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Empowering Educational Leaders: Nurturing Strong Teaching and Learning Environments in Kenyan Schools.



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Empowering Educational Leaders: Nurturing Strong Teaching and Learning Environments in Kenyan Schools.

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Abstract

Purpose: Kenya's paradigm shifts in curriculum from content based to competence-based curriculum is geared towards improving the quality of education to meet the global demands. This prompts the need to build a firm foundation from early childhood education through appropriate classroom learning experiences and good leadership. This study explored educational leaders' practices in their management of primary schools in Kenya.

Methodology: This article draws evidence from the Longitudinal Study which was designed among other things to establish the best practices that teacher educators can adopt to inform the professional learning of Student Teachers to become effective champion teachers, and leaders. The study adopted a mixed method approach with a sample size of 29, comprising 4 education officers, 25 head teachers in Mombasa and Kilifi counties in Kenya.

Findings: The findings revealed that most education leaders have embraced transformative leadership styles and policies to motivate their subordinates through action research, portfolio, mentorship, coaching, collaboration, and networking. Findings revealed further that mentorship is key in educational leadership and thus should be regarded as a vital aspect in teacher education and in professional learning. Data also indicated that leadership styles differ in relation to the context.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: The leader's role is deeply involved with setting the school's direction; thus, teacher leadership preparation is essential for successful implementation of education processes and programs. Hence, we recommend that school leaders should be adequately prepared to face the tasks and the accompanying contextual challenges they face once assigned the responsibilities to lead institutions.

Keywords: *Early Childhood Education, Education Leadership, Professional Learning, Leadership Styles*



INTRODUCTION

Educational leaders are among the key stakeholders of curriculum implementation and building strong teaching and learning foundations in schools. Educational leaders such as education officers, school administrators and head teachers have a great influence on transforming and initiating a learner friendly school. Amutenya (2017) noted that, due to their responsibility of assessing and overseeing the curriculum, educational leaders play a significant role in the education system of every country. Furthermore, Óskarsdóttir and colleagues also acknowledge the key role of educational leaders in providing direction by drawing clear goals, supporting teachers in implementing curriculum and monitoring progress (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020). It is obvious therefore that the quality of the educational leaders' impacts learning outcomes. One of the prerequisites in an education setting is a conducive teaching and learning environment focusing on nurturing and motivating both teachers and learners to achieve positive experiences and learning outcomes. School leaders are vested with the responsibility of providing guidance, mentorship and coaching to teachers for effective and quality teaching and learning experiences (Amutenya, 2017; Kilag et al., 2023).

Many studies have attributed learner achievement gaps to the poor quality of teaching resulting from the poor quality of teachers (Noor & Nawab, 2022), even though so many other factors are involved. For instance, UNESCO, (2015, p. 4) alludes that an education system is only as good as its teachers. This includes 'head teachers' since they mentor and support classroom teachers and also oversee teaching and learning at school. This proves the need for professional development of educational leaders. The professional development of head teachers would enable most leaders and teachers to meet the ever-changing demands in the education system. Countries such as Finland and Singapore that have a high regard for teachers and desire for equitable high-quality education have seen an improvement in their education system over the years through capacity building. The Finnish view is that teaching should be a long-term profession where people can grow into leadership positions and develop expertise over time, an ideology that has seen increased competition for teaching slots among young Finns (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Data for this study emanated from a foundation for learning (F4L) project which was implemented by the Aga Khan university, Institute for education development, east Africa. The F4L project among other things worked in partnership with Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) to strengthen educational leadership structures via leadership training for head teachers in Mombasa. The longitudinal study among other things was designed to capture the transformations brought about the F4L project interventions. Against this background, this article aimed to bring to light leadership practices in building strong teaching and learning environments in pre-primary and primary schools. This article provides responses to the following questions.

1. How does the leadership training program, such as the Foundations for Learning (F4L) project, influence the leadership practices of head teachers in Mombasa, Kenya?

2. What strategies were employed by educational leaders to support teaching and learning in Kilifi and Mombasa counties?
3. What challenges do educational leaders face in improving teaching and learning in schools?
4. What leadership approaches did educational leaders draw on to address challenges that limit effective teaching and learning?

