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From policy to practice: Understanding barriers and enablers to gender-responsive and inclusive educational leadership in Kenya

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Abstract

Educational leaders play a critical role in translating gender-responsive and inclusive education policies into equitable practices that enhance the participation, achievement, and well-being of all learners. Despite Kenya's policy commitment to inclusive and gender-responsive education, gaps persist between policy intentions and school-level implementation due to limitations in leadership capacity and systemic support. This study examined educational leaders' understanding and implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive practices, as well as the barriers and enablers influencing their efforts to create equitable learning environments. Guided by transformative leadership theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study design involving 40 purposively selected educational leaders from Coastal Kenya. Participants comprised 26 leaders enrolled in an 18-month Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management programme offered through the Foundations for Learning (F4L) Project, a collaboration between Aga Khan University and the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI), and 14 leaders who participated in an F4L sensitization workshop. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis and analysed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed that although leaders demonstrated awareness of gender-responsive and inclusive education, many lacked the deeper conceptual understanding and practical competencies required for consistent implementation. The enactment of inclusive practices was constrained by cultural norms, inadequate professional development, and limited institutional support. However, leaders who embraced inclusive approaches reported improvements in learner participation, engagement, and academic performance, particularly among marginalized and vulnerable learners. The study concludes that strengthening

educational leaders' capacity through sustained professional development and supportive institutional frameworks is essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice. It recommends a collaborative approach involving educational institutions, policymakers, and communities to address structural barriers and advance equitable educational outcomes in Kenya.

Key terms: Gender-responsive education, inclusive practices, educational leadership, equity, transformative leadership

1.0 Introduction

The pursuit of global equity is deeply embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education for all. Beyond increasing access to education, global frameworks emphasize the need to transform educational systems to address gender inequalities, eliminate discriminatory practices, and empower all learners, particularly those who experience multiple forms of marginalization (Adipat & Chotikapanich 2022, UNESCO, 2019). This critical objective requires both administrative compliance and fundamental systemic transformation, a process for which educational leaders are positioned as the primary agents responsible for translating policy commitments into tangible school-level practices. As such, leadership practice becomes a critical site where global policy aspirations are either realized or constrained in context. The development of Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Educational Leadership (GRIEL) is recognized as paramount to addressing structural inequalities that persistently marginalize vulnerable learners (Gatundu 2025).

In Kenya, the education sector is undergoing significant national reforms, notably the shift towards Competency-Based Education (CBE) (Ministry of Education 2018, Oguta 2025). This curricular change necessitates that school administrators transition from traditional managerial oversight to more sophisticated instructional leadership roles, driving pedagogical innovation and institutional effectiveness. Educational leaders are explicitly tasked with stewarding gender-responsive and inclusive practices, ensuring that every student, including those from vulnerable or marginalized groups, such as girls and boys from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or those with disabilities, experiences a supportive and equitable learning environment. However, this expectation presupposes that leaders possess both the conceptual understanding and practical capacity required to enact such reforms effectively.

Kenya's reform agenda is shaped by policy and regulatory frameworks that directly influence school leadership practice, including the Basic Education Act (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2013), the National Policy on Gender and Development (GoK, 2015), the Teachers Service Commission Act (TSC, 2012), the Teacher Performance Appraisal and Development (TPAD) system (TSC, 2016; 2018), the Competency-Based Curriculum Guidelines, and the Kenya Education Sector Strategic Plan (Ministry of Education, 2018)

Collectively, these frameworks establish expectations for accountability, quality assurance, learner-centred education, and equitable access, while defining the policy space for gender-responsive and inclusive leadership. However, despite providing institutional direction and legitimacy, implementation at the school level depends on leaders' interpretive capacity, contextual realities, and resource availability. This often creates a gap between policy intent and practice, particularly in contexts constrained by limited resources and entrenched socio-cultural norms, thereby weakening the effective enactment of inclusive educational leadership.

Recognizing capacity gaps in this area, the Foundations for Learning (F4L) Project was launched as a collaborative initiative between Aga Khan University (AKU) and the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI). The project seeks to strengthen the professional knowledge and skills of teachers and school leaders across East Africa, with a specific focus on promoting gender-responsive and pluralist

educational environments. As a key semi-autonomous government agency, KEMI is mandated to provide management training and consultancy to align school leadership practices with national reforms and policy priorities. Such initiatives reflect growing recognition that leadership development is essential for bridging the gap between policy and practice.

