

‘You call your teacher *zombi*?’: Nicknaming of Tanzanian secondary school teachers

Gastor Cosmas Mapunda 

Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania

Correspondence: mapundag23@gmail.com

Abstract: Nicknaming of teachers in Tanzanian secondary schools is commonplace, and students use it to communicate their opinions about their social relations regarding their teachers. The study sought to identify which teachers’ nicknames exist in the schools, the reasons for their assignment, and whether or not the practice should continue. Open-ended questionnaires were administered to 263 students in five schools in three regions. We found that some nicknames relate to ferocious beings, fierce creatures, funny-looking objects, comedians, classroom teaching, physical appearance, dress, age and phraseology. Also, some nicknames are used in multiple schools, even when they are far apart. We also found that teachers’ nicknaming is used clandestinely about teachers, who hold more power in the schools. Nicknaming is used for expressing social relations particularly related to students’ loathing, disapproval, mocking and praising. Thus, teachers’ nicknaming is an important sociolinguistic mechanism for expressing power relations.

Introduction

This article focuses on nicknames assigned mostly by students to teachers in secondary schools in Tanzania. Previous research (e.g. Adams 2009; Mapunda 2014) shows that nicknames in society in general are given in different contexts and serve different functions, depending on complex social networks which dictate their creation and use. As suggested by Holland (1990: 255), nicknames ‘rarely if ever serve a singular function, but instead simultaneously play a variety of roles within the social environments in which they occur’. Likewise, Mapunda (2014) holds that, in educational settings, nicknames show the disposition of the nicknamed as being a happy, friendly, or unfriendly person. Furthermore, Bowles et al. (2009) argue that some nicknames are used clandestinely to hurt the referent. Additionally, Mensah (2016) holds that nicknames may express a number of things, including love and solidarity, or they may tease, ridicule, or even denigrate the nicknamed person.

Research on nicknaming in general relates more closely to sociolects. Some studies have shown that there are nicknames related to sports (e.g. Kennedy and Zamuner 2006), some to political affairs (e.g. Lieberman and Kenny 2007; Adams 2009), and to educational settings (e.g. Mapunda 2014; Ilonga 2019), to name but a few. When it comes to research on teacher and faculty nicknames, much has been carried out in Western educational settings (e.g. Crozier 2002; Adams 2009) and only a few in sub-Saharan Africa settings (Mapunda 2014).

As to the rationale for the study, there have been concerns about how discipline is handled in schools in Tanzania and beyond (e.g. United Republic of Tanzania 1978; Yahaya 2009; Hecker et al. 2018; Kambuga et al. 2018). In Tanzania, the issue has been studied mainly through disciplines such as psychology and law (Kambuga et al. 2018; Mgonda 2019). However, sociolinguistics is another important sub-discipline that can provide an understanding of the issue. Since a study of this nature¹ has not been carried out yet, this contribution is timely, apt and desirable. It is particularly important because the situation under which nicknames are given to school teachers in Western schools may reflect a different kind of social relation between teachers and students compared to that of Tanzania and comparable countries. This is likely to be the case because social relations in schools are in many ways reflective of social relations in the wider society in general.

The practice of students nicknaming their teachers, its context, students' attitudes, and the knowledge of the functions they serve will illuminate the relationship between teachers and students not only in Tanzanian schools, but also in other sociocultural situations and policies elsewhere in the world. Knowledge of nicknaming practices will help teachers, students, policy makers and other educational stakeholders to reflect upon school social environments not only in the studied schools, but also in wider contexts.

The purpose of the study is threefold:

- i) identify which teachers' nicknames exist in the schools;
- ii) explain why such nicknames are given to teachers; and
- iii) comment on whether teacher nicknaming should continue in the schools.

In the sections that follow, I will first present the theoretical perspective that guided the study, followed by an explanation of the methods and procedures used. The findings are then presented immediately thereafter, followed by a discussion and the conclusion.

Nicknaming of teachers as social action

Nicknaming of secondary school teachers in Tanzania is conceptualised by using the Weberian (1864–1920) social action theory. According to Weber, 'before the cause of an action could be ascertained you had to understand the meaning attached to it by the individual'.ⁱⁱ The Weberian theory may look old, but it is still relevant and can be applied today. For example, Etzrodt (2005: 96) has argued that '[a]n action is instrumentally rational if the actor is evaluating different anticipated alternative results of possible actions and chooses the best of these alternatives'. To make the concept of social action even clearer, Deppermann (2021: 69) holds that '[a]ll linguistic action is social action, because it is necessarily addressed to some recipient, even if they are unknown, or it is the agent themselves'. This ties in well with the nicknaming of teachers by students as a form of social action. Likewise, Leslie and Skipper's (1990) socio-onomastic theory of nicknames can be viewed as a derivation of the Weberian theory. For them, meanings of nicknames can be understood by examining the situation in which they (the nicknames) are used, and the origins of nicknames are known by exposing the justification for their use; and this is included in the immediate environment of the particular social grouping. Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012) further argue that while consciousness of social forces may not be present, the sociological imagination exposes the social construction of names, thus unmasking the taken-for-granted ideas, which often cloak people's understanding of the social naming process. According to Leslie and Skipper (1990: 273), nicknames need to be approached as an aspect of the process of social action; and this is done by looking at the social complexities of where they are used. They argue that

[n]ames are not just arbitrary symbols; they signify status, achievement, privilege, and meaningful social organization. They may communicate ethnicity, social status, and social prestige, all understood as meaningful within social contexts. Since names provide meanings – they also guide activity by providing plans which transmit cultural knowledge and help us to choose among projects of action.