Although this study has been limited to Kilifi and Mombasa Kenya, it has wider implications. The insights gained add to the existing knowledge on leadership practices that are deemed imperative for effective and quality education. Furthermore, these insights may provide a lens to the government through the Ministry of Education to rethink the need of capacity building for leaders and teachers. Other educational leaders may also be provoked to rethink and reflect on their leadership styles and come up with models aimed for improvement.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The F4L interventions and the diploma in education management program seek to empower and equip educational leaders with teacher leadership skills to fully execute their mandate. Leadership styles play a role in managing the subordinates. For instance, transformative leaders inspire and motivate their subordinates to become effective as well as create an institutional vision that can be adopted. Therefore, the education officers offer support to head teachers, who in turn support the teachers in the implementation of the curriculum.

Moreover, empowering educational leaders (independent variable) influences the nurturing of strong teaching and learning environments (dependent variable) through the mechanisms of the intervening variables which include teachers' morale, collaborative professional culture, parental and community involvement, and support. The interplay of the variable improves leadership and enhances the quality of educational experiences and outcomes within Kenyan schools.

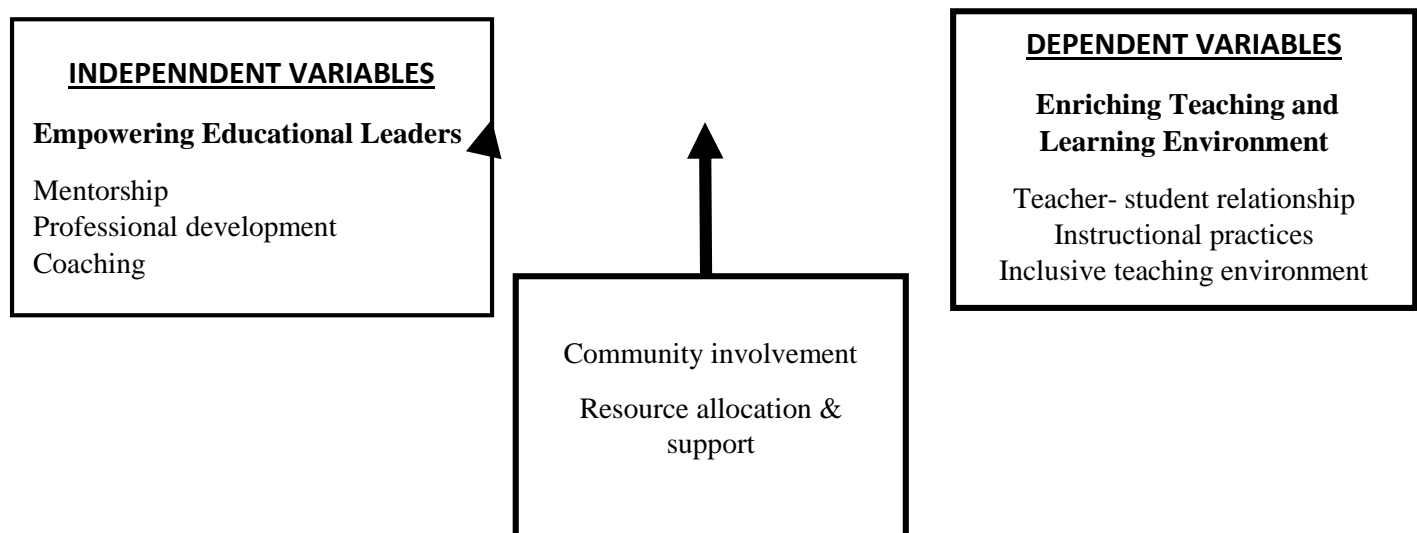


Figure 1: Conceptual framework

METHODOLOGY

The study followed a pragmatic paradigm and thus a mixed method approach was adopted resulting in a pluralistic approach to data collection where both qualitative and quantitative data was collected. This approach enabled us to shed light on the behaviors and/or practices of the study participants, the beliefs that drive those behaviors/practices and the consequences emanating from those behaviors/practices. The study was carried out in two selected counties in Kenya, namely, Mombasa and Kilifi which were purposely selected since these were counties where the Foundation for learning project (F4L) interventions were conducted. The study population was 24 head teachers and 4 education officers. The head teachers were sampled from a number that was undertaking a Diploma in Education Leadership and Management programme under the F4L project. The study employed purposely stratified sampling technique whereby head teachers and education officers were sampled. The starters which were considered were, management that is a study participant had to be a primary school leader, from either Kilifi or Mombasa County, enrolled for the diploma in Education Leadership and Management programme under the F4L project and education officers that worked within the jurisdiction of F4L project schools. Primary data were collected using two main tools, namely, questionnaires and interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Educational leaders' biographic data

Four education officers who participated in this study were County Quality Assurance and Standards Officer (CQASO), Sub County Quality Assurance and Standards Officer (SQASO) and Sub County Director of Education (SDE). The findings reveal that all (100%) hold a master degree and 67% are above fifty years of age and 33% aged between 41- 50 years. It also reveals that all officers have working experience between 21-30 years. This implies that the educational leader position is dominated by mature and experienced educators.

