



Between Policy and Practice: Unveiling School Leaders' Unawareness of Volunteer Teacher Guidelines

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Abstract :

This study examines the implementation gap between national policies and volunteer teacher management practices in public secondary schools. Using a qualitative case study approach with semi-structured interviews with 18 principals as well as an analysis of the 2023 national policy document, the study identified three key findings: first, the majority of school principals were unaware of the existence of the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines, so recruitment was carried out without standard procedures and formal employment contracts. Second, informal recruitment practices, such as through parent meetings or referrals from TAESA, are adaptive strategies but weaken the principles of transparency and accountability. Third, the incentive and recognition system for volunteer teachers is sporadic and unstructured, which strengthens the marginal position of volunteer teachers in the education system. This gap reflects the weak dissemination of policies, the lack of training for school principals, and the limitations of institutional capacity in the context of education decentralization. This study recommends strengthening policy socialization, providing continuous training, implementing regulation-based incentives, and integrating volunteer teachers into national training programs to achieve an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable education system.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of education policies in a decentralized system often faces high structural and bureaucratic complexity (Altamimi et al., 2023; Bell & Smith, 2022; Faguet & Shami, 2022). According to policy implementation theory, the success of policy implementation is determined by the clarity of policy formulation, the administrative capacity of the implementers, and the effectiveness of communication between levels of government (Altamimi et al., 2023; Bell & Smith, 2022; Faguet & Shami, 2022). In the context of managing volunteer teachers, school principals play the role of lower-level bureaucratic actors, *also known as street-level bureaucrats* (Jo, 2024; Lee & Youm, 2024; Lovell, 2024). They not only carry out formal mandates, but also interpret, adjust, and even change the content of policies according to local conditions. On the other hand, theories related to organizational justice emphasize the importance of striking a balance between contribution and reward within the work system. When volunteer teachers do not receive the recognition and protection they deserve, the spirit of participation becomes a hidden burden (Adamovic, 2023; Rahman & Karim, 2022; Sheeraz et al., 2021). Thus, this theoretical context confirms that the gap between policy and practice is not merely technical, but structural and normative.

Several previous studies have highlighted the structural challenges in implementing education policies in developing countries. A study by Mgaiwa (2021) on the evaluation of the *Education Quality Improvement Programme (EQUIP)* found that principals in Tanzania have a limited understanding of the role of academic leadership, which is exacerbated by a lack of service training over the past two years. Meanwhile, Malisa & Mahonge (2023) highlight the principal's dilemma in carrying out decentralized reforms, particularly in aspects of accountability and inter-institutional relations in Tanzania. On the other hand, studies by Botha & Crafford (2024) examine the practice of contract teachers in sub-Saharan Africa, which reveals diversity in recruitment and professionalisation, but a lack of formal supervision and documentation, including in the context of informal recruitment, such as volunteer teachers. These three studies demonstrate that weak training, inadequate accountability structures, and informal practices are significant factors contributing to the gap between policy and practice at the school level.

Although the government has established the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines as a formal reference, the reality is that field practice reveals significant inconsistencies. Most school principals lack a comprehensive understanding of the guidelines' content, particularly in terms of recruitment, employment contracts, and incentive provision. This problem is not only caused by weak policy socialisation, but also by the absence of specialised training that equips school principals with the necessary implementation skills. On the other hand, informal practices that develop ad hoc are blurring the line between policy and implementation. While previous research has highlighted numerous structural problems at the national level, very few studies have delved deeply into the experiences of school principals as key policy implementers at the grassroots level. Therefore, there is an important gap in the literature that has not answered how the perception and strategy of school principals affect the effectiveness of volunteer teacher policies at the secondary school level.

Building on this, this research makes an original contribution to understanding how school principals, as lower-level policy implementers, interpret and implement the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines. Unlike previous studies that focused on structural or macro-policy dimensions, this study focuses on the daily practices of school principals in dealing with policy vacancies, budget constraints, and pressure on teaching staff. The novelty of the research lies in its approach, which combines thematic analysis based on field data with lower-level bureaucratic theories and the concept of organizational justice. By examining the dynamics of informal recruitment, the absence of formal contracts, and the inequity of incentives, this study reveals the reality of policy deviations that occur systemically and remain unseen by central policymakers. In addition, this research expands our understanding of how the decentralization of education creates a space for interpretation and improvisation, which has a direct impact on the quality and equity of education, particularly in the context of developing countries.

