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Organisational Communication and Employee Voice in Colleges of Education in Ghana: The Role of Leadership and Institutional Hierarchy

Authors

Sulemana Iddrisu [1];Kadir Fuseini [2]; Abdul Kadir Salifu [3]; Ismail Abu [4]

Main author's email: sulesakabu@yahoo.com

(1.2.3) Tamale College of Education, Ghana.

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Abstract

This study examined how leadership communication practices and institutional hierarchy influence employee voice in six Colleges of Education in Ghana. Specifically, it explored how leadership communication and organisational communication channels shape lecturers' willingness to speak up and how institutional hierarchy influences their opportunities to express dissent and participate in decision-making. Employee voice is essential for effective institutional communication, participation and organisational development. However, leadership practices and institutional hierarchies may shape lecturers' willingness and opportunities to express their views, concerns and suggestions. An exploratory design was employed within a qualitative research framework. Convenience sampling was used to select 12 lecturers from six colleges, with each institution contributing two participants for semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that leadership accessibility, openness, active listening, participatory decision-making, recognition and constructive feedback encouraged lecturers to express their views and concerns. Conversely, limited acknowledgement, one-way communication and inadequate feedback discouraged participation. The findings further showed that seniority, professional status differences, bureaucratic reporting procedures, departmental boundaries, committee membership and unequal participation in meetings influenced whose contributions received attention. The study concludes that meaningful employee voice depends on supportive leadership relationships and institutional structures that provide equitable opportunities for participation. It recommends strengthening responsive leadership practices, improving communication channels, promoting inclusive decision-making and reducing unnecessary hierarchical barriers to upward communication. The study contributes to understanding employee voice by demonstrating how leadership relationships and institutional power structures jointly shape lecturers' opportunities to speak and be heard.

Key terms: Colleges, employee voice, institutional hierarchy, leadership communication, organisational communication.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Organisational communication is central to the coordination of work, information exchange and decision-making within institutions (Keyton, 2017). In higher education, it provides lecturers with opportunities to share professional knowledge, identify institutional challenges and contribute to decisions concerning teaching, research and administration. An important aspect of this communication is employee voice, which refers to the voluntary expression of ideas, suggestions, concerns and objections intended to improve organisational functioning (Morrison, 2023; Pfrombeck et al., 2022). Employee voice can be promotive, when employees propose ideas for improvement, or prohibitive, when they raise concerns about practices that may negatively affect the organisation (Liang et al., 2012; Chamberlin et al., 2017). Similarly, Van Dyne et al. (2003) explain that voice and silence are multidimensional behaviours shaped by employees' motives and organisational experiences. Thus, employee voice provides an important means through which institutional members contribute to organisational development. According to Detert and Burris (2007), employees are more willing to voice their opinions when leaders establish a workplace climate that encourages open communication and makes them feel psychologically safe. Their findings highlight managerial openness as an important factor in promoting psychological safety and encouraging employees to speak up. Likewise, Edmondson (1999) establishes that psychological safety enables individuals to take interpersonal risks, including expressing opinions and raising concerns.

Despite its importance, employee voice does not automatically occur simply because formal communication channels exist. In many organisations, employees may withhold suggestions or dissenting opinions because they fear embarrassment, damaged professional relationships, victimisation or negative career consequences. For instance, Milliken et al. (2003) identify fear of negative consequences and perceptions of managerial responsiveness as important factors influencing employees' decisions to remain silent. Similarly, Morrison (2014) observes that employees often assess the potential risks and benefits of speaking before communicating concerns to individuals in higher organisational positions. Furthermore, Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) demonstrate that perceptions of organisational justice influence employees' willingness to raise critical work-related concerns. These challenges may become more pronounced in hierarchical institutions, where information passes through several administrative levels, access to senior management depends on official positions, and meetings often give greater prominence to senior officers. More importantly, having the opportunity to speak does not necessarily mean that employees will be heard or that their contributions will receive attention. In this connection, Burris et al. (2013) emphasise the distinction between employees expressing their views and management actually receiving their contributions. Similarly, Burris (2012) demonstrates that managers may respond less favourably to employees who express challenging rather than supportive opinions. Taken together, these studies suggest that employee voice depends not only on opportunities to speak but also on how leaders receive, interpret and respond to employees' contributions.

