

EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF ORGANIZATIONAL SILENCE AMONG TEACHERS AT SECONDARY SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Sharing ideas, knowledge and information by employees are having pertinent importance for organizational leaders to gain an in-depth understanding of issues to elevate the performance. However, silence among employees yield adverse impact, therefore, current study was opted to explore causes of silence among teachers of secondary schools. Secondary school teachers were the unit of analysis and hence forth constituted the population of study. Data were collected through cross sectional survey using questionnaire. Quantitative data was collected from a sample of 446 teachers of secondary schools, qualitative data was collected from 25 secondary school teachers. The frequency of open ended and analysis of interview responses from secondary school teachers regarding the reasons for their silence revealed that the leading reason for silence among teachers is the corrosive behavior exhibited by school heads. To break the silence, it was suggested that heads may eliminate the reasons for silence and may create a welcoming atmosphere and many female teachers be allowed to share their thoughts without fear of repercussions.

Keywords: organizational silence, teachers, secondary schools

Introduction

The significance of exchanging information, ideas, and skills cannot be overstated, as it is integral for fostering communication, seeking support in decision-making processes (Ghosh, 2022). Drawing from the insights of Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), Anwar and Yoo (2022) emphasize that sharing facilitates a deeper understanding of concepts and aids in articulating issues to others. It encompasses the transmission of ideas, information, emotions, and perspectives on a given problem or topic of discussion. This collaborative exchange not only enhances social cohesion and comprehension but also cultivates a culture of respect for diversity and a shared sense of identity. Moreover, sharing insights and knowledge enables organizational leaders or group heads to gain comprehensive insights into problem-solving and related tasks. Hence, sharing stands as a pivotal element in nurturing relationships, be it among individuals, groups, or organizations. As highlighted by Lekhawipat et al. (2018), the exchange of ideas and information is indispensable for personal, social, and organizational advancement, fostering a fair and inclusive organizational environment.

Conversely, the absence of idea-sharing often manifests as silence, a term typically associated with introverted tendencies and reserved behavior within society. However, philosophical perspectives view silence in a positive light, radiating with constructive potential (Afsar, 2013). Employees may withhold innovative ideas, occasionally opting for silence instead of sharing them with higher authorities, as noted by Cinar et al. (2013). This official silence serves to safeguard organizational strategies from potential competitors (Wang & Hsieh, 2013), making it a widely discussed topic in organizational discourse (Karaca, 2013). Silence, viewed as

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an organizational phenomenon, warrants managerial attention to address its underlying causes (Valikhani & Karpardaz, 2015). It's essential to understand that silence transcends mere quietness, encompassing the total disengagement of employees on physical, intellectual, and emotional levels (Nikmaram et al., 2012). Furthermore, silence extends beyond the absence of verbal communication; it also encompasses refraining from sharing knowledge, collaborative brainstorming, problem identification, solution-seeking, and even the intentional creation of problems to derive innovative solutions (Karaca, 2013).

Voice and silence represent contrasting concepts, each with its distinct implications. While voice embodies the power of expression (Zaman et al., 2021), silence, as noted by Brinsfield et al. (2020), hinders the dissemination of ideas, words, imaginations, information, suggestions, and concerns to the public sphere. Voice, characterized by its ability to articulate diverse perspectives and foster creativity, serves as a catalyst for progress and innovation (Mowbray et al., 2015). Conversely, silence, while less critical, imposes barriers that inhibit the expression and advancement of ideas. Despite its empowering nature, voicing one's thoughts often entails risks and entails costs for others (Hsiung, 2012).