The F4L supported diploma in education management focus areas

- Empowering school leaders to become true champions of learning.
- Gender, equality and inclusion, mentorship, change management, curriculum implementation.
- Engaging the stakeholders, mobilizing resources
- Action research and evidence-based learning.

Education leaders' leadership style

Data indicates that all (100%) of the educational leaders practice coaching leadership, transformative leadership and democratic leadership. Moreover, 33% of the respondents practice laissez-faire leadership and none of the respondents practice dictatorship leadership. In Addition, the educational leaders believed that their leadership styles largely motivated their subordinates to work effectively in teamwork, creativity, problem-solving, material development and mentorship. These findings agree with Bernard Bass claims as cited in Anderson (2017) that in their daily encounters with employees or subordinates, transformational leaders demonstrate the following behaviors: idealized influence, customized consideration, intellectual stimulation as well as inspirational motivation.

The effect of leadership style on teaching and learning

The research findings indicate that leadership style affects various aspects of teaching and learning. The following are the results from the responses of the educational leaders: Two thirds (66%) of the respondents believe that their leadership style to a great extent motivates their subordinates to work effectively in material development. Each education leader had a different opinion on the level to which leadership style plays a role in ICT integration in teaching and learning. Two educational leaders felt that their leadership styles supported ICT integration in teaching and learning to some extent while the other two leaders felt that their leadership style played a great role.

However, responding to a question on the uptake of ICT integration by teachers in teaching and learning, all the 4 participants cited lack of ICT integration even where the gadgets [tablets] that were brought to them by the government were either faulty or not used out of technophobia. This was noted from the response of the following participant:

Majority of these teachers suffer from technophobia. They do not want to know anything that goes beyond taking a book and going to class. When you ask them why you are not integrating ICT, they blame the administration for not providing those facilities (R1).

It was obvious that integration of ICT in teaching and learning required more than just an effective leadership style. Gacicio et al. (2021) study findings support the above that eight dimensions of transformational leadership could influence the integration of ICT into teaching positively. Consequently, it implies that the association between ICT integration and transformational leadership style is significantly mediated by the school environment. On the contrary, Gençer and Samur (2016) allude that leadership style is not a predictor of competency level of technology leadership. In addition, they also argue that leadership style characteristics cannot be used as a method to transform education and schools.

Regarding the relationship between leadership style and the utilization of the mentorship initiative in teaching and learning, they all noted that their leadership styles shaped mentorship practices in schools, and that the styles even supported their subordinates to work effectively in areas such as action research to inform practice as well as supporting innovation in teaching and learning. This

is in line with Anderson (2017) assertions that the goal of transformational leadership is to elevate followers' behavior, attitudes and beliefs to a higher plane of motivation and a leader does this by inspiring followers to reach even greater heights of performance and achievement than they have already attained.

Supporting schools

This section focuses on the support that educational leaders offer to schools. The findings revealed that leaders provided support to schools in the following areas: Preparation of professional documents, Professional Development workshops, School-based insets, sourcing for donors, supporting teachers on making an ICT integrated lesson, Team building, Workshops for teachers on lesson planning, lesson preparation and using gender responsive pedagogy (GRP). This is corroborated by R2 who outlined an enhancement of the workshops by indicating that he would wish to conduct them at cluster level as it emerged that teachers were still using the 8-4-4 system in teaching CBC.

The data also revealed that the education officers offered support to head teachers through role modeling, sensitizing and training on Gender based violence, equality in doing classroom roles and activities. However, a third (33%) of the participants wished to support through assessment but were not allowed. These findings agree with Óskarsdóttir et al. (2020) and Amutenya (2017) who acknowledge the crucial role of educational leaders in providing direction by defining clear goals as well as assisting teachers in implementing and assessing the curriculum.

During the interviews the officers were also asked to state their leadership philosophies. There was an indication that all participants had and used leadership philosophies to inform their practices. Furthermore, a diverse school of thought was noted based on the leaders' personal beliefs. For instance, R1 posited that *'serving people to the best of my ability'* was his leadership philosophy. Another participant highlighted perseverance, as in *'I should not give up'* R2. Good listening skills were also noted as a leadership philosophy that was imperative in their practice. The aforementioned concept is in tandem with Zuckerman and O'Shea (2021) findings that educational leaders possess a range of leadership schemas related to schools, such as relational, servant, facilitative, distributed, and leading by example. These authors also argue that leaders engage different leadership maps for different tasks or goals using situational leadership to engage with the dynamics of each situation in deciding how to carry out tasks and make decisions.