These concerns are particularly relevant to Ghanaian Colleges of Education, which operate within established governance and administrative structures. The Colleges of Education Act, 2012 (Act 847) establishes governing Councils and Academic Boards, defines their functions and assigns the principal key academic, administrative and disciplinary responsibilities. In addition, the Act provides for departmental representation and committee structures, thereby establishing formal mechanisms for institutional participation. However, these arrangements also define decision-making responsibilities through established offices and reporting relationships. Consequently, questions arise about how lecturers

experience access to decision-makers, communicate institutional concerns and participate in decisions that affect their professional responsibilities.

Previous studies have examined governance and administrative developments in Ghanaian Colleges of Education. For example, Nkyi-Asamoah and Amakyi (2022) investigated principals' perceptions of the transition of Colleges of Education to tertiary status, identifying governance structures, Academic Board committees and committee-based decision-making as important institutional changes. Similarly, Abudetse et al. (2025) examined governance practices and leadership styles in Colleges of Education in the Volta Region, highlighting their relationship with institutional performance. Although these studies provide useful insights into institutional governance and leadership, limited attention has been paid to lecturers' everyday communication experiences, their access to institutional decision-makers and the factors shaping their willingness to express concerns.

To address this gap, the present study examines organisational communication and employee voice through lecturers' experiences in six Colleges of Education in Ghana. Specifically, it explores leadership communication practices, including accessibility, active listening, participation and feedback, alongside hierarchical influences such as status differences, reporting relationships, departmental boundaries, meeting practices and informal gatekeeping.

Research Objectives

To examine how leadership communication practices and organisational communication channels influence lecturers' opportunities to express their views, concerns and suggestions in Colleges of Education in Ghana.

To explore how institutional hierarchy shapes lecturers' experiences of speaking up, expressing dissent and participating in organisational decision-making in Colleges of Education in Ghana.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Leadership Communication Practices and Employee Voice

Leadership communication plays a central role in shaping employee voice because it influences whether employees feel encouraged and psychologically safe to express ideas, raise concerns and question organisational practices. In particular, inclusive leadership, managerial openness and supportive communication can encourage employees to communicate upward. Younas et al. (2023) established, through a survey of 252 employees and their supervisors in UK cargo companies, that inclusive leadership positively influences employee voice, with psychological empowerment serving as a mediating factor in this relationship. Similarly, Lee and Dahinten (2021), in a correlational survey of 526 nurses from three hospitals in South Korea, established that psychological safety mediated the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voice. Their findings suggest that inclusive leadership encourages employees to speak up rather than withhold concerns. Fatoki (2024) also found that psychological safety and affective commitment helped explain the relationship between inclusive leadership and employee voice among employees of small hospitality firms in South Africa. Furthermore, McKee (2024), through a review of management literature, highlighted the importance of managerial feedback-seeking practices in promoting upward communication. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that leadership accessibility, active listening, constructive feedback and responsiveness can strengthen employees' confidence to contribute to organisational discussions.

In addition to leadership practices, studies have focused on the influence of organisational context and power relations on people's attitude towards their readiness to speak out. Morrison (2023), in her broader review of voice/silence concepts, identifies risks related to speaking out, organisational contexts and responses of management as important factors in people's choices to speak out or stay silent. Similar conclusions were reached by Mohammad et al. (2023) in their systematic review of 67 published studies. From a qualitative perspective, Gan (2020) investigated university employees' experiences of expressing/not expressing their opinions in regard to institutional power relations and practices, thus showing how the very power relations and communication methods can make people derive the meaning of speaking out as inefficient. More recently, Lister et al. (2025), in the process of the scoping review conducted among post-graduate students, found that supervisory relationships, employment conditions and hierarchical standards of teaching can inhibit academic staff from speaking out. Even though the findings of these studies are significant for understanding communication practices, they mostly analyse their fulfilment in universities, health care and business. Therefore, there is insufficient information on how teachers in Colleges of Education perceive the process of communication with the administration of their departments and universities.