It is, therefore, plausible to argue that, when students assign nicknames to their teachers, they communicate not only the status of their current relationship with their teachers, but also how they are likely to relate to them outside their official roles as students and teachers. Talking about nicknames assigned to politicians, Nikolenko (2023: 1372) is of the view that there are nicknames that are used to express 'potential criticism of the subject through different means which are formed due to the incentive to change certain negative actions or characteristics'. But also, as several studies have shown (e.g. Mapunda 2014; Pais 2018; Dianitami et al. 2023), actions which are valued by students as commendable are assigned positive nicknames, whereas those which are assessed as disparaging are resisted by assigning teachers negative nicknames (e.g. Scott 1990; Dianitami et al. 2023). In a school context, relationships between teachers and students can impact on the students' perception of their own school life. Thus, nicknames in general are sociolinguistic conventions which

are used by students to show, among other things, power relations. In regard to sociolinguistic conventions, Fairclough (2013: 1) argues that they 'have a dual relation to power: on the one hand they incorporate differences of power, on the other hand they arise out of – and give rise to – particular relations of power'. Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012: 18) see the use of nicknames as an expression of power and resistance to power. Thus, teaching staff nicknames 'do not only serve as symbols of power and resistance to power, but are also used to co-construct individual and social identities'. When there are differences in power relations, subjects may find ways to express their situation. In this regard, the nicknaming of teachers is not merely a merry-making action by students, it serves a communicatively important function. In addition, as an aspect of social action, the nicknaming of teachers by their students communicates important information about state policies and guidelines on student-teacher relationships in secondary schools. It is this communicative function which the current study unveils, as will be clear in the findings section.

Methods and procedures

Before carrying out the study, it was assumed that different types of schools, based on their ownership and administrative policies, would activate different nicknaming practices due to likely differences in social relations between teachers and students. Against this thinking, I chose the schools on the basis of their ownership (community, military, religious/secular, or government), location (rural, urban, or semi-urban) and administrative region. It was expected that students exposed to different sociocultural settings might reveal different teacher-student social relations, which would also be reflected in the nicknames.

In view of this, five schools were identified from three different administrative regions: Dar es Salaam, Tanga and Kilimanjaro. In terms of the attributes of the schools, they were different in terms of their ownership, the size of the school and the location of the school. School A is in the Dar es Salaam Region, the largest and busiest city in the country. The school has been operational for several decades, is run by the military and most teachers and administrators in this school are military personnel.ⁱⁱⁱ School B is in the Kilimanjaro Region and is located in the Moshi Municipality. It is an older boys-only government boarding school. Two other schools, Schools C and D, are also in the Kilimanjaro Region. School C is a community-owned day school located on the outskirts of Moshi Town and admits both boys and girls. The school was established in the early 2000s. The school has fewer girls, and these are accommodated in hostels. Furthermore, School D is privately owned and run by the Catholic Diocese of Moshi in a relatively remote setting. This is a day and boarding co-education school which started in the 1980s. Most students in School D are boarders. The last on the list is School E, located in a semi-urban rural setting in Korogwe District, Tanga Region, in the north-eastern part of the country. This is also a community-owned secondary day school.

The data for the study were collected with assistance from the class teachers who organised the classes. After providing a thorough explanation of the nature and purpose of the study, 263 students voluntarily agreed and verbally consented to participate. They were assured that their identities would remain confidential, so they did not need to provide their names. Additionally, they were guaranteed the confidentiality of the information they provided. There were 121 girls and 142 boys. Their class levels ranged from Form I to Form IV (approximately 15 to 18 years old). Students were asked not to write their names on the questionnaire to remain unidentifiable, and class leaders were asked to distribute the questionnaires and to collect them. The students filled in the questionnaires on the same day while in class, and the class leaders collected and submitted them to the researcher before he left the school. The non-presence of the researcher and teachers^{iv} in the classroom made it possible for the students to mention as many nicknames as they could remember, and without any fear of being identified. The qualitative data were extracted by asking students to provide descriptions of some of their responses. The questionnaire was mainly qualitative and focused on the three questions highlighted in the introduction section. These were: (i) to identify which teachers' nicknames existed in the schools; (ii) to explain why such nicknames were given to teachers; and (iii) to comment on whether teacher nicknaming should continue in the schools. The questionnaires were

all returned because they were collected immediately after completion. Some questions were not answered, perhaps because the students did not have any answer, or simply decided not to.

Interviewing students was not possible because when they were asked, they were not willing to participate. The reason which many of them gave for their unwillingness to be interviewed was the fear that their identity might be disclosed in the course of the process.