The participants in this study were educational leaders enrolled in the 18-month Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management (DELM) programme, positioning them at the intersection of policy, professional development, and practice, and providing a strategic lens for examining implementation in school contexts.

Problem statement

Educational leaders are expected to steward gender-responsive and inclusive practices to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all learners. This requires both a strong conceptual understanding and the practical capacity to implement these approaches effectively within schools. However, many leaders have limited knowledge, skills, and institutional support (Koskei et al., 2020), resulting in inconsistent integration of inclusive strategies across leadership, pedagogy, and decision-making. Consequently, learner outcomes, particularly for marginalized groups such as learners with disabilities and those at risk, remain adversely affected.

Although Kenya has a robust policy framework supporting educational equity and gender equality, including the National Policy on Gender and Development (GoK,2015), policy alone does not guarantee transformative practice. Many policies frame inclusion broadly, with limited attention to gender power relations, participation, and measurable equity outcomes. As a result, compliance often remains procedural, while deeper exclusion persists.

This creates a persistent policy–practice gap. Despite growing policy emphasis, limited empirical evidence exists on how leaders interpret and implement inclusion. Understanding their knowledge, practices, and contextual challenges is therefore critical.

Main Research Question

How do educational leaders understand, implement, and experience the barriers and enablers associated with integrating gender-responsive and inclusive practices within their schools?

Subsidiary questions

1. What is the level of knowledge and understanding of gender-responsive and inclusive practices among educational leaders?
2. What factors impede or enable educational leaders to effectively implement gender-responsive and inclusive practices within their institutions?
3. What strategies can be employed to strengthen educational leaders' capacity and institutional support systems for the promotion of gender-responsive and inclusive practices?
4. What is the relationship between the implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive practices and learner outcomes?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 From Policy Commitments to Educational Practice: The Persistent Equity Gap

The global commitment to equitable education, reflected in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4,

emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education for all learners (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022). However, educational equity extends beyond increasing access to schooling; it requires addressing structural inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized learners, including girls, learners with disabilities, and those affected by socio-economic disadvantage, and creating educational environments that promote participation, empowerment, and equality (Noor, 2025; UNESCO, 2019). Subsequently, targeted universalism advocates for shared educational goals achieved through differentiated interventions that respond to diverse learner needs (Hardrick et al., 2023).

Achieving inclusive education requires gender-responsive pedagogy, inclusive learning materials, accessible infrastructure, and greater learner participation (Ramanan & Mohamad, 2025). It also requires dismantling socio-cultural and institutional barriers that exclude vulnerable learners and creating safe, supportive educational environments (Ismail & Ismail, 2026; Nwachukwu, Chukwuma et al., 2025). Although Kenya has established strong policy and curriculum frameworks supporting inclusion and equity, including the Basic Education Curriculum Framework, which emphasizes learner-centered and inclusive education (KICD, 2017), these commitments do not automatically result in meaningful school-level transformation.

2.2 Educational Leaders' Knowledge and Understanding of Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Practices

Educational leaders play a central role in translating inclusive policies into everyday school practices. However, studies indicate that many leaders possess a general awareness of gender equality and inclusion but have limited conceptual and practical understanding of how these principles should shape leadership, resource allocation, pedagogy, and school culture (Maiyo, 2023). A narrow understanding of gender that focuses mainly on parity between boys and girls often overlooks intersectional concerns related to disability, poverty, and diverse learning needs (Bešić, 2020).

Professional preparation and continuous learning significantly influence leaders' capacity to implement inclusive practices. Although leadership development programmes expose school leaders to national and international inclusion frameworks, many lack the technical expertise to identify gender bias in teaching materials, support inclusive classrooms, and develop gender-responsive management systems (Gatundu, 2025). Such limitations may result in gender-blind leadership practices that unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities (Kihwele et al., 2025). Therefore, leadership preparation should move beyond policy awareness toward developing a critical understanding and practical competencies for inclusive transformation.

2.3 Barriers and Enablers Influencing the Implementation of Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Practices

The implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive education is influenced by a combination of enabling conditions and systemic barriers. Enablers include supportive policies, institutional commitment, access to gender-responsive resources, and leadership approaches that prioritize equity and inclusion (Opiyo, 2019; Parashchenko, 2025). In Kenya, structures such as the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) and Teacher Professional Development (TPD) initiatives provide opportunities for strengthening leadership competencies and supporting educational reforms.