Institutional Hierarchy and Employee Voice

Institutional hierarchy shapes employee voice by distributing authority, status and access to decision-makers unevenly. Consequently, employees may consider their organisational positions, the authority of those receiving their messages and the possible consequences of expressing disagreement before raising concerns. Recent empirical studies demonstrate that these power differences influence employees' decisions to speak or remain silent. For instance, Lam and Xu (2019), using two-period data from 159 junior employees in China, examined the relationship between abusive supervision, power-distance orientation and employee silence. Their findings revealed that abusive supervision was associated with defensive silence, while power-distance orientation influenced employees' tendency to withhold concerns. Similarly, Wang et al. (2021), using data from 647 employee–supervisor dyads in China, investigated how mismatches between power and status influenced employee voice. Their findings highlighted the importance of power struggles and power-distance orientation in explaining employees' voice behaviour. These findings suggest that employees' willingness to question decisions depends partly on their perceived organisational status and relationships with those exercising authority. Thus, hierarchical relationships may discourage lecturers from expressing dissenting opinions, particularly when senior officers are perceived as inaccessible or unresponsive.

In addition to this, there isn't a guarantee of equal participation and influence with the presence of formal institutional frameworks. Pfrombeck et al. (2022), upon reviewing employee voice literature, developed the Hierarchy of Voice framework, which illustrates how the power differences in the position of employees and the target of their voice impact their decision to voice their opinions and communicate their worries to the respective authorities. Their framework shows that workers can tailor how, when and what they communicate depending on their position within a given organisation. Likewise, examining the situation of customer service personnel, Kim and Kiura (2020) showed that the perception of sufferers' social status and evaluations regarding interpersonal and procedural fairness are crucial for their ability to express their opinions. In academia, Gan (2020) showed that power within an organisation is associated with the way employees perceive their voice and silence in the academic environment. Later, Lister et al. (2025) reported that certain hierarchical norms and unsuccessful relationships with supervisors could impede academic

voice expression. Overall, these papers suggest that the existence of meetings, committees and the overall bureaucratic structure does not guarantee equal participation among teachers with the possibility to influence decision-making. Instead, it could be assumed that the bureaucratic positions of participants in decision-making procedures should influence the extent of their participation.

These issues are particularly relevant to Ghanaian Colleges of Education, where formal governance and administrative structures organise institutional communication and decision-making. These structures include governing Councils, Academic Boards, departmental committees and administrative offices. Previous studies have examined aspects of governance and leadership within these institutions. For example, Nkyi-Asamoah and Amakyi (2022), using a non-experimental survey and a basic interpretive research approach, investigated principals' perceptions of the transition of Colleges of Education to tertiary status. Their findings identified governance structures, functional Academic Board committees, committee-based decision-making and the operationalisation of governing Councils as important institutional developments. In a related study, Abudetse et al. (2025) investigated the influence of governance practices and leadership styles on institutional performance in Colleges of Education in Ghana's Volta Region, drawing on data from 120 respondents through a quantitative cross-sectional explanatory design.

Although these studies provide useful insights into institutional governance and leadership, limited attention has been given to how lecturers experience everyday institutional hierarchy and navigate power relationships when expressing concerns. In particular, little is known about how lecturers outside key committees access senior management, communicate dissenting opinions and negotiate departmental and administrative reporting relationships. Therefore, the present study addresses this gap by exploring lecturers' experiences of institutional hierarchy in six Colleges of Education in Ghana, focusing on status differences, bureaucratic procedures, meeting practices, departmental boundaries and informal communication networks.

Theoretical Framework

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), focuses on the quality of the working relationship between leaders and individual employees. High-quality exchanges are characterised by mutual trust, respect, support, reciprocal influence and a willingness to go beyond formal job responsibilities. In contrast, low-quality exchanges are generally formal, limited to contractual obligations and characterised by minimal relational support. In this study, LMX Theory provides a basis for understanding how lecturers' relationships with principals, vice-principals, heads of department and other managers influence their access to leadership and willingness to express concerns. Specifically, the theory informs the first research objective and interview questions relating to leadership accessibility, active listening, acknowledgement, feedback and participation. Trust is important because lecturers need to feel confident that their views will be treated fairly and will not be used against them. Similarly, mutual respect encourages leaders to perceive disagreement as a professional contribution rather than an act of disloyalty. Furthermore, leadership support and responsiveness may encourage lecturers to raise difficult issues when they believe management is willing to listen and provide assistance. Thus, LMX Theory explains how the quality of leadership relationships can either facilitate or constrain employee voice.