With a big number of nicknames, Pais (2018) suggests a seven-point typological classification of teachers' nicknames coined by high school students in some Portuguese and Brazilian schools. He suggests typologies of teachers' nicknames that can be grouped into the following categories: (i) harassment of students: e.g. *Cão* (dog) given to a teacher who is described as a devil; *Cobra* (snake), *Mazelada* (flawed) for being bad, *Terrorista* (terrorist) because he delights in other people's disasters and causes fear; (ii) performance in teaching: e.g. *Aurélio* assigned to a teacher who knows the meanings of many words and seems like a dictionary. The nickname is after Aurélio Buarque de Holanda who compiled a comprehensive Portuguese dictionary. Additionally, the nickname *Cagece* (the Portuguese acronym for the Ceará Water and Sewage Company) is assigned a teacher who 'only says bullshit' in class; (iii) sexual nature: e.g. *Samanta* (Samantha) given to a teacher who is described as 'playing like a woman'; (iv) authoritarianism, bureaucratism and respectability of a teacher: e.g. *Ditador* (dictator) for behaving like a dictatorial military person, and *Generalá* (female general) given to a teacher who demands and gets respect from students; (v) physical characteristics and appearance: e.g. Bull Dog because the teacher is 'bad and ugly', and Pepe Jeans which is the only jeans brand that the teacher wears; (vi) marriage and conjugality: e.g. *Divorciada* (divorced woman) because the teacher has been divorced four times, and *Lésbica* (lesbian) given to a female teacher who has an online site where she admits being a lesbian; and (vii) distinctive attributes, e.g. *Sovaquinho* (little armpit) given to a teacher who sweats a lot. While some of these categories are similar to the findings of the current study, there are a few categories which differ, including the category that associates some teachers with funny, strange and pugnacious individuals or objects.

In this study, I collected a total of 196 nicknames from the students in the five schools. From School A, 52 nicknames were mentioned; from School B, 27 nicknames; from School C, 39 nicknames; School D, 48 nicknames; and from School E, I got 30 nicknames. I identified all the categories pointed out by Pais, except two, one on marriage and conjugality and the category of funny, strange and pugnacious individuals or objects. I grouped all the nicknamed into five categories, namely physical appearance, habitual mannerisms, performance in teaching, vindictive and ruthless, and funny, strange and pugnacious individuals or objects. One possible explanation for the absence of the marriage and conjugality category in our findings could be the cultural norm of avoiding open discussions about personal marital and sexual matters in Tanzania. For example, while Pais (2018) talks about a teacher who has been divorced four times, or even the female teacher with an online site where she declares to be a lesbian, these issues are not expected to feature in the public domain in Tanzania. As for the funny, strange and pugnacious individuals and objects, this can also be cultural, because some of the names are associated with local TV comedians in Tanzanian. In the categories, I have separated habitual mannerisms from performance in teaching because I found them to be different.

Findings

In this section, I present the findings as per the three objectives of the study. The first sub-section presents findings on the first objective of identifying which teachers' nicknames exist in the schools. This is followed by the reasons for the existence of the nicknames and whether such nicknames should continue or not.

Teachers' nicknames in secondary schools

In this part, some of the categories identified by Pais (2018) have been used. The first one is to do with teachers' physical characteristics as a pool of nicknames, and this aligns with the category identified by Pais (2018). They include *Sir Kijicho* (a one-eyed person), *Kipara* (bald head), *Kibajaj* (a brand of an Indian tricycle known as Bajaj), *Skeleton* (also called *Smiguel*) (a slim teacher), *Two faces* (has

a bald head, so that his face and forehead look like they are joined), and *Bi Mchina* (Lady Chinese), but it refers to someone who has big buttocks, which is associated with the taking of Chinese drugs to enlarge them. Other nicknames in this category include *Kaneck*, *Kispika* and *Mashallah*. Teacher *Kispika* (a small loudspeaker) has a very high-pitched voice, and is seen by students as shouting; while *Kaneck* (a long narrow neck), a word that has been formed by fusing two parts – a diminutive Swahili morpheme *ka-* and the English word *neck*, and is given to a female teacher whose neck is narrow and long. *Mashallah* is a nickname whose origin is an Arabic word commonly used in Swahili in appreciation or admiration of a woman's beauty – which was described as 'appreciating God's creation' due to her beauty. This finding is consonant with a finding by Dianitami et al. (2023: 2052) who found that '[n]icknames can be sourced from a reflection of their distinctive body parts, such as the face, forehead, and body posture'.

Another criterion is that of habitual mannerisms, from which the following nicknames were identified by the students: *Gentlemen* (this teacher often calls students 'gentlemen'), *Kishazi* (the Swahili word for 'phrase'), *Kidushu* (Swahili slang for a beautiful and breezy girl), the nickname is given to a teacher who calls students *Kidushu*), *Asha Ngedere* (a famously pugnacious female character in a Tanzanian comedy played by a male comedian called Joti), and *Kishoiya* which is a word from the Chagga language to refer to an indolent or slothful person. This finding is consistent with a finding by Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012) who found that a physical education instructor at a Nigerian university was nicknamed *Kalokalo* because he often uses the expression '*Kalokalo*' to refer to a student who exhibited old-fashioned skills in sporting activities. The nicknames in this category align with those identified by Pais in the category of performance in teaching.

The third category of teachers' nicknames is associated with the subject taught. The nicknames found in this category include *Mr Kinunda* (named after a mathematics book author), which was the most famous nickname in School B. Other teachers are nicknamed *Fungus* (after the topic in biology), *Madam Mbia* (after a character in a book) and *Profesa* (given to a teacher who teaches like a university professor, but who complicates his teaching to the extent that students find it difficult to understand him).

In addition to the classification by Pais (2018), in the current study a category of funny, strange or pugnacious individuals or objects was observed among Tanzanian secondary school students. This criterion featured prominently in all the five secondary schools. These were the names *Bi Joti* (also called *Madam Joti*) and *Asha Ngedere* who are famous Tanzanian comedians.