Nevertheless, institutional mechanisms may have limited impact when implementation emphasizes administrative compliance rather than transformative change. For instance, accountability processes such as Teacher Performance Appraisal and Development (TPAD) may prioritize measurable outputs while giving less attention to equitable participation, school culture, and learner voice. Furthermore, deeply rooted cultural beliefs, patriarchal norms, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and

inflexible curricula continue to constrain educational leaders' efforts to implement inclusive practices (Owusu, 2014; Opiyo, 2019).

2.4 Strengthening Leadership Capacity and Institutional Support for Inclusive Practice

Addressing the gap between policy and practice requires sustained and context-specific professional development that strengthens both the knowledge and implementation skills of educational leaders. Research indicates that one-off training workshops are insufficient for long-term change; instead, continuous professional learning, mentoring, and collaborative approaches are needed (Opiyo, 2019). Transformational leadership development, school-based coaching, and tools such as the Index for Inclusion can support leaders in evaluating and transforming school cultures, policies, and practices through an equity lens (Montero-Ojeda, Cardenas-Mahecha et al., 2025).

Effective implementation also requires multi-sectoral collaboration among schools, communities, and educational authorities. Community engagement, including collaboration with local leaders and the development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), can strengthen shared responsibility for inclusion (Baafi, 2021). In addition, leadership development should promote relational competencies such as empathy, active listening, and critical reflection to help leaders address resistance and navigate challenges associated with gender-responsive reforms (White & Fletcher, 2026).

2.5 Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Practices and Learner Outcomes

Evidence suggests a strong relationship between gender-responsive and inclusive practices and improved learner outcomes. When schools create environments where learners feel valued, represented, and supported, learners demonstrate greater engagement, participation, retention, and academic achievement (Clarkee, 2026; Thomas, 2016). Inclusive approaches also enable schools to address the underlying causes of absenteeism and dropout through proactive support systems.

Targeted interventions, including mentorship programmes and gender forums, have been associated with improved participation and achievement among marginalized learners, particularly girls (Ntombela et al., 2025). These findings indicate that the effectiveness of educational leadership should be evaluated not only through compliance with policies but also through its contribution to equitable learner experiences and outcomes.

2.6 Transformative Leadership Theory as a Lens for Policy-to-Practice Change

Transformative leadership theory provides a critical framework for understanding how educational leaders can move beyond administrative compliance toward challenging inequitable structures and promoting social justice within schools. Transformative leaders act as change agents who question existing norms, promote participation, and establish inclusive values within school cultures (Sharma & Adeoye, 2024; James & Lekule, 2026). By developing critical awareness of power relations and inequities, educational leaders are better positioned to translate gender-responsive and inclusive policies into meaningful practices that improve learner experiences and outcomes (Shields, 2022).

This theoretical perspective aligns with the study's focus on understanding educational leaders' knowledge, implementation experiences, barriers, and enablers in translating policy commitments into equitable educational practices.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design informed by transformative leadership theory to examine how educational leaders understand, implement, and experience barriers and enablers to

gender-responsive and inclusive practices. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 40 educational leaders from Coastal Kenya who had relevant knowledge and experience related to the study objectives (Tajik et al., 2025). The participants included 26 leaders enrolled in an 18-month Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management (DELM) programme and 14 who had participated in a leadership sensitization workshop under the Foundations for Learning (F4L) Project.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis to gain insights into participants' perspectives and practices (Njeri Mugwe & Runo, 2026). The data were analysed using thematic content analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2023) approach to identify and interpret recurring themes. Findings are organised around key areas of leaders' knowledge, barriers and enablers, capacity-building strategies, and perceived learner outcomes. Ethical standards were maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and adherence to institutional ethical requirements.

4.0 Findings

Level of Knowledge and Understanding of Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Practices

The findings indicate that educational leaders possess a foundational understanding of gender-responsive and inclusive practices; however, significant gaps remain in their depth of knowledge and practical capacity. As shown in Figure 1, only 57.14 per cent of participants had received gender-responsive capacity-building training, while 42.86 per cent had no formal training, suggesting uneven professional preparation for implementing inclusive practices.

