

KEMI Journal of Educational Leadership and Management

KJELM

[ISSN 3079-4048]

Volume: 2 Issue: 1 | Jun-2026

Leveraging digital skills and artificial intelligence for inclusive educational leadership in marginalised communities

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Cite this article in APA

Njogu, G. W. (2026). Leveraging digital skills and artificial intelligence for inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities. Kenya Journal of Education Leadership and Management, 1(1), xx–xx. https://doi.org/10.68147/03c362e9

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Abstract

Education systems are rapidly transforming under technological shifts and global disruptions, yet equity gaps persist. In Kenya and across Africa, digital skills training has become essential for sustainable and inclusive education. Marginalized communities, including rural learners, low-income households, and women, remain excluded due to structural barriers in access, affordability, and digital literacy. This study examines how digital skills and artificial intelligence (AI) can foster inclusive educational leadership in such contexts. Guided by questions on how leaders can leverage digital skills, the role of AI in promoting equitable teaching and learning, and the practices needed for ethical and sustainable reforms, the study employed a mixed-methods research design. Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 150 educators and community leaders in rural and peri-urban Kenya, complemented by semi-structured interviews with 20 education leaders. Secondary data from relevant policy documents, reports, and scholarly literature were also reviewed to provide contextual insights. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were coded thematically. Findings show that digital skills training enhances learner confidence, teacher efficiency, and leadership accountability. AI-driven adaptive tools supported differentiated instruction, particularly benefiting learners with disabilities and those experiencing literacy challenges. Leaders emphasized governance frameworks that integrate ethics, data privacy, and sustainability. Persistent barriers included high internet costs, limited teacher training, and gender disparities in

access to digital devices. The paper argues for a three-pronged strategy: integrating digital skills into curricula, leveraging AI for personalised and inclusive learning, and establishing governance systems that ensure equity and sustainability. Policy recommendations include subsidised connectivity, continuous professional development in AI pedagogy, and gender-responsive frameworks. By positioning digital innovation as both a pedagogical tool and governance enabler, inclusive leadership can bridge divides and strengthen resilience in education systems.

Key terms: Digital Skills Training; Artificial Intelligence; Inclusive Educational Leadership; Marginalized Communities; Digital Inclusion; Educational Equity

1.0 Introduction

The rapid acceleration of technological innovation has amplified global conversations around inclusion, equity, and sustainability in education. While artificial intelligence (AI) and digital skills training are increasingly recognized as critical tools for personal and professional advancement, marginalized communities, including low-income populations, women, rural residents, and people with disabilities, remain disproportionately excluded from these opportunities due to inequalities in infrastructure, affordability, digital literacy, and access to devices (World Bank, 2021; International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2022).

Digital skills have become essential competencies for participation in the knowledge economy. Recent studies indicate that digital competencies enhance employability, learning outcomes, problem-solving abilities, and civic participation, particularly among youth and underserved populations (Van Laar et al., 2020). However, the digital divide continues to limit the ability of marginalized communities to benefit from technological advancement, especially where connectivity, teacher preparedness, and digital resources remain inadequate (GSMA, 2021).

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly transforming education through adaptive learning systems, predictive analytics, automated feedback, and assistive technologies. Research shows that AI-driven educational tools can support personalized learning and improve inclusion by addressing diverse learner needs, including learners with disabilities and those experiencing learning difficulties (Luckin et al., 2016; UNESCO, 2023). However, effective AI integration requires ethical leadership, data governance frameworks, and institutional readiness to ensure that technological benefits are distributed equitably (UNESCO, 2023).

Inclusive educational leadership plays a vital role in bridging these gaps. Leaders who promote digital competencies, collaborative decision-making, and equitable technology adoption can create learning environments that support participation for all learners (Ryan, 2016). By fostering digital skills and leveraging AI-driven solutions, education leaders can strengthen teaching practices, improve governance, and empower marginalized communities socially and economically.

This research therefore examines how digital skills training combined with AI applications can cultivate inclusive educational leadership and enable marginalized communities to participate meaningfully in the 21st-century knowledge economy.

