

INFLUENCE OF INCLUSIVENESS ON PROMOTION OF CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS' MODEL IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN MERU COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract

Inclusiveness in education should foster acceptance, kindness and considerate regard for all learners, and attending to diverse learning needs, as well as addressing gender-based and disability related stereotypes. The study therefore sought to establish the influence of inclusiveness on promotion of child-friendly schools' model in public primary schools in Meru county, Kenya. The study was anchored in Katz & Kahn's (1978) systems theory and transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978). Correlational research design with a mixed methods approach was used. The study targeted 6,814 persons, including 5520 teachers, 647 representatives of boards of management and 647 school heads from the entire county. The study utilized Yamane's technique to compute a sample of 378 participants. Quantitative data was collected from teachers and headteachers through a self-designed questionnaire with closed-ended items. Interview guide with open-ended items was used to gather qualitative information from representatives of boards of management. Piloting of instruments was conducted with information from 40 individuals, comprising of 24 teachers, 8 representatives of boards of management, and 8 headteachers, who were not part of the main study. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the reliability of instrument. A measure of 0.71 was achieved, indicating high internal consistency. Quantitative data was analyzed in descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data was analyzed in thematic analysis. The findings indicated that inclusiveness had statistically significant influence on promotion of CFS model ($r(286) = 0.18, p < 0.05$). The study recommends that school-based support programmes aimed at promoting fairness, and cushioning learners from poor socioeconomic backgrounds be replicated in all schools. This could be achieved through creation of school-based income generating activities, incorporation of external stakeholders such as alumni associations, and donor funding.

Keywords: *Inclusiveness in Education, Gender Sensitive School, Diverse Learning Needs, Fairness and Inclusivity, School Inclusive Culture, Disability Rights*

1. Introduction

Inclusiveness in education is described as an approach that focuses on the needs of different learners from diverse backgrounds, including learners with various special needs and learning abilities. Through school governance practices that promote inclusiveness, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, those living with disabilities, minority tribes, and diverse cultures can have equal access to quality learning opportunities (UNICEF, 2016). School leadership practices should uphold the tenets of Child Friendly Schools' (CFS) framework developed by UNICEF, whose intention was to incorporate the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) into school management systems.

Developed by UNICEF, the model is rights-based, advocates for basic and quality education for all children (UNICEF, 2009). Under the framework, schools are envisaged as inclusive, child-seeking, gender sensitive, and non-discriminating learning systems that actively identify and address the barriers to quality education, such as those connected to socioeconomic challenges (OECD, 2017). These efforts notwithstanding, many children especially those with disabilities continue to miss out on the benefits of education. According to Mizunoya et al. (2016) in a study prepared for UNICEF, nearly 40% of children living with disabilities in low, and middle-income countries are excluded from school at primary level. It was further established that the impact of disability considerably surpassed other characteristics that disabled children had to go through irrespective of their age, gender, family income or location of residence.

Studies show that many countries still face various challenges in implementation of CFS. Coachman (2020) argued that some of the challenges facing the establishment of child-friendly schools in Sao Paulo, Brazil, include socioeconomic inequalities amongst the communities and unequal access to education, which continue to prevent many children from achieving their full potential. These sentiments are consistent with a UNICEF (2016) report, which stated that unless socioeconomic inequalities are urgently addressed, nearly 70 million children below five years are likely to die, while nearly 60 million of those at the primary school level are at risk of being excluded from attending school.

In Turkey, Urinbojev et al. (2016) in an analysis of 23 studies examining adherence to children rights in the classroom found that the relationship between teachers and pupils in the classroom environment is hierarchical and unequal in nature, where adults make decisions unilaterally and children are seen as lacking discipline, dependent and requiring clear authoritative guideline. This is one of the challenges facing education today that child-friendly school framework sought to address by incorporating CRC principles, whose perspective on the rights of the child aimed at reshaping the interaction between teachers and learners in the school setting. Indeed, Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt (2013) in Sweden emphasized the need for rights to education as an effective approach to help realize egalitarian relationship between teachers and learners, thus countering exclusion and hierarchical relationship in schools.

Research has shown that there are various factors that can hinder promotion of child-centered and right-based approach to education. In Italy, some studies indicate that diversity in the context of languages has immense potential to engender linguistic insecurity among the learners. According to Piccardi and Nodari (2022), Italian schools are among the most diverse in terms of languages. Such diversity fosters communication inadequacy among students, making them feel discriminated against and less regarded in the learning environment. This therefore points to the need to encourage respect and promotion of positive perspective about diverse cultures, groups and languages.

