responsibilities. However, when regulations are perceived as restrictive or unclear, teachers become hesitant to exercise independent judgement. A Head Teacher explained that: *"Teachers are responsible for maintaining discipline, but they have to follow government guidelines. Sometimes a teacher may know how to handle a particular case, but the regulations make the teacher very careful before taking action."* (HT, 2026). The results are in line with those of Narayanan et al. (2024), who show that instructors use their autonomy within organizational frameworks and that the level of discretion they have is influenced by institutional settings. In order to allow teachers to use their professional judgment while still adhering to institutional norms, the research indicates that clear disciplinary policies are crucial.

The findings in table indicate that 90.8% of teachers agreed that administrative interference and excessive accountability limit teachers' disciplinary independence, while 4.6% disagreed and 4.6% were undecided. The mean score of 4.25 indicates a high level of agreement. This result suggests that frequent administrative intervention reduces teachers' sense of professional independence in handling disciplinary cases. Teacher Professional Autonomy Theory emphasizes the importance of allowing teachers to apply professional judgement within their areas of responsibility. A Head Teacher explained that: *"Accountability is necessary, but when every disciplinary decision made by a teacher has to be questioned by the administration, teachers may become afraid of making decisions on their own."* (H T, 2026). Kamugisha et al. (2024) support this finding; they emphasize the value of teacher autonomy in Tanzanian public primary schools' organizational setting. According to their research, teachers' degree of autonomy is influenced by the circumstances in which they carry out their professional duties. The results show that adequate professional discretion must be matched with administrative accountability in this situation.

The findings in table indicate that 90.8% of teachers agreed that large classes, inadequate training limit teachers' effective disciplinary practices, while 4.6% disagreed and 4.6% were undecided. The mean score of 4.32 indicates a high level of agreement. This finding implies that teachers' ability to exercise autonomy is influenced by their working conditions and professional preparation. Even where teachers have formal authority to manage discipline, large classes and inadequate training, limit their ability to exercise that authority effectively. A Head Teacher stated that:

"The number of pupils in some classes is very high and this makes it difficult for teachers to give individual attention to disciplinary problems. Some teachers also need more training on how to manage difficult behavior without relying on harsh methods." (HT, 2026)

The finding is consistent with Masath et al. (2023); their study in Tanzanian public elementary schools highlighted how crucial it is to assist educators in using suitable and non-violent methods of discipline. According to the findings, in order for teachers' professional autonomy to effectively contribute to students' discipline, sufficient training and supportive working conditions must complement it.

The findings in the table indicate that parental complaints and community expectations were identified as another important challenge. The findings show that 94.3% of teachers agreed that parental complaints and community expectations restrict teachers' disciplinary authority, while 4.6% disagreed and 1.1% were undecided. The mean score of 4.36 was the highest among the five items, suggesting that this was the most strongly reported challenge. The finding indicates that teachers' disciplinary decisions are influenced not only by school-based factors but also by parents and members of the wider community. A Head Teacher explained that:

"Teachers have to be very careful when disciplining pupils because some parents come to school to complain about the way their children have been treated. This sometimes makes teachers hesitate to take disciplinary action even when a pupil has broken school rules." (HT, 2026).

This finding is consistent with Narayanan et al. (2024), who emphasize that teacher autonomy is shaped by the organizational and relational context in which teachers work. From the perspective of Teacher Professional Autonomy Theory, teachers exercise professional judgement within a social environment involving different stakeholders. Thus, parental expectations influence the practical space available to teachers when making disciplinary decisions.

The findings in table indicate that 88.5% of teachers agreed that child-rights reforms and inadequate resources limit teachers' disciplinary flexibility, while 5.7% disagreed and 5.7% were undecided. The mean score of 4.25 indicates a high level of agreement. This result suggests that the increasing emphasis on pupils' rights has changed the ways in which teachers are expected to manage discipline. Teachers may be restricted from using certain traditional disciplinary practices, while inadequate resources and training limit their ability to implement alternative approaches. A Head Teacher explained: *"The emphasis on children's rights has changed how teachers handle discipline. Teachers cannot use some of the old methods, but they also need training and resources to know what alternative methods they can use when dealing with persistent indiscipline."* (HT, 2026). The finding is supported by Masath et al. (2023), whose study examined interventions aimed at reducing violent disciplinary practices among teachers in Tanzanian public primary schools. Their work underlines the importance of supporting teachers to adopt appropriate alternative disciplinary approaches. In relation to Teacher Professional Autonomy Theory, the finding exhibits that teachers' professional discretion operates within legal and ethical limits, particularly those concerning the protection of pupils' rights.

Limitations of the Study

The study faced limitations during data collection. First, some of the respondents were not available because of their academic work during the data collection period. This limitation was overcome by adjusting the data collection schedule through consultations with school administrators. Another limitation was the bias in the responses from the respondents. Since the teachers and head teachers provided information concerning teachers' autonomy and pupils' discipline, some of the respondents provided socially desirable responses. This limitations minimized by assuring the respondents of confidentiality and anonymity in order to encourage the provision of honest opinions and experiences.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that participants perceived several institutional, professional, and contextual factors as challenges to teachers' autonomy in promoting pupils' discipline in the selected primary schools in Morogoro Municipality. These included administrative restrictions, large class sizes, inadequate professional development, parental expectations, and insufficient resources. The findings reflect participants' views regarding the challenges they experience when exercising professional judgement in disciplinary matters and Participants also emphasized the perceived importance of supportive school leadership, favorable working conditions, clear disciplinary procedures, and adequate professional support in enabling teachers to exercise professional judgement while maintaining accountability and safeguarding pupils' rights.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results, the study suggests that school administration and education authorities establish precise rules on the disciplinary duties and decision-making power of teachers. While school administrators should create supportive environments that permit teachers to have acceptable autonomy in routine disciplinary concerns, schools should enhance ongoing professional development in classroom management, conflict resolution and child rights. Education authorities should address large class sizes and a lack of resources and schools should work more closely with communities and parents to support fair and uniform disciplinary procedures.

Declaration of AI Use

During manuscript revision, ChatGPT and Grammarly were only utilized to help with reference formatting and grammar correction. The correctness, integrity, and final content of the manuscript are entirely the responsibility of the author or authors.

Competing Interests

The authors affirm that none of the work described in this study was influenced by any known conflicting financial interests, non-financial interests, or personal ties.

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