1.1 Background

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has placed digital literacy at the heart of global competitiveness. Skills such as data analysis, programming, cybersecurity, and digital marketing are no longer peripheral but

central to workforce readiness. However, digital divides persist, with the International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2022) reporting that nearly 2.7 billion people remain offline globally, the majority from marginalized groups.

AI technologies, on the other hand, offer powerful tools for inclusivity. AI-driven platforms can personalize learning for diverse needs, support translation for linguistic minorities, and provide real-time analytics for resource distribution. Yet, without digital skills, marginalized learners and educators cannot harness these benefits effectively (UNESCO, 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

Despite global efforts to enhance digital inclusion, marginalized communities continue to face barriers in accessing quality education and leadership opportunities. These barriers include inadequate infrastructure, limited exposure to digital technologies, insufficient teacher training, affordability challenges, and socioeconomic inequalities (World Bank, 2021; International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2022). Traditional education models often struggle to integrate emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), creating a widening gap between digitally connected and underserved populations.

Although digital skills training has been recognized as important for improving employability, learning outcomes, and social participation, many marginalized communities still lack the competencies required to effectively engage with digital platforms and emerging technologies (Van Laar et al., 2020). Similarly, AI applications have demonstrated potential in supporting personalized learning, adaptive instruction, and improved educational decision-making; however, their benefits remain unevenly distributed due to limited infrastructure, inadequate digital capacity, and weak governance structures (UNESCO, 2023).

The absence of inclusive educational leadership further compounds these challenges. While existing studies have examined digital skills development and AI adoption independently, limited research has explored how the integration of digital skills and AI can strengthen inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities. In particular, there is insufficient evidence on the leadership practices required to ensure that technology-driven reforms are equitable, ethical, and sustainable (Ryan, 2016).

Therefore, the problem addressed by this study is the limited understanding of how digital skills training and artificial intelligence can be strategically leveraged to develop inclusive educational leadership and bridge digital inequalities among marginalized communities. The study seeks to answer: ***How can digital skills training and artificial intelligence be harnessed to build inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities?***

1.3 Research Objectives and Questions

Objectives

1. To examine the role of digital skills training in fostering inclusive educational leadership.
2. To analyse how AI tools can enhance education and leadership outcomes in marginalized communities.
3. To identify barriers and opportunities for integrating digital skills and AI in marginalized educational settings.
4. To recommend strategies for policymakers, educators, and organizations to promote inclusive leadership.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine how digital skills training and artificial intelligence can be leveraged to foster inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the role of digital skills training in fostering inclusive educational leadership.
2. To analyse how AI tools can enhance education and leadership outcomes in marginalized communities.
3. To identify barriers and opportunities for integrating digital skills and AI in marginalized educational settings.
4. To recommend strategies for policymakers, educators, and organizations to promote inclusive leadership.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does digital skills training empower leaders and learners in marginalized communities?
2. What role does AI play in enhancing inclusive educational leadership?
3. What barriers hinder the adoption of digital skills and AI in marginalized communities?
4. What best practices can ensure effective integration of digital skills and AI for inclusive leadership?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Digital Skills Training and Inclusion

Research consistently shows that digital skills enhance employability, leadership, and social participation (Van Laar et al., 2020). Studies from Africa and Asia highlight that when young people in marginalized areas receive digital training, their opportunities for entrepreneurship and civic engagement expand significantly (GSMA, 2021).

At the continental level, the African Union's Digital Education Strategy and Implementation Plan (2023–2028) emphasizes digital technology appropriation in education, aiming to accelerate the adoption of digital tools for teaching, learning, research, and governance (African Union, 2022). The strategy identifies key priorities such as equitable access, teacher capacity building, digital literacy integration into curricula, and strengthening education systems through technology. These priorities align with the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 2016–2025), which promotes inclusive, quality, and technology-supported education across African countries (African Union, 2016).

In Kenya, the Ministry of Education's ICT in Education and Training Policy (2021) underscores the role of digital literacy in the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). The policy prioritizes infrastructure development, teacher training, online safety, and equitable access to ICT resources, positioning digital skills as essential for workforce readiness and inclusive participation.