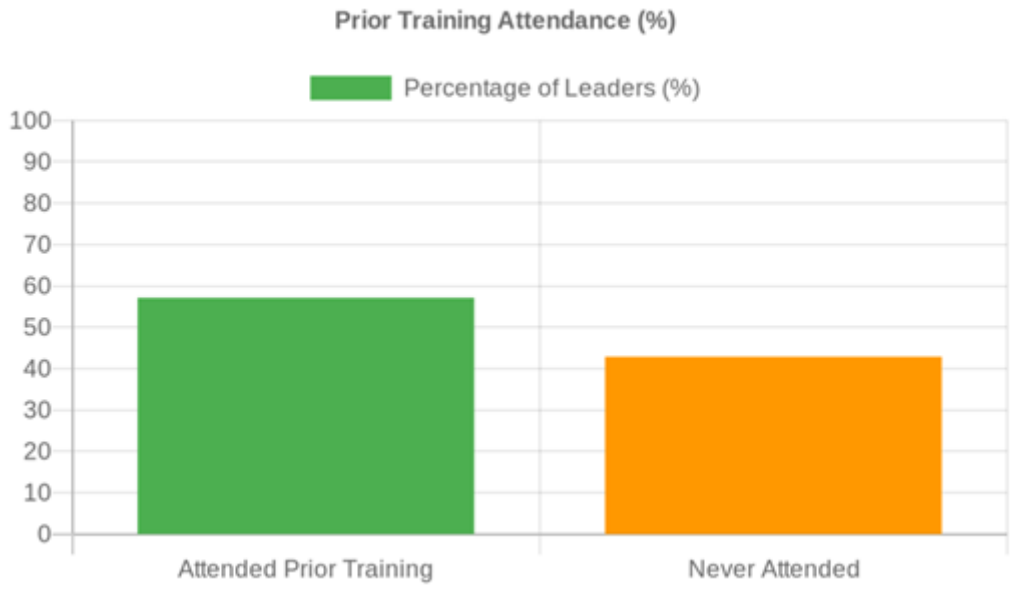


Figure 1: Participants Prior Training on Gender Responsiveness and Inclusion

Even without training, Figure 2 shows that the majority (82%) of particpants indicated that they had knowledge of gender responsiveness; however, their conceptualisations of it were different. Participants' conceptualizations further revealed a predominantly equality-based understanding of gender responsiveness. Only a minority of participants linked gender responsiveness to broader dimensions of inclusion, including learners with disabilities and diverse needs (20%), balanced staffing (11.42%), and gender-sensitive infrastructure (1%). This suggests that many educational leaders have not fully integrated the institutional, physical, and socio-cultural dimensions of inclusion.

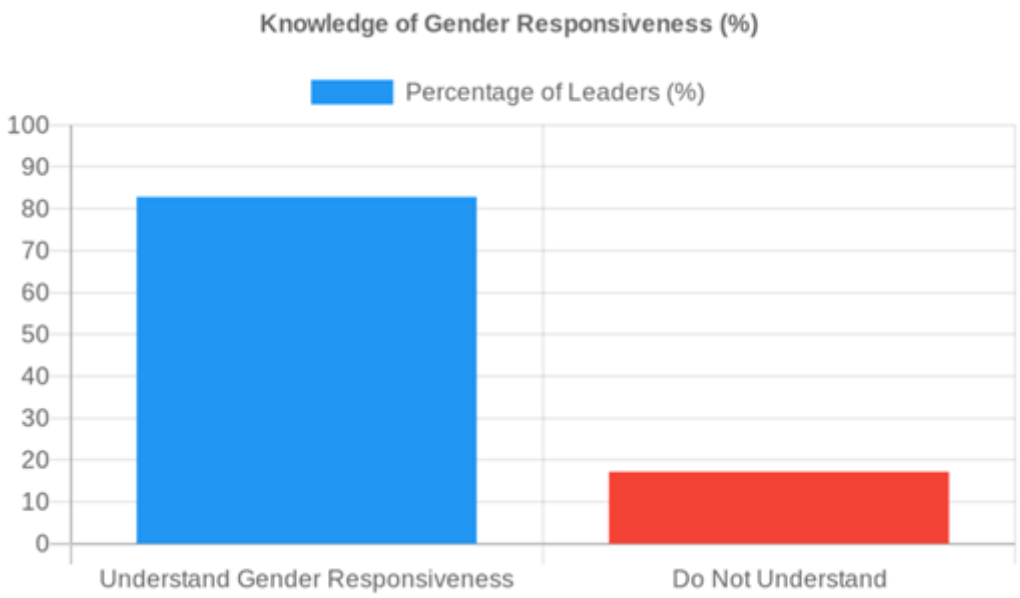


Figure 2: Participants knowledge on Gender Responsiveness

As presented in Table 1, the majority (82.85%) associated gender responsiveness with teaching all learners equally and avoiding discrimination. For example, one participant noted, *"You do not concentrate on one gender or the other one"* (HT1). Another emphasized the use of gender-responsive examples in teaching (GO9). While these responses demonstrate awareness of inclusive principles, they also indicate a limited understanding of equity that requires recognition of diverse learner needs and structural barriers.

