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Bridging education gaps: Teaching, learning, and inclusion in Kenya

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolving dynamics of teaching, learning, and inclusion in Kenya, particularly within the transition from the 8-4-4 curriculum to Competency-Based Education (CBE). The reform emphasizes learner-centered approaches that foster creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving, positioning education as a key driver of socio-economic development. Despite progress, rural and marginalized communities continue to face persistent barriers such as poverty, cultural norms, insecurity, and inadequate resources. The study adopted a systematic qualitative review of 40 peer-reviewed articles, policy documents, and reports published between 2014 and 2024. The sources were identified through structured searches in databases such as ResearchGate, Academia, Mendeley, ORCID and Google Scholar using predefined inclusion criteria. Through thematic analysis, five dominant strategies emerged for strengthening teaching, learning, and inclusive education: teacher preparedness, infrastructure, digital technology to bridge access gaps, community-driven education models, and legislative reforms alongside financial support programs. Notable interventions include Teacher Capacity Building and Deployment, mobile learning centers for nomadic communities and localized initiatives addressing dropout linked to early pregnancy in counties such as Kilifi, Bungoma, and Homa Bay. While these strategies demonstrate progress, challenges remain in terms of uneven policy implementation, inadequate data, insufficient resource allocation, weak digital infrastructure, and limited teacher training in inclusive pedagogy. The review highlights the importance of multi-sectoral collaboration and community-based approaches in fostering equitable learning opportunities. It concludes that although Kenya has made significant strides in teaching, learning, and inclusion, more empirical research is needed to evaluate the long-term impact of

policies and programs. The findings provide valuable insights for policymakers, especially regarding teacher preparedness. They recommend that the Ministry of Education conduct in-service training for teachers on the proper utilization of the available school resources. Schools should encourage the surrounding community and other well-wishers to give a hand in the provision of school resources, expand non-formal education centers and adult literacy classes that are flexible to learners with family responsibilities, and link families to income-generating activities to reduce the economic pressure that fuels early marriage.

Key terms: Bridging, Education Gaps, Inclusive Education, Marginalized, Rural Communities

1.0 Introduction

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of socioeconomic development, and access to quality education is essential for realizing its full value. Inclusive education is increasingly promoted and supported, not only by passionate individuals and advocacy groups but also by non-governmental organizations, well-wishers, and governments worldwide. However, confusion, misunderstandings, and differences of opinion persist, leaving many questions about its effective implementation unanswered. For example, rural and marginalized communities continue to face significant barriers such as poverty, restrictive cultural norms, insecurity, floods,inadequate infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, teenage pregnancy, early marriage, and limited capacity to identify learners with disabilities. These socio-cultural and structural challenges negatively affect learners' retention in schools. The situation is particularly critical in regions such as Kilifi, Bungoma, Homa Bay, Turkana, and parts of Kajiado, where poverty, cultural practices, and gender inequality intersect to limit educational opportunities.

Although initiatives like 100% transition policy, Free Primary Education (FPE), the School Feeding Programmes, the **Re-entry Policy for Adolescent Mothers**, the Digital Literacy Programme (the laptop/tablet project, and various Scholarship programmes such as the Elimu Scholarship aim to address these disparities (such as high dropout rates and early pregnancies), limited transition to secondary education persists among marginalized groups.

This paper reviews practical, policy, and programmatic strategies aimed at advancing teaching, learning and inclusive education in Kenya, with particular attention to how gender-based vulnerabilities intersect to affect the country's most underserved learners.

2.0 Materials and Methodology

The study adopted a systematic qualitative review design. A total of 40 documents were analysed, including academic journal articles, Ministry of Education policies, and reports from development partners such as UNESCO and UNICEF, published between 2014 and 2024. Searches conducted in ResearchGate, Academia, Mendeley, ORCID and Google Scholar used terms like "teaching, learning and inclusive education, "marginalized learners," "teenage pregnancy education Kenya," and "early marriage school dropout." Sources on education access for rural and marginalized communities such as nomadic and poor communities, especially girls, were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method.

3.0 Results

3.1Teacher preparedness

Teachers play a key role in determining the quality of implementation of education policy. The Ministry of Education has strengthened teacher preparedness to address educational gaps through curriculum reforms that emphasize competency-based and inclusive teaching. This has been complemented by continuous professional development—particularly in STEM subjects—strategic deployment of teachers to marginalized regions, mentorship programs, the provision of teaching and learning resources that are suitable for marginalized groups and ICT tools, supportive policies on gender and special needs education, and the promotion of research-informed practices. In addition, teachers undergo training through a model of professional learning grounded in an apprenticeship approach, which fosters both practical knowledge and a critical understanding of everyday practices that contribute to marginalization

3.2 Infrastructure

The Kenyan government and NGOs have implemented various initiatives to bridge education gaps through infrastructure. The government has constructed and expanded classrooms, established nomadic education centers, and supported community-driven school projects. NGOs such as the Kenya Drylands Education Fund (KDEF), Big Girls Foundation, Kenya Connect, Street Child, and Tunapanda Institute complement these efforts by building classrooms, dormitories, sanitation facilities, and providing digital learning resources. These combined efforts aim to create safe, inclusive, and well-equipped learning environments, particularly for marginalized and rural learners.