2.2 Artificial Intelligence in Education

AI is increasingly applied in personalized learning, predictive analytics, and administrative efficiency (Luckin et al., 2016). For marginalized groups, AI tools such as adaptive learning systems, language

translation, and assistive technologies can bridge systemic gaps in education (UNESCO, 2023).

Regionally, UNESCO's AI Needs Assessment Survey in Africa (2021) highlights both opportunities and risks of AI adoption. It identifies capacity-building needs, ethical concerns, and uneven distribution of benefits across African countries, stressing the importance of governance frameworks that safeguard equity and human rights. Similarly, the Artificial Intelligence in Sub-Saharan Africa Education Report (2025) outlines use cases where AI can address Africa's education crisis, including adaptive learning for rural students, predictive analytics for resource allocation, and assistive technologies for learners with disabilities.

2.3 Inclusive Educational Leadership

Inclusive leadership in education emphasizes equity, representation, and shared decision-making. Leaders who integrate digital tools into curricula foster more participatory learning environments (Ryan, 2016). When combined with AI, leadership can be more data-driven, transparent, and responsive to diverse community needs.

The African Union strategy, Kenya's ICT policy, and UNESCO's regional reports converge on the need for leaders who can champion digital inclusion while ensuring ethical, sustainable, and contextually relevant reforms. These frameworks reinforce the argument that inclusive educational leadership must be both technologically competent and socially responsive.

2.4 Gaps in Literature

While research exists on digital skills and AI independently, limited studies examine their intersection in inclusive educational leadership for marginalized communities. This study contributes by situating empirical findings within continental, national, and regional policy frameworks, bridging the gap between practice and policy.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

This study is informed by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory, which explains how technological innovations are adopted within organizations and communities. The theory provides a useful framework for understanding how digital skills and artificial intelligence are introduced, accepted, and integrated within educational institutions. In marginalized communities, educational leaders play an important role as change agents who influence the adoption and effective use of technological innovations. The theory suggests that successful adoption depends on perceived usefulness, accessibility, capacity building, and institutional support.

3.2 Inclusive Leadership Theory

The study is also grounded in Inclusive Leadership Theory, which emphasizes participation, equity, empowerment, and responsiveness to diversity. Inclusive leaders actively create opportunities for marginalized groups to participate in decision-making and access educational opportunities regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, disability, or geographical location. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how digital technologies and AI can be deployed to promote educational equity and social inclusion.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

The study conceptualizes digital skills training and AI adoption as independent variables influencing inclusive educational leadership outcomes. Leadership practices mediate this relationship through policy implementation, governance, capacity building, and equitable resource distribution. The anticipated outcomes include enhanced learner participation, improved learning outcomes, increased digital inclusion, and sustainable educational transformation.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine how digital skills training and artificial intelligence (AI) contribute to inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities in Kenya. The mixed-methods approach was selected because it enabled the integration of quantitative evidence on digital skills adoption with qualitative insights on leadership experiences, implementation challenges, and opportunities for technology-driven inclusion.

4.2 Secondary Data Review

The study reviewed existing literature, policy documents, and reports from credible sources, including UNESCO, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the World Bank, and the African Union. The review focused on digital inclusion, AI in education, digital leadership, and technology adoption barriers in marginalized contexts (UNESCO, 2023; World Bank, 2021). The secondary data provided contextual understanding and supported interpretation of primary research findings.

4.3 Survey Participants and Sampling

Primary quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 150 educators and community leaders from selected marginalized rural and peri-urban communities in Kenya. Participants were selected using purposive and stratified sampling approaches to ensure representation of education stakeholders working with underserved populations.

The questionnaire examined:

- digital skills competency levels;
- access to digital technologies;
- use of AI-supported educational tools;
- leadership practices promoting inclusion;
- barriers affecting technology adoption.

4.4 Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with education leaders to obtain deeper insights into experiences, challenges, and strategies for integrating digital technologies in education leadership. The interviews explored how leaders use digital skills and AI to improve participation, equity, and decision-making.

