

Organizational Voice and the Role of Leadership in Education

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Abstract

This literature review explores the dynamic interplay between leadership styles and the vocal behavior of educational staff—defined as constructive, improvement-oriented communication that contributes positively to organizational functioning. Despite its documented benefits, such proactive expression is frequently inhibited, as employees may be reluctant to voice concerns or suggestions, and certain leadership approaches may unintentionally suppress open dialogue. Leadership style emerges as a pivotal determinant of employee voice, particularly within educational settings where it influences staff performance and, by extension, student academic outcomes. Engagement in extra-role communicative behaviors—such as the sharing of insights, expertise, and innovative ideas—has been linked to enhanced institutional decision-making processes and overall organizational efficacy. Educational institutions where such voice behavior is encouraged tend to demonstrate stronger performance and more favorable outcomes. While a substantial body of literature has focused on employee silence, comparatively less attention has been given to the phenomenon of employee voice, especially in relation to how leadership within educational contexts fosters or constrains such behavior among teaching staff. This review underscores the necessity for further empirical inquiry into which specific leadership styles are most conducive to promoting various dimensions of teacher voice behavior, and how such practices influence performance at both the individual (unit) and organizational (school-wide) levels.

1. Introduction

In the context of today's complex and rapidly evolving educational landscape, the proactive expression of concerns, insights, and work-related perspectives by educational staff functions as a critical catalyst for fostering academic innovation, enhancing the efficiency of decision-making processes within schools, and strengthening both interpersonal relationships and overall staff wellbeing. While employee silence has been linked to diminished productivity, suboptimal performance,

job dissatisfaction, and weakened organizational commitment, the articulation of voice behaviors is associated with positive organizational outcomes and heightened professional engagement [1].

Effective communication and a collaborative organizational climate—particularly between leadership and staff—are fundamental to the smooth and efficient functioning of educational institutions. Educational leadership that embraces participatory decision-making processes and demonstrates trust in the perspectives of staff members cultivates a shared understanding of institutional goals. Moreover, such leadership practices facilitate active engagement, strengthen collegial collaboration, and reinforce staff commitment to the implementation of collectively developed decisions, often reached through democratic consensus [2].

The construct of organizational voice and its intersection with leadership behaviors in educational settings has garnered increasing scholarly attention. Research highlights those environments characterized by open communication channels and supportive leadership are correlated with greater staff satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, and improved institutional performance [3]. In light of these insights, the present review synthesizes the theoretical underpinnings of employee voice within educational contexts and underscores the need for further empirical exploration into how leadership styles within educational institutions shape and influence voice behavior among educational personnel.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Organizational voice conceptualization

From the perspective of organizational behavior, employee voice is conceptualized as a discretionary, informal, and extra-role communicative act whereby individuals express ideas, suggestions, concerns, or opinions related to work, with the overarching aim of promoting organizational improvement or facilitating change [1]. This definition emphasizes the prosocial motivation underlying voice behavior and frames it as a voluntary and complex action that extends

beyond the formal boundaries of an employee's job responsibilities [4].

Within the field of industrial relations, employee voice is primarily viewed as a mechanism for alleviating individual dissatisfaction, thereby serving employee well-being. Conversely, in the human resource management literature, voice is defined more broadly to encompass both formal and informal participation in decision-making processes, including in-role behaviors (e.g., task-focused initiatives and quality circles) and extra-role contributions (e.g., suggestion schemes).

Voice behavior is central to the broader construct of organizational voice, which is understood as the expression of constructive input—ideas, opinions, and knowledge—intended to support organizational development [5]. It is typically examined as a collective communication phenomenon, whereby employees openly articulate work-related issues to their hierarchical superiors in an effort to influence or improve organizational functioning [6].

Employee voice can be exercised through both direct and indirect mechanisms. Direct voice mechanisms include open-door policies, regular team briefings, problem-solving committees, scheduled meetings between leadership and staff, written communications such as newsletters and notice boards, electronic tools such as intranet platforms and email, and formal suggestion systems [7]. Indirect, or representative, voice mechanisms involve collective structures such as elected employee councils, grievance procedures supported by trade unions, multi-tiered arbitration and mediation systems, collective bargaining frameworks, and co-determination arrangements [7].

Organizations may institutionalize formal mechanisms to facilitate voice expression, whether directly to management or indirectly through employee representation. These formal channels are typically procedural in nature, enabling the collection, dissemination, and evaluation of employee input—examples include structured suggestion schemes and organized problem-solving groups focused on operational enhancement. Alongside these, informal voice mechanisms remain prevalent, such as spontaneous discussions, informal meetings, and digital communications like casual emails or messaging.