Other factors impeding implementation of CFS include lack of adequate knowledge in school leaders about relevant practices, and poorly prepared teachers, who still lean towards traditional teaching methods, thus lacking confidence in fostering inclusive approaches in instructional activities (Covell, et al., 2010; Howe & Covell, 2010).

Studies show that progress has been made in implementation of CFS framework in nearly all regions. However, some regions or countries have lacked systematic mechanisms of evaluating their progress. In Indonesia, for instance, Arifin (2019) argues that while CFS is the most relevant model in education management towards development of reliable human resources that countries need to address current economic challenges, there are still numerous challenges impeding full implementation of the programme. The researcher notes that many children still have their rights violated and continue to be discriminated based on gender, ethnicity, disabilities or families' background.

Research from the African region shows that even though some progress has been made in implementation of CFS, some countries are still facing challenges in overcoming gender-based discriminations. This implies that many children are still missing out on meaningful learning opportunities. In a Nigerian based study, Anpe and Gambo (2015) found that many public secondary schools were yet to be fully inclusive, which continues to negatively impact on realization of child-friendly schools' framework. The CFS advocates for education to all children regardless of their gender, disabilities, ethnicity, race, religion or social status of their parents or communities.

Despite commitment to call to action initiatives such as sustainable development goals and child-friendly schools' framework, evidence from Tanzania indicates that more still needs to be done to bridge the gap on gender parity in schools. Girls are disproportionately deprived, a factor that negatively impacts on implementation of child-friendly schools' model in the country (Awinia, 2019).

In Kenya Manduku et al. (2016) established that designs for some of the school facilities were discriminative against girls and failed to cater for the needs of learners with disabilities. As UNICEF (2009) report asserts, it is the responsibility of educational leaders to ensure that education systems support improvement of overall quality of education. Such leaders should address the challenges related to poor attendance as one way of ascertaining that children remain in school irrespective of their gender, disability or socioeconomic status of parents. The study therefore sought to establish the influence of inclusiveness on promotion of child-friendly schools' model in public primary schools in Meru county, Kenya.

2. Literature Review

According to UNICEF (2016) inclusiveness in education entails putting in place practices that focus on providing meaningful learning opportunities for all children including groups that have been excluded. This includes addressing the needs of learners from different backgrounds, culture, languages, minority groups and learners with special needs and learning abilities. According to a World Bank (2011) survey, it is estimated that 93 million to 150 million children below 14 years are living with some form of disability. The report also found that after being enrolled in schools many of such children have attendance problems and others end up dropping out of school, which makes living with disability one of the largest hindrances to education.

Some studies have shown that illiteracy levels are likely to be higher in children with visual impairments, multiple or mental disorders compared to children with only motor disabilities (Hayes & Bulat, 2017). Research also indicates that learners with disabilities are likely to score less compared to learners without disabilities (Lambert & Tan, 2020). This points to disadvantaged position that learners with disabilities have had to endure in schools whose leadership practices do not prioritize on upholding disability rights.

A global estimates' report by Women enabled international – WEI (2019) showed that girls were dropping out of school more than boys, and that only 41.7% of girls with disabilities finished primary education. While the study showed that lack of consideration on gender sensitivity, inclusive culture and disability rights impacted on learning, pupil enrollment and completion rates, it did not assess how such aspects would impact on other indicators of CFS model such as school systems, and safety and protection.

In the United States, Taggart and Paschal (2019) explored on possible influence of equitable treatment of aspiring Latino college students. The study used logistic regression technique to identify the variables related to the aspirations of high school students to attend college. The findings revealed that perception of equitable treatment for diverse groups of students influenced the students desire to attend college. This indicated that practices and approaches that enhance fairness in the learning environment can have a bearing on students' desire to attend specific schools. This study was however focused on high school and college students and there was need to assess how this construct of fairness and respect for diversity would impact on promotion of CFS model in Meru county.

Similarly, Wells et al. (2016) in New York, investigated the possible benefits of management practices that seek to promote diversity in schools. The researchers found out that racially diverse settings were helpful in reduction of prejudice as such approaches help promote friendship and contact amongst students and across different ethnic groups. The study also established that promoting diversity had greater academic benefits to students of color since there was significant decrease in risk of experiencing discrimination and related stereotyping. However, the study did not reveal whether promoting diversity in school settings had any influence on other principles of CFS such as gender responsiveness, school retention and school systems.