3.3 Digital technology to bridge access gaps

Digital tools can deliver education to hard-to-reach learners, including girls forced into early marriage or kept out of school due to pregnancy. In Turkana and West Pokot, UNICEF and World Vision have introduced solar-powered mobile learning units targeting girls withdrawn from school for marriage. In urban informal settlements, Safaricom's Shupavu291 platform offers SMS-based learning for girls unable to attend school due to pregnancy or caregiving duties. Radio programs are being aired by KBC to provide educational content across various regions, including, marginalized areas

3.4 Community-driven education models

Community-led initiatives play a vital role in supporting girls' retention and preventing harmful practices. For instance, in Kilifi and Homa Bay, FAWE and Plan International run "Girls' Clubs" and community dialogues to raise awareness on early marriage, helping return pregnant girls to school. Similarly, in Kajiado, the "Adopt-A-Girl" program provides mentorship and financial support for girls rescued from forced marriage. Meanwhile, in Kibera, community schools collaborate with local clinics to deliver sexual and reproductive health education, reducing unplanned teenage pregnancies.

3.5 Legislative reforms alongside financial support programs

The Constitution of Kenya mandates the provision of basic services, including education, to marginalized areas through mechanisms like the Equalisation Fund to reduce regional disparities. It also provides for special opportunities for minority and marginalized groups in the educational and economic fields.

(i) Equalization Fund:

This programme allocates a portion of national revenue to disadvantaged regions to help them catch up with the rest of the country, particularly by improving essential services such as education in marginalized counties.

(ii) Inua Jamii Programme:
Led by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in collaboration with other agencies, this programme provides cash transfers to vulnerable groups, including orphaned children, the elderly, and persons with severe disabilities, while also supporting their access to education.

(iii) The Basic Education Act (2013) and the National School Re-entry Policy (2020) legally support girls' right to return to school after childbirth.

(iv) The Elimu Scholarship Programme prioritizes girls affected by early marriage and pregnancy, covering school fees and providing psychosocial support.

Despite these advancements, enforcement remains inconsistent, and stigmatization within schools continues to hinder re-entry efforts

4.0 Challenges and Hindrances

Despite progress, several challenges hinder the achievement of truly inclusive education:

i. Deep-rooted beliefs in early marriage and gender roles can undermine initiatives, as some parents or elders resist changes.

ii. Stigmatization of pregnant or married girls in schools continues to hinder reintegration.

iii. Even with national policies (e.g., the National School Re-entry Policy, 2020), **enforcement is inconsistent**, and community programs sometimes struggle to track progress and outcomes.

iv. Teenage pregnancies and sexual exploitation persist due to inadequate sexual and reproductive health services in some areas.

v. Safety concerns during travel to school can also prevent girls from attending

vi. Remote or nomadic communities (e.g., parts of Kilifi, Kajiado) face **distance and transportation challenges**, making regular attendance difficult

vii. Community programs often rely on NGOs or external funding, which may be inconsistent or short-term, affecting sustainability.

viii. Lack of infrastructure, teaching materials, and trained personnel limits program effectiveness

i.Connectivity, resource availability, and device affordability, however, remain significant barriers.

5.0 Discussion

Despite existing interventions, barriers such as early marriage and teenage pregnancy remain entrenched, with over 30% of girls married before 18 years of age in counties like Narok and Samburu (UNFPA, 2022). Addressing these challenges requires culturally sensitive policies, anti-harmful-practice campaigns, school accountability for re-entry, teacher training in gender-responsive teaching and psychosocial support, and partnerships between government, civil society, and traditional leaders to shift social norms and scale successful programs.

The inadequacy of essential resources such as classrooms, sanitation facilities, playgrounds, and laboratories continues to undermine learners' retention and academic progress. Addressing this challenge necessitates collaborative interventions from government, NGOs, local communities, and other stakeholders to ensure equitable resource distribution and foster inclusive, sustainable education for marginalized groups.

6.0 Conclusions

This review confirms that teaching, learning and inclusive education for rural and marginalized communities in Kenya requires a combination of teacher preparedness, infrastructure, and digital technology innovation to bridge access gaps, community-driven education models, and legislative reforms alongside financial support programs. Key actors must respond to contextual realities such as nomadism, slum living conditions, and sociocultural practices that affect girls' education

7.0 Way Forward

The Ministry of Education should conduct in-service training for teachers on the proper utilization of the available school resources; additionally, **teacher training** should embed gender-responsive pedagogy and psychosocial support, equipping educators to meet the unique needs of vulnerable learners.

Apart from the government's provision of school resources, schools should encourage the surrounding community and other well-wishers to assist in the provision of school resources. There is also need to foster **community ownership** of campaigns against harmful practices is necessary to ensure sustainability and grassroots support.

Kenya must adopt a **holistic and sustained approach**. Policy frameworks like the National **School Re-entry Policy (2020)**should be strengthened through consistent enforcement and the integration of **cultural sensitivity** to avoid community resistance, while linking families to income-generating activities to reduce their economic pressure that fuels early marriage.

At the school level, establishing **accountability mechanisms** will safeguard girls' right to re-enter and remain in school.

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