The study also draws on the Hierarchy of Voice framework developed by Pfrombeck et al. (2022), which explains how differences in power and status between employees and voice recipients shape employee voice. In this study, employee voice refers to lecturers' discretionary expression of work-related ideas,

suggestions, concerns and dissent intended to influence institutional practices and decisions. Morrison's work provides a broader foundation for understanding voice and silence as context-dependent choices. However, the Hierarchy of Voice framework offers a more specific explanation of how organisational positions influence decisions to speak, the manner in which messages are communicated and how they are received. Accordingly, the framework informs the second research objective and interview questions concerning seniority, administrative authority, departmental access, reporting procedures, meeting participation, informal gatekeeping and anticipated retaliation. For instance, a lecturer may prefer to raise an issue privately with a trusted head of department rather than challenge a principal directly.

Similarly, formal communication channels may remain unused when lecturers anticipate negative consequences or believe their concerns will be disregarded. Importantly, the framework also draws attention to the role of message recipients, as management may acknowledge, filter, reinterpret, ignore or act upon lecturers' contributions. Therefore, it helps distinguish between the decision to express concerns and the subsequent organisational handling of those concerns. The two theoretical perspectives provide complementary explanations of employee voice by connecting the quality of leadership relationships with the influence of institutional power and status.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates how leadership communication practices and institutional hierarchy interact to shape lecturers' employee voice within Colleges of Education. It proposes that lecturers' willingness and ability to express suggestions, concerns, opinions and dissenting views are influenced not only by how leaders communicate but also by the organisational structures within which communication takes place.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Leadership communication practices represent the relational dimension of the framework. These include leaders' accessibility, openness, active listening, participatory decision-making, acknowledgement of lecturers' contributions, constructive feedback and recognition. When leaders demonstrate these practices, lecturers may feel valued, respected and encouraged to express their views. Institutional hierarchy represents the structural dimension. It includes formal authority, seniority, status differences, departmental boundaries, reporting procedures and access to decision-making platforms. Such structures may either facilitate or constrain lecturers' opportunities to communicate with institutional leaders. The framework further identifies intervening processes, including perceived risks of speaking up, access to decision-makers, trust and expectations about whether expressing an opinion will produce meaningful outcomes. These processes influence how leadership communication and institutional hierarchy shape employee voice. Lecturers' voice may subsequently receive different management responses, including acknowledgement, feedback, action or non-response.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

An exploratory qualitative design was employed to investigate how lecturers experience leadership communication and institutional hierarchies within Ghanaian Colleges of Education. Using a qualitative exploratory design, the study investigated the ways in which leadership relationships and organisational structures influence lecturers' involvement in institutional decision-making. This approach provided deeper insights into participants lived experiences and interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The study was conducted in six colleges: Bagabaga, Tumu, Gambaga, St. Vincent, Savannah and Tamale Colleges of Education. Twelve lecturers, two from each institution, were recruited through convenience sampling based on accessibility, willingness and professional experience (Etikan et al., 2016). The sample prioritised accounts over statistical representativeness, with adequacy judged by the relevance and depth of information obtained (Malterud et al., 2016).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews exploring leadership accessibility, openness, listening, participatory decision-making, feedback, opportunities to express disagreement, and hierarchical influences such as authority, seniority and reporting structures. Probing questions elicited specific examples. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, checked against audio recordings and anonymised using participant codes.

The analysis employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic approach, involving data familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition and the presentation of findings. Eight themes emerged, covering leadership communication, employee voice, power distance and status differences.

