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Improving foundation level programme implementation for learners with intellectual disabilities: An action research study in a rural school, Turkana County, Kenya

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Abstract

This action research study examined Foundation Level Programme implementation for learners with intellectual disabilities in a public primary and junior school in Lokiriama Sub-County, Turkana County, Kenya. Conducted during Term 2 of 2025 (5 May–18 July), it involved two learners: an 8-year-old boy and a 9-year-old girl, both with mild intellectual disability; their parents/guardians; and the class teacher as practitioner-researcher. Reconnaissance found no individualised education plan (IEP) files, two printed manila charts, end-of-term assessment without consistent prompt-level records, and no recent structured parent contact. One action-research cycle included planning three priority targets per learner and eight weeks of differentiated activities four times weekly using beads, pebbles, bottle tops, sand, picture cards and handwashing routines. Evidence came from observation, work samples, assessment checklists, reflective notes and parent feedback. School records showed emerging functional progress. Learner A moved from scribbling without a functional crayon hold to colouring about 30% with an adapted grip and hand-over-hand support, counting 1–3 with support, and completing four of six handwashing steps with physical assistance. Learner B progressed from random scribbling to tracing A and B in sand and using a name card; follow-up notes also described counting bottle tops to five with verbal prompting and handwashing with verbal support. Both parents/guardians accepted gradual development and agreed to reinforce hygiene at home. These descriptive results do not establish causation. The study illustrates how individualised targets, locally available materials, dated assessment and home–school communication can support classroom planning in a resource-

constrained setting.

Key terms: Foundation Level, intellectual disability, action research, individualised education plan (IEP), inclusive education, Turkana

Introduction

Background of Study

Education systems are expected to provide equitable learning opportunities for learners with diverse abilities. Inclusive education involves more than placing learners in the same physical environment: it also requires curriculum flexibility, accessible resources, differentiated teaching and assessment responsive to learner needs (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). For learners with intellectual disabilities, functional learning may include communication, self-care, social participation, safety, early literacy, numeracy and greater independence in everyday activities.

At the study school in Lokiriama Sub-County, Turkana County, the Foundation Level Programme supports learners with intellectual disabilities through structured and functional learning. The assessment table included in this study records two learners. The small cohort allows close attention to individual performance, but findings must be interpreted as context-specific rather than generalised to other schools.

The study approached Foundation Level implementation as a practical school-improvement inquiry. The author was the teacher implementing the programme, which provided direct access to classroom practice but also created a risk of assessor bias. The findings are therefore interpreted cautiously and should be strengthened by clear records, consistent indicators and, where feasible, independent review.

Statement of the Problem

Reconnaissance conducted between 5 and 9 May 2025 revealed several gaps in the implementation of the Foundation Level Programme for learners with intellectual disabilities at the study school. Individualised Education Plan (IEP) files were unavailable for the two learners enrolled in the programme; assessment practices were largely summative and did not consistently record levels of prompting or learner independence; instructional resources were limited; and structured school-home communication had not been maintained consistently. These gaps limited systematic planning, monitoring of learner progress, and collaboration between the school and parents or guardians.

For learners with intellectual disabilities, effective implementation of the Foundation Level Programme requires individualized planning, continuous assessment, functional learning activities, appropriate support materials, and active parental engagement. Without these components, opportunities to monitor learner progress and respond to individual learning needs may be reduced. The present action research therefore sought to improve programme implementation through individualised planning, differentiated instruction, continuous assessment, use of locally available learning resources, and strengthened home-school collaboration.

Objectives of the Study

To establish the baseline level of selected functional and learning competencies among participating learners.

To identify key barriers affecting effective implementation of the Foundation Level Programme.

To implement individualised and functional teaching strategies supported by individualised education plans and continuous assessment.

To strengthen the use of locally available and appropriate learning resources.

To improve parent/guardian participation in reinforcing functional learning.

To monitor changes in learner participation, skill demonstration and teacher documentation during the action period.

Research Questions

What was the baseline level of selected learner competencies?