Informal organizational norms also play a pivotal role in shaping voice behavior. These unwritten behavioral expectations influence perceptions of what constitutes acceptable communication within the workplace. Such norms can signal to employees whether voicing concerns is encouraged or suppressed, and how both formal and informal voice channels are likely to be received. As Kwon and Farndale [8] note, the mere existence of formal voice procedures does not guarantee employee confidence in the safety or efficacy of using them. Employees

tend to gauge managerial receptiveness based on observed behaviors—such as the responsiveness to formal input, the presence (or absence) of retaliation for speaking up, and whether meaningful organizational change results from voiced concerns.

2.2. The types of organizational voice

In terms of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence the motivations of employees' behavior, three types of organizational voice can be distinguished.

Acquiescent voice is an organizational behavior exhibited by employees which involves the expression of supportive views based on the employees' feeling of resignation [9]. Instead of expressing their suggestions for change and considering new approaches, employees mainly show their acquiescence to work issues trying to disengage from responsibilities, obligations and possible negative outcomes due to the sense of 'resignation' they experience [10]. This is an attitude of resignation formed by the view that employees cannot make any difference in the organization, in conjunction with the fact that they exhibit low self-esteem [11].

A defensive voice implies a self-protective behavior based on fear. It is distinguished into two interrelated types, fear-based voice and voice based on the sense of powerlessness and insecurity experienced by the employees [12]. It is characterized by employees trying to make safe decisions by taking less personal responsibility and attributing bad outcomes predominantly to negative external factors. The key common feature of these tactical behaviors is the effort of employees to protect themselves from potentially undesirable consequences of their actions.

Prosocial voice refers to a positive behavioral intention that emphasizes the expression of change-driven views and motivation to improve the situation in an organization. It is an organizational behavior exhibited by employees oriented towards cooperative motives, such as altruism, followed usually by supportive views about the organization as a workplace [13]. The opinions that employees propose are driven by cooperative motives and are proactive and constructive having as an ultimate goal to benefit all: both employees and the organization. [9, 13].

2.3. The motivations and inhibitors of voice

According to Morrison [14], the starting point for voice or silence behavior is the existence of a latent voice opportunity within an organization. Whether or not this opportunity materializes and what form it takes—which could be either voice or silence—depends on a number of individual and

environmental factors. These factors can be divided respectively into two categories: a) incentives and b) inhibitors, of voice or silence, respectively. Employees will engage in voice behavior only if the incentives are stronger than the inhibitors. Otherwise, silence will prevail. Both incentives and inhibitors operate through multiple mechanisms. An employee's desire or not of to contribute to both the organization and to its employees (pro-social motivation) is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the occurrence of voice or silence behavior as these behaviors can also be triggered by weighing the pros and cons of remaining silent or adopting voice behaviors as well as through an automatic (unconscious) process which is related to the individual characteristics of the employee and is independent of the process of scoping, which can be triggered by these characteristics.

A multitude of factors have been empirically investigated as motivators for voice behavior. The extroversion of the employee's personality, commitment to the task, proactive behavior in performing tasks [13, 15], sense of obligation to constructive change, sense of identity with the organization, job satisfaction, the perceptions of supervisors or top management of organizations on issues such as transparency, the possibility of consulting the views of employees but also of supervisors among themselves [16], the climate within the organization [17] and the presence of 'formal' mechanisms to express the voice of employees [10, 12]. According to Morrison [14], several empirical studies have demonstrated that voice is influenced by several individual factors such as proactive personality, extraversion, self-confidence, conscientiousness and sense of duty, organizational role transcendence, job satisfaction, individuals' perceptions and beliefs about the organization and sense of obligation to constructive change [15].

In terms of the inhibitors of the expression of employees' voices within the organization, which push them to silence, these include factors related to the individual characteristics of employees such as: goal orientation [15], the ability to emotionally detach from events occurring in the work environment and the individual's beliefs about any consequences of voice behavior and environmental factors such as abusive leadership [16], instrumental climate and the absence of leadership that acts transformationally by developing high quality relationships with employees with the goal of both organizational and employee well-being [18], the prevalence of organizational culture within the organization that does not encourage change. Also, inhibitors of employees' voices are factors such as employees' perceived sense of lack of power and the emotional state of fear within the organization [12, 10, 19].

2.4. The effects of voice within organizations

On an individual level, the effortless expression of employees' views within the organization, whether at an individual level (employee voice) or at a collective level (organizational voice), enhances employees' self-image and self-esteem. Moreover, organizational voice is positively correlated with employees' affective commitment. However, there may also be negative consequences of an employee's voice, where a hierarchical supervisor considers this voice behavior as an attempt for the employee's deployment of personal motivation and rewards, such as promotion in the hierarchical structure, resulting thus in the employee's isolation from other colleagues and management.