Challenges faced by educational officers in supporting teachers

Although the educational officers were aware of their responsibilities to support schools, school leadership and teachers, they highlighted a myriad of hurdles they faced as they executed their roles. For instance, two thirds (66%) of the participants noted insufficient teaching and learning materials among teachers. Other challenges included lack of stable internet connectivity which hindered effective integration of ICT which is key for the effective implementation of CBC which Kenya as a nation subscribed to. Unstable power supply and outage was noted to be a major

obstacle to ICT integrated teaching and learning practices. Lawrence and Tar (2018) findings are related to ours that inadequate infrastructure, hardware and software quality, ease of use, collegiality and support, professional development commitment, and formal computer training history, affect teachers' decisions to adopt ICT integration in teaching and learning.

In the same vein, 66% of the participants noted that teachers faced challenges in implementing inclusive practices in classrooms and the school as a whole. They mainly attributed it to insufficient teaching and learning materials such as assistive devices, ICT gadgets, and limited low-cost, no-cost materials for developing a variety of teaching and learning aids to cater for diverse learning needs. According to the data, the provision of a conducive teaching and learning environment, including one that addresses structural challenges, is unavoidable if we are to build strong foundations for learning. The findings above also agree with Rainer et al. (2012) that indeed educational leaders face challenges ranging from school policies to inadequate finances and resources and also some which are out of their control such as access to facilities, government targets etc.

Educational leaders' views after the F4L intervention

The findings reveal that there were significant changes in the project schools as a result of the F4L intervention. This is evident where all the participants affirmed a lot of improvement especially on teacher practices after the intervention '*...the intervention at least has borne fruits because some schools are improving*' R2. Given that the 21st century skills are stressed in the F4L intervention, data indicates a 66% change in effective communication, critical thinking, collaboration, ability to network, problem solving, material development and enhancing teaching and learning in project areas.

It is worth noting that the support that educational officers offer in schools is most of the time cascaded to classroom teachers via school head teachers. In this particular F4L intervention, cascading of knowledge and skills was to be done by the head teachers that were enrolled in a two years' diploma course in leadership and management. The educational leaders were sampled as a way of triangulating the data collected from the head teachers since in effort to build strong sustainable foundations for learning, educational leaders cannot be excluded from the equation.

SCHOOL HEADTEACHERS

Head teachers' biographic data

A majority (85%) of the study participants were aged above 41 years. This is an indication that the leadership of schools is dominated by persons of middle age, mature and experienced teachers. Only one participant had less than 10 years, while more than three quarters had between 11-30 years' job experience. Four participants had above 30 years' experience. This indicates that most of the respondents were mature educators that had acquired a lot of teaching experience. Over half of the respondents had bachelor's degrees, a fifth (21%) had diplomas, 17% had certificate and

less than a tenth had master's degree as the highest qualification. This denotes that many teachers have strived to upgrade to higher education qualifications.

Head teachers' duties as described in the code of conduct

Majority of the study participants (67%) identified monitoring implementation of the curriculum as their main responsibility as head teachers. While 41% cited the discipline docket in the schools as their responsibility and (33%) highlighted learner assessment as part of their responsibilities.

Head teachers' leadership styles and its effect on their roles

The survey revealed that transformative leadership (71%) was the most practiced leadership style, followed by Democratic (25%) and Pedagogical leadership (4%). Moreover, more than three quarters (79%) of the respondents rated higher or highest the extent to which their leadership style motivated their subordinates to work effectively in creativity. Almost all (96%) of the study participants believed that their leadership style motivated their subordinates to work effectively in collaboration, networking as well as in problem solving and team working. In addition, more than three quarters (78%) of the respondents rated higher or highest the extent to which their leadership style motivated their subordinates to work effectively in mentorship.

Two thirds (63%) of the respondents rated higher or highest the extent to which their leadership style motivated their subordinates to work effectively in material development. However, only (58%) of the study participants rated higher or highest the extent to which their leadership style motivated their subordinates to work effectively in innovation and 57% in action research and 42% in ICT integration in teaching and learning. The results are in tandem with Anderson (2017) who suggests that the best way to address the needs of schools in the twenty-first century is through transformational leadership, which also positively affects school leadership's ability to facilitate change in school restructuring initiatives.