Vindictive and ruthless teachers have been named after cruel people in history or in the Bible. This category did not show direct relevancy to the nature of ownership of the school in some instances. For example, the nickname *Pilato* (after the biblical Pontius Pilate) featured in Schools A (owned by the military), B (owned by the government of Tanzania), C (owned by the community) and School D (owned by the Catholic Church). The nickname *Idi Amin* is from the late Ugandan dictator Idi Amin Dada. Another prominent nickname given under this category is *Hitler*, after the infamous German fascist Adolf Hitler. Other such names are *The Killer* (a Hong Kong action film of the late 1980s featuring some feared assassins), and *Jumong* (the main character in a South Korean TV drama, who is good at martial arts). This category aligns with what Nikolenko (2023) finds about negative nicknames assigned to politicians, some of which were pejorative nicknames that condemn, mock and demonstrate disgust of those who are nicknamed. Thus, teachers who are assigned these nicknames are compared to those individuals because they deal ruthlessly with students. What is even more interesting is the fact that some of these schools are hundreds of kilometres apart, located in different administrative regions.

Reasons for assigning nicknames to teachers

The most recurring reasons for students to assign nicknames to their teachers in the schools include unreasonable punishment, not listening to students' reasoning, and teachers insulting students. Another reason is what students described as teachers' unacceptable behaviour, followed by age, physiology and appearance, common wording and phraseology, and subject matter and efficiency (or lack of it) in teaching. A study by Mapunda (2014) also found that at the University of Dar es Salaam, some lecturers' nicknames were to do with age, behaviour and in/efficiency in teaching. It

is important to note that some nicknames are given on the basis of a combination of reasons, and in this case, there were nicknames given because the teachers were likened to funny people in society due to how they looked.

Being harsh to students was found to be the most popular reason for assigning nicknames to teachers. In School A, for instance, *Mkoloni* (colonialist) was mentioned by all the students who participated in the study. This male teacher is described as being strict and harsh, and is likened to the colonialists who were known for their brutality. The other most commonly mentioned nickname is *Terminator* (also called *Sir Kijicho*) (translated as Sir Small Eye). This teacher has one eye, but is capable of seeing students even from afar (especially delinquents), and when he sees them, he punishes them. He is also described by students as being very harsh. Other nicknames related to teachers' punitive behaviour are *Pilato* (compared to the Biblical Pontius Pilate who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus), *Kumbatia Ubao* (hug the chalkboard), a teacher who tells students to hug the chalkboard as he canes them, *Son of Adam*, described as a patient teacher (Jesus is also referred to as the Son of Adam in the Bible), but his patience changes abruptly into fury like on the last day when Jesus came back (according to the Bible). In regard to teachers being punitive, a number of studies and media reports on punishment in Tanzanian schools corroborate this situation (e.g. Feinstein and Mwahombela 2010; Lauvergnier 2016; Hecker et al. 2018). For example, in a study carried out by Hecker et al. (2018: 77), it is found that out of 215 Tanzanian teachers who participated in their study, as many as 97 per cent of the teachers 'used at least one form of physical violence against a student in the past year'. Another example is taken from the media: Lauvergnier (2016) reports in *The Observer* about trainee teachers who featured in a video clip severely beating a secondary school student in Mbeya. The report says that the student teachers nearly killed the student. Yet, another report on severe punishment is by Josephine Christopher who reports for the *Citizen* (2021) and says, '[t]he picture of a Standard Seven student went viral on various social media showing bruises the boy sustained on the back following caning by his teacher'. What seems apparent is that the Tanzania's law on students' punishment (i.e. The Education Corporal Punishment Regulation No. 294 of 2002)^v disapproves of this kind of punishment, but the oversight of the law seems relaxed. This helplessness of the students could be the reason for nicknaming their teachers as an alternative to venting their disappointment.

In School B, for example, out of the 44 students who participated in the study, 43 mentioned the nickname *Mbaba* (a big man/father). The nickname is given to a teacher who is the discipline master in the school. He has a huge physique (muscular), is ruthless, fond of caning and behaves like a harsh father in his own home. In the same school, another teacher has been nicknamed *Batista* after the famous American wrestler, Dave Batista. This teacher is also famous for caning students, and would not listen to students, but simply punishes them. Other names in that same category are *Sitaki Maelezo* (I don't want explanations), who does not listen to any explanation, and *Komando* (Commando), given to a teacher who chases students in the dormitories. In School D, which is owned by the Catholic Church, nicknames which are known to the entire school include *Pilato* (the Biblical Pontius Pilate who sanctioned the crucifixion of Jesus Christ) and *Mjeda* (Swahili slang for soldier) have been assigned to these teachers because of their cruelty and mercilessness. One student had this to say about some of these teachers,

I would like Teacher Pilato to stop his brutal behaviour because he is the reason why many students transfer to other schools. And, using teachers' nicknames is not bad at all, only that there are nicknames like Pilato, Mjeda and Mavoko which are bad. But it all depends on the behaviour of the teacher.

Unacceptable behaviour is another reason for the assignment of teachers' nicknames. In this article, unacceptable behaviour is reflected particularly through teachers' dress styles and manners. Nicknames like *Madam Sketi* (Madam skirt) and *Masogange* (a Tanzanian female actress who has big buttocks and wears tight clothing) have been given to female teachers because they wear tight clothes and mini-skirts.^{vi} Another aspect of unacceptable behaviour is too much alcohol. Due to this, a male teacher is nicknamed *Chapombe* (a drunkard). This teacher drinks a lot of liquor and smells of it when in class.

Some nicknames were assigned from funny people in society, and are meant to make fun of the teachers because of their physiology. Examples of such names are *Bi Joti* (also nicknamed Madam Joti) and *Asha Ngedere*, which are given to two female teachers at School B. These teachers are compared to Joti who is short, funny looking, male Tanzanian comedian who often acts as a woman. Students say that because *Bi Joti* is very short and wears high heels to look tall.

