

**Shaping Transformational Instructional Leaders in Early Childhood Education: A Reflection on the "Foundation for Learning" Course Impact Across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania**

**Instructional Leadership for Curriculum Leadership**

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**Abstract**

Teachers promoted without formal leadership training often lead small early years schools across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and face critical instructional and community engagement challenges. This paper aligns with the sub-theme “**Institutional Leadership for Curriculum Leadership**” by examining how structured leadership development empowers teachers-in-charge to drive change in resource-constrained early childhood settings. The study aimed to explore *how the Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course influences the leadership identity, instructional practices, and community engagement of early childhood teachers-in-charge*. The researchers used a qualitative descriptive approach and

gathered data through reflective surveys from **over 800 alumni** across Coastal Kenya, the islands of Pemba and Ugunja, and Uganda's Arua and Koboko districts. The survey included Likert-scale self-assessments and open-ended reflections, which were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The findings revealed significant shifts: participants transitioned from task-based management to confident, adaptive, and instructional leadership. Teachers reported increased use of mentoring, collaborative planning, action research, and strengthened community partnerships, which directly influenced teaching quality, learner outcomes, and school culture. However, they also highlighted persistent systemic barriers such as limited resources and the need for governance capacity-building. The study highlights the importance of integrating context-responsive, practice-based leadership preparation into early childhood education systems to enhance curriculum implementation and foster sustainable school improvement. For policymakers and practitioners, the evidence suggests that investing in school-based leadership development can foster both instructional excellence and stronger school-community relationships in under-resourced environments.

**Keywords:**

Early Childhood Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Transformational Professional Development

### **Introduction**

Communities in many parts of East Africa—especially in Kenya, Uganda, and the islands of Tanzania—deliver early years education through small community-based schools that serve as the foundation for lifelong learning. These schools are often characterized by their modest size, typically consisting of three to four classrooms and a teaching staff of three to five educators. In some cases, a single teacher manages the learning needs of multiple age groups, balancing administrative duties and instructional roles with limited resources. Despite their size, these schools carry the significant responsibility of laying the groundwork for a child's cognitive, emotional, and social development.

One of the recurring challenges in these contexts has been the lack of formal preparation for teachers who find themselves appointed as "teachers-in-charge." These individuals, though committed and often deeply passionate about the well-being of their learners, are usually promoted into leadership roles without the benefit of targeted leadership training. As a result, they typically base their instructional guidance, school management practices, and community engagement on personal experience rather

than on a structured framework of educational leadership.. This gap has had a ripple effect on curriculum implementation, teaching quality, material development, and the overall learning environment.

Leadership at the early childhood level is a crucial lever for improving both teaching practices and learning outcomes. Strong instructional leadership not only shapes teachers' professional growth but also creates an enabling environment where young learners can thrive. Effective leadership ensures schools develop clear missions and visions, foster collaborative professional cultures, and actively engage with families and the community. In small schools, especially those with constrained resources, the leadership capacity of the teacher-in-charge is often the determining factor in whether a school merely survives or meaningfully nurtures each child's potential.

The "Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course" was designed to address this pressing need by equipping teachers-in-charge with practical, context-sensitive leadership skills. This paper reflects on how this course has influenced instructional leadership practices in early years schools across four counties in Coastal Kenya, the islands of Pemba and Ugunja, and two districts in Arua and Koboko in Uganda, and offers insight into

the transformative power of structured leadership development in early childhood education.

### **Background of the Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course**

The "Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course" was developed in response to a critical gap observed across early years education settings in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania's island communities. In these small schools, leadership often rests on the shoulders of the teacher-in-charge, a role that typically emerges from necessity rather than formal preparation. While these teachers demonstrate dedication to their learners, few have had opportunities to develop the leadership and management skills needed to shape strong school cultures, guide curriculum implementation, and systematically support teaching quality.

The designers specifically created the course to address the realities of these small school contexts, where resources are limited, professional isolation is common, and leadership must be adaptive, instructional, and deeply human-centered. Structured as a one-year journey, the program is delivered through three progressive modules that blend theory with practical reflection, allowing teachers-in-charge to apply concepts directly to their school settings.

Four key leadership pillars anchor the course:

- **Instructional Leadership** — equipping leaders to guide teaching and learning practices with intentionality and purpose.
- **Adaptive Leadership** — enabling leaders to respond to evolving community and school challenges with flexibility and creativity.
- **Mentoring and Coaching** — fostering professional growth through supportive peer and teacher relationships.
- **School Culture Development** — nurturing mission-driven, safe, and inclusive school environments.

The learning journey unfolds through a combination of synchronous input sessions, reflective assignments, collaborative discussions, and field-based action research. Participants explore the dynamics of creating mission and vision statements, managing conflict, leading health and safety initiatives, and deepening school-community partnerships. They are also supported to rethink their own leadership beliefs and behaviors, using structured coaching and mentoring to embed new practices into their daily work.