According to Messiou (2019), based on conclusions drawn from research carried out in Europe for nearly two decades, children need to be involved in informing the thinking, policy making, and decisions on inclusive and interactive learning. While this is consistent with the recommendation by the United Nations as spelt out in the CRC (1990), the input of the children continue to be overlooked by school administrations. Messiou (2019) further argues that the conversations need to shift from merely giving learners a voice, to more a radicle approach that aims at promoting extensive conversation among students and other education stakeholders with regard to the need for inclusive culture in schools.

Consistent with the above arguments, Ainscow (2020) from the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom, opines that to make progress regarding equity and inclusiveness in schools, there is need for effective strategies from school managements. In essence, there is need for fresh thinking that seeks to address challenges faced by children who are marginalized due to contextual factors. Overcoming such challenges can be an effective way of making learning environments fully inclusive so that all children can learn in places where they feel respected irrespective of gender, ethnicity, disability or families' socioeconomic statuses (Schuelka, 2018).

In a related study carried out in the United Kingdom Forrest et al. (2022) explored on the perceptions of heads of primary care teaching regarding implementation of inclusive practices and cultural diversity in medical schools. The study adopted a collaborative and qualitative approach, and used focus groups to collect data from 23 heads of primary care training institutions. The findings revealed that there was lack of diversity and inclusive culture in the learning environment. Further institutions faced challenges in implementing inclusive practices and the efforts being made were perceived as being passive and as a form of tokenism. The study was however, carried out in college level institutions and the results might not be generalized for the study area.

Research carried out in other areas has however shown that inclusiveness and fairness in governance can be helpful in improving retention of learners in schools. Kilpatrick et al. (2016), in Curtin University, Australia, explored on the factors influencing retention and success of differently abled students in higher education institutions. Using exploratory design, the study analyzed data from higher education between 2007 and 2013. The findings indicated that socially inclusive practices and involving students in policy development were some of the governance practices supporting retention.

However, this study was carried out in a developed country and focused on higher education and the results may not be generalized for assessing promotion of C.F.S model in primary schools in Meru County.

In yet another study Molla and Nolan (2019) investigated the challenges faced by Australian early childhood education sector with regard to promoting inclusiveness and diversity as a way of making schools more accommodative for children with diverse learning needs. The findings revealed that among the challenges faced by Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) centres was cultural exclusion. In essence, the ECEC sector experienced various forms of exclusion including discrimination based on race, immigrant status, neighbourhood, gender, country of language or class etcetera. Such exclusion barriers result in negative learning environment, leading to absenteeism or dropping out altogether.

Studies have shown that practices that promote inclusive culture may be helpful in improving the learning environment for learners with diverse learning needs. In a study carried out in Spain, Roldán et al. (2021) investigated how inclusive, interactive learning would impact on learning experiences of students without special needs. The study adopted a qualitative design and relied on data obtained from participants in three educational centres with students with and without special needs. The findings revealed that promotion of inclusive culture enabled students without special needs to build respectful attitudes and understanding of diversity. Thus, promotion of inclusive practices was found to enhance positive learning environment for both learners with and those without special needs. The findings were however based on a shallow criterion, given that the study was qualitative only, and just gathered data from three schools. The present study employed a mixed method and relied on data from larger and more representative population.

In Nigeria, despite inclusive education being stated as part of educational policy, its level of implementation is yet to be fully ascertained. A study by Anpe and Gambo (2015) in Nigeria's River State aimed at determining the level of implementation of inclusive education policy in public secondary schools. The study found that public secondary schools were not fully inclusive, thus negatively impacting on realization of child-friendly schools' framework, which advocates for providing education to all children regardless of their gender, disabilities, ethnicity, race, religion or social status of their parents or communities. The study however was carried out only in public secondary schools, while the present study was targeted on public primary schools.

In Kenya, Manduku et al. (2016) sought to find out how inclusivity in learning and equality and gender equity as components of CFS initiative would impact on learners' academic performance in primary schools in Londiani, Kericho county. The study found that some of the school facilities, such as toilets and libraries were not well designed for learners with disabilities. The study however found classrooms to have been well designed to cater for learners with special needs, which was instrumental on child development and quality of learning. Nevertheless, it would be imperative to find out how inclusiveness might impact on other aspects of CFS that were not in the focus of the study, such as safety and protection and child enrollment and retention, which were part of the present study.