4.5 Case Study Analysis

The study also analysed selected digital inclusion initiatives, including Skills for Success, Tech4All Kenya, AI-powered EdTech initiatives, and community-based AI literacy programmes. These case studies were

examined to identify practical examples of how digital skills and AI can strengthen inclusive leadership, especially among women, youth, and underserved learners.

4.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to identify patterns in digital skills adoption and leadership outcomes. Qualitative data from interviews and case studies were analysed thematically by identifying recurring themes related to inclusion, leadership, AI adoption, and barriers.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and cultural considerations were respected during data collection.

5.0 Findings

The findings demonstrate that digital skills training, artificial intelligence (AI), and inclusive educational leadership practices contribute to improved educational outcomes in marginalized communities. The results are presented according to the study objectives, focusing on the impact of digital skills training, the role of AI in inclusive learning, barriers affecting adoption, and opportunities for sustainable digital transformation.

5.1 Impact of Digital Skills Training on Inclusive Educational Leadership

Digital skills training improved leadership capacity among educators and community leaders. ***Table 1 presents the findings on how digital skills training influenced leadership capacity and technology adoption among respondents.***

Table 1

Digital Skills Training and Leadership Outcomes Among Respondents

Indicator	Percentage
Improved leadership confidence after training	78%
Increased learner confidence in digital platforms	63%
Infrastructure barriers affecting adoption	62%
Need for additional digital/AI training	45%

The findings indicate that digital skills training strengthened leadership confidence, technology adoption, and educators' ability to integrate digital tools into teaching and community initiatives. 78% of respondents reported improved leadership capacity after participating in digital skills training**.** Participants highlighted increased confidence in using technology for lesson planning, digital content creation, mentoring peers, and supporting community-based initiatives.

In addition, 63% of respondents reported increased learner confidence in using digital platforms. Educators noted that exposure to digital tools improved learners' participation, access to learning resources, and ability to engage with online learning environments. This suggests that digital skills training benefits not only teachers and leaders but also strengthens learner autonomy and digital

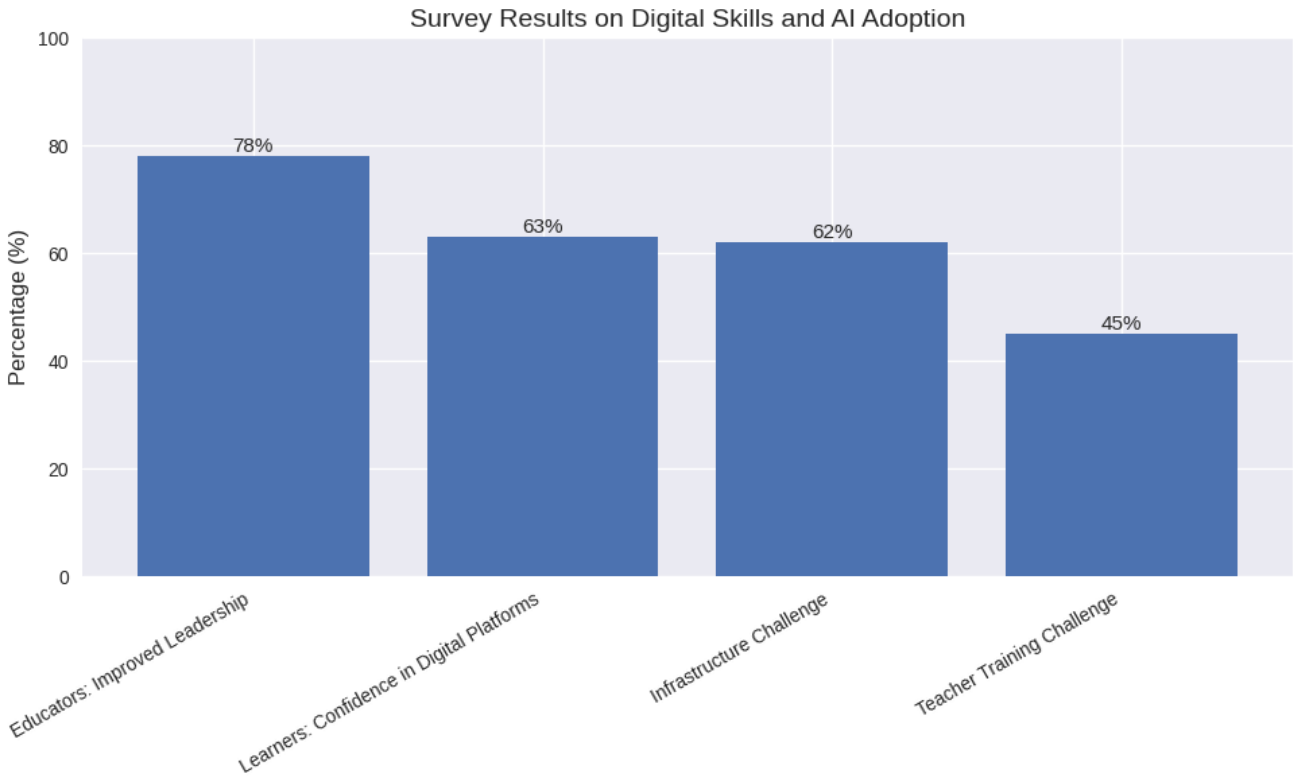
readiness. These findings support Van Laar et al. (2020), who emphasize that digital competencies enhance participation, learning engagement, and effective use of technology.