This research aims to uncover in-depth how school principals in Tanzania understand and implement the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines in the context of education management at the secondary school level. The primary focus lies on two key dimensions: first, the extent to which principals are aware of the content of the national guidelines, and second, how the strategies they apply in daily practice reflect the application or deviation of the guidelines. Through a qualitative approach based on case studies, this study examines informal recruitment practices, the absence of formal

contracts, and the provision of non-structural incentives that often conflict with the official policy framework. This research aims not only to map the gap between policy and practice, but also to understand the dynamics of decision-making by school principals in situations of limited resources. Thus, this study contributes to the formulation of more effective and contextually relevant policy implementation strategies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore the principal's understanding and practice in implementing the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines in public secondary schools in Dodoma City, Tanzania. This design was chosen because it enables a holistic exploration of contextual phenomena in real-life situations, particularly when the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly defined (Aurini, 2022; Nassaji, 2020; Renjith et al., 2021). The intrinsic case study type of research was chosen because the primary focus was on the unique characteristics of the local context in Dodoma, rather than on cross-case generalizations. The research approach is interpretive, based on the constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes that social reality is shaped by participants' subjective experiences (Bouncken et al., 2021; Bryda & Costa, 2023; Charli et al., 2022). Thus, this study does not aim to test hypotheses, but rather to understand the meaning and dynamics of policy implementation at the school level from the perspective of direct actors. The research location in Dodoma was chosen because it is a national and regional administrative center with a high concentration of volunteer teachers, thereby representing policy dynamics at the grassroots level.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 18 purposively selected principals of public secondary schools, who met the criteria of involvement in managing volunteer teachers since 2023 (Bathran & Samuel, 2024; Pyo et al., 2023; Strijker et al., 2020). The interview, conducted in Kiswahili, lasted 45–60 minutes and was recorded and transcribed verbatim. Additionally, a document analysis was conducted on the *Guidelines for Volunteer Teachers (2023)* and relevant national education policies. The role of the researcher is as the main instrument in the process of data exploration and interpretation, which also ensures that research ethics are maintained through verbal consent and confidentiality guarantees. The research location is focused on Dodoma City from January to March 2025. To ensure the credibility of the data, triangulation techniques and member checking were employed by seeking clarification of the narrative from key informants. The following table of informants presents their background and contributions to the research focus:

Table 1. Research Informant

Informant	Code	Data Contribution	Relevance to Research Focus
Head of S1	I_S1_2025	Informal recruitment practices and the role of SMTs	Indicates deviation from national guidelines
Head of S3	I_S3_2025	Recruitment through parent meetings	Describe community-based adaptive strategies
S6 Head	I_S6_2025	Ignorance of official guidelines	Showing weak policy dissemination
S11 Head	I_S11_2025	Non-monetary forms of incentives (food/land)	Relevant to assess local context-based incentives
S16 Head	I_S16_2025	Focus on STEM and in-house mentoring	Provide an overview of volunteer placement strategies

In addition, data analysis is conducted using a thematic analysis framework, which comprises the following stages: data introduction, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, definition, and reporting. This technique was chosen because it enables the systematic and in-depth organisation of the meaning of qualitative narratives (Chai et al., 2021; Leko et al., 2021; Saldaña, 2020). Additionally, a deductive content analysis of policy documents is conducted to identify gaps between practice and official mandates. Data reduction was carried out through open coding of interview transcripts, and the data were then presented in a comparison matrix between school policies and practices. Conclusions are drawn through triangulation between informant narratives and document analysis. To maintain the credibility of the interpretation, the researcher conducts trial audits and reflective recording to avoid confirmation bias. Thus, this analysis explains not only the "what" that the principal does, but also the "why" and "how" of the practice is formed in a complex and decentralized institutional context.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Principal's Unawareness of the National Guidelines for Volunteer Teachers