Trustworthiness was supported through interviews, probing and careful interpretation to enhance credibility, and consistent procedures and documentation to promote dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All participants took part voluntarily after providing informed consent and were free to withdraw from the study at any stage without facing any penalties. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymisation and secure storage of interview data.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section analyses and interprets the findings in line with the study's two research objectives. The first objective examined how leadership communication practices and organisational communication channels influence lecturers' expression of views, concerns and suggestions within Colleges of Education in Ghana. Specifically, it explored leadership accessibility, openness, participatory decision-making, responsiveness, recognition, trust and the use of formal and informal communication channels. The second objective investigated how institutional hierarchy shapes lecturers' opportunities and willingness to speak up, with particular attention to power distance, professional status, bureaucratic procedures, departmental boundaries and hierarchical meeting practices. The findings are organised thematically, drawing on participants' interview accounts and interpreting their experiences in relation to existing literature on employee voice, organisational communication and institutional power relations. Although the two objectives are presented separately for analytical clarity, they are interconnected because leadership communication takes place within institutional structures that influence whose voices are heard, how concerns are communicated and whether employees feel safe expressing dissent.

Objective 1: Leadership Communication Practices and Organisational Communication Channels

Theme 1: Openness and Accessibility of Leadership Communication

Participants described leadership accessibility and openness as important conditions that encouraged them to communicate work-related concerns and professional suggestions. One lecturer explained:

> *When the principal is approachable, you can discuss issues affecting your work without feeling that you are challenging authority. It makes communication easier because you know that your concerns can be heard.*

Another participant observed:

> *Sometimes, staff members have useful suggestions, but they remain silent because they do not know whether management will be willing to listen. If leadership creates opportunities for open discussion, more people will contribute.*

According to the demonstration provided, having access to leaders means that not only should they be physically available, but they should also be open in interpersonal and psychological ways to input whenever it comes from the employees. The participants of the discussion seem to believe that accessible leadership means that the environment in which it is applied is such that expressing an unwelcome opinion should be seen as a natural element of the job rather than an attack against the managers. This aspect is crucial because although the teachers may be able to physically access the leaders, they may not seek help if the leaders are noted not to be responsive to feedback from the teachers earlier.

Theme 2: Participatory Leadership and Involvement in Decision-Making

Lecturers distinguished between being informed about institutional decisions and having meaningful opportunities to influence them.

One participant stated:

> *When management invites lecturers to contribute to decisions, we feel that our professional experience matters. We become more willing to suggest changes because we know that our opinions may influence the final decision.*

Another explained*:*

There are meetings where management informs us about decisions that have already been taken. We attend, listen, and leave, but we do not really have the opportunity to influence what happens.

The narratives demonstrate an important difference between communication as information dissemination and communication as participatory involvement in the process. For example, management meetings can offer teachers a platform to communicate decisions but do not ensure teachers' involvement in the making of these decisions. The participants' experiences imply that real involvement in the process means more than just offering teachers a chance to be present at meetings or informing them about management decisions. Real involvement means enabling them to voice their opinion, ask questions about the proposed actions, and influence decisions before they are finalised.

The results underline the connection between participation, professional acknowledgement and ownership of decisions taken by the institution. When teachers take part in making decisions, they start to see themselves not just as the recipients of the administrative decisions, but as active participants in the process. Their professional knowledge and experience in the classroom can be very useful in making decisions on issues related to teaching, learning, workload and resource allocation. Thus, alienating teachers from discussions can lead to decisions that do not take into account the practical problems faced by academic staff.

Theme 3: Leadership Responsiveness to Employee Concerns

Participants emphasised the importance of acknowledgement and feedback after raising institutional concerns.

One lecturer remarked:

Sometimes, staff raise concerns about workload or the resources needed for teaching, but they do not receive feedback. After some time, people begin to feel that there is little benefit in raising the same issues.

Another noted:

Even when management cannot solve a problem immediately, an explanation helps. Staff want to know that their concerns have been considered and that something is being done about them.

Lecturers had raised several concerns. It is also vital to express appreciation towards the lecturers, communicate the management's stand, and provide feedback on the steps already taken by management for addressing issues or not taking any action. An important inference that could be drawn from the findings was that the respondents did not demand that every raised issue be resolved right away by the management. The respondents, however, mentioned that the explanation of why their concerns had been raised is what mattered to them the most. This indicates that the lack of a solution may be less damaging to employee voice than the lack of communication about the problem.