Another reason for assigning teachers' nicknames was teachers' common wording and phraseology. This is consistent with a finding by Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012: 14) that some university lecturers earned their nicknames as a 'result of their frequent use of certain expressions'. Examples of such nicknames include *Kidushu* (slang for a dull and lazy female student), *Kishoiya* (brainless person in the Chagga language), and *Yesu* (Jesus). In School D, the nickname *Akumeni* (Acumen) has been assigned because of the teacher's constant talk about dialogue among Christians from different denominations. Along with this, the subject matter and teaching efficiency (or inefficiency) are other reasons for assigning nicknames to secondary school teachers in Tanzania. For example, in School C, there were names to do with the teacher's teaching ability and subject matter, e.g. *Kishazi* (a 'phrase' in Swahili), *Kwame Nkrumah* (in history), *Domain* and *Jembe* (colloquial Swahili for someone who is clever). In School D, the nicknames are assigned due to the subjects which the teachers taught. Some nicknames are based on some memorable attribute of a particular topic/subject. For example, one teacher is nicknamed *Asinjo* after a male character in a play that has a relationship with Wanjiro in a play called 'This time tomorrow'. Incidentally, another teacher, who is teacher *Asinjo*'s friend, is nicknamed *Wanjiro* (a female teacher who is always together with teacher *Asinjo*). In the play, the character Wanjiro is Westernised, just like this female teacher.

Some nicknames were given because of teachers' appearance, age, or physiology. Beauty, ugliness, abnormalities, and/or pronounced bodily features have been used as criteria for assigning nicknames to teachers (but usually associated with another factor, such as harshness). For example, the teacher who is nicknamed as *Kibaraza* (balcony/porch) is bald-headed, but he is also known for caning students. This finding is also consistent with a finding by Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012) who found that a lecturer at a Ghanaian university was nicknamed *Papa Ajasko* because he has a bald head. In School D, *Babu* (grandfather) is an old man, which is to do with his age, while *Mafungasha* (slang word for huge buttocks) is associated with the teacher's physiology. *Kispika* (a small loud speaker) is based on the teacher's high-pitched voice, and *Mapua* (big ugly nose) is based on the teacher's big nose, among many others. A female teacher who has a long narrow neck is nicknamed *Kaneki*, a nickname formed by fusing words from two languages – the English word *neck* and the Swahili diminutive morpheme *ka-*. In School E, one common nickname in this school is *Kibajaji*. The nickname is from a three-wheeler, Indian passenger vehicle (a tuk-tuk) which is short and rounded, called Bajaj. The teacher who has been nicknamed after this vehicle is short and fat, and this is the possible reason for the nickname. The teacher looks funny because he is short, and keeps his hair long. Another famous teacher in this school is nicknamed *Ben Ten* after the famous American children's cartoon character Ben Ten. He is also short and keeps his hair long. Both teachers are famous for caning students. Another famous nickname in the school is *Kwapa* (translated literally as *armpit*). This particular teacher's sweats a lot and gives out a bad smell. But more noticeable, according to students' responses, teacher *Kwapa* mistreats students by using insulting language and caning them.

Should nicknaming continue in schools?

In addition to the students' reasons for nicknaming their teachers, another question which was addressed through a quantitative question was whether or not teachers' nicknaming should continue. The responses are compared by school and then by sex. Figure 1 presents the comparisons by school.

School A had the biggest percentage of responses wanted teachers' nicknaming to continue being used, and the most important reason is that these teachers mistreat them. As per my earlier expectation that different types of schools, based on their ownership and administrative policies, would activate different nicknaming practices due to likely differences in social relations between

Whether teachers' nicknames should continue or not

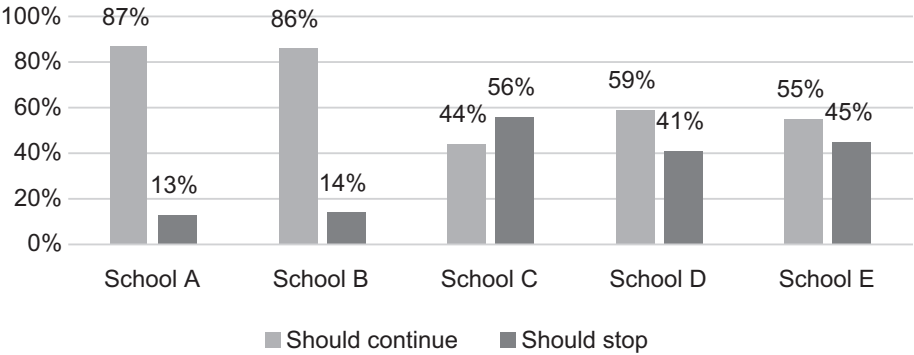


Figure 1: Students' views on whether or not teachers should continue to be given nicknames

teachers and students, I expected that a school that is owned by the military would have more punitive staff than those owned by other kinds of institutions. The earlier expectation is supported by the finding that 87 per cent of the responses supported the continued use of teachers' nicknames, and particularly for those who mistreat students. The findings from School A are not very different from those of School B (see Figure 1). One possible explanation is that School B is a boarding school, and students live far away from their parents. One can assume that because these students have no chance of reporting their punishments on a daily basis, these teachers are at liberty to punish students without fear. Findings from the other three schools are relatively comparable in terms of their attitude to the use of teachers' nicknames. It is only School C, a community school, where more responses do not support the continued use of teachers' nicknames. For the other two schools, the situation is relatively relaxed. Out of the 39 participants in School C, 17 (43.6%) want teachers' nicknames to still be used, while 22 (56.4%) want them to be stopped. In School E, 53 students participated in the study. In this school, 53.3 per cent want the nicknaming of teachers to continue, whereas 45.3 per cent want the practice to stop. Looking at the overall picture, out of the 263 students who participated in the study, 181 (68.8%) want the use of teachers' nicknames to continue, while only 82 (31.2%) do not want the use of these nicknames to continue.