Programs such as Tech4All contributed to improved digital literacy, entrepreneurship skills, and leadership pathways among women and youth by equipping participants with practical digital competencies. These findings support Van Laar et al. (2020), who argue that digital competencies enhance professional performance, innovation, employability, and participation in the digital economy.

The findings further demonstrate that digital skills are not only technical abilities but also leadership enablers that allow educators and community leaders to make informed decisions, promote inclusion, and support sustainable education reforms.

Figure 1

Survey Results on Digital Skills and AI Adoption Among Educators and Community Leaders



5.2 Role of Artificial Intelligence in Enhancing Inclusive Education

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools enhanced personalized learning and supported inclusive teaching practices. The findings show that AI-driven adaptive learning platforms enabled educators to respond to diverse learner needs, particularly learners with disabilities and those experiencing literacy challenges.

AI-supported solutions assisted teachers in providing differentiated instruction by adapting learning materials based on learner abilities and progress. Predictive analytics also supported education leaders in identifying learning gaps, planning interventions, and allocating resources more effectively.

Table 2 ***Key Findings on Digital Skills, Artificial Intelligence, and Inclusive Educational Leadership***

Theme	Key Finding

Lesson Planning	Teachers accessed more online resources for lesson preparation and improved instructional planning.
Differentiated Instruction	AI tools supported learners with disabilities and learners experiencing literacy challenges through personalized learning approaches.
Governance and Leadership	Leaders emphasized ethical AI use, data privacy, accountability, and sustainability in technology adoption.

These findings align with UNESCO (2023), which highlights that AI can support equitable education when implemented through ethical, inclusive, and responsible governance frameworks. The study also confirms that AI adoption requires leadership commitment to ensure that technology benefits underserved learners rather than increasing existing inequalities.

5.3 Barriers Affecting Digital and AI Adoption

5.3.1 Infrastructure Barriers

Despite the benefits of digital technologies, several barriers limited effective adoption in marginalised communities. As shown in ***Table 1***, 62% of respondents identified infrastructure challenges, including unreliable internet connectivity, limited electricity access, and inadequate digital resources, as major obstacles.

5.3.2 Capacity Building Gaps

Additionally, 45% of respondents reported insufficient teacher training in digital and AI tools, limiting educators' confidence and ability to integrate emerging technologies effectively into teaching and leadership practices.

5.3.3 Gender Disparities

Gender disparities also influenced access to digital opportunities, with women and girls experiencing challenges related to device ownership, affordability, and participation in digital training programmes. These findings are consistent with GSMA (2021), which identifies affordability, connectivity limitations, and gender inequalities as major contributors to the digital divide.