In a related study, Kinyanjui (2019) investigated whether implementation of gender equality and inclusion of students with special needs in regular public primary schools in Nairobi and Kajiado counties influenced quality of learning as a principle of child-friendly schools initiative. The findings indicated that both gender sensitivity and inclusiveness were positively related with increased quality of education. The influence of disability rights was however not under investigation, and this formed part of the gaps that were being addressed by the present study. Similarly, a study conducted by Kanamba (2014) in Igembe North Meru County on evaluating inclusiveness in terms of gender, found that female students were more disadvantaged in terms of access to schools than their male counterparts. However, there was need for further research since the study focused on a small fraction of Meru county, and only explored on gender sensitivity, ignoring other aspects such as disability rights.

3. Materials and Methods

The objective of the study was to establish the influence of inclusiveness on promotion of child-friendly schools' model in public primary schools in Meru county, Kenya. The study adopted a correlational research design and a mixed methods approach. The study targeted 6814 individuals comprising of 5520 instructors, 647 school heads, and 647 chairpersons of all boards of management in Meru county. The study used Yamane's (1967) formula to calculate a sample of 378 respondents. Questionnaires with 5 likert scales were used to collect quantitative data from teachers and school heads, while qualitative data was obtained from school boards' representatives through interview guides. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze quantitative data through Pearson's r , while thematic content analysis was used for qualitative data. Piloting of instrument was done in selected schools that were not part of the main study, involving forty participants; eight school boards' representatives, 24 instructors, and 8 school heads. Reliability of instrument was determined through Cronbach's alpha and a value of 0.71 was achieved and accepted as a measure of high internal consistency.

4. Results

From 306 questionnaires administered to teachers and headteachers, 288 were retrieved, representing a response rate of 94%. For interviews, the researcher was able to interview 66 out of 72 targeted respondents, representing a rate of 92%. These rates were deemed as acceptable for generalization of the results to the population based on recommendation by Fincham (2008) that surveys involving educational institutions should aim for a rate of 80 percent or higher. The results further indicated that out of those sampled, 56.1% of headteachers were male compared to 43.9% of their female participants. The results indicated that the number of men in school leadership was higher than that of females. However,

the gender distribution for teachers was almost even, with male teachers being 50.9% against 49.1% of their female counterparts.

Description of Inclusiveness and Promotion of Child-friendly Schools’ Model

The objective of the study was to determine the influence of inclusiveness on promotion of child-friendly schools’ model in public primary schools in Meru County. The scores on inclusiveness and promotion of CFS were computed and analyzed so as to establish the mean scores and standard deviations of each of the measures as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 :Means and Standard Deviations of Inclusiveness Scores

| Variable | Measure | Mean | SD | |
|---------------|---|------|------|--|
| Inclusiveness | Established mechanism for promoting fairness and reining in common biases and stereotypes has helped enhance gender sensitive environment | 4.03 | 1.05 | |
| | Established control of discriminatory beliefs enhances safety and protection within the learning environment | 3.87 | 1.11 | |
| | Strong inclusive culture in my school is helpful in promoting pupils’ enrollment | 3.61 | 1.28 | |
| | School management ensures that all learners irrespective of their gender, disability or family backgrounds are treated equally, thus improving the quality of learning environment. | 4.22 | 1.14 | |
| | The school has established strategies for taking into consideration the needs of all the learning communities, thus resulting in improved school systems | 4.01 | .95 | |
| | Management’s approach to promote reforms towards supporting learners with disabilities enhances the quality of learning environment | 3.86 | 1.06 | |
| | School management has established mechanisms to promote fairness and diversity | 3.90 | 1.02 | |
| | School-based mechanisms for controlling discrimination and attitudinal barriers against vulnerable children has enhanced pupil completion rate | 3.88 | 1.12 | |
| | Valid N (listwise) | | | |

Note. N = 288, SD = Standard Deviation.

As demonstrated in Table 4.1, the results on the ratings of the measures of inclusiveness indicate that ensuring that all learners, irrespective of their gender, disabilities or family background were treated equally leading to improved quality of learning environment was the most highly rated with a mean score of 4.22 (*SD* = 1.14). The findings imply that treating all learners fairly, and without any form of discrimination regardless of their gender, disability or family background can promote positive and healthy learning environment. These findings agree with those of Kilpatrick et al. (2016), in Australia as reviewed in the literature that inclusive practices aimed at promoting fair treatment of students can reduce the rate of dropping out of school.