Discussion

What these findings suggest from a theoretical point of view is that students, as a social group representing similar less powerful social groups, would usually take some social action, as their way of speaking back to those in power. Weighing the options available to them (e.g. rioting, beating up their teachers, etc.), these students decided that an amicable choice would be to allusively refer to their teachers with nicknames, some of which are nasty. Some students know their teachers only by their nicknames, which may suggest that knowing them by their real names may not be important. A number of scholars (e.g. Batoma 2009; Afful and Mwinlaaru 2012; Mapunda 2014) have talked about the clandestine use of nicknames for different reason. For example, remarking about the clandestine use of nicknames in situations like this, Batoma (2009: 223) is of the view that a nickname '...is allusive to the extent that its content, which expresses the opinion or the position of the name giver, can only be deciphered as a precise message by the individuals concerned by the said situation'.

While these students are socially constrained in communicating their situation freely because of possible negative consequences, they quietly nickname their teachers as a social action. The kind of constraint faced by these students is what Fairclough (2013: 32) amplifies here: '...it is only through being so constrained that they [in this case, students] are made able to act as social

agents...social agents are active and creative'. According to the social action theory, nicknaming is the rational action which the students have decided to adopt, and they do it creatively in such a way that the teachers are represented in many different ways. As the findings show, some teachers are presented as merciless beings (e.g. the Biblical Pontius Pilate, killer, etc.), funny (*Zombi* for a zombie, or *Chapombe* for a drunkard) or even good ones like Professor or Madam Allele who teach their subjects well. The lasting effect of this nicknaming is that some students may be scared and dislike the school, or the labels of the teachers remain in the minds of the students for the rest of their lives.

The study has shown that teachers' nicknames are mostly based on how teachers treat or relate to students. Other criteria include how some teachers appear and having no regard for students' rights. The nicknames are also due to the teachers' behaviours, appearance, friendliness to students, teachers' actual names being unknown to students, the urge for praise from students, efficiency/inefficiency in teaching, and the names they call students. In this regard, Khetoa and Mokala (2022: 68) have argued in their study that nicknames 'are an important tool in ostracising people that behave inconsistently with what the larger society expects'. The opposite is also true, that some nicknames are used to acknowledge those who do well in their everyday interactions with students as Pais (2018) shows about the teacher nicknamed *Aurélio*. A study on the nicknaming of teachers in Tanzanian secondary schools provides important information on how teachers should reflect about their own practices to make students' school experiences enjoyable. Parents, schools and the government may wish to examine how teachers and students relate, and find ways of dealing with students' and teachers' welfare. This feedback is important because in rare extreme cases there have been reports about incidents of students attacking their teachers and teachers mistreating students to the extent of wounding and even causing deaths (e.g. <https://www.bbc.com/swahili/habari-47469543>).

The sociolinguistic information provided through these nicknames is important in the sense that it brings into the open how power relations are likely to make the school environment encouraging, demoralising, or even point to its security status. For example, it is likely that relationships between teachers and students can cause some teachers to dislike the profession, and in other cases for some students to dislike schooling, or to transfer to other schools where they will be treated better. Through this kind of feedback, teachers who are given appreciative nicknames may be encouraged to do even better. More importantly, from this study, schools should be able to gauge their own situation and wisely decide on how they want their teachers and students to relate. While it is true from this study that a large number of students prefer the nicknames to continue being used, in some schools, a bigger percentage did not want the practice to continue. Those who wanted the nicknames to continue were those where the teachers were punitive, dressed unacceptably, wooed female students, or did not respect their students. Such teachers were given nicknames that showed disapproval and ridicule, and even to curse.

Conclusion

We have shown that in Tanzanian secondary schools some students use nicknaming as a strategy for expressing their views of their social relations with their teachers. It has become apparent that most of the nicknames are used clandestinely because of the power relations which do not provide them with any overt opportunity of expressing their situation, that is happiness or unhappiness, without facing further consequences. Using the social action theory, nicknaming seems to be a viable and rational mechanism for them to vent their grudges, and to express their appreciation for teachers who, in their opinion, do well. As social subjects, the students actively and creatively (Fairclough 2013) speak back to their teachers, but allusively.

Finally, it has become apparent that students are likely to assign nicknames to their teachers, whether the teachers engage in unpleasant actions or do well in their work. The nicknames serve as commentaries on efficient and inefficient teaching, dress, speech, topics taught, physiology and mannerisms. Different attributes work conjointly in the nicknaming process. For example, when the teacher is viewed as punitive, or behaving in an unacceptable manner, is inefficient in teaching, or unnecessarily makes students' lives difficult, a nasty nickname is assigned. The study has also

shown that there are some similarities in nicknaming patterns: punitive teachers are given more nicknames, but the kind of school in terms of its ownership may influence the type of teachers' nicknames given.