5.4 Opportunities and Best Practices for Sustainable Digital Transformation

The study found that successful digital transformation initiatives involved collaboration among governments, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and technology partners. Partnerships enhanced access to digital resources, capacity building, and community-based solutions.

Community-driven approaches improved relevance and sustainability because they considered local needs and challenges. Education leaders who prioritized ethical technology use, data privacy, accountability, and sustainability created more inclusive and resilient education systems.

The findings demonstrate that technology alone cannot address educational inequalities. Effective inclusive leadership is necessary to guide digital transformation, promote equitable access, and ensure that AI and digital innovations benefit marginalized communities.

6.0 DISCUSSION

This should be a separate section.

6.1 Digital Skills as Enablers of Inclusive Leadership

The findings demonstrate that digital skills training contributes significantly to leadership effectiveness, confidence, and educational innovation. Leaders equipped with digital competencies are more capable of promoting participation, accountability, and inclusive decision-making processes.

6.2 Artificial Intelligence and Educational Inclusion

The study confirms that AI has the potential to personalize learning, support learners with disabilities, and facilitate equitable access to educational opportunities. However, successful implementation requires appropriate safeguards to prevent exclusion and algorithmic bias.

6.3 Leadership, Governance and Digital Transformation

The findings suggest that technology alone cannot transform education. Effective transformation requires leaders who are technologically competent, ethically grounded, and committed to equity and sustainability.

6.4 Theoretical Implications

The findings support Diffusion of Innovation Theory by demonstrating that successful adoption of digital technologies depends on leadership capacity, institutional preparedness, and stakeholder engagement. The findings also support Inclusive Leadership Theory, which emphasizes access, participation, and empowerment as foundations of educational transformation. The study reveals that digital skills and AI can serve as practical mechanisms for actualizing inclusive leadership principles in marginalized communities.

7.0 STUDY LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this study is that the primary data were collected from selected rural and peri-urban communities in Kenya. Consequently, the findings may not fully represent all marginalized populations across Africa. Furthermore, changes in digital technologies and AI applications occur rapidly, and some developments may not be fully reflected in the study findings. Future research should include larger samples and comparative cross-country studies to enhance generalizability.

8.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Conclusion

This study examined how digital skills training and artificial intelligence can be leveraged to foster inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities. The findings demonstrate that digital skills strengthen leadership capacity, improve learner engagement, and enhance educational participation. Artificial intelligence further supports personalized learning, adaptive instruction, and evidence-based decision-making. Despite these benefits, barriers related to infrastructure, affordability, capacity building, and gender inequality continue to hinder equitable access. The study concludes that inclusive educational leadership is critical in ensuring that digital technologies and AI contribute to sustainable, equitable, and transformative education systems.

8.2 Recommendations

8.2.1Policy Integration

Governments and education stakeholders should integrate digital skills and AI literacy into national

education policies and curricula to promote equitable access to technology-supported learning (African Union, 2022).

8.2.2 Capacity Building

Continuous professional development programmes should be provided for educators and leaders to strengthen digital competencies, AI pedagogy, ethical technology use, and data-informed decision-making.

8.2.3 Infrastructure Development

Investment should be increased in affordable internet connectivity, reliable electricity, and accessible digital devices, particularly in marginalized and rural communities.

8.2.4 Inclusive Technology Models

Digital and AI interventions should adopt gender-responsive, disability-inclusive, and culturally relevant approaches to ensure that all learners benefit.

8.2.5 Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Governments, communities, NGOs, research institutions, and technology companies should collaborate to develop sustainable digital inclusion initiatives that respond to local needs.

By embracing digital skills and AI alongside inclusive leadership practices, marginalized communities can overcome digital barriers and participate more effectively in building equitable and sustainable education systems.

9.0 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to knowledge by providing empirical evidence on how digital skills training and artificial intelligence can strengthen inclusive educational leadership in marginalized communities. It extends existing literature by integrating technological innovation, educational leadership, and social inclusion within a single analytical framework. The study further contributes to policy discussions on sustainable education by identifying leadership practices necessary for equitable and ethical implementation of digital technologies in underserved contexts.

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