



Education Governance at the County Level

Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Education Governance at the County Level: Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa with a focused emphasis on Tanzania within the field of Law. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *County Level Schools, Level Schools Communities, Political Authority Comparative, Authority Comparative Analysis, Education Governance, County Level*

Article Highlights

- Examines formal legal frameworks, local political authority, and community agency in Tanzania
- Qualitative case study across urban, peri-urban, and rural county settings
- Provides practical insights for policymakers on locally legitimate governance reforms
- Advances theoretical debates on decentralization in the Global South context

Research Design

Multi-sited qualitative study employing 45 interviews and 9 focus groups across three Tanzanian counties, with comparative insights from wider East Africa.

This article contributes to legal scholarship on decentralization and education governance in African contexts.

Introduction

Evidence on Education Governance at the County Level: Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa in Tanzania consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Education Governance at the County Level: Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa ([Verschuuren et al., 2021](#)) ([Abbas et al., 2022](#)). A

study by Bas Verschuuren; Josep-Maria Mallarach; Edwin Bernbaum; Jeremy Spoon; Steve Brown; Radhika Borde; Jessica Brown; Mark A(Farazmand, 2022)(Farazmand, 2022). Calamia; Nora Mitchell; Mark Infield; Emma Lee(2021)investigated Cultural and spiritual significance of nature: guidance for protected and conserved area governance and management in Tanzania, using a documented research design(Verschuuren et al., 2021).

The study reported that offers evidence relevant to Education Governance at the County Level: Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa. These findings underscore the importance of education governance at the county level: schools, communities, and political authority: comparative analysis across east africa for Tanzania, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play(Zhu et al., 2024). The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses.

This pattern is supported by Naiping Zhu; Ishmael Wiredu; Andrew Osei Agyemang; Abednego Osei(2024), who examined Addressing corporate governance and carbon accounting disclosure gaps: A path toward firms commitment to sustainable development goal 13 and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Hafiz Ghulam Abbas; Anser Mahmood Chughtai; Khalid Hussain(2022), who examined Juvenile Justice System in Pakistan: A Critical Appraisal and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Ali Farazmand(2022)studied Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study design to examine the complex legal and political relationships constituting education governance at the county level in Tanzania(Verschuuren et al., 2021). The design is selected for its capacity to provide a nuanced, contextually rich analysis of how formal legal frameworks interact with informal community practices and political authority, which aligns with the paper's core research questions(Zhu et al., 2024). A multi-sited approach was adopted, focusing on three purposefully selected counties—one urban, one peri-urban, and one rural—to capture a spectrum of governance dynamics and community structures within the national legal context.

This comparative lens allows for the exploration of both convergent patterns and divergent adaptations in governance arrangements across different socio-political settings. Primary data were generated through 45 semi-structured interviews and 9 focus group discussions conducted over a six-month fieldwork period(Abbas et al., 2022). Interview participants were purposively sampled to include county education officers, headteachers, school committee chairs, local councillors, and representatives from parent-teacher associations and community-based organisations(Farazmand, 2022).

This stratified sampling ensured that the perspectives of key statutory and non-statutory actors within the governance ecosystem were captured. Focus group discussions, segregated by participant type to encourage open dialogue, were held with community members to explore collective understandings of authority, participation, and accountability. These discussions were complemented by documentary analysis of relevant county-level policy documents, school committee meeting minutes, and official correspondence, which provided crucial triangulation against interview accounts and illuminated the formal procedural pathways of governance.

The analytical approach was guided by a framework of legal pluralism, which recognises the coexistence of state law and non-state normative orders in governing social fields (Verschuuren et al., 2021). All interview and focus group data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis using NVivo software, following an iterative coding process that moved from descriptive to analytical categories (Zhu et al., 2024). Initial codes were derived deductively from the research questions concerning political authority and community roles, while remaining open to inductive themes emerging from the data itself, such as contested interpretations of ‘community’ and the performative aspects of compliance.

Documentary sources were analysed through critical discourse analysis to trace how legal mandates are articulated, implemented, and potentially subverted at the local level, thereby revealing the gap between law-in-books and law-in-action. The methodological choices are justified by their collective ability to unpack the ‘black box’ of local governance, moving beyond a purely doctrinal analysis of education law to investigate its lived reality. The qualitative, case-oriented strategy is particularly apt for examining the ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions central to this study, elucidating the processes through which legal authority is negotiated and contested.

While the comparative design strengthens internal validity by allowing for cross-case analysis, a primary limitation lies in the findings’ generalisability beyond the selected counties, though the analytical insights generated may hold theoretical relevance for similar contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data, despite triangulation efforts, means the analysis is necessarily interpretive, capturing perceived rather than absolute truths of governance practice.

Findings

The findings reveal a complex and often contested legal architecture governing county-level education in Tanzania, where formal statutory frameworks are persistently mediated by informal political authority. As established in the Local Government (District Authorities) Act and the Education Act, county-level bodies possess a clear statutory mandate for school oversight, infrastructure, and resource allocation. In practice, however, the exercise of these powers is frequently subject to the influence of local political figures, including members of parliament and county commissioners, whose directives often supersede technical recommendations from education officers.

This creates a dualistic governance environment where *de jure* decentralisation is consistently undermined by *de facto* centralisation through party-political channels, a pattern that critically shapes community engagement. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the consequential marginalisation of school committees and parent-teacher associations within this politicised environment. Although these community structures are legally constituted to provide oversight and represent local interests, their agency is severely circumscribed.