Head teachers' insights on transformed practices after the F4L interventions

In the survey, the head teachers were asked to rate the extent to which the intervention had transformed their practices. The majority (96%) noted major changes in the area of integrity, hence integrity scored the highest change amongst others after the F4L intervention. In addition, 91% of the study participants observed changes in their practices in regard to critical thinking while 90% noted transformations in the area of effective communication. Other areas of transformed practices are summarized in the table below.

Practice	Percentage (%)of study participants
Empathy	87
Open Mindedness	78
Problem solving	75
Creativity	75
ICT integration in teaching learning and leading	75
Vision	70
Compassion disposition	58

Table 1: Other Areas of transformational practice ratings

It is evident that compassion calls for action taking, and action taking requires resources be it financial resources or time. In the East African context, where we have limited resources, it is not surprising that compassion registered the lowest change.

Head teachers' experiences in the development of E-Portfolio

When they were asked to share their experiences regarding the development of a portfolio, all participants (100%) cited it as challenging at first. However, from the findings, the study participants were able to overcome the challenging experiences through support from facilitators in a form of mentorship and peer coaching and constant practice. It was also evident that they were able to transfer the knowledge, competences and skills of developing “hardcopy” portfolios to developing e-portfolios.

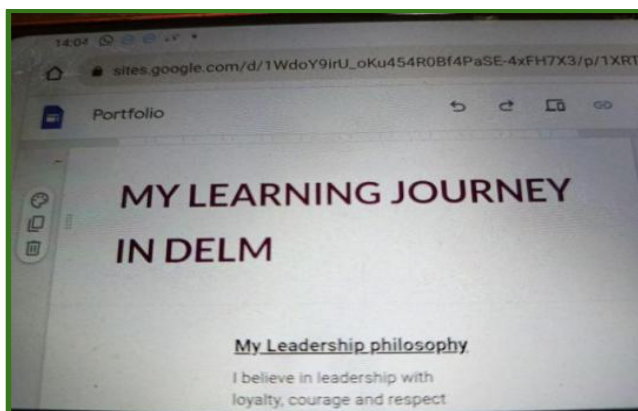


Figure 2: Sample E-portfolio

Head teachers Experiences, Perceptions and Understanding on Action Plan and Action Research

The study also sought to establish whether the head teachers were conversant on action plan and action research after the intervention. Data indicated that half (50%) of the participants seemed to have an idea and had understood what an action plan entailed.

I managed to get to know how to develop a plan because we have developed so many. So right now in my school, I helped to develop a strategic plan plus a school development plan we have developed and I realize that when you develop such plans, as long as you have the implementation plan, it becomes very easy to put it into practice and it makes you achieve your objectives. R7

However, it was also evident that 50% of the participants could not differentiate between an action plan and action research. This was noted from the responses such as the one below.

The action plan has initially been a bit of a challenge because normally we are not used to it...there are other types of research. It was not research that was familiar to me, so it's something that I really had to understand. R2

The findings of head teachers' inadequate knowledge of action research and action plan is in tandem with Cortes et al. (2021), where it was concluded that participants did not go into great detail regarding preliminary impressions of action research which necessitated for a professional development program. Moreover, when data was being collected, head teachers were in the initial stages of conducting Action research, for instance they had already thought-out areas of focus and/or research topic. They identified areas such as syllabus completion, drug and substance abuse, professional documents - Record of work, truancy in schools, improving learners' enrollment and retention in schools, absenteeism in school, teacher motivation to improve science performance in school, dropout rates in school, school enrolment and retention.

Another indicator that the participants were working on their action research was the existence of developed data collection instruments which included interview guides, focus group discussion guides and questionnaires. Despite the progress in conducting action research, some challenges were noted including time constraints, development of the action plan, development of the research topic/ identifying a problem, challenges on data collection and unfamiliarity study design in question.