Today's era is considered a highly changing and competitive environment and hence organizations are facing changes quickly in information processing as well as in decision-making. Healthy organizations consider employees a valued source of creative and innovative ideas and valuable opinions and pursue criticism, grievances, and even notification of misconduct. That's why, the organization uses employee knowledge, information, and ideas to encourage groundbreaking initiatives and increase organizational performance (Alqarni, 2020). As a result, administrators intend to create a healthy and open environment that encourages employees to share their views, ideas, knowledge, concerns, grievances, and information regarding issues under consideration at the workplace. Such actions are compatible with the literature on management that emphasizes the importance of employee voice in organizations (Morrison and Milliken, 2000). However, regrettably, many employees get to remain silent and withhold their opinion, ideas, and information about issues. Theorists and Researchers (Çakıcı, 2007; Perlow and Williams, 2003; Milliken et al., 2003; Pinder and Harlos, 2001; Morrison and Milliken, 2000) have found that workforces are usually reluctant to share their opinion with their bosses and colleagues when they have grave concerns to share. This behavior is known as Organizational Silence (OS). More specifically, OS refers to employees withholding potentially useful information or important concerns that they do not share with their heads or reporting authority (Morrison and Milliken, 2000; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). In other words, it refers to the tendency of employees not to speak up when they have ideas, suggestions, concerns about problematic issues, or an unlike viewpoint that might be supportive or appropriate to share (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Milliken et al., 2003).

Similarly, educational institutions are not immune to these challenges. Alqarni (2020) highlights numerous issues concerning teachers' behavior that directly affect organizational performance within educational settings. These issues include a tendency for limited participation in decision-making processes, minimal involvement in initiatives and innovative endeavors, hesitancy to share ideas and suggestions, reluctance to report workplace misconduct, and a pervasive culture of deference towards authority figures. Correspondingly, Çakıcı (2007)

and other researchers have identified organizational silence (OS) as a prevalent behavior among teachers in school environments. Recent studies have linked OS to detrimental outcomes, arguing that it impedes learning, error correction, and crisis resolution (Perlow & Williams, 2003). Moreover, Perlow and Williams (2003) underscore the psychological toll of silence, which can lead to feelings of humiliation, suppressed anger, resentment, and ultimately stifle creativity and productivity within the organization. Morrison and Milliken (2000) further elaborate on the consequences of organizational silence, including a

- Lack of idea analysis,
- Limited informational diversity,
- Employees feeling undervalued, and
- Cognitive dissonance.

Employee silence is widely acknowledged as detrimental to organizations, often leading to increased employee dissatisfaction, which manifests in absenteeism, high turnover rates, and compromised communication channels, thereby undermining overall organizational functioning. Additionally, the consequences may extend to diminished innovation, subpar project outcomes, decreased morale, and the production of defective products. Over time, organizational silence can render some employees disengaged and apathetic toward the quality of their work (Bagheri et al., 2012). While it's commonly assumed that employee silence primarily harms the organization, it's important to recognize that its adverse effects are felt by both the organization and its employees. Richard (2003) outlines various factors contributing to organizational silence, including

- Fear
- Embarrassment
- Limited ethical responsibility perceptions
- Peer pressure
- Lack of opportunities for expression, and
- Insufficient organizational political acumen

Consequently, the issue of organizational silence has emerged as a pressing concern for educational institutions, with significant implications for overall performance. Thus, there is a compelling need for comprehensive investigations into organizational silence within schools. In contemporary discourse, employee silence has emerged as a compelling subject for researchers. When employees deliberately or inadvertently refrain from expressing crucial opinions pertaining to the organization's well-being, it gives rise to employee silence within the organizational context (Morrison, 2014). Often, employees withhold their ideas due to concerns that their viewpoints might lead to conflicts with their colleagues (Doostar, Esmaeilzadeh, & Hosseini, 2014). However, organizational silence is recognized as an adverse phenomenon, with potential detrimental effects on organizational performance (Al Barrow, 2022).

Organizational silence is recognized as a deliberate behavioral choice (Bagheri, Zaref & Aeen, 2012), wherein employees consciously overlook issues such as illegal or immoral activities, disrespect, and violations of legal standards within the organization, opting not to react. This phenomenon can pose significant challenges and even jeopardize the organization in the face of adversity. Several factors contribute to organizational silence, including fear of reprisal, lack of confidence in leadership, or the perception that speaking up will yield no meaningful change. The repercussions of organizational silence can be far-reaching, resulting in reduced productivity, heightened turnover rates, and a stifling of innovation within the organization (Kanani, Enayati, Lari, & Sal, 2015). By remaining silent about problems, employees miss out on opportunities to offer valuable feedback or suggestions for improvement, leading to inefficiencies and suboptimal performance. Moreover, when employees feel unable to voice their concerns, they may become disengaged and less committed to the organization, ultimately exacerbating turnover rates and undermining organizational performance.