Ignorance of national guidelines refers to the condition in which school principals are unaware of the full content, procedures, or mandates of official documents issued by the government related to the management of volunteer teachers. In the context of this study, this ignorance includes inconsistencies in the recruitment process, the absence of formal contracts, and negligence in meeting aspects of legal protection and professionalism for volunteer teachers. This phenomenon is particularly significant to analyze because it highlights the significant gap between central policy and practice at the school level. When school principals do not understand or thoroughly implement the guidelines, the existence of volunteer teachers is vulnerable to exploitation, inconsistency in roles, and unfairness in task division. This theme is relevant because it highlights the structural barriers to the dissemination of education policy in a decentralised system like Tanzania, while underscoring the need for more effective communication and training strategies from central institutions to the grassroots.

The majority of school principals stated that they were unaware of or had never received official documents related to the guidelines for managing volunteer teachers from the central government. This ignorance causes schools to develop their ad-hoc approaches. One of the principals said, "To be honest, we have never received an official document explaining how volunteer teachers should be recruited and managed. So, all this time, we have been using our school plan, based on urgent needs and the experience of previous years. We rely on internal coordination and discussions with the teaching staff (I_S7_2025)." A similar statement was also conveyed by another school principal, who regretted the lack of formal direction from the relevant authorities, "I think it is miserable because until now there are no national guidelines that we have received directly. As a result, we rely on our initiative, and this makes the practice in each school very different. (I_S6_2025)."

Based on the results of the interview above, most school principals lack an adequate understanding of the existence and content of the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines. This ignorance has direct implications for the weak application of basic policy principles, such as open recruitment procedures and formal employment contracts. In the absence of this understanding, schools tend to adopt approaches that are both

internal and informal, such as verbal agreements or referrals from parent meetings. As a result, legal and professional protections for volunteer teachers are weakened, and the chances of injustice increase. This situation also reflects the weak dissemination and training mechanisms from national education authorities to implementers on the ground, who should be at the forefront of policy implementation.

Findings on the ground indicate that none of the 18 schools where the study was conducted involved school councils in the recruitment of volunteer teachers, as outlined in national guidelines (Guideline 2.4). Instead, recruitment is carried out by the School Management Team (SMT), school principals, or even through referrals from TAESA. No school uses official media or bulletin boards as a means of recruitment, as required in the guidelines. This practice demonstrates that national-level policies are not consistently implemented at the school level. This indicates weak supervision from central authorities and a weak capacity of institutions, such as school boards, to carry out their roles according to mandates.

Departing from this, it is evident that the findings reveal that most school principals in Dodoma are unaware of the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines. This unawareness leads to inconsistencies in the implementation of volunteer teacher management practices in schools, such as recruitment without standard procedures and the absence of employment contracts. This inequality highlights the disparity between central policies and grassroots-level practices. Without capacity building and effective policy dissemination, the implementation of volunteer teacher programs risks continuing in an informal pattern that threatens the quality and fairness of education.

Informal Recruitment Strategy by School Principals in Managing Volunteer Teachers

Informal recruitment strategies in this context refer to the methods by which school principals, outside of official guidelines, fill teacher vacancies, particularly for volunteer teachers. Although ideally the recruitment of volunteer teachers should follow procedures such as open announcements, qualification-based selection, and school board involvement, the reality is that many principals use alternative means such as recommendations from parents, referrals from local labor agencies (TAESA), or internal selection based on the needs of the subject of the lesson. This practice was born out of urgent conditions, limited resources, and a lack of supervision from education authorities. The definition of this theme is relevant because it illustrates how school principals, as policy implementers, often have to make pragmatic decisions to maintain the continuity of learning, even though they must overlook formal procedural and legal aspects. In the context of decentralization and budget constraints, such as in Tanzania, this strategy represents local adaptation to national policies that have not been effectively communicated.