What baseline competency needs were recorded for each learner, and what changes appeared in the follow-up record?

What changes in performance and prompting levels were recorded after the teaching activities?

How did parents/guardians describe their role in reinforcing functional learning at home?

What practical lessons can be drawn from the documented learner results, and what limitations affect those lessons?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it connects curriculum implementation with school-level leadership and practical classroom improvement. For learners, the approach seeks to increase access to meaningful learning and functional participation. For teachers, it provides a manageable system for planning, assessment and reflection. For school leadership, it offers evidence that can guide resource allocation, supervision and programme sustainability. For parents and guardians, it clarifies ways of reinforcing functional skills at home. More broadly, the study may offer lessons for schools implementing specialised curriculum pathways in rural and resource-constrained contexts.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The study draws on social constructivist perspectives, which emphasise learning through interaction, modelling and supported participation. For learners with intellectual disabilities, concrete materials, demonstrations, and graduated prompts can link new skills to familiar activities. The prompting changes recorded in Table 1—for example, Learner B completing handwashing with verbal prompting only at follow-up—are consistent with the general principle of reducing assistance as performance develops. This interpretation is tentative because the record does not isolate the effect of any teaching strategy.

Action research links a practical problem with planned action, evidence collection, reflection and adjustment (McNiff & Whitehead, 2010; Mertler, 2019). In this study, one cycle was documented during Term 2 of 2025.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework linked implementation inputs, instructional processes and expected outcomes. Inputs included teacher planning time, individualised education plans, assessment tools, adapted materials and parent/guardian support. These inputs were translated through baseline assessment, individualised target setting, differentiated instruction, practical activities, continuous assessment, parent engagement and reflective review. The expected outcomes were improved learner participation, communication, independence, functional literacy and numeracy, social interaction and documentation of

progress.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework – Foundation Level Implementation (adapted from KICD, 2019).

Inputs	Processes	Expected Outcomes
IEPs; learner profiles; assessment tools; teacher time; adapted/local materials; parent support	Baseline assessment → individualised planning → differentiated teaching → continuous assessment → parent engagement → reflection and adjustment	Improved participation; communication; independence; functional literacy/numeracy; social interaction; better documentation

Empirical Literature Review

Studies on inclusive education consistently emphasize the importance of individualized instruction, differentiated assessment, and learner-centred teaching approaches in supporting learners with intellectual disabilities (Ainscow, 2020; UNESCO, 2020). Research shows that effective implementation of inclusive and special-needs programmes depends on the availability of appropriate teaching resources, teacher preparedness, parental involvement, and structured progress monitoring systems.

In Kenya, studies have documented challenges related to inadequate instructional resources, limited teacher preparation, insufficient assessment practices, and barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education programmes (Carew et al., 2019; Ireri et al., 2020; Mutugi, 2018; Ohba & Malenya, 2022). Other studies have highlighted the importance of creating supportive learning environments and promoting active participation of learners with disabilities in classroom activities (Mwanzia et al., 2021; Odongo & Davidson, 2016).

Research conducted in pastoralist and rural contexts further emphasizes the need for culturally responsive learning materials and locally relevant instructional approaches (Ng'asike, 2019; Bertoli et al., 2024). Such approaches recognise the realities of resource-constrained settings while supporting learner engagement and participation.

However, relatively few studies have documented how individual teachers implement Foundation Level programmes and adapt classroom practices in small rural schools serving learners with intellectual disabilities. The present action research contributes to this area by documenting a school-based improvement process focused on individualised planning, functional learning activities, parent engagement, and continuous assessment within a rural school in Turkana County.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a practitioner action-research design and used one action-research cycle during Term 2 of 2025. I was the class teacher implementing the programme and served as the practitioner-researcher. The cycle comprised reconnaissance, planning, implementation, assessment and reflection. Reconnaissance took place on 5–9 May; planning took place on 10–11 May; implementation ran from 12 May to 11 July (eight weeks, four 30-minute sessions per week); and follow-up assessment took place from 14–18 July 2025. A reflection entry was made on 13 June 2025. The cycle is documented in Table 2.