Table 1

Perceptions of Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Practices

Perception Category	Percentage of Respondents (%)
Teaching as a whole / Non-discrimination	82.85
Inclusivity (Disability / Diversity)	20.00
Balanced Human Resource (Staffing)	11.42
Infrastructure (Toilets/Furniture)	1.00

Overall, the findings reveal a clear knowledge-to-practice gap; although leaders value equality and inclusion, limited training and narrow conceptual understanding may constrain their ability to translate policy commitments into transformative, gender-responsive and inclusive practices.

Factors Impeding or Enabling the Implementation of Gender-Responsive Practices

The findings indicate that the implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive practices is influenced by the interaction of enabling factors, such as professional development opportunities, and persistent socio-cultural and institutional barriers. Although initiatives such as the DELM programme have strengthened leaders' awareness and capacity, participants identified several contextual challenges that constrain the translation of policy into practice.

A major barrier was entrenched patriarchal norms that continue to influence community perceptions and leadership practices. One participant observed, *"We have the male as the dominant part of the community"* (GO5), highlighting how traditional gender expectations can limit acceptance of inclusive

approaches.

Structural challenges, particularly gender imbalance among school staff and limited support for special schools, also emerged as significant barriers. A headteacher described the difficulty of managing certain learner needs due to inadequate staffing support, stating, *"The children who will fight are boys... the other day I was injured at my back trying to pull them out"* (HT27). Similarly, leaders from special schools reported feeling excluded from broader educational initiatives: *"Being in the special schools, I think we are left out in most of the things"* (HT20). These findings suggest that institutional inequalities can undermine the effective implementation of inclusive leadership.

Infrastructural limitations further constrained gender responsiveness. Participants noted that inadequate and poorly designed facilities failed to adequately address the differing needs of learners, particularly regarding sanitation and accessibility (HT26).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that while policy frameworks and leadership training provide important enabling conditions, their implementation is constrained by socio-cultural norms, unequal institutional support, staffing challenges, and inadequate infrastructure. Addressing these barriers requires a more holistic approach that combines professional development with strengthened institutional and community support systems.

Strategies to Strengthen Capacity and Support Systems

The findings indicate that strengthening gender-responsive and inclusive educational practices requires a multi-level approach involving teachers, communities, and educational authorities. As shown in Figure 3, the majority of participants (58.82%) identified classroom teachers as the primary targets for capacity building because they interact directly with learners and are responsible for translating inclusive policies into everyday pedagogical practices. As one government official stated, teachers should be prioritized because they "deal directly with the learners" (GO3).