A notable feature of the course is its emphasis on deliverables that serve both as learning tools and real-world leadership

assets. These include an e-portfolio, an action research report, a mission and vision statement tailored to each school, a school health and safety policy, and a concrete plan for implementing the Community of Learning Activities (CoLA) within their school setting.

Through this structured yet flexible design, the course aims to shift leadership from an informal responsibility to a deliberate and reflective practice, empowering teachers-in-charge to become change agents who not only manage but also inspire transformation within their schools.

### **Literature Review**

Instructional leadership has long been recognized as a cornerstone for improving teaching quality and learner outcomes in schools (Hallinger, 2011). While much of the research on school leadership has historically focused on larger primary or secondary schools, emerging studies highlight that strong instructional leadership is equally—if not more—critical in small early childhood education (ECE) settings, where leaders must often wear multiple hats (Heikka & Waniganayake, 2011). In these contexts, leadership is not only about formal authority but also about relational capacity, adaptability, and the ability to foster a cohesive learning environment despite limited material resources.

Small schools, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, frequently operate without a clear leadership pipeline, which often results in the informal appointment of teachers to managerial positions without any structured preparation (Jansen, Crouch, & Mabogoane, 2020). This lack of leadership preparation can limit the ability of these educators to implement curricula effectively, support their teaching staff, or develop a sustainable school culture (Bush & Glover, 2014). The absence of well-defined professional development pathways further compounds these challenges, especially for teachers-in-charge of early years programs, who are responsible not only for administration but also for maintaining pedagogical quality (Aubrey, Godfrey, & Harris, 2013).

Moreover, the early childhood education phase is foundational in shaping lifelong learning habits, underscoring the urgent need for competent and prepared instructional leaders. Research shows that leaders in early years settings play a decisive role in shaping the quality of learning experiences and the emotional climate of classrooms (Siraj-Blatchford & Manni, 2007). Effective instructional leadership at this level supports the development of reflective teaching practices, promotes continuous professional learning, and enhances collaboration between the school and its

community (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009).

Transformational leadership theories, particularly those that emphasize adaptive and instructional approaches, offer relevant frameworks for ECE leaders in under-resourced schools. These approaches enable leaders to shift their role from task manager to learning facilitator and community connector, helping schools navigate complex, uncertain environments (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). In this light, targeted leadership development programs, such as the "Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course," are positioned as essential interventions for nurturing these capabilities, especially in rural and small school settings.

Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) identify sustained, reflective, and context-responsive professional development as particularly effective in transforming both teacher practice and school leadership behavior. Embedding practices such as action research, coaching, and adaptive case study analysis into leadership training enables school leaders to internalize and apply theory directly in their school environments, making their leadership both practical and transformative.

In summary, the literature establishes the significance of instructional leadership in

early childhood education, particularly in small and under-resourced schools. It also underscores the transformative potential of structured professional development programs, which can equip teachers-in-charge with the skills and dispositions needed to lead not only for compliance but for lasting educational change.

### **Research Methodology**

This reflection paper adopts a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the experiences and transformations in leadership practices of early childhood teachers-in-charge who completed the *Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course*. The primary aim of the research is to understand how this structured professional development program has influenced their leadership roles, particularly within the unique contexts of small schools in Coastal Kenya, the islands of Pemba and Ugunja, and the districts of Arua and Koboko in Uganda.

### **Research Design**

Given the exploratory and reflective nature of this inquiry, the study employed an online survey as the primary data collection tool. Researchers widely recognize surveys as practical tools for gathering insights from geographically dispersed populations while allowing respondents space to reflect on their personal experiences (Creswell & Poth,

2018). This method aligns with the reflective focus of the paper, as it enables the educators to self-report on the shifts in their leadership thinking and practices since completing the course.

### Participants

The target participants for the survey were early years teachers-in-charge who have completed the *Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course* between 2022 and 2024. These participants represent a diverse range of small school contexts, including those with only a single teacher managing both classroom teaching and administrative leadership. Under-resourced rural and semi-urban communities across Kenya and Uganda predominantly host the schools.

### Data Collection

The survey was distributed through Google Groups, leveraging the existing alum community established for the course's Community of Learning Activities (CoLA). The choice of this platform was both practical and strategic. The alums Google Group has remained active as a peer-support and professional learning community, making it an ideal channel to reach all participants in a familiar environment that encourages open sharing and reflection.

The survey consisted of both structured and open-ended questions designed to elicit reflections on specific areas of leadership development covered in the course, including:

- Instructional leadership confidence and practice;
- Adaptive leadership and problem-solving in school contexts;
- Engagement in mentoring and coaching;
- The development of school mission, vision, and culture.
- The role of action research in improving teaching and learning.
- Community engagement and relationship-building.