Target Population and Sample Size

The study involved exactly two learners, purposively selected because they were the only Foundation

Level learners in the school during Term 2 of 2025. Learner A was an 8-year-old boy with mild intellectual disability, assessed through the Education Assessment and Resource Centre (EARC) in January 2025 and in the programme for one year. Learner B was a 9-year-old girl with mild intellectual disability and no reported co-occurring physical disability. Two parents/guardians participated in home–school communication. The learners are identified only as A and B, and the school is described generically as a public primary and junior school in Lokiriama Sub-County to reduce identification risk.

Research Instruments

Instrument/Method	Purpose
Structured observation	Record participation, communication, behaviour, independence and performance during classroom and routine activities.
Practical performance tasks	Assess functional skills in authentic or simulated real-life activities.
Oral/communication assessment	Assess comprehension, response, naming, requesting and other functional communication.
Work samples and portfolio	Provide dated evidence of completed activities and development over time.
Checklist/rating scale	Record level of independence and prompting required for specific skills.
IEP and teacher-record review	Compare planned targets with evidence of implementation and learner progress.
Parent/guardian feedback	Identify skills observed at home and opportunities for reinforcement.

Data Collection Procedures

Reconnaissance and baseline evidence was collected from 5–9 May 2025, with baseline functional assessment completed on 8–9 May. The teacher reviewed learner files, the materials inventory and parent-contact books, and assessed five priority areas—communication, literacy, numeracy, self-care and social participation—alongside safety and motor skills documented in Table 1. Follow-up assessment using the same competency indicators was completed from 14–18 July 2025. The use of repeated observation and competency-linked evidence is consistent with competency-based assessment guidance (Kenya National Examinations Council [KNEC], 2021). Evidence included structured observation notes, learner work samples, assessment checklists, reflective-journal notes and parent verbal-feedback notes. An EARC assessment was recorded for Learner A in January 2025.

Table 2. Action Research Cycle Timeline, Term 2 2025

Phase	Dates	Activities	Evidence
Reconnaissance	5–9 May 2025	Reviewed IEP files, materials inventory and parent-contact books; completed an initial functional check.	No IEP files; two printed charts; baseline notes.
Baseline	8–9 May 2025	Assessed communication, literacy, numeracy, self-care and social skills; also noted safety and motor skills.	Baseline descriptors (Table 1).

Planning	10–11 May 2025	Set three priority targets per learner; prepared beads, pebbles, bottle tops, sand and picture/name cards.	IEP targets and prepared materials.
Implementation Cycle 1	12 May–11 July 2025	Eight weeks; four 30-minute sessions weekly. Used sand tracing, object counting, picture cards and handwashing routines; reduced prompts where appropriate.	Observation notes, work samples and prompt checklists.
Reflection and adjustment	13 June 2025	Learner A still needed HOH for grip, so an adapted grip was introduced. Learner B moved to a verbal prompt for letter A.	Reflective journal.
Follow-up assessment	14–18 July 2025	Repeated the same competency indicators used at baseline.	Follow-up descriptors (Table 1).
Parent engagement	16 May and 12 July 2025	Conducted home visits/shared targets; parents agreed to reinforce hygiene at home.	Parent verbal-feedback notes.

Data Processing and Analysis

The analysis was descriptive and comparative. For each learner, baseline and follow-up descriptors were compared across the same competencies, paying attention to demonstrated skill and prompting level. Observation notes, work samples and parent feedback were triangulated. A colleague acted as a critical friend by reviewing the checklists. Because the teacher also assessed the learners and there was no comparison group, the results are interpreted as descriptive evidence of change during the action period rather than proof of causation.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted as a classroom-based improvement initiative under the authorization of the school administration. Participation of learners and parents or guardians was voluntary, and the researcher ensured that the rights, dignity, and welfare of participants were protected throughout the study. Learners were identified using pseudonyms (Learner A and Learner B) to safeguard confidentiality and prevent identification.