Some school principals stated that the recruitment of volunteer teachers was conducted directly through internal forums, without utilizing formal media as stipulated in the guidelines. The principal from S3 said. "Usually, we announce the need for volunteer teachers during the meeting of students' parents. If anyone knows a graduate who is waiting for a placement or wants to teach, they can immediately convey this information. We process it quickly because of the urgent need (I_S3_2025)." Meanwhile, the principal of S18 relies on local institutions such as TAESA, "We are working with TAESA to get volunteer teachers, but without an open announcement. They send us a list of candidates and we choose based on the needs of the subjects, especially Science and Mathematics. There is no formal selection process (I_S18_2025)."

From the quote, the principal uses an informal approach to meet the needs of the teaching staff. Although this is administratively against the rules, it emerges as a solution to the urgent need and weak structural support. Recruitment through parent meetings or institutions such as TAESA not only avoids an open selection process but also overrides the principles of accountability and participation that should be the cornerstone of education policy. Additionally, the absence of a formal contract exacerbates the vulnerability of the volunteer teacher position. This practice can create a gap between schools, where volunteer teachers at one school may go through a much more lenient process than those at another. This confirms that although informal recruitment is adaptive, its sustainability widens the gap in policy implementation at the grassroots level.

Departing from this, the informal recruitment strategies implemented by schools are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Volunteer Teacher Recruitment Strategy and Its Impact

Recruitment Strategies Implemented by Schools	Impact on Practice and Accountability
Announcement of needs through a parent meeting	Fast but non-transparent process and limited reach
Referrals from TAESA without open selection	Speed up the process, but without the need for quality
Probation period without a formal legal basis	Provide flexibility but no legal protections for teachers
Recruitment by Principal/SMT	Reinforcing the centralization of decisions and weakening the functioning of school boards

Building on the presentation of Table 2, it is evident that the recruitment strategy of volunteer teachers implemented by schools still faces several significant challenges in terms of transparency, quality, and accountability. Announcement of needs through a parent forum does speed up the process, but its reach is limited and prone to information bias. Referrals from TAESA without open selection are indeed efficient; however, they overlook the quality assurance mechanism for educators. Similarly, the use of probationary periods without a legal basis provides room for flexibility, but risks raising legal protection issues for teachers. Meanwhile, the pattern of direct recruitment by school principals or SMTs reinforces the centralization of power and weakens the collective role of school boards. From the overall pattern, short-term effectiveness is not always directly proportional to long-term sustainability and accountability. Therefore, a more open, merit-based, and regulatory framework is needed to maintain the quality of education as well as justice for teaching staff.

Informal recruitment strategies employed by school principals in managing volunteer teachers often rely on informal approaches, reflecting an adaptive response to system inefficiencies. While this strategy accelerates the fulfillment of teacher needs, it does so at the expense of transparency, accountability, and legal protection. The lack of involvement from the school board and the absence of open announcements are manifestations of deviations from national guidelines. These findings highlight the need for mechanisms to enhance policy dissemination, training for school principals, and incentives to promote compliance with formal procedures.

Gap in Incentives and Recognition for Volunteer Teachers

The gap in incentives and recognition refers to the imbalance between the basic needs, professional contributions, and returns received by volunteer teachers in the form of material and symbolic support. In the context of this study, incentives include financial compensation, access to training, supporting facilities, and formal awards such as certificates. The absence of these elements risks lowering motivation, reinforcing a sense of marginalization, and increasing the resignation rate of volunteer teachers. This theme is particularly relevant in describing the dynamics of human resource management, which requires not only administrative management but also psychosocial reinforcement through recognition and ongoing support. Amid a limited education system, this theme shows that uneven incentives and neglect of the basic needs of volunteers can be factors that undermine the sustainability of the program, as well as weaken the spirit of professionalism among education volunteers.

It is known that not all schools in this study implement an incentive system based on the allocation of local government funds, as stipulated in the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines. Instead, incentives are provided sporadically through BOS funds, parent donations, or school community initiatives. Most schools can only afford limited incentives, such as lunch or transportation money, and often those incentives are not timely. In some cases, such as in S11, schools even offer land for gardening as an additional form of incentive. Although creative, these practices are not accompanied by formal recognition such as certificates of appreciation or letters of recommendation. The absence of a structured incentive system reinforces the position of volunteer teachers as a marginalized group within the education system, lacking access to training, competency enhancement, and clear career paths.