The findings of this study may have implications for the field of sociolinguistics. Firstly, they add to the growing scholarship on nicknaming in general, and more specifically in educational institutions (e.g. Afful and Mwinlaaru 2012; Mapunda 2014; Pais 2018). Also, the findings have shown that the use of nicknaming as a channel for student expression provides room for them to speak back to their teachers as a form of resistance, which Scott (1990: 198) has described as 'disguised, low-profile, and undeclared' resistance, suggesting the inevitability of resistance as a social action. The findings also advance the Weberian social action theory, shedding light on individual actions in organisations and their potential impact on organisational development. This is done by denigrating acts that are socially viewed as unacceptable, and commending those which need to be. Lastly, the findings open up opportunities for comparing different social settings.

Endnotes

- ⁱ There is one study on nicknames at a Tanzanian university (Mapunda 2014).
- ⁱⁱ (<https://revisesociology.com/2017/01/26/max-webers-social-action-theory/>)
- ⁱⁱⁱ There are several schools owned by the military in Dar es Salaam.
- ^{iv} Class leaders, who were fellow students, oversaw the filling in of the questionnaires in the absence teachers and the researcher.
- ^v <http://www.endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/country-reports/URTanzania.pdf>
- ^{vi} According to Tanzanian culture, and also the code of ethics and conduct for the public service, wearing tight clothing is distasteful.

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ORCID iD

Gastor Cosmas Mapunda - <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5683-0175>

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I – School A

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
1	Terminator	Has huge physique and chest like the actor in the movie <i>Terminator</i>
2	Babu Andi	When he teaches maths, he must say 'and' but he pronounces it 'andi'.
3	Chapombe	A drunkard, or someone who looks like a drunk person
4	Dictator	His behaviour of making them angry, and unkindness
5	Distribution	The teacher constantly repeats this word when he teaches in class.
6	Fala	<i>Fala</i> is a derogatory Swahili word which refers to a person who has lost direction in life. This teacher uses this word to insult students.
7	Fally Ipupa	Looks like the popular Congolese musician, Fally Ipupa
8	Jet Li	A quarrelsome teacher, compared to Jet Li who was a famous Chinese martial arts actor
9	Jike Dume	This female teacher is a tomboy.
10	Joti	The shortest teacher at the school, and has a small physique.
11	Kibichwa	A small ugly head (<i>ki-</i> diminutive morpheme)
12	Kisungura	This is Swahili slang for 'girl'. This male teacher is given this nickname because he woos girl students for sexual purposes.
13	Kumbatia Ubao	When he wants to cane students, he tells them <i>kumbatia ubao</i> ('hug' the chalkboard).
14	Masogange	She looks like the Tanzanian actress, Masogange, who has huge hips and buttocks, and wears tight clothing.
15	Manyunyu	Uses this word <i>manyunyu</i> (drizzles) to signify the beginning of rain; which metaphorically refers to the number of times corporal punishment is administered. When he punishes, he says <i>Hayo ni mawingu bado mvua yenyewe</i> ('This is merely drizzle, wait for the rain').
16	Mkoloni	The Swahili word for a colonialist. He does old-fashioned things, and likes to be feared by students.
17	Nabii	This teacher once called himself <i>nabii</i> (prophet) because he heals students of their ignorance by caning them.
18	Ndonga	Is slang for <i>club</i> . The teacher has a small head like a club.
19	Pilato	This unkind teacher got this nickname after the Biblical Pontius Pilate who ordered Jesus to be crucified.
20	Focal Lens (Also called Sir Kijicho)	This teacher has one eye, but is capable of spotting students from afar, particularly if they come to school late; and when he sees them, he punishes them.

APPENDIX II – School B

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
1	Asha Ngedere	A quarrelsome character in a famous Tanzanian comedy, played by a male.
2	Batista	Named after the famous American wrestler, Dave Batista – merciless and never listens to student. He enjoys caning students.
3	Bi Joti	The teacher is short and fat, and looks like a famous Tanzanian male comedian who normally acts as a woman.
4	Bolt	Jogs with students every morning. He is faster than the students; and is also famous for corporal punishment.
5	Consumer	Commerce teacher who masters his subject.
6	Fungus	A topic from biology which the teacher teaches well.
7	Idi Amin	Former Ugandan dictator; ruthless and very punitive
8	Jumong	Lead actor in a Korean movie
9	Kibaraza	Swahili slang for a bald head
10	Kinunda	A good mathematics teacher, like the author of a famous mathematics book called <i>Kinunda</i> .
11	Komandoo	The teachers chases students in dormitories.
12	Madam Allele	After a topic in biology – good biology teacher.
13	Madam Mzuri	Madam Beautiful – the female teacher is beautiful.
14	Mapoti	It means hotpots. The teacher brings food in hotpots.
15	MC	He talks so loudly like a master of ceremonies (MC). He is famous for punishing students.
16	Oyono Mbia	A character in a literary work, whom the teacher mentions often.
17	Pilato	Punishes students, and does not listen to any excuse
18	Profesa	The teacher teaches well, like a university professor, but also complicates his teaching.
19	Ratio	The nickname originates from a topic in maths. The teacher is a good maths teacher.
20	Sitaki Maelezo	Teacher who does not listen to any excuse from students.

APPENDIX III – School C

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
1	Babu	Swahili word for 'grandfather', but it also refers to any old man. The teacher is old.
2	Dude	A huge shapeless object. The teacher has a huge physique; he is punitive to students.
3	Kidushu	This teacher uses the word <i>Kidushu</i> to refer to students who do not do things correctly, but jokingly. <i>Kidushu</i> is slang, referring to someone who is foolish, dull and lazy.
4	Kijeba	This is slang for a person who is or looks old.
5	Kishazi	This is the Swahili word for 'phrase'. The teacher masters the topic very well.
6	Kishoiya	A fool, someone who does not seem to understand things. The teacher behaves like someone who just wonders.