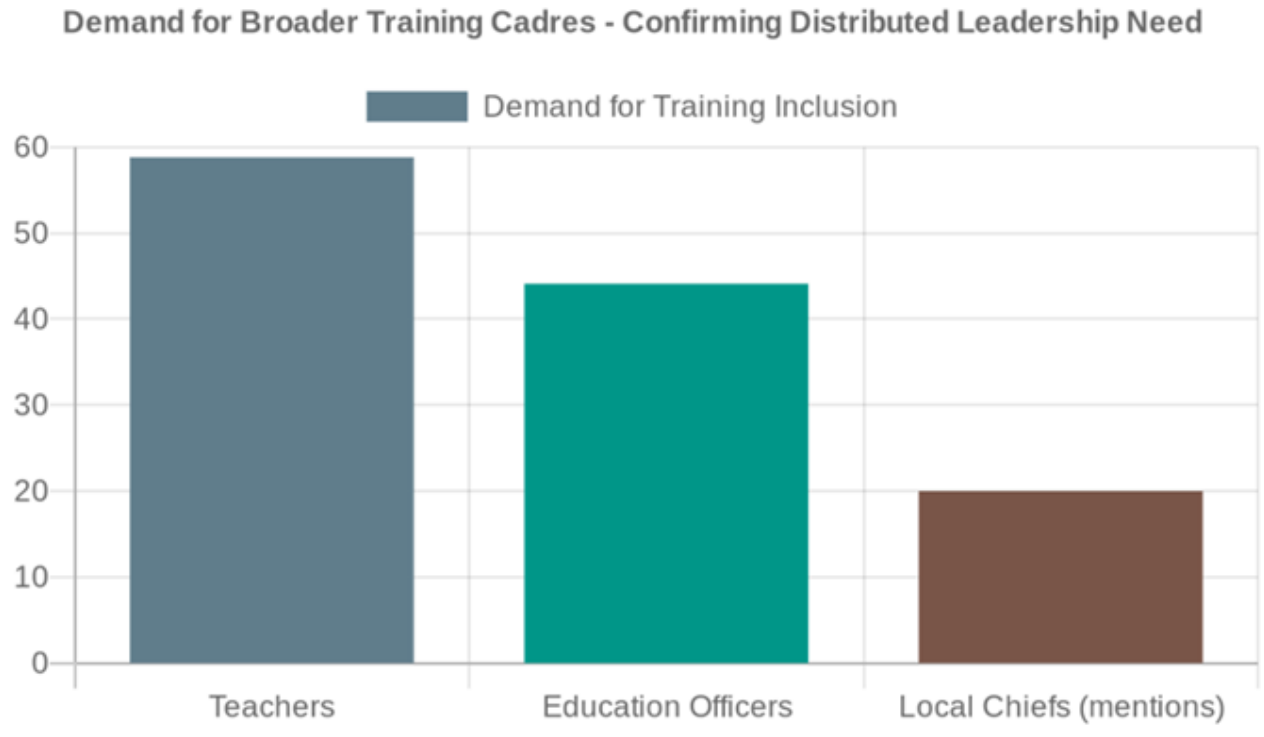


Figure 3: Demand For Training among Leadership Cadres

Participants further emphasized the need for community sensitization to address socio-cultural barriers that undermine inclusion. Collaboration with local leaders, such as chiefs and other community representatives, was considered essential for promoting positive attitudes toward equitable education. One headteacher noted that local administrators could help communities understand “the importance of everybody being included in education” (HT25).

The findings also highlighted the importance of strengthening the capacity of education officers and institutional support systems to ensure effective implementation, monitoring, and sustainability of gender-responsive initiatives (HT14).

Overall, the findings suggest that isolated training programmes are insufficient for meaningful change. Effective implementation requires sustained professional development, community partnerships, and institutional commitment that support educational leaders and teachers in translating inclusive policies into practice.

Relationship Between Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Practices and Learner Outcomes

The findings demonstrate a positive relationship between the implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive practices and improved learner engagement, participation, retention, and academic achievement. Participants observed that when learners experience recognition, respect, and a sense of belonging, they become more actively involved in classroom activities and are more likely to succeed academically. This suggests that inclusive educational leadership extends beyond ensuring access to schooling and involves creating learning environments that respond to the diverse needs and experiences of all learners.

These findings support previous research demonstrating that gender-responsive and inclusive practices enhance learners’ participation, motivation, and educational achievement by fostering environments where all learners feel valued and supported (Thomas, 2016; Clarkee, 2026). The findings also reinforce the argument that targeted interventions, such as mentorship programmes, gender forums, and individualized learner support, can reduce barriers to participation and improve educational outcomes among marginalized learners, particularly girls and other vulnerable groups (Ntombela, et al., 2025).

From a transformative leadership perspective, these outcomes demonstrate the role of educational leaders as agents of equity who influence not only institutional practices but also learners’ experiences and opportunities. Transformative leaders create school cultures that challenge exclusion, promote meaningful participation, and ensure that diverse learner needs are addressed (Shields, 2022; Sharma & Adeoye, 2024; James & Lekule, 2026). Therefore, the effectiveness of gender-responsive and inclusive leadership should not be measured solely by compliance with policy requirements, but by the extent to which leadership practices contribute to equitable participation, improved learning experiences, and positive outcomes for all learners.

Overall, the findings affirm that bridging the policy–practice gap requires educational leaders to move beyond procedural implementation of inclusive policies toward sustained, context-responsive practices that create supportive and equitable learning environments. Such transformation is essential for achieving the broader goals of inclusive and quality education.

Discussion of Findings

First, the findings reveal that educational leaders possess a foundational awareness of gender-responsive and inclusive education; however, their understanding is often limited to general principles of equality and non-discrimination rather than a deeper appreciation of equity, diversity, and the structural barriers that affect marginalized learners. While most participants recognized the importance of treating all

learners fairly, many had not received formal training in gender responsiveness, resulting in inconsistent knowledge and limited capacity to translate policy commitments into practical leadership strategies.