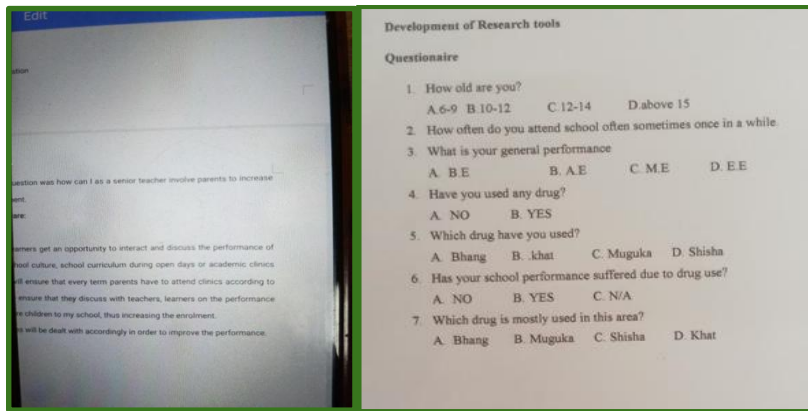


Figure 3: A concept notes for an Action Research and a sample protocol

Adopted practices and policies in project schools after the F4L intervention

When the participants were asked to state whether they had been able to adopt any idea/practice or strategy from the F4L project as a policy or practice, (25%) of the participants each mentioned a strategic plan and child protection respectively while (8.3%) stated guidance and counseling. (8.3%) cited effective communication and collaboration, (8.3%) mentioned prize giving day, (8.3%) adopted play-based teaching and learning strategies while (8.3%) adopted service charter, and (8.3%) adopted honor boards for children. Similarly, the findings revealed that eleven (91%) of the participants seemed to have been carrying out reflective practices either as a school policy or personal practice. They used reflective practice to identify areas of action plan or action research as evident in the following response.

So, when I started looking at reflection as a source of a task that I would go and implement at school. They have started being meaningful so that every day when I go through learning, I am able. I have to identify what it is that is an area that I would be able to implement at school. R2

Data indicated that they have been using reflective practices to improve their practice as they were taught during the F4L funded diploma training, *'I sit and try to look at the possible ways of making it better, and from that I have improved in so many things, and in my classroom teaching. It is really working.'* R5. However, a participant cited challenges of lack of time as a result of large classes that was an impediment to reflective practice as illustrated in the response below.

...but back in the working station many times you may fail to reflect as often as you would want to because of the engagements of the work, the work that we have, we find there are issues that you could have sat and reflected on, but because you get to be busy all through maybe the whole day. R6

Time management is another aspect that head teachers worked on in a quest to improve practice. Several ways of achieving the aforementioned were mentioned by the participants. For instance, 41.7% noted that setting of targets helped them to manage time well, 25% mentioned proper

planning, 41.7% cited punctuality, 50% mentioned sensitization on time management to other members of the staff, while 25% stated timely communication and rescheduling. Furthermore 16% of the study participants reported that they carried out lesson planning to be prepared as they went to class, *'I do lesson planning. I have learned so much. I know how to do a gender responsive lesson plan. I can do that.'* R7. All these efforts were geared towards ensuring content mastery. Three (25%) reported that they were not very good at lesson planning yet but had improved from where they were before the training and two (16%) reported that teachers still made sub-standard lesson plans. This, they claimed, was due to CBC as they still had challenges with the new curriculum.

When they were asked about teaching and learning strategies, 91% reported that they had been able to improve their strategies and even learnt new ones. Some of these strategies included allocating extra time to the time takers, peer teaching, group work, discovery learning, collaboration with parents especially in designing learning materials, talking walls that enabled learners to continue learning even in the absence of the teacher and team teaching. This was evident in the following statement:

I also employ new strategies because we share a lot with the other course participants on how to get knowledge impacted on learners. So, when employing these teaching and learning strategies, I find that my learners are enjoying lessons. Like when I teach mathematics, I usually make sure that I give time for the time takers to do an activity which they did not get right. So, I don't rush them, I give them more time, I used to teach and complete even without caring whether these ones have got anything. But now I know how to take care of them. So, I give each learner time to acquire something. R5.

However, 8% reported they had not been able to be as effective as they wished due to large classes and low teacher-learner ratio. On teaching and learning resources, 50% reported that they used locally available resources (LAR) to make teaching and learning resources as expressed by one of the study participants that;

I'm able to, I have improved because now I know that these learning materials should be appropriate, I should not take complicated or choose the learning materials that are very expensive. I just go by the locally available resources. R5

Other teaching and learning resources utilized apart from the LAR were the readily available teaching and learning resources. On this, 25% of the study participants sourced teaching and learning materials from the internet although sometimes they experienced problems with connectivity. On whether the participants had been able to improve their practice in guidance and counseling, 91% said they carry out guiding and counseling sessions for their learners while 16% noted that they used guidance and counseling as an alternative to corporal punishment.

We have vibrant Guidance and counseling sessions where we meet every Wednesday from 3:30 pm to 4:30pm. We meet per class; we separate learners by gender. The boys meet

separately, and the girls meet also so that it is a whole school activity, and all the teachers are involved. R2

Some study participants noted how the diploma training had enlightened them to an extent that they questioned their practice in areas they took for granted. For instance, a study participant reflected on disciplinary measures and noted the following.