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
7	Kispika	Has a very high-pitched voice. Teaches well and is loud enough to be heard. She talks non-stop like an MC or the radio.
8	Kitufe	He is fat and short. The name is given due to his physiology.
9	Kwame Nkrumah	The teacher talks about the late Ghanaian president and Pan-Africanist Kwame Nkrumah very often.
10	Mafungasha	The teacher has a huge body. The word is Swahili slang for describing such people.
11	Mangoto	Someone who knuckles students on the head.
12	Mapua	Big nose; Given to a school matron.
13	Mashallah	This is an expression of admiration of the teacher's good work.
14	Mjeru	This is the short form for the word <i>Mjerumani</i> , which refers to a German. The teacher is very harsh, like how German colonialists dealt with their subjects in the colonies. He also speaks English with a German accent.
15	Para	This is a shortened Swahili word for the word <i>kipara</i> (hairless). The nickname is given to a teacher who is bald.
16	Skeleton	She is slim, like a skeleton. She is harsh to students, and also very insulting.
17	Two faces	This is the name of a famous Nigerian musician. He is bald, so his forehead looks like his face. The teacher can be friendly, but can also change abruptly and become too harsh. The teacher is scornful of students.
18	Yesu	Teacher likes saying <i>Yesu</i> (Jesus), whenever she speaks.
19	Zeraa	Teacher fails to pronounce the construction 'there are'; correctly so she says 'zeraa'.
20	Domain	Uses this word often in the classroom when he teaches.

APPENDIX IV– School D

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
1	Akumene	This teacher talks a lot about religious dialogue.
2	Bi Mchina	Translated literally as Chinese Lady – but it refers to someone who has enlarged her buttocks with Chinese drugs.
3	Hitler	The Nazi, Adolf Hitler, known for his cruelty.
4	Jembe	Literally a hoe (farming implement), but it is a slang for someone who can be relied upon, very clever.
5	Jitu Baya	Ugly looking person.
6	Jumong	Very harsh
7	Kaneki	Colloquial expression from the English word <i>neck</i> and a Swahili diminutive morpheme <i>ki-</i> . The teacher has a long narrow neck.
8	Kasuku	A parrot – the teacher talks a lot.
9	Kishotii	Colloquial expression from the English word <i>short</i> and a Swahili diminutive morpheme <i>ki-</i> . The teacher is very short.
10	Mang'oro	Uses the word <i>Mang'oro</i> in class to refer to students are not clever. The teacher is clever, a womaniser, (woos female students)
11	Mathematician	A good maths teacher

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
12	Mavoko	A name of a Tanzanian musician called Rich Mavoko. The teacher shouts a lot when speaking.
13	Mbulula	A Chagga word for someone who is not clever.
14	Mjeda	Swahili slang for 'soldier'. When on the parade ground, he drives students speedily and harshly.
15	Mnyama	Means 'animal', and the teacher is harsh to students.
16	Pilato	Likes to talk loudly, walks around with a cane. He is very unkind to students all the time.
17	Speak English	He insists that students should speak English and not Swahili.
19	The Killer	This is a very cruel teacher. He gets angry very quickly, canes students a lot; students are scared of him.
20	Zombi	Swahili borrowing for zombie. The teacher given this nickname has a disability with his leg. He mercilessly punishes students, and students see him as walking like a zombie.

APPENDIX V – School E

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
1	Ben Ten	Short and keeps his hair long, so that he looks like the Ben Ten cartoon.
2	Bi Kidude	This female teacher dresses like Bi Kidude, the famous Zanzibari <i>taarab</i> singer.
3	Bonge	<i>Bonge</i> is Swahili slang for someone who is overweight. The teacher is fat, and is famous for caning students.
4	Bukubuku	Swahili slang for one thousand Tanzanian shillings – the teacher asks students to pay this amount to attend his private tuition.
5	Graduation	This teacher is nicknamed <i>graduation</i> because he pronounces the word like an American.
6	Hip hop	When he speaks, his voice is like a hip-hop musician.
7	Iddi Amin	The name is from the former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. The teacher never laughs with students.
8	Kibajaji	Short and fat, and with a big tummy. He is harsh.
9	King Kong	He has huge physique and is dark skinned, like King Kong. He punishes students.
10	Kinundu	Has a <i>kinundu</i> (a swelling) on the back of his head
11	Kipara	Bald
12	Kipaza Sauti	When he teaches, he shouts and has a high-pitched voice
13	Kwapa	It is the Swahili word for <i>armpit</i> . He oozes sweat. He is unkind to students, and notorious for caning them.
14	Lomolomo	This nickname is given to the teacher because when he speaks he spits some saliva. He also has a big mouth, and leaves his mouth open most of the time.
15	Manyunyu	This literally means drizzling or light rain. When the teacher speaks he spurts out saliva jets from his mouth.
16	Mcholonge	<i>Cholonga</i> is a Swahili word for chopping – meat. This teacher is also a butcher, and the name results from the butchery activities.

	Nickname	Meaning/attributes according to the students
17	Mrisho Ngasa	He likes football and plays it like the star Tanzanian player Mrisho Ngasa.
18	Shadow	A topic in literature which he teaches.
19	Swahili Speaker	Does not want students to speak Swahili so he keeps on reminding Swahili speakers not to do so.
20	Tumbo	It is literally translated as 'stomach'. The teacher has a big one.