Therefore, breaking the silence and fostering an environment where employees feel empowered to express their opinions and concerns on critical issues is paramount for addressing one of the most pressing challenges faced by organizations today. In the ongoing pursuit of success, organizations prioritize their human capital to enhance efficiency and productivity through the sharing of knowledge and information (Goldberg & Fleming, 2016). Literature underscores that organizational performance hinges on the extent of knowledge and information exchange among individuals within the organization (Abdelwhab Ali et al., 2019). Within educational contexts, the active participation of teachers in sharing their knowledge, insights, and perspectives is pivotal, as emphasized by UNESCO (2005) who stated, "without the participation of teachers, changes in education are impossible." However, it has been observed that some teachers exhibit reluctance in sharing their knowledge and perspectives, opting for silence. Hence, the objective of this study is to investigate the underlying reasons for silence among secondary school teachers as perceived by school heads.

Methodology

Research approaches including three types: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, the latter combining both quantitative and qualitative elements (William, 2011). Quantitative research deals with numerical data, often collected through survey questionnaires, while qualitative research is used to deeper understanding of concepts and experiences (Creswell, 2009). In this study, organizational silence in schools was investigated using a quantitative approach, employing survey questionnaires for data collection from teachers. Open-ended survey responses were used to enhance, confirm, or refine the story told through quantitative data. Open-ended questions were included to have insights into the reasons behind teachers' silence behavior. Open-ended questions offer a valuable avenue for obtaining genuine feedback, allowing individuals to articulate their experiences in their own words. Personally, analyzing survey responses of this nature presents an opportunity to empathize with audience, glean crucial insights, and inform informed decision-making. In this study, open-ended questions were included into the survey questionnaires for head teachers and teachers. Teachers were asked

“why you refrain from sharing your point of view in administrative and academic matters of school”?

From the responses to open-ended questions, themes were formulated and ranked. Subsequently, responses from open-ended questions were qualitatively analyzed through interviews to increase the credibility and viability of the causes of silence. Interviews served as a triangulation method to increase the credibility and viability the thematic representation of organizational silence. Thus, the research strategy involved a combination of open-ended questions and interviews to comprehensively understand the causes of organizational silence and suggested remedies.

Selection of Participants

In research, two sampling methods are commonly employed including probability and non-probability sampling methods (Adams et al., 2014). In this study, for collection of responses of open-ended questions, probability sampling technique was used. Responses received against open ended questions, from randomly selected 446 teachers, were ranked. However, to increase the credibility and viability of these responses, an interview was conducted and participants were chosen by non-probability sampling technique. Non-probability sampling encompasses various techniques such as convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling (Adam et al., 2014). The convenience technique was utilized owing to the limited timeframe and challenges in obtaining responses from every employee.

The qualitative part of current study comprised five teachers from five secondary schools in Sargodha, having different designations such as secondary, elementary, and language teachers. Purposive sampling, aimed at selecting information-rich cases for in-depth exploration rather than generalization (Patton, 2014), was utilized. Specifically, the maximum variation sampling method, a type of purposive sampling, was employed to ensure a diverse representation of individuals relevant to the phenomenon under study. The goal of maximum variation sampling is to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives within a relatively small sample, without seeking generalizability but rather aiming to uncover commonalities and differences across various contexts (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). Accordingly, interviews were conducted with teachers from different roles, schools, and genders to encompass diverse viewpoints. Participation was voluntary, and interviews were scheduled according to participants' availability.

Interview Protocol and Data Analysis

In this manuscript, the research strategy involved a combination of open-ended questions and interviews to comprehensively understand the causes of organizational silence. Open-ended survey responses were used to enhance, confirm, or refine the story told through quantitative data. Descriptive analysis was used to analysis the responses to open-ended questions. Based on the frequency of responses to open-ended questions, themes were formulated and ranked. Using these themes, an interview protocol was prepared in the manner that each theme was converted into interrogative form (research question). Subsequently, themes were qualitatively analyzed through interviews to increase the credibility and viability of the causes of silence. Interview served as a triangulation method to increase the credibility and viability the thematic

representation of organizational silence. To analysis the interview responses, direct quotations were used to reflect the views of the interviewed.