All records used in the study were anonymised, and no personal identifiers were included in the manuscript. Parent or guardian consent was obtained before using learner assessment records and classroom observations for research purposes. Data were stored securely and used solely for educational improvement and scholarly reporting. The researcher adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the Kenya Education Management Institute (KEMI) and maintained professional responsibility throughout the action-research process.

Research Findings and Discussion

Baseline and Implementation Findings

The action-research intervention focused on addressing competency gaps identified during the baseline

assessment through individualised target setting, functional learning activities, continuous assessment, and parental engagement. During the eight-week implementation period, learners participated in structured activities involving sand tracing, counting using locally available objects, communication exercises using picture cards, and self-care routines such as handwashing. The teacher systematically documented learner participation, skill demonstration, and levels of prompting throughout the implementation period.

Comparison of baseline and follow-up records indicated observable changes across communication, literacy, numeracy, self-care, social participation, safety, and motor skills. Although these observations cannot establish causation because of the action-research design and absence of a comparison group, they provide practical evidence that can support programme improvement and future instructional planning.

Table 1 provides the clearest empirical evidence available for evaluating the action. The following analysis therefore concentrates on the recorded baseline and follow-up descriptors.

For Learner A, literacy changed from no functional crayon hold and scribbling only to using an adapted grip and colouring approximately 30% with hand-over-hand (HOH) support. The record also described emerging communication through responding to a name or verbal cue, pointing to picture cards and using the words “maji” (water) and “kula” (eat). Numeracy changed from no counting/matching to counting 1–3 with verbal support using concrete objects. In self-care, Learner A moved from full dependence to completing four of six handwashing steps with physical support at the wrist. These descriptors suggest emerging skills, but do not establish independent or consistent performance across repeated trials.

For Learner B, basic literacy changed from random scribbling and no recorded recognition of A to tracing A and B in sand and using a name card. Communication increased from two prompted words to a broader recorded vocabulary that included “mama,” “baba,” “maji,” “kula,” “shule” (school) and “asante” (thank you). Numeracy records described progress from inconsistent counting of 1–4 to counting bottle tops; the follow-up narrative supplied for this revision specifies counting to five with verbal prompting. In self-care, the record describes handwashing with verbal reminders rather than the earlier combination of verbal and physical help. Social participation also improved, with greeting peers and waiting for a turn during bead-stringing with a verbal reminder. These observations are descriptive and should not be treated as standardized measures of achievement.

Self-care and safety records also show changes in the level of support described. Learner A progressed from full physical assistance and dependence in self-care to washing four of six recorded steps with physical support at the wrist. Learner B progressed from verbal and physical support for handwashing to completing six of six steps with verbal prompting only. In safety, Learner A was recorded as staying on the mat and identifying fire as “hatari” (“danger”), while Learner B was recorded as stopping at the instruction “Simama” (“stop”). Social and motor records similarly describe more participation at follow-up, including sitting in a circle for ten minutes and threading beads. Because the indicators are descriptive and the assessment interval is unknown, these changes should be treated as preliminary.

The table suggests that concrete, locally available materials were used in learning activities: stones for counting, bottle tops for numeracy, sand for letter tracing and beads for motor practice. This study did not report the quantities or costs of these materials, so no cost-effectiveness claim can be made. The examples nevertheless show how familiar materials can be linked to specific learning tasks.

Both parents/guardians participated in home–school engagement. Parent A reportedly stated on 16 May 2025 that they had ‘accepted that the learner has slow developmental growth’ and were willing to reinforce hygiene at home. Parent B reportedly described practising handwashing before kula (eating) at

home twice daily. The teacher also recorded parent engagement on 16 May and 12 July 2025. These comments suggest acceptance of gradual progress and willingness to reinforce routines at home. They are parent-reported observations, not independent evidence that home practice caused the changes in self-care.

Baseline and Follow-up Results Table

Table 1 summarises the baseline (8–9 May 2025) and follow-up (14–18 July 2025) competency descriptors recorded for Learners A and B in the school assessment record.