I have seen the need to have a policy at school. I always thought that maybe punishment can improve behavior, but it inflicts fear on the student more than guiding them to realize their goals. R11

Apart from assessing learners' behaviors and forging useful disciplinary measures, they also highlighted the milestones they had achieved in relation to assessment practices. 58% reported that they used various methods such as checklist, observation, topical assessment, activities, and quizzes. 33% reported that they initially bought assessment tasks/papers/exams from commercial suppliers but after the intervention they developed internal assessment panels for that role.

Regarding ICT integration in teaching and learning, 41% reported that they integrated ICT in various ways including online lessons and they also offered students the opportunity to interact with ICT gadgets. This is unlike the past where they thought that ICT only meant using a projector and computer during class time. The above was evident in the excerpt below.

...my lessons now are really integrated. It has become interesting because you see at first, I thought maybe using ICT is just taking a projector and you display the slides and you say maybe I have used the ICT, but we were told and it is very true that taking a projector and projecting slides, it's not ICT. You should teach them how to use the gadgets. They should manipulate them. Otherwise, if you are doing everything as a teacher that is not an ICT integrated lesson. R9

Additionally, findings from the survey revealed that the majority (92%) of the study participants observed changes in their practices regarding collaboration. Similarly, 83% observed changes about networking and team spirit, aspects vital for school improvement. On gender responsiveness in teaching and learning, all participants (100%) admitted improvement on ensuring gender responsive teaching, learning and assessment in their practice. According to them, this was evident in areas such as pedagogy, assessment practices, teaching and learning resources and language used. For instance, in language used, the following participants noted that, '*So, after going through this course, I'm very sensitive to even the words that I use when teaching and even answering questions, you have to balance.*' R9 and '*When you are teaching, there are some words which you should avoid using, to ensure that they don't feel inferior.*' R3

The findings further indicated that changes in the aforementioned practice did not only take place during lesson delivery but also during development of teaching and learning materials as well as in the preparation of teaching and learning activities where both genders are involved as noted by

this participant, '*...in preparing teaching aid you make sure that you consider both genders and also when we're giving out assignments or you have a group discussion you mix boys and girls in those groups.*' R12.

Regarding diversity and inclusive teaching and learning practices, all participants (100%) reported that they used teaching and learning strategies that met the needs of individual learners (inclusion and diversity). Some of the areas where inclusion and diversity were practiced included:

- Sitting arrangement in class
- Assessment methods
- Remedial lessons
- Individualized education programs
- Exam fee waiver for learners from poor backgrounds
- Modified facilities e.g. toilets, ramps
- Assigning of duties to both boys and girls
- Inclusive lesson plans

All the above findings sum up to the imperative need of inclusive school leaders and their role in raising the achievement of all learners as alluded by (Óskarsdóttir et al., 2020)

Support offered to schools and teachers by head teachers

The study also sought to establish whether there was any kind of support head teachers offered to their schools and teachers. It was evident from the findings that they cascaded the knowledge and skills gained from the F4L DEMA/ DELM courses to their teachers back at school. This support included preparation of professional documents, facilitation of professional development workshops, school-based insets, sourcing for donors, supporting teachers in the designing of ICT integrated lesson plans, team building workshops for teachers, creating awareness on lesson preparation as well as using gender responsive pedagogy. Moreover, they collaborated with teachers in the interpretation of curriculum designs, peer teaching, preparation and use of e-portfolio, mentorship, guidance and counseling, facilitation of teachers benchmarking trips, scheduling subject panels meetings, and supporting teachers on embracing gender and inclusive practices.

In addition, support offered to teachers based on the study participants' leadership styles in relation to inclusion and diversity education were; awareness on being a champion teacher, counseling, development of Individualized Education Programs, employment of the board of management teachers to reduce teacher-pupil ratio, eradicating culture of girls being supported by same gender, feeding program for the vulnerable, formation of guidance and counselling forums for the learners, allocating equal teaching and learning opportunities, sensitization on retention of learners with

special needs, team work, delegation of duties, making the environment conducive and safe for learning and sensitization on school policies. These findings agree with Kilag et al. (2023) assertions of the head teacher's role of providing mentorship, coaching and guidance to teachers.