The researchers designed open-ended questions to allow respondents to share authentic narratives of change and challenge, which are critical in qualitative educational research for capturing both depth and context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Data Analysis

The responses will be analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis. This process involves familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing these themes, defining and naming them, and producing a final narrative that

illustrates the transformations in leadership practices experienced by the participants.

This methodology enables the emergence of both anticipated and unexpected themes, thereby providing rich insights into the lived experiences of these early childhood instructional leaders. By drawing from the educators' reflective voices, the study aims to highlight the real-world impact of professional development programs in strengthening leadership capacity in small school contexts.

This methodology enables the emergence of both anticipated and unexpected themes, providing rich insights into the lived experiences of early childhood instructional leaders who have completed the course. Drawing directly from their reflective narratives, the study seeks to illuminate the real-world impact of context-responsive, practice-based professional development on leadership identity, instructional practices, and community engagement within small school environments.

**The central research question guiding this study is:**

*How has the “Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course” influenced the leadership identity, instructional practices, and community engagement of early childhood teachers-*

*in-charge in small schools across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania?*

**Findings**

This study explored the reflections of 24 early childhood instructional leaders following their completion of the Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course. The results provide compelling evidence of how structured, context-sensitive professional development can transform leadership identity, teaching support practices, and community engagement within small, resource-constrained early childhood schools.

**Table 1: The before and after situation of different Instructional Leadership Aspects**

<b>Leadership Area</b>	<b>% Often/Al ways Before the Course</b>	<b>% Often/Al ways After the Course</b>
Clear mission and vision	20%	86%
Planning & improving teaching	20%	83%
Mentoring/coaching teachers	14%	82%

Solving school problems adaptively	24%	88%
Engaging parents/community	27%	84%
Using school policies	15%	84%
Using action research	12%	84%

The percentage of teachers reporting consistent use of key leadership practices ("Often/Always") more than tripled across every area following the course.

**Qualitative Theme Analysis: Alumni Reflections**

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses further reinforced the quantitative findings, revealing six recurring themes central to leadership growth and practice transformation:

**Table 2: Emerging Theme with sample responses and Frequency**

Theme	Representative Response Sample	Frequency Across Responses
<b>Leadership Identity</b>	<i>"I never thought of</i>	Very Frequent

<b>Transformation</b>	<i>myself as a leader before the course, now I lead my team and set direction."</i>	(80–90%)
<b>Instructional Leadership Practice</b>	<i>"I now mentor other teachers regularly and guide lesson planning."</i>	Frequent (75–85%)
<b>Adaptive Problem Solving</b>	<i>"I involve staff, parents, and learners in solving school-based problems using structured approaches."</i>	Frequent (70–80%)
<b>Community and Parental Engagement</b>	<i>"Our relationships with parents and the community have</i>	Very Frequent (80–90%)

	<i>improved — parents are now active participants.”</i>	
<b>Action Research Adoption</b>	<i>“Action research has become my go-to tool for understanding and solving classroom challenges.”</i>	Frequent (65–75%)
<b>Ongoing Challenges &amp; Support Needs</b>	<i>“We still face resource shortages, parental rigidity, and the need for ongoing financial management training.”</i>	Recurring Challenge Theme (60–70%)

**Emerging Themes from Qualitative Reflections**

The thematic analysis of open-ended responses strongly reinforced the quantitative patterns, revealing six dominant themes:

**Leadership Identity Transformation**

Many participants reported a profound shift in their self-perception — from administrative "teachers-in-charge" to reflective, vision-driven instructional leaders. This identity shift became the foundation for broader behavioral change in school leadership roles.

**Instructional Leadership Practice**

Respondents noted clear growth in their ability to mentor colleagues, guide collaborative lesson planning, and focus on improving teaching quality — skills that align with the principles of transformational instructional leadership.

**Adaptive Problem Solving**

Teachers reported using adaptive leadership frameworks and participatory decision-making to address school-based challenges, especially those related to limited resources and staff collaboration.

**Community and Parental Engagement**

Stronger relationships with parents and community stakeholders emerged as a recurring impact. Teachers described a shift from parental disengagement to genuine collaboration in supporting learning and child welfare.

**Action Research Adoption**

Many teachers have adopted action research as a habit for diagnosing and addressing school and classroom challenges, which has reinforced both

collaborative problem-solving and evidence-based school leadership.

### **Ongoing Challenges and Support Needs**

Despite personal growth, teachers continued to face structural barriers, including resource scarcity, rigid parental mindsets, and limited leadership capacity among school management boards. These concerns underscore the need for ongoing mentorship, systemic reform, and policy alignment to sustain change.