Table 1. Baseline and follow-up competency descriptors for Learners A and B (Term 2, 2025)

Competency	Learner A: Baseline	Learner A: Follow-up	Learner B: Baseline	Learner B: Follow-up
Communication	Full physical prompt; crying for needs	Verbal/visual cue; responds to name or cue, points to cards; uses “maji” (water) and “kula” (eat)	2 words: mama, kula, with prompt only	6 words: mama, baba, maji, kula, shule, asante
Basic literacy	No crayon hold; scribble only	Adapted grip; colours 30% with HOH support	Random scribble; no A	Traces A, B on sand; own name card
Basic numeracy	No counting; no matching	Counts 1–3 with stones and verbal support	Counts 1–4 inconsistently	Counts bottle tops to 5 with verbal prompting
Self-care (ADL)	Fully dependent; full physical support	Washes 4 of 6 steps with physical support at the wrist	Required verbal and physical support for handwashing; dependent in self-care	Washes hands with a verbal reminder only
Social participation	Sat alone; no eye contact	Sits in circle 10 min; eye contact 5 sec	Greeted teacher only	Greets peers, says “asante” (thank you) and waits for a turn with a verbal reminder
Safety	No danger identification; moves out of class	Stays on mat; identifies fire as hatari (danger)	Ran to road	Stops at simama (stop)

Motor skills	No beads; weak grasp	Threads 3 large beads with HOH support	2 beads with support	Threads 8 small beads independently

Note. Source: school Foundation Level assessment record, Term 2 2025. HOH = hand-over-hand support; ADL = activities of daily living. The percentage is the recorded proportion of colouring/letter work completed as described in the school record; it is not a standardized test score. Kiswahili terms: maji = water; kula = eat; shule = school; asante = thank you; hatari = danger; simama = stop.

Discussion of Findings

The learner-level record documents descriptive changes in several functional competencies for both learners. Examples include Learner A's movement from no counting to counting 1–3 with support and Learner B's movement from inconsistent counting of 1–4 to counting bottle tops to five with verbal prompting, alongside reduced prompting for handwashing. These findings are consistent with the practical value of concrete materials and individualised targets, but they cannot establish that the intervention alone produced the changes.

Locally available materials named in the record—stones, bottle tops, sand and beads—were associated with specific counting, tracing and motor activities. This offers a practical example for a rural school, although the manuscript provides no cost data and does not compare these materials with specialized resources. The findings should be read alongside the broad inclusion principles discussed by Ainscow (2020) and UNESCO (2020), not as a test of those sources.

Parent feedback indicates that both parents/guardians accepted the learners' gradual developmental progress and agreed to reinforce hygiene routines at home. This supports the practical relevance of structured home–school communication, although the small number of parent comments and the teacher's role in collecting them limit the strength of the inference.

From an instructional-leadership perspective, the table illustrates the value of recording both skill performance and the level of prompting. However, the manuscript does not report evidence about head-teacher supervision, resource allocation or changes in school documentation. Leadership implications should therefore be framed as recommendations for future practice rather than as measured outcomes.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

The study examined implementation of the Foundation Level Programme for two learners with intellectual disabilities in a rural school setting. The assessment record describes baseline-to-follow-up changes in communication, early literacy, numeracy, self-care, social participation, safety and motor skills. It also illustrates the practical use of stones, bottle tops, sand and beads in selected activities.

The most interpretable results were the recorded changes in early literacy, numeracy and self-care. Learner A progressed from scribbling without a functional crayon hold to colouring approximately 30% with an adapted grip and HOH support, and from no counting to counting 1–3 with support. Learner B progressed from random scribbling to tracing A and B in sand and using a name card; the follow-up narrative records counting bottle tops to five with verbal prompting and handwashing with a verbal reminder. Records also describe changes in communication and social participation.

Conclusions

This action research study sought to improve implementation of the Foundation Level Programme for learners with intellectual disabilities through individualized planning, differentiated instruction, continuous assessment, use of locally available learning materials, and enhanced parent engagement. The findings indicate that the action-research process contributed to improved documentation of learner progress and provided practical strategies for monitoring functional competencies within a resource-constrained school environment.