Results

For obtaining personalized insights into the reasons for organizational silence within school settings, the research instrument administered to Secondary School Teachers featured an open-ended question. The responses garnered from these open-ended questions were meticulously dissected into meaningful units, with each unit encapsulating a singular idea. Subsequently, each idea was categorized according to its frequency and ranked based on occurrence (mode). The findings were then presented in the following tables for clarity and comprehension. The responses received against these open-ended questions were broken into meaningful units such that each unit communicates only one idea (Shoufan, 2023; Trainor, & Bundon, 2021). Each idea was categorized based on their frequency, counted and ranked according to their occurrence (mode). This method helped to analyze and prioritize the most common reasons contributing to organizational silence in the educational settings in the perspective of secondary school teachers.

Analysis of Open-ended Questions

Question to Secondary School Teachers (N=446), “Why you refrain from sharing your point of view in administrative and academic school matters”?

Table-1: Reasons for Silence as perceived by Teachers

Reasons/Themes	Occurrence/Frequency	Percent	Rank
1. Corrosive Behavior of Heads	112	25%	1
2. Avoid Conflicts	90	20%	2.5
3. Fear of Consequences and Self-protection	90	20%	2.5
4. Shyness and Hesitation	79	18%	4
5. Lack of Confidence and Information	75	17%	5

The table above reflects the findings derived from an open-ended question asked to secondary school teachers, aimed at understanding the reasons contributing to silence. A total of 446 distinct reasons were found and subsequently grouped into five overarching themes. Out of these, the prime reason identified by 25% (112) of teachers was “the corrosive behavior of heads”, ranking it as the leading reason (Ranked-1). Following closely, 20% (90) cited that “Avoid Conflicts” is reason to remain silent, while an equivalent percentage (90) attributed silence to the “Fear of Consequences and Self-protection” (Ranked-2.5 for both options). Following closely, 18% (79) of respondents highlighted the “Shyness and Hesitation” a significant factor leading to silence within the school (Ranked-4). Moreover, 17% (75) attributed their reticence to “lack of confidence and information”, refraining them from expressing their

perspectives (Ranked-5). These insights provide valuable perspectives into the dynamics shaping the reticence observed among secondary school teachers and their reluctance to engage in discussions regarding school-related matters.

Analysis of Interview Responses

Interview was aimed at to confirm the reasons that influence teacher participation in administrative and academic matters of the school. As mentioned earlier, researcher has derived five potential themes from responses to the open-ended question: “Why do you refrain from sharing your point of view in administrative and academic matters of the school?” Each theme serves as an interview question, inviting deeper insights into the challenges teachers face in expressing their viewpoints. The table below outlines these themes:

Table-2: Formulation of Questions for Interview

Open-ended Question to Teachers	Creation of Themes	Formulation of Questions for Interview
Why you refrain from sharing your point of view in administrative and academic matters of school	1. Corrosive Behavior of Heads	In what ways do you believe the corrosive behavior of head contributes to cultivating a culture of silence among staff members?
	2. Avoid Conflicts	Do you think that teachers do not give their opinion in school matters to avoid conflicts
	3. Fear of Consequences and Self-protection	How does the Fear of Consequences and Self-protection influence on teachers and they observe silence
	4. Shyness and Hesitation	Can you believe that Shyness and Hesitation is cause of silence of teachers
	5. Lack of Confidence and Information	Do you understand that Lack of Confidence and Information is reason due to which teachers reluctant to share their point of view

Question-1: Do you believe that the behavior exhibited by school heads can sometimes discourage teachers from openly expressing their viewpoints on various issues?