This finding reinforces existing evidence that awareness of inclusive education does not necessarily equate to the competence required to implement gender-responsive and inclusive practices effectively. Similar concerns have been reported by Maiyo (2023), who found that educational leaders often possess a broad understanding of inclusion but struggle to operationalize these principles within school leadership, pedagogy, and resource allocation. The findings also support Besic's (2020) argument that narrow interpretations of gender, focused mainly on equal treatment of boys and girls, may overlook intersectional inequalities related to disability, poverty, and other forms of marginalization. Therefore, effective gender responsiveness requires moving beyond equality of treatment toward equity-oriented approaches that recognize diverse learner experiences and provide differentiated support.

The limited exposure of many participants to formal gender-responsive capacity-building initiatives further suggests that existing professional development opportunities may be insufficient to equip educational leaders with the technical competencies required for transformative practice. This aligns with Gatundu's (2025) assertion that school leaders often lack practical skills for identifying gender bias, developing inclusive institutional systems, and addressing barriers that hinder equitable participation. Without such competencies, leadership approaches may remain gender-blind and inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities, as observed by Kihwele et al., (2025).

From a transformative leadership perspective, these findings highlight the importance of developing leaders who are not merely implementers of policy but critical agents of change capable of questioning unequal power structures and creating inclusive school cultures (Shields, 2022; Sharma & Adeoye, 2024; James & Lekule, 2026). The findings therefore expose a significant policy–practice gap: although Kenya's educational policies advocate gender responsiveness and inclusion, inadequate conceptual understanding and uneven professional preparation constrain leaders' ability to enact these principles meaningfully.

Consequently, strengthening leadership preparation should extend beyond awareness-raising workshops toward continuous and context-responsive professional development that builds critical reflection, practical implementation skills, and the capacity to transform school cultures. Such an approach would better enable educational leaders to translate policy aspirations into equitable learning experiences for all learners.

Second, the findings demonstrate that the implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive practices is shaped by the interplay between supportive structures and persistent socio-cultural and institutional barriers. Although leadership development initiatives and national policy frameworks provide a foundation for advancing inclusion, educational leaders continue to encounter challenges in translating these commitments into everyday school practices. This reinforces the study's central argument that the existence of policy frameworks alone does not guarantee transformative change at the school level.

The identified barriers, including patriarchal beliefs, gender stereotypes, inadequate infrastructure, insufficient support for special schools, and staffing challenges, reflect the broader structural and institutional inequalities that continue to influence educational experiences. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that inclusive education requires more than access and policy provision; it demands deliberate efforts to dismantle socio-cultural and institutional barriers that restrict the participation of marginalized learners (Nwachukwu, Chukwuma et al., 2025; Ismail & Ismail, 2026). Similarly, persistent inequalities related to resources, infrastructure, and social conditions continue to undermine equitable educational outcomes despite expanded access to schooling (Noor, 2025).

The findings also reveal that institutional mechanisms intended to promote educational quality may have

limited impact when they prioritize compliance over meaningful inclusion. This observation supports the argument that educational reforms should move beyond procedural implementation and focus on transforming school cultures, participation, and equity outcomes. In this regard, gender-responsive education requires deliberate attention to learner voice, accessibility, equitable resource distribution, and the removal of barriers that affect vulnerable learners (Ramanan & Mohamad, 2025).

At the same time, the findings demonstrate the importance of enabling conditions such as leadership training, supportive institutional structures, and access to inclusive resources. These findings align with Opiyo (2019) and Parashchenko (2025), who emphasize that sustained institutional commitment, adequate resources, and leadership support are essential for embedding gender-responsive and inclusive practices within schools.

Viewed through the lens of transformative leadership, the findings suggest that educational leaders must move beyond administrative compliance to become agents of social change who challenge discriminatory norms and promote equitable participation (Sharma & Adeoye, 2024; James & Lekule, 2026). However, the ability of leaders to enact such transformative practices depends on the availability of institutional support and broader community acceptance. Therefore, closing the policy–practice gap requires a holistic approach that combines leadership capacity development with community engagement, adequate resources, and institutional systems that sustain inclusive practices.

Third, the findings indicate that strengthening gender-responsive and inclusive education requires a comprehensive approach that extends beyond the capacity of individual educational leaders to include teachers, communities, and institutional support structures. Participants emphasized that classroom teachers should be prioritized in professional development efforts because they play a central role in translating inclusive policies into everyday pedagogical practices. This finding suggests that sustainable implementation of gender-responsive education depends on building the capacity of all actors involved in the teaching and learning process.