In addition, the data suggest that a series of experiences related to unanswered concerns can gradually erode the confidence of lecturers in institutional communication processes. The absence of feedback and acknowledgement of the similar issues raised by lecturers might lead to the assumption that talking might be useless. Such assumptions might lead to employees keeping silent, not lacking ideas but being uncertain whether it is worth sharing them. Morrison (2014) also points out that employee voice and

silence depend on the conditions of operating in organisations as well as on the expectations of employees in terms of consequences of speaking.

Thus, the findings underline the importance of feedback in effective leadership communication. The leaders of organisations are to develop mechanisms for acknowledging expressed concerns, communicating decisions, and providing explanations in cases when suggestions cannot be implemented.

Theme 4: Fear of Negative Consequences and Leadership Reactions

Some lecturers described carefully considering the possible consequences of expressing disagreement with institutional leadership. One participant explained:

> *You may identify a problem with a decision, but you have to think carefully before raising it. You do not want your comment to be interpreted as disrespect or opposition to management.*

Another stated,

> *Some staff prefer to discuss their concerns privately with colleagues rather than bring them to management. They are not necessarily satisfied with the situation; they are simply worried about the possible consequences of speaking openly.*

The evidence presented above suggests that the lecturers' actions of being vocal do not solely depend upon the presence of channels of communication, but also on the interpretations of interpersonal and professional risks by the lecturers. Participants could differentiate between holding a legitimate concern and being in a position to communicate it freely. The likelihood of the disagreement being taken as disrespect indicates that critical communication may be viewed in a particular institutional context as questioning the authority rather than as a beneficial contribution to the organisation.

The results indicate that fear can make communication divert from the formal channels of communication to informal talks with colleagues. Although these talks give lecturers an opportunity to express their anger and validate their feelings, these communications do not necessarily lead to any actions being taken within the institution, as the problem discussed does not enter the decision-making process.

Theme 5: Formal and Informal Communication Channels

Participants identified staff meetings and established administrative procedures as formal communication channels, while private conversations with trusted colleagues or heads of department constituted informal channels. One lecturer observed:

> *Staff meetings provide an official opportunity to raise issues, but not everyone feels comfortable speaking in front of the principal and other senior officers. Some people would rather discuss the matter with a trusted head of department first.*

Another explained:

> *Informal conversations sometimes help us understand how management might respond to an issue. However, if concerns remain at the informal level, they may never reach the people who can address them.*

This study showed that lecturers had different communication preferences, which were influenced by the complexity of concerns and the professional ties with managers. Formal communication enabled lecturers to follow recognised institutional procedures, directing their concerns and proposals. Such communication

was successful as long as lecturers were confident about meeting the communication requirements and the principle of transparency operated.

As for informal communication, it allowed lecturers to avoid potential threats usually associated with discussing delicate matters. Thus, the reliance on trusted colleagues suggests that good relationships played an important role in the communication process. However, informal communication strategies also have their drawbacks since private concerns may not reach top managers directly in cases when a colleague or a department head is unable or unwilling to convey the message through official channels.

Thus, the findings of the research indicate that the use of official and informal communication may carry contradictory messages. While informal communication is helpful for initiating concerns, the use of official communication is vital for their recognition and response from the organisation. Therefore, effective communication in an organisation is determined not only by the introduction of formal procedures for communication but also by enabling their use and ensuring successful interpersonal communication at the workplace.

Theme 6: Recognition, Trust and Constructive Voice

Participants associated recognition and trust with a greater willingness to contribute suggestions and concerns. One lecturer stated:

> *When management appreciates staff who bring forward useful ideas, others become encouraged to contribute. People begin to see that speaking up can help improve the college rather than create unnecessary problems.*

Another remarked:

> *Trust is important because you need to believe that your words will not be used against you. If staff members feel that their contributions are respected, they are more likely to share their concerns and suggestions.*

The evidence suggests that recognition and trust are important relationship factors for productive employee voice. Recognition shows the lecturers that their skills and contributions are appreciated by the institution. Moreover, it may increase the conviction that expressing an opinion is a good thing, not just another precarious venture in the process of communication. Yet, the evidence shows that recognition needs to be wider than appreciation of the opinions that align with management's views.