Challenges encountered by head teachers while improving teaching and learning practices

Despite the huge transformation in their practices, the findings revealed that head teachers were not spared of the myriad of challenges faced in any other organization. Most notably, cultural practices in schools affected gender inclusion in the teaching and learning process. These included: early marriages, gender roles and economic activities in the respective area. Furthermore, 34% of the study participants agreed that discriminatory cultural practices affected the implementation of the effective leadership practices which they were exposed to during the diploma program. Other vices that negatively impacted on the inculcation of gender responsive and inclusive teaching and learning practices included communities' resistance towards education, stereotypes, and myths on religion. Similarly, 54% of the respondents posited that insufficient teaching and learning materials as a challenge that teachers are facing in implementing the F4L objectives. The aforementioned challenge supports (UNESCO, 2015) claim on the qualitative challenges faced by teachers in many countries. These qualitative challenges were largely attributed to large class sizes which hamper teachers from developing enough teaching and learning materials to enable hands-on lessons. Other limiting factors were unstable internet and unstable electricity which hindered ICT integration in teaching and learning.

The hurdles were also evident in the data obtained from interviews and these included learners reporting late to school, inadequate learning resources such as exercise books, little cooperation from the parents to curb truancy, inadequate infrastructure such as desks, cultural practices that only valued boy child education, parental conflicts as well as inadequate ICT infrastructure such as labs and computers. Despite the limited ICT infrastructure in schools, 16.7% of the head teachers felt that their teachers had inadequate ICT skills, and inadequacy in lesson preparation, thus, teachers needed retooling to ensure effective implementation of the CBC, findings which are in line with UNESCO (2015) qualitative challenges faced by teachers in schools.

...The competencies don't come out; they don't come out clearly. It's like it's a bit of it for teaching. And there's a bit of the scheme. The Lesson plan looks like CBC, but the actual teaching is not, maybe they would need to be retooled. R2

Mitigating the challenges

The findings revealed that 8.3% of the study participants use local authorities to curb truancy in case of lack of cooperation from the parents as noted by a study participant that '*...why is this child not coming to school? And you want to meet the parents, they sometimes don't come. So, I usually use the chiefs. We have two chiefs there. They have really helped me.*' R11

To curb the challenge of lack of exercise books, some head teachers noted that they ensure equity in sharing of books provided by the Ministry of Education, and this is mainly achieved by giving them to only those learners that cannot afford to buy books. The following participants explained this.

For the books, the Ministry of Education brings some which are not enough, and we try to give to those who cannot afford it but for the pupils whose parents can afford, we don't give them. So, we preserve them for those who have no books at all. R5

Other measures include engaging Non-Governmental Organizations that sensitize on girl child education in communities that only value boy child education.

...we have a company which is nearby, which is known as SOKO. They normally come at exactly 1:30pm, come and talk to the girls and then they talk about the challenges they experience during adolescence. Then they offer some materials. Then they continue learning. R3

Other strategies which the head teachers used included:

- Use of locally available materials such as trees to make desks.

...we had some trees in the compound, and they were cut down and some desks were made so that we can accommodate some learners. R3

- Internal capacity building for teachers through their peers to improve teachers ICT skills.

...what we are planning is to sensitize and do what we call capacity building for teachers so that we can show them that there is no escape in ICT. You don't run away from ICT. R12

- Sourcing for donations/funds

Right now, we have talked, through the head teacher, we have written a letter to our MCA (Member of County Assembly) and he promised us that you'll do something if we can get some computers. We have written a letter to the Mombasa Senate to see if we can chip into providing some resources. R9

RECOMMENDATIONS

The head teachers suggested several improvements to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in their institutions. They emphasized the need for more and larger classrooms to better accommodate students. Professional development and capacity building in ICT integration are crucial, ensuring that teachers are equipped to use technology effectively in their teaching. Acquiring additional resources, particularly computers, is also essential. They highlighted the importance of parental support in the learning process, as it significantly impacts student success. Furthermore, the development of school policies, such as an ICT policy, was noted to be necessary to ensure all teachers are proficient in using technology and incorporate it into their lessons

regularly. Overall, head teachers believed that a supportive and well-resourced environment, combined with effective leadership and mentorship, is vital for achieving positive learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study created an opportunity for finding out how interventions such as those provided in the Foundations for Learning project impact on building a strong teaching and learning environment in primary schools. From the findings, it is evident that after the intervention, head teachers had understood their roles better and even undertook additional ones such as: guidance and counseling, ensuring a child friendly and safe environment, and teacher support. Furthermore, all participants alluded to the fact that they had observed improvement in their performance as educational leaders because of the F4L project workshops. They cited positive changes in among other areas like monitoring and evaluation of curriculum implementation, information on policy matters, teacher management and delegation, conflict resolution, use of ICT and leadership skills.

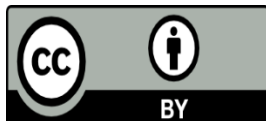
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