School-1: Yes, “because, if school leaders exhibit dismissive or authoritarian behavior, it can create a chilling effect, causing teachers to hesitate in expressing their viewpoints openly.” (respondent-1)

School-2: Fact is that, “the school heads serve as role models for the entire school community. If they demonstrate a willingness to listen, respect differing opinions, and foster open dialogue, it sets a positive tone that encourages teachers to express their viewpoints without fear of retribution or judgment.” (respondent-1)

School-3: Yes, *“If school leaders are perceived as unapproachable or unreceptive to feedback, it can deter teachers from openly sharing their viewpoints on various issues, ultimately hindering the school's ability to address challenges effectively.”* (respondent-1)

School-4: Actually, *“The behavior exhibited by school heads can either empower or disempower teachers in expressing their viewpoints. When school leaders demonstrate humility, openness to feedback, and a willingness to engage in meaningful dialogue, it creates a sense of psychological safety that encourages teachers to speak up and share their perspectives.”* (respondent-1)

School-5: *“If school leaders foster an atmosphere of fear or intimidation, it can suppress teachers' willingness to speak up and contribute their viewpoints on important issues.”* (respondent-1)

Question-2: Do you think that teachers do not give their opinion in school matters to avoid conflicts?

School-1: *“In some cases, teachers may choose not to voice their opinions on school matters to avoid potential conflicts or tensions with colleagues or administrators. This can be especially true*

in environments where there is a lack of trust or where differing viewpoints are not always welcomed.” (respondent-2)

School-2: *“Teachers may refrain from giving their opinions on school matters if they perceive that*

speaking up could lead to interpersonal conflicts or jeopardize their professional relationships. In

such situations, maintaining harmony within the school community may take precedence over expressing individual viewpoints.” (respondent-2)

School-3: *“Conflicts among teachers or between teachers and school administrators can be disruptive to the learning environment. Some teachers may choose to avoid giving their opinions on school matters as a means of minimizing potential conflicts and preserving a sense of cohesion within the school community.”* (respondent-2)

School-4: *“Teachers are often deeply invested in the well-being of their students and the success of their school. However, the fear of conflict or the desire to maintain professional harmony may lead some teachers to keep their opinions on school matters to themselves, even when they have valid concerns or insights to share.”* (respondent-2)

School-5: *“Ultimately, the decision to give or withhold opinions on school matters is a personal one that varies from teacher to teacher. While some may choose to speak up and advocate for their viewpoints, others may prefer to avoid conflicts and focus on their primary responsibility of educating students.”* (respondent-2)

Question-3: Do you believe that due to Fear of Consequences and Self-protection teachers observe silence

School-1: Yes, *the “Fear of consequences, can undoubtedly contribute to teachers observing silence on certain issues.”* (respondent-3)

School-2: *Defiantly, “Teachers may choose to observe silence out of self-preservation, especially*

if they believe that expressing them opinions could jeopardize their work performance and/or professional relationships.” (respondent-3)

School-3: *No doubt, the “actually fear of consequences stemming from challenging authority or questioning established norms can lead to self-censorship and silence, even when teachers have valid concerns.” (respondent-3)*

School-4: *“Self-protection is a natural response as teachers seek to avoid potential conflicts or negative consequences for voicing them opinions.” (respondent-3)*

School-5: *“Teachers may choose silence as a means of safeguarding their professional reputation and avoiding conflict.” (respondent-3)*

Question-4: Do you believe that Shyness and Hesitation is cause of silence of teachers

School-1: *“For some teachers, shyness and hesitation can indeed be significant factors that contribute to their silence in certain situations.” (respondent-4)*

School-2: *“Shyness and hesitation can create barriers to effective communication. Teachers who struggle with shyness may find it challenging to express their opinions confidently, leading them to observe silence rather than risk feeling uncomfortable or exposed.” (respondent-4)*

School-3: *“Teachers who are shy or hesitant may hold back from voicing their opinions, even when they have valuable insights to contribute.” (respondent-4)*

School-4: *“The fear of being judged or criticized can exacerbate feelings of shyness and hesitation, making it difficult for teachers to speak up even when they have important perspectives to share.”*

(respondent-4)

School-5: *“Shyness and hesitation can also stem from cultural or personality factors that influence individual communication styles.” (respondent-4)*