Departing from this, the form of volunteer teacher incentives is presented in Figure 1.

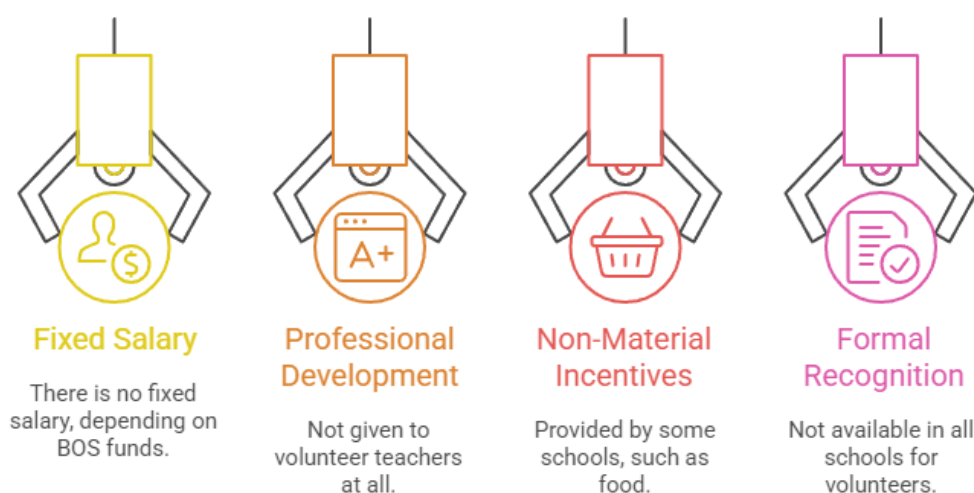


Figure 1. Volunteer Teacher Incentives

Figure 1 illustrates that incentives for volunteer teachers remain minimal, failing to provide adequate welfare and professional development guarantees. First, incentives in the form of fixed salaries are not consistently available because they depend on the availability of BOS funds, so the financial sustainability of volunteers becomes fragile. Second, professional development is not provided at all, which has implications for the limited opportunities for volunteer teachers to improve their competence.

Third, non-material forms of incentives, such as feeding, are present in some schools; however, they are sporadic and unsustainable. Fourth, formal recognition of the role of volunteer teachers is also not available in all schools, resulting in their contributions being under-recognised institutionally. This condition reveals a significant disparity between the actual needs of volunteer teachers and the form of appreciation they receive. The implication is that without improvements to a more equitable and sustainable incentive system, the motivation and quality of volunteers' teaching may decline, ultimately affecting the overall quality of education.

The incentive and recognition system for volunteer teachers has not been implemented in accordance with national guidelines and therefore does not meet the principles of justice and sustainability. The incentives provided are informal, uneven, and not based on a structured system. The absence of formal recognition, such as certificates or participation in training, weakens the spirit of professionalism and makes volunteers feel institutionally unrecognised. Therefore, reforms in the provision of incentives and recognition are key to increasing the motivation, sustainability, and integration of volunteer teachers into a more inclusive and equitable education system.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal a significant gap between national policies on the management of volunteer teachers and practices at the school level, particularly in the Dodoma region of Tanzania. The principal's unawareness of the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines is a central issue that has implications for the weak implementation of recruitment standards, employment contracts, and legal protection for volunteer teachers. These findings are relevant to the research focus of examining how school leaders understand and implement education volunteer policies. In the context of a decentralized education system, barriers to the dissemination of policies from central authorities to the grassroots are a key factor that leads to implementation deviations. Therefore, the following discussion will outline a thematic analysis of the main findings associated with policy implementation theory and previous literature.