Objective 2: Institutional Hierarchy and Lecturers' Willingness to Speak Up

Theme 7: Power Distance and Deference to Senior Authority

Lecturers described how seniority and formal authority influenced the manner in which they expressed disagreement.

One participant explained:

> *In this institution, you have to consider who is speaking before you decide how to respond. Even when you disagree with a senior officer, you may choose your words carefully because of the position the person occupies.*

Another observation:

Some junior staff members believe that questioning a senior officer is inappropriate. They may have a different opinion, but they prefer to remain silent to avoid appearing disrespectful.

The findings indicate that hierarchical structures influence teacher interactions as they create behavioural norms within various levels of hierarchy. Regarding interview findings, it should be noted that the participants emphasise that the degree of disagreement with an opinion depends on how effective the opinion is and the authority of the person who proposes the opinion. Therefore, sometimes teachers alter their speech and utilise softer language or fail to express their opinions at all. Therefore, it can be assumed that the distance between authority figures influences not only the way voice is exercised but also the frequency with which it is used. Though teachers know how to express their opinions and are aware of the drawbacks of the decisions taken, they do not spend much time saying what they think as they feel obliged to respect authority.

Theme 8: Status Differences Between Senior and Junior Staff

Participants suggested that institutional rank and length of service influenced lecturers' confidence in expressing opinions during meetings and other institutional discussions. One lecturer stated:

As a relatively junior member of staff, you may have an idea that could improve teaching, but you sometimes wait for a senior colleague to introduce it. It feels easier when someone with greater authority supports the suggestion.

Another explained:

Senior staff members usually speak more confidently during meetings. Some junior colleagues remain quiet, even when they understand the issue, because they are uncertain about how their contributions will be received.

These illustrations indicate that differences in professional role may lead to systemic inequalities in terms of participation in institutional discussions despite the fact that lecturers are said to have similar rights and opportunities. The impressions received from interviewees indicate that senior lecturers feel much more secure and justified in voicing their opinions compared to junior representatives of the profession.

Discussion

Leadership Communication Practices and Employee Voice

The first objective examined how leadership communication practices and organisational communication channels influence lecturers' opportunities and willingness to express their views, concerns and suggestions. The findings indicate that leadership accessibility, openness, active listening, participatory decision-making, recognition and constructive feedback encourage employee voice. These findings support Fatoki's (2024) observation that inclusive leadership promotes employee voice through psychological safety and affective commitment. Similarly, McKee (2024) highlights the importance of managerial practices that encourage upward communication. They also align with Detert and Burris (2007), who demonstrate that managerial openness encourages employees to express constructive suggestions and concerns.

The findings further align with Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, which views trust, mutual respect and reciprocal interactions as essential elements of effective leader–employee relationships. In this regard, Hu et al. (2018) establish that employees' willingness to express their views is shaped by the quality of

leader–member relationships, psychological safety and psychological empowerment. Likewise, Botero and Van Dyne (2009) establish that LMX interacts with power distance in shaping employee voice. In the present study, lecturers were more willing to communicate when institutional leaders were approachable and receptive. However, formal opportunities, such as staff meetings, did not always guarantee meaningful participation, particularly when decisions had already been made. This suggests that effective leadership relationships require genuine consideration of lecturers' contributions rather than merely providing opportunities to speak.

The results also differentiate between management's inability to address issues and its unwillingness to recognise them. Participants appreciated explanations and feedback even when solutions were unattainable. These findings support Morrison's (2023) claim that organisational context impacts the decision of employees to speak out or remain silent. Likewise, Fatoki (2024) shows that psychological safety is a critical connection between inclusive leaders and employee voice. The results highlight that trust, responsiveness, recognition and useful feedback help lecturers feel free to share their thoughts, even if they include criticism. Hence, LMX theory plays an instrumental role in analysing the extent to which quality of leadership relations enables or hinders employee voice within Education Colleges.