Question-5: Do you understand that Lack of Confidence and Information is the reason due to which teachers reluctant to share their point of view about school matters

School-1: *“Absolutely, lack of confidence and information can significantly impact a teacher's willingness to share their point of view. Teachers may feel hesitant to speak up if they don't feel knowledgeable or confident about the topic being discussed.” (respondent-5)*

School-2: *“Teachers may also fear being perceived as incompetent or uninformed if they share their point of view without sufficient background knowledge. This fear of being judged can lead to reluctance to contribute to discussions or offer opinions.” (respondent-5)*

School-3: *“In environments where there is pressure to demonstrate expertise or authority, teachers may feel reluctant to share their point of view if they perceive themselves as lacking in confidence or information. This can create a culture of silence where valuable*

perspectives go unheard.” (respondent-5)

School-1: *“Providing teachers with access to relevant information and professional development opportunities can help build them confidence and empower them to share their point of view more*

freely. When teachers feel knowledgeable and supported, they are more likely to contribute actively to discussions.” (respondent-5)

School-1: *“Teachers may feel hesitant to give their opinions on school matters if they believe that*

their viewpoints will not be valued or respected by decision-makers.” (respondent-5)

Conclusion and Discussion

The frequency of open ended and analysis of interview responses from secondary school teachers regarding the reasons for their silence revealed that the leading reason for silence among teachers is the corrosive behavior exhibited by school heads. This includes actions and attitudes from school leadership that create an environment where teachers feel discouraged or unsafe to voice their opinions. This finding aligns with existing research indicating that leadership behavior significantly impacts teacher morale and willingness to communicate (Blase & Blase, 2004). Negative behaviors from school heads, such as intimidation, favoritism, or lack of support, create an environment of fear and mistrust (Fullan, 2001). Effective leadership practices that promote transparency, respect, and support are crucial in encouraging teachers to voice their opinions (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). A significant portion of the teaching staff prefer to maintain harmony and avoid disputes, possibly to keep a peaceful work environment or due to a lack of conflict resolution mechanisms. This tendency can be understood through the lens of conflict avoidance theory, which suggests that individuals often refrain from expressing their views to maintain harmony (Rahim, 2002). In educational settings, the desire to avoid conflicts can be heightened by the hierarchical nature of schools, where teachers may feel subordinate to administrators (Hargreaves, 1994). Creating a culture where constructive conflict is seen as a means to improvement rather than as a threat can help reduce this silence (Tjosvold, 2008). Secondary school teachers cited fear of consequences and self-protection as reasons for their silence. This finding resonates with the concept of organizational silence, where employees withhold information due to fear of negative repercussions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In schools, this fear can stem from potential job insecurity, negative evaluations, or professional ostracism (Klaas et al., 2012). Addressing this issue requires creating safe channels for feedback and ensuring that speaking up does not lead to adverse consequences (Detert & Treviño, 2010). Shyness and hesitation were identified as contributing factor to silence among teachers. This aligns with personality research indicating that individual traits such as introversion can affect one's likelihood to speak up in group settings (Cain, 2013). Schools can support these teachers by providing professional development opportunities that focus on building communication skills and confidence (Bandura, 1997). Secondary school teachers reported a lack of confidence and information as reasons for their silence. This finding highlights the importance of empowering teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate actively in discussions (Louis et

al., 2010). Professional development programs that enhance teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical skills can boost their confidence and willingness to contribute (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Implications

The findings of this study underscore the multifaceted nature of public-school teacher silence at secondary level. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes improving leadership behaviors, fostering a positive conflict resolution culture, providing safe feedback mechanisms, and supporting teachers' professional development. By understanding and addressing the root causes of silence, schools can create a more inclusive and communicative environment that benefits both teachers and students. It is also concluded from the findings that teachers remain silent due to the fear of adverse performance evaluation report from their head. So, there is need to conduct professional training for behavior modification for heads from school education department through QAED training academy Punjab. Findings revealed that majority of teachers do not try to discuss academic problems with their colleagues and heads. So, heads may hold meetings with teachers periodically in which they discuss on their academic and non-academic issues

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Conflict of Interests

The authors affirms that they have no conflict of interests.

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