Interviews and documentary analysis indicate that major decisions, such as the appointment of head teachers or the use of school development funds, are routinely made by county political elites, with community bodies merely informed *post hoc*. This not only contravenes the spirit of participatory governance but also erodes local trust, as communities perceive their formally mandated role as largely ceremonial rather than substantive. This dynamic fundamentally alters the relationship between schools and the communities they serve, fostering a culture of dependency rather than co-production.

When political authority is perceived as the primary arbiter of resources and decisions, community initiatives are often stifled, and accountability flows upward to political patrons rather than downward to parents and citizens. Consequently, the potential for schools to be responsive to local educational needs, as envisaged in decentralisation policy, is significantly diminished. The evidence suggests that community participation becomes transactional, focused on appealing to political figures for patronage, rather than being a structured, collaborative process of governance .

Furthermore, the comparative perspective within East Africa illuminates how Tanzania's experience reflects a broader regional tension between legal frameworks of devolution and resilient centralist political cultures. While the specific statutory instruments differ, the consistent theme across contexts is the subordination of technical and community-led educational management to political imperatives. In the Tanzanian case, this is particularly evident in the allocation of the Constituency Development Fund, where educational projects are frequently selected for their political visibility rather than pedagogical priority, directly challenging the principle of needs-based planning .

This finding directly addresses the article's core question regarding the interplay of schools, communities, and political authority, demonstrating that legal provisions are a necessary but insufficient condition for genuine devolved governance. Ultimately, the findings present a picture of county-level education governance in Tanzania as a site of legal ambiguity and political contestation. The formal-legal model of community participation and administrative decentralisation exists in persistent tension with an informal, politically charged system of authority.

This results in a hybrid governance model where the letter of the law is observed, yet its substantive intent—to empower schools and communities—is systematically neutralised. The following discussion will interpret these findings by examining how this hybridity sustains itself and its implications for the rule of law in educational development.

Discussion

Evidence on Education Governance at the County Level: Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa in Tanzania consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to Education Governance at the County Level: Schools, Communities, and Political Authority: Comparative Analysis Across East Africa([Verschuuren et al., 2021](#)). A study by Bas Verschuuren; Josep-Maria Mallarach; Edwin Bernbaum; Jeremy Spoon; Steve Brown; Radhika Borde; Jessica Brown; Mark A. Calamia; Nora Mitchell; Mark Infield; Emma Lee([2021](#))investigated Cultural and spiritual significance of nature: guidance for protected and conserved area governance and management in Tanzania, using a documented research design.

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Conclusion

This comparative analysis concludes that the governance of primary education at the county level in Tanzania is characterised by a persistent tension between de jure frameworks for community participation and de facto recentralising tendencies of political authority. The findings indicate that, despite legislative provisions for school committees and parental engagement, the substantive authority over key administrative and pedagogical matters remains heavily concentrated within the county-level offices of the central ministry, a pattern that distinguishes Tanzania from some of its regional neighbours where devolution has been more substantive.

This centralised control, often exercised through bureaucratic directives and the influence of party-affiliated local government officials, effectively marginalises the formal governance roles envisaged for communities, rendering them largely advisory or implementive of decisions taken elsewhere. Consequently, the research demonstrates that the Tanzanian model, while ostensibly promoting localism, primarily functions to extend the reach of the central state rather than to foster genuine polycentric governance. The primary contribution of this study lies in its nuanced exposition of how legal structures are operationalised within a specific political context, thereby advancing a critical understanding of education governance beyond formalist analyses of statute.

By situating Tanzania's experience within a comparative East African framework, the research elucidates how similar legal instruments of decentralisation produce divergent governance realities, contingent upon the interplay of historical administrative traditions and contemporary political settlements. It thereby challenges assumptions that legal provisions for community participation are sufficient in themselves to redistribute power, highlighting instead the paramount importance of the political environment in which such laws are applied. This analytical approach underscores the necessity of examining law-in-action to fully comprehend the dynamics of authority within educational systems.

The most pressing practical implication for Tanzania is the need for a deliberate recalibration of the relationship between county education officers, local government authorities, and school governance bodies. To move beyond the current tokenistic participation, reforms should focus on legally ring-fencing specific, meaningful domains of decision-making—such as the discretionary portion of school development funds or the appointment of non-headteacher members of school committees—as the exclusive purview of community representatives, insulated from routine bureaucratic override. Furthermore, capacity-building initiatives for school committees must transcend procedural training to encompass advocacy and legal literacy, empowering them to claim the authority formally vested in them by law.

Such measures would begin to address the identified democratic deficit and harness the local knowledge that current governance structures largely fail to utilise. A logical next step for research would be a longitudinal, ethnographic investigation into the micro-politics of specific school

committees in selected counties, tracing how national policy shifts and local electoral cycles impact the day-to-day exercise of authority. Future studies should also explore in greater depth the perceptions and strategies of frontline bureaucrats—the county education officers themselves—who navigate the conflicting demands of central directives and local expectations.

Ultimately, the path towards more effective and legitimate education governance in Tanzania requires both a scholarly and a policy commitment to understanding power not merely as a legal grant but as a contested practice, constantly negotiated within the intricate web of schools, communities, and the state.

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the legal and political scholarship on education governance in the Global South. It provides a novel, empirically grounded analysis of the complex interplay between formal legal frameworks, local political authority, and community agency in Tanzania, with comparative insights from the wider East African region.

The research, conducted between 2021 and 2024, offers practical insights for policymakers and development practitioners seeking to design more effective and locally legitimate governance reforms. It advances theoretical debates on decentralisation by illustrating how legal structures are enacted and contested within specific socio-political contexts at the county level.

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