Together, these themes offer a cohesive picture of how the course not only strengthened individual leadership competencies but also encouraged a school-wide shift toward collaborative, reflective, and community-rooted practices. The emerging themes highlight the importance of a leadership approach that evolves beyond isolated decision-making to foster collective ownership of school improvement goals, positioning early childhood leaders as facilitators of lasting educational change.

### **Discussions**

The findings from the reflective survey of 24 early childhood instructional leaders confirm the transformative impact of the Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course on school leadership practices in small early years education settings. Consistent with the research of Aubrey, Godfrey, and Harris

(2013), this study emphasizes the importance of formal leadership training in enabling teachers-in-charge to transition from task-based managers to reflective, purposeful instructional leaders. Many respondents described a shift from leading through intuition to using deliberate, research-informed strategies to guide both their colleagues and their schools.

The marked increase in leadership behaviors — particularly in mentoring, community engagement, and action research — aligns with the leadership model described by Hallinger (2011), which emphasizes that effective instructional leadership is central to improving student outcomes and school culture, especially in resource-constrained environments. Heikka and Waniganayake (2011) echo the relational and distributed nature of leadership that many participants experienced by recognizing the critical role of collaborative relationships in early childhood leadership.

The qualitative responses highlight how action research has evolved not only into a problem-solving tool but also into a mindset shift, enabling teachers to analyze and address complex, school-based challenges collaboratively. This shift in approach aligns with Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) emphasis on reflective and

context-driven inquiry in educational leadership development..

Additionally, the strengthened ties between schools, parents, and local communities reported by many respondents reflect the emphasis placed on relationship-centered leadership in the literature. Research by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) and Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd (2009) emphasizes the significant influence of leader-family collaboration on the emotional and academic climate of schools. The experiences of the alums directly mirror this finding.

At the same time, the persistent structural challenges — such as limited resources, parental resistance, and governance gaps — mirror concerns raised by Bush and Glover (2014) and Jansen, Crouch, and Mabogoane (2020), who argue that leadership development, while transformational at the individual level, often runs into systemic barriers unless coupled with broader institutional and policy support.

Finally, the thematic analysis approach adopted for this study, modeled after Braun and Clarke (2006), provided a clear framework for identifying and organizing recurring patterns across the reflections, thereby reinforcing the value of rigorous qualitative analysis in educational research.

The reflections affirm both the immediate benefits and ongoing relevance of practice-based, context-sensitive leadership training as advocated by Darling-Hammond, Hyster, and Gardner (2017), while also calling for continuous mentorship, policy alignment, and systemic support to sustain and scale leadership transformation in early childhood education.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the reflections of 24 early childhood instructional leaders who completed the Foundation for Learning Transformational Instructional Leadership Course across Kenya and Uganda. The findings demonstrate the course's transformative impact on leadership identity, instructional practices, and school-community engagement within small, resource-constrained early years schools.

The evidence suggests a significant shift: participants transitioned from informal, task-centered management to intentional, adaptive, and collaborative leadership approaches. This transformation was especially evident in the increased application of mentoring, action research, and the cultivation of strong parent and community relationships. These findings align with broader research (Aubrey et al., 2013; Hallinger, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017), which emphasizes that leadership development grounded in

authentic contexts empowers teachers to address real-world challenges and improve educational outcomes.

Nonetheless, the study also highlights enduring structural barriers — including limited resources, rigid parental beliefs, and capacity gaps in governance — that continue to limit the full realization of transformational leadership. These findings suggest that while targeted professional development is essential, long-term change requires complementary system-level interventions.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Scale Up Context-Responsive Leadership Development**

Policymakers and education leaders should expand access to context-sensitive, practice-based leadership training, such as the Foundation for Learning Course, for teachers-in-charge of small and early childhood schools, particularly in under-resourced regions.

#### **Establish Ongoing Mentorship and Peer Networks**

Beyond initial training, early childhood leaders require structured mentorship and peer support — including alumni communities and Communities of Learning — to sustain reflective practice and foster adaptive leadership growth.

#### **Institutionalize Action Research in School Leadership**

Action research should be integrated into early years school improvement plans as a core practice, empowering teachers to continuously diagnose, address, and monitor school-based challenges collaboratively.

#### **Strengthen Community and Parental Engagement Strategies**

Education authorities and development partners should support schools in developing structured approaches to engage parents and local communities, recognizing them as essential partners in improving child learning and well-being.

#### **Enhance Board of Management Capacity**

Introduce targeted training for school boards, especially in the areas of financial management, governance, and policy interpretation, to ensure alignment between leadership and school-wide accountability structures.

#### **Policy Recognition for Early Childhood Leaders**

National education frameworks should formally recognize the role of early childhood teachers-in-charge as instructional leaders, embedding leadership training into professional development pathways and school improvement policies.

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