At the organizational level, when the management of organizations positively accepts upward communication, with employee voice acting as feedback for management decisions, this is also perceived positively by the employees themselves and thus, they are empowered to implement constructive changes in the organization. According to the research of Rees, Alfes and Gatenby [20], there is a direct correlation between employees' perception of organizational voice and their loyalty to the organization while the trust that employees show in senior managers and their direct hierarchical supervisors plays a mediating role in the above relationship. Silverman, Bakhshalian and Hillman [21], supported that the content, the perception and the applications of organizational voice do not remain static but evolve alongside technological changes. Organizational voice can be channeled through social networks which are not just an opportunity for expression but can also be an opportunity to incentivize expression and participation with equity and transparency. Dromey [22] recognizes the potential of social networks in modern organizations considering that social platforms can be used as a lever of innovation and to improve collaboration between stakeholders in the organization. According to Holland, Cooper and Hecker [23], the use of social media is characterized by immediacy of focus on the issues that concern the organization while the fact that they are outside the control of the organizations' management is a risk factor for the organization's image and reputation.

2.5. Leadership style as an antecedent of employee voice behavior

Voice behavior has been proven in practice to perform better at a collective level than at an individual level. Developing or enhancing existing voice systems and processes within organizations includes, among others, open-door policies, as collaboration between managers of all levels and the existence of dispute resolution mechanisms [10]. As

a result, activities such as unionization within organizations or collective bargaining processes may be reduced and replaced or combined with more modern and consensual methods such as joint consultation, working groups or problem-solving groups which has a significant benefit on job performance.

Supervisor and leadership behavior has been consistently identified as a critical determinant of employee voice and silence. Leaders play a pivotal role in shaping employees' willingness to engage in voice behaviors, as their leadership style significantly influences both individual motivation and broader organizational outcomes [6]. Leadership can thus be conceptualized as a key organizational variable that facilitates or inhibits voice expression, with top management assuming a central role in cultivating an organizational climate and culture that either encourages or suppresses employee voice [24].

Extant research underscores leadership style as a crucial situational factor affecting voice behavior [8]. Positive or empowering leadership styles are shown to be particularly effective in fostering employees' willingness to speak up [25]. For instance, transformational leadership has been found to enhance voice behavior by promoting psychological safety, thereby mitigating fears of negative repercussions associated with speaking out [26]. Transformational leaders also contribute to the development of employees' relational self-concept, which reinforces motivation to voice concerns and suggestions, and influences how employees perceive their role in contributing to organizational change, consistent with the Pygmalion effect.

Ethical leadership similarly demonstrates a positive association with voice behavior. Ethical leaders engage with employees in a manner characterized by openness, integrity, and fairness, which strengthens psychological safety and enhances both relational and organizational identification. Moreover, authentic leadership has been found to support employee's voice by encouraging morally grounded actions and fostering environments where employees feel safe to express their views—psychological safety serving as a key mediating factor in this relationship.

Inclusive leadership has also been linked to increased voice behavior by addressing employees' relational needs and facilitating self-expression. This approach has been shown to reduce instances of silence, enabling employees to feel more secure in contributing their perspectives. A high-quality leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship further strengthens this dynamic, as employees in high-LMX relationships are more inclined to voice their opinions and suggestions [27]. In contrast, authoritarian leadership is negatively associated with voice behavior, particularly in high power-distance cultures where information sharing is constrained

and employee's behavior is often restricted to narrowly defined in-role expectations [27].

Van Dyne et al. [5] demonstrated that high-quality supervisory relationships amplify the positive effects of LMX on voice. Conversely, when supervisors engage in abusive behaviors, employees' trust in leadership diminishes. This erosion of trust leads to reduced voice behavior, driven by the belief that speaking up will yield no meaningful change. Abusive supervision has been shown to suppress both promotive and prohibitive voice; a relationship mediated by factors such as diminished work engagement, heightened perceptions of injustice, negative reciprocity, and increased cynicism.

3. Methodology

In order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the leadership styles that affect voice behavior, in educational environment, this study followed a qualitative research approach. A literature search strategy was conducted by consulting Web of Science, ERIC, and SCOPUS databases, using the following search terms: leadership AND style(s) AND voice AND behavior AND educational environment. The search covered research articles written in English and published in peer-reviewed scientific journals. We confined our search to the period 2013–2023, since over this decade, a growing body of studies have been published on educational staff voice, showing the progress that has been made in our understanding of when and why employees choose to speak up or remain silent [1].