The need for continuous and context-specific professional development supports previous studies indicating that one-off sensitization workshops are insufficient for fostering meaningful and sustained inclusive change (Opiyo, 2019). Instead, ongoing training, mentoring, coaching, and collaborative professional learning opportunities are necessary to develop leaders' practical competencies and their ability to address complex issues of exclusion and inequity. Similarly, the use of reflective tools, such as the Index for Inclusion, can support educational leaders in critically examining and transforming school cultures, policies, and practices to promote equity (Montero-Ojeda, Cardenas-Mahecha et al., 2025).

The findings further highlight the importance of community engagement in addressing socio-cultural beliefs that hinder gender responsiveness and inclusion. Collaboration with parents, local leaders, and community structures can promote collective responsibility for challenging discriminatory norms and supporting vulnerable learners. This aligns with Baafi's (2021) argument that community partnerships and professional learning communities are essential for creating sustainable inclusive practices.

From a transformative leadership perspective, capacity development should extend beyond technical skills to include critical reflection, empathy, and the ability to engage diverse stakeholders in addressing inequality (White & Fletcher, 2026; Shields, 2022). Educational leaders must therefore be equipped not only to implement existing policies but also to question practices and structures that perpetuate exclusion. These findings suggest that closing the policy–practice gap requires sustained professional learning, stronger institutional support, and collaborative partnerships that enable educational leaders to create equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Finally, the findings demonstrate a positive relationship between the implementation of gender-responsive and inclusive practices and improved learner engagement, participation, retention, and

academic achievement. Participants observed that when learners experience recognition, respect, and a sense of belonging, they become more actively involved in classroom activities and are more likely to succeed academically. This suggests that inclusive educational leadership extends beyond ensuring access to schooling and involves creating learning environments that respond to the diverse needs and experiences of all learners.

These findings support previous research demonstrating that gender-responsive and inclusive practices enhance learners' participation, motivation, and educational achievement by fostering environments where all learners feel valued and supported (Thomas, 2016; Clarkee, 2026). The findings also reinforce the argument that targeted interventions, such as mentorship programmes, gender forums, and individualized learner support, can reduce barriers to participation and improve educational outcomes among marginalized learners, particularly girls and other vulnerable groups (Ntombela, Ramabodu et al., 2025).

From a transformative leadership perspective, these outcomes demonstrate the role of educational leaders as agents of equity who influence not only institutional practices but also learners' experiences and opportunities. Transformative leaders create school cultures that challenge exclusion, promote meaningful participation, and ensure that diverse learner needs are addressed (Shields, 2022; Sharma & Adeoye, 2024; James & Lekule, 2026). Therefore, the effectiveness of gender-responsive and inclusive leadership should not be measured solely by compliance with policy requirements, but by the extent to which leadership practices contribute to equitable participation, improved learning experiences, and positive outcomes for all learners.

Overall, the findings affirm that bridging the policy–practice gap requires educational leaders to move beyond procedural implementation of inclusive policies toward sustained, context-responsive practices that create supportive and equitable learning environments. Such transformation is essential for achieving the broader goals of inclusive and quality education.

Conclusion

This study reveals that although educational leaders demonstrate a general commitment to gender-responsive and inclusive education, gaps remain in their conceptual understanding and practical capacity to translate policy into meaningful school practices. Implementation is further constrained by socio-cultural beliefs, inadequate resources, and limited institutional support. However, the findings also demonstrate that inclusive and gender-responsive practices can enhance learner participation, engagement, and achievement. Bridging the policy–practice gap therefore requires strengthening educational leaders' competencies and creating supportive school and community environments that promote equity for all learners.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen continuous professional development: Educational leadership programmes should provide ongoing practical training on gender-responsive pedagogy, inclusive school management, and strategies for addressing barriers to learner participation.
2. Promote school–community collaboration: Educational leaders should work with parents and local community leaders to challenge harmful gender norms and build shared responsibility for inclusive education.
3. Strengthen school-level support systems: Schools should establish practical mechanisms such as mentorship programmes, learner support structures, and regular reflection among teachers to identify and address barriers to inclusion.

Improve monitoring of inclusive practices: School leaders and education authorities should monitor not only policy compliance but also indicators such as learner participation, accessibility, and the experiences of marginalized learners.

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