Institutional Hierarchy and Employee Voice

The second objective examined how institutional hierarchy influences lecturers' willingness and opportunities to express their views and concerns. The findings indicate that seniority, formal authority, departmental boundaries, bureaucratic procedures and committee membership shape whose contributions receive attention in institutional decision-making. These findings support Pfrombeck et al.'s (2022) Hierarchy of Voice framework, which explains how differences in social status and power influence employee voice. Similarly, Lister et al. (2025) highlight the importance of understanding academic voice and silence within institutional power relationships. Gan (2020) also identifies organisational power as an important influence on employees' decisions to speak or remain silent. Thus, lecturers' reluctance to question senior officers reflects how hierarchical relationships can discourage open disagreement.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that institutional procedures and professional status create unequal opportunities for upward communication. This is consistent with Lam and Xu (2019), who demonstrate how power imbalances and power-distance orientation contribute to employee silence. Similarly, Detert and Edmondson (2011) explain how employees develop implicit beliefs that questioning authority may be inappropriate or risky. Abudetse et al. (2025) highlight the significance of governance practices and leadership styles in shaping institutional performance within Ghanaian Colleges of Education. The present findings extend these discussions by demonstrating how departmental gatekeeping, committee membership and administrative reporting procedures influence lecturers' access to institutional decision-makers.

The results indicate that the voice of employees is impacted by the interplay between leadership relations and the organisational political structures. While LMX theory elaborates on effective communication of lecturers to express their voice in terms of trust and supportive leadership relations, the Hierarchy of Voice explains how the differences in status and leadership shape the solution of whose messages are expressed, sent and accepted. Thus, these two perspectives are complementary. As a result, improving employee voice requires not only supportive leadership but also institutional mechanisms allowing for equal

participation. This means that lecturers will need to have the confidence to express their ideas and ensure that they are heard by decision-makers.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This study examined how leadership communication practices and institutional hierarchy influence employee voice among lecturers in six Colleges of Education in Ghana. Regarding the first objective, the findings demonstrate that leadership accessibility, openness, active listening, meaningful participation, recognition and constructive feedback are important conditions for encouraging lecturers to express their views, suggestions and concerns. However, one-way communication, limited acknowledgement and the absence of feedback may weaken lecturers' willingness to contribute to institutional discussions. An important finding is the distinction between management's inability to resolve a concern and its failure to acknowledge or respond to it. Even when immediate resolution is not possible, providing explanations, acknowledging concerns and communicating subsequent actions can demonstrate that lecturers' contributions are valued.

On the issue of the second objective, results show that the hierarchy of the institution has an impact on the readiness of lecturers to raise issues and opportunities to do so via seniority and status differences among them, as well as through bureaucratic channels, departmental boundaries, lack of equality in meetings, and informal gatekeeping practices. Even though these factors create the official ways for communication and accountability, they may impose restrictions on those lecturers who are trying to communicate with senior management. Moreover, it also prevents these lecturers from getting their message across to decision-makers.

Recommendations: College management should strengthen inclusive communication channels through which lecturers can express suggestions, concerns and opinions. These may include staff consultations, departmental meetings, committees and designated representatives responsible for conveying lecturers' concerns to management. Multiple channels would create alternative opportunities for participation when direct communication is difficult. Principals, vice-principals and heads of department should acknowledge concerns promptly and provide constructive feedback. Where immediate resolution is not possible, management should explain the reasons, identify the responsible office and communicate next steps. This would help lecturers distinguish unresolved concerns from those that have been ignored.

A significant priority is ensuring balanced participation in institutional meetings and decision-making. Chairpersons should encourage contributions from all institutional levels, particularly junior lecturers who may hesitate to express dissenting views to senior colleagues. For participation to be meaningful, lecturers should be consulted before decisions are finalised, allowing their views to inform discussions. Colleges should also review administrative reporting procedures, eliminating unnecessary requirements without compromising accountability.

Furthermore, communication among departments, committees and the wider academic community should be improved. Heads of department and committee representatives should have responsibilities for conveying lecturers' views accurately and communicating management decisions or actions. Leadership development programmes for principals, vice-principals and heads of department should emphasise active listening, respectful disagreement, constructive feedback and inclusive communication. Such programmes should equip leaders to create environments where lecturers can raise concerns without fear of retaliation.

Institutional leaders should recognise that disagreement is not necessarily disrespect or disloyalty; rather, it can support institutional learning, accountability and development.

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