4. Results

Findings from recent research suggest that leader-related variables—particularly leadership style and the quality of leader-member exchange (LMX)—are among the most influential determinants of employee voice behavior. In educational settings, both school leaders and educational staff serve as pivotal agents of effective leadership that contribute directly to enhancing student academic performance [28]. Consistent with broader organizational research, the job performance of educational staff has been empirically linked to the behaviors and leadership styles exhibited by their superiors. Moreover, educational leaders shape the communicative landscape within schools, influence organizational climate, and act as primary determinants of staff motivation, task performance, and the experience of time pressure or emotional exhaustion which can culminate in stress or professional burnout.

Alqarni [29] highlights persistent challenges faced by educational institutions, including limited staff participation in decision-making, weak engagement in innovative initiatives, reluctance to express ideas, and hesitancy to report unethical

conduct. The likelihood that educational staff will engage in voice behavior increases when they perceive that their perspectives are genuinely heard, supported, and respected by leadership figures [28]. Supportive leadership practices, characterized by transparent communication and constructive leader-subordinate interactions, have been shown to foster an effective work environment conducive to achieving institutional goals. Gürlü and Şimşek [30] further emphasize the positive correlation between organizational voice and the degree of encouragement, acceptance, and support leaders offer towards staff contributions in schools across all educational levels.

Leadership style is widely recognized as a core determinant of employee voice, which in turn fosters positive psychological outcomes for employees by affirming their value within the organization [6]. Within higher education, Wang et al. [31] found that transformational leadership significantly enhances university faculty members' voice behavior, with team psychological safety acting as a key moderator of group voice climate.

Conversely, authoritarian leadership styles have been associated with diminished teacher commitment, reduced trust in school principals, and increased organizational silence. Educators subjected to abusive supervision are particularly prone to silence, withholding valuable information, insights, and emotions in response to hostile leadership practices. Ethical leadership, by contrast, has consistently shown a positive association with teacher voice behavior, a relationship mediated by the presence of an ethical organizational culture and the perception of psychological safety. In higher education, inclusive leadership has been linked to enhanced organizational citizenship behaviors, innovative work behaviors, and improved knowledge sharing, while also fostering a climate of innovation and creative instructional practices among high school teachers [32].

Leadership is a multifaceted and context-sensitive process. Despite an expanding body of literature on leadership and employee voice, gaps remain in our understanding of why educational staff often withhold information or refrain from speaking up. These gaps underscore the need for further empirical study into how varying leadership styles influence voice behavior in educational institutions, and how these dynamics can be harnessed to optimize both staff well-being and institutional effectiveness.

5. Discussion

Among the various leadership paradigms, transformational leadership has been consistently associated with fostering a psychologically safe organizational climate, wherein employees feel

secure in voicing concerns without fear of negative repercussions. By nurturing strong interpersonal relationships and trust, transformational leaders are particularly effective in reducing employees' apprehension about speaking up within the organization [31]. In addition to transformational leadership, other contemporary leadership styles—such as ethical, inclusive, and authentic leadership—also contribute positively to the creation of a supportive and caring organizational climate. These styles promote self-awareness, trust, sincerity, and psychological empowerment, thereby inspiring employees to express their ideas and perspectives constructively.

The present study offers a theoretical contribution by deeper into the understanding of the motivational influence of educational leaders—particularly school principals—on the voice behavior of educational staff. The educational landscape in Western societies is often shaped by systemic pressures and increasing demands, which can adversely affect the well-being of educators. This is manifested in fluctuating levels of motivation, emotional strain, and eventual burnout. Against this backdrop, the findings suggest that when educational leaders are trained and encouraged to adopt supportive leadership practices, these efforts may significantly enhance the autonomous motivation, job satisfaction, and psychological well-being of educational personnel.

When educators engage in extra-role communicative behaviors—such as sharing constructive ideas, knowledge, and feedback—educational institutions (schools or universities) benefit through improved decision-making processes, elevated organizational performance, and reduced involuntary turnover [29].

6. Conclusions

Despite the growing interest in the dynamics of voice behavior among educational staff, the extant literature reveals a notable gap in empirical studies that specifically examine the role of school principals' leadership styles in shaping such behaviors. To address this gap, future research should further analysis how and to what extent leadership practices within primary and secondary schools influence the frequency and quality of voice behavior, including its various dimensions (e.g., promotive vs. prohibitive voice).

These insights hold significant implications for educational leadership development. They reinforce the argument that achievement-oriented leaders must clearly communicate expectations and cultivate environments that actively support voice expression. If educational leaders are equipped with the tools and training necessary to encourage staff voice, this can result in enhanced teacher motivation, improved classroom climates, greater student engagement, and

more effective discipline management.

7. References

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