The follow-up assessment records documented improvements in several competency areas, including communication, early literacy, numeracy, self-care, social participation, safety awareness, and motor skills. While the study design does not permit conclusions regarding causality, the findings demonstrate the value of individualized target setting, structured monitoring, and functional learning activities in supporting programme implementation. ,

The study further highlights the importance of maintaining learner profiles, Individualised Education Plans, competency-based assessment records, and regular school-home communication. Effective implementation of the Foundation Level Programme requires collaboration among teachers, school leadership, parents or guardians, and other educational stakeholders to support holistic learner development. ,

Recommendations

The school should maintain an up-to-date learner profile and individualised education plan for each Foundation Level learner.

Teachers should use simple, dated and competency-linked assessment records consistently.

The school should establish a small resource bank of locally available and adapted materials.

School leadership should include Foundation Level implementation in routine instructional supervision and review.

Parents/guardians should receive regular, practical information on learner targets and ways to reinforce skills at home.

Learner portfolios should be maintained to support progress reporting, reflection and transition planning.

Successful school-level practices should be documented and shared with other teachers and relevant education stakeholders.

Further research could examine Foundation Level implementation across several schools in Turkana County, compare different models of locally developed learning resources, investigate parent engagement strategies and examine longer-term learner transitions. Multi-school studies with larger samples could provide evidence on factors associated with successful implementation across different contexts.

Limitations of the Study

The study involved two learners in one school and relied on records collected by the implementing teacher. Although dates and the action cycle were documented, the competency descriptors were not standardized quantitative measures and there was no comparison group. Changes may partly reflect maturation, increased familiarity with classroom routines or assessor bias. Parent feedback was limited and not independently verified. The findings should therefore be read as a local account of documented change, not as proof of causal impact or as generalizable to all learners with intellectual disabilities.

AI-use disclosure: AI tools assisted with language editing and manuscript organisation. The author is responsible for the accuracy of the school records, learner data, interpretation and final submitted text. Data in Table 1 are reported from the school's Term 2 2025 records, and reflective observations are presented from the author's role as class teacher.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Funding: No external funding was received; the activity was classroom-based.

Implications for Practice

The findings suggest that teachers implementing the Foundation Level Programme can strengthen learner support through individualised target setting, continuous documentation of learner progress, strategic use of locally available instructional materials, and active engagement of parents or guardians. School leaders can further support implementation by ensuring that Individualised Education Plans are maintained, learner assessment records are updated regularly, and Foundation Level activities are integrated into routine instructional supervision. These practices may contribute to improved programme implementation and more responsive support for learners with intellectual disabilities in resource-constrained educational settings.

Further Research

Future studies may examine the effectiveness of psychosocial support interventions for teachers working in insecurity-prone areas. Comparative studies involving different conflict-affected regions of Kenya could provide a broader understanding of the relationship between insecurity, teacher wellbeing, and professional practice. Mixed-methods studies incorporating standardised mental health assessment tools could also complement qualitative findings and provide deeper insights into the psychological effects of prolonged insecurity on educators.

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https://doi.org/10.1177/20436106231199773 Appendices Appendix 1: Sample Individualised Education Plan (IEP) Targets Learner A: (1) Hold an adapted crayon for 10 seconds; (2) count beads from 1 to 3 with support; (3) wash 4 of 6 handwashing steps with wrist support. Learner B: (1) Trace letters A and B on sand; (2) count bottle tops to 5 with verbal prompting; (3) complete handwashing with a verbal reminder. Appendix 2: Checklist Rating Scale Appendix 3: Learning materials used were beads, pebbles, bottle tops, sand tray and picture cards (locally available, zero cost). Appendix 4: Parent/Guardian Consent Statement (Sample Wording) I have been informed in a language I understand about the purpose of this classroom-based improvement activity, the use of anonymized learning observations, and the voluntary nature of my participation. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and understand that my child's identity will not be included in the manuscript. I permit for my child's anonymised classroom learning information to be used for this report. Parent/guardian signature: _____ Date: _____. Researcher/teacher:_____