This research aligns with the theory of policy implementation, as presented by Capano (2025), which posits that successful implementation is highly dependent on policy clarity, effective communication between levels of government, and the capacity of implementers on the ground. The principal's ignorance of the guidelines highlights the weaknesses in policy communication and administrative training. Research by Ochieng & Yeonsung (2021) supports this by pointing out that schools in Tanzania often face barriers to accessing policy documents due to limited information infrastructure. Next, Wimmer (2021) found that in developing countries, policy diffusion is often fragmentary, so school principals rely on local interpretations. This is also reinforced by studies, such as those by Harris et al. (2022), which state that the meaning of policies by school leaders significantly affects the form of implementation, in contrast to the findings of Yurkofsky (2022), which emphasize the importance of ongoing training for school leaders to understand and implement policies consistently. Therefore, these findings indicate that the absence of training and socialisation has a direct impact on the weak legal and professional standards of volunteer teachers.

The phenomenon of informal recruitment reflects the adaptive approach described in the theory of Street-Level Bureaucracy (Chang & Brewer, 2023; Marienfeldt, 2024; Peeters & Campos, 2023), where policymakers often have to adapt procedures to the reality of the field. In this context, school principals face the pressure of meeting the needs of teaching staff without adequate administrative and financial support. A study by Hakiman & Sheely (2025) in Kenya shows that similar informal recruitment practices occur due to weak central control and high local demands. Blackmore et al. (2023) also note that the dominance of principals in decision-making often ignores the role of school boards, as seen in this study. However, unlike the Supriatna study (2025), which emphasises the need for flexible yet accountable regulations, the practice in Dodoma widens the accountability gap due to the absence of a supervisory mechanism. This suggests that without institutional support, adaptive strategies can turn into procedural deviations.

Incentive and recognition inequality can be explained through an organizational justice theory approach (Bloch et al., 2022; Donkor et al., 2023; Hermanto & Srimulyani, 2022), which highlights the importance of a balance between individual contributions and institutional rewards, when volunteer teachers do not receive proper compensation or formal recognition, work motivation and institutional loyalty decline. Research by Malisa (2023) in Botswana indicates that symbolic recognition, such as certificates, can enhance professional identity and a sense of belonging. Faguet (2022) emphasizes the importance of teacher involvement in ongoing professional development to ensure equal integration. Instead, the study's results revealed that non-monetary incentives are sporadic and unsustainable, and formal recognition is almost nonexistent. This indicates that without a structured incentive and recognition system, the existence of volunteer teachers remains in a marginal status, prone to being abandoned.

In practical terms, this research makes a significant contribution to education authorities in Tanzania, improving policy dissemination mechanisms and strengthening the capacity of school principals to manage volunteer teachers professionally and accountably. Practical recommendations include policy-based training, strengthening the role of school boards, and diversifying transparent and sustainable funding sources. Theoretically, this research contributes to expanding the understanding of the dynamics of policy implementation at the grassroots level, particularly in the context of decentralized education systems. These findings also strengthen the theory of policy implementation and lower-level bureaucracy by showing how the interaction between weak institutional structures and local needs pressures can result in systemic procedural deviations.

The results of this study confirm that the gap between policies and practices in the management of volunteer teachers in Tanzania is due to a combination of school principals' unawareness, informal recruitment approaches, and the absence of a fair and sustainable incentive system. These three themes are interrelated and reflect the weak coordination between the central and school levels in a decentralized education system. To remedy this situation, a comprehensive strategy is needed that includes intensive training, restructuring of supervision structures, and integration of volunteer teachers into the national professional development framework. Further research is recommended to investigate the role of secondary institutions, such as local governments and non-governmental organisations, in enhancing the implementation of education policies at the school level.

CONCLUSION

This research reveals a significant gap between national policies on the management of volunteer teachers and practices at the secondary school level in Tanzania. The principal's unawareness of the 2023 Volunteer Teacher Guidelines has led to procedural deviations in the recruitment, placement, and legal protection of volunteer teachers. The informal recruitment strategy employed by school principals demonstrates an adaptive response to structural limitations, yet it also weakens the principles of transparency and policy accountability. On the other hand, the lack of incentives and recognition for the contributions of volunteer teachers highlights their marginal position in the education system. These three findings show the weakness of institutional coordination and supporting mechanisms within the framework of education decentralization. Therefore, the results of this study emphasize the need to strengthen policy dissemination, principal training, and a fair incentive system to ensure a more consistent, effective, and sustainable policy implementation at the grassroots level.

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