The rating on whether promoting fairness and controlling common biases and stereotypes enhanced gender sensitive environment was the second highest rated item with a mean score of 4.03 (*SD* = 1.05). This finding supports that of Taggart and Paschal (2019) in a study carried out in United States that established that the rate of Latino students was likely to increase based on fair treatment of students from different groups. This implies that such students are likely to find the school environment to be accommodating, safe, and friendly for all and devoid of any form of discrimination.

The data also indicates that the rating on whether schools had strategies for addressing diverse needs of all the learners towards improved school systems had a high mean score of 4.01 (*SD* = 0.95). The findings corroborate the affirmations by Hayes and Bulat (2017) that supporting diversity in a manner that seeks to address the needs of all children including those with disability can improve their learning experiences. It is observed from the results that the measure on whether the school management had established mechanisms for promoting fairness and diversity had a mean score of 3.90 (*SD* = 1.02). The findings suggest that practices that promote equality and seek to address diverse needs of all learners notwithstanding their gender, religion, disability or family backgrounds create a favorable and all-inclusive environment for learning.

It is further observed that the measure on whether school-based mechanisms for controlling discrimination and attitudinal barriers against vulnerable children had enhanced pupil completion rate received a mean score of 3.88 (*SD* = 1.12). The findings imply that promotion of practices that seek to reduce discrimination, prejudice and attitudinal barriers in school creates a learning environment where all children feel welcome, and embrace each other’s unique differences. The findings are consistent with those of Juvonen (2019) that inclusive in education can be helpful in fostering acceptance, encouraging respect, and addressing disability and gender-related stereotypes. The measure on whether control mechanisms established in school for controlling discriminatory beliefs had enhanced safety and protection within the learning environment had a mean score of 3.87 (*SD* = 1.11). This corroborates Losinski et al. (2019) in their inferences that schools should be seen as agents for change and always strive to control bias and discrimination.

The results indicate that the measure on whether reforms towards supporting learners with disabilities had enhanced the quality of learning environment obtained a mean score of 3.86 (*SD* = 1.06). These findings indicate that supporting learners

with disabilities, who may have various difficulties coping independently can empower them to have a positive sense of self towards improved learning experiences. Lastly, the results indicate that the measure as to whether school inclusive culture was helpful in promoting pupils' enrollment had the lowest mean score of 3.61 ($SD = 1.28$). This finding lends credence to WEI (2019) report that showed that lack of inclusive culture resulted in negative impact on pupils' learning outcomes, school enrollment and completion rates. The results were further analyzed in order to categorize the scores of inclusiveness into groups with low or high agreement levels as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Agreement Levels of Inclusiveness Rating Scores

| Agreement Levels | | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-------|-----------|---------|
| Valid | Low | 139 | 48.3 |
| | High | 149 | 51.7 |
| | Total | 288 | 100.0 |

Note. $N = 288$.

As exemplified in Table 2, the results indicate that slightly more than half (51.7%) of the participants were categorized as having reported high agreement levels regarding the influence of inclusiveness on promotion of CFS model, compared to 48.3% in the low agreement levels' category. Based on the results, it is apparent that inclusiveness played a role in making the learning environment more child-friendly. The results imply that promoting inclusiveness in schools can help foster respect and appreciation of diversity among the learners, thus making such schools more accommodating and conducive for all children to succeed academically.

The findings support those of Roldán et al. (2021) in their study carried out in Spain which established that inclusivity and interactive learning benefited learners as they learned how to respect others' differences. Such pupils were found to acknowledge differences, develop friendships, and social competencies, resulting in a more welcoming and supportive learning environment. The findings are also consistent with those of Manduku et al. (2016) in a study carried out in Kericho county in Kenya that classrooms were well designed to cater for the unique needs of learners with disabilities, thus promoting a suitable environment for child development and quality of instructional processes.

The results of the present study are however opposed to what Forrest et al. (2022) established in their study in United Kingdom. The researchers found that learning institutions were faced with challenges with regard to promotion of inclusive culture in the learning environment. Although the findings were derived from a sample with diverse sociocultural dynamics compared to those of the present study, it emerged that the efforts made by educational leaders towards overcoming marginalization, discrimination and challenges related to diverse cultures were perceived as passive and mere tokenism.

To test the possibility of relationship between inclusiveness and promotion of child-friendly schools, the following null hypothesis was advanced:

H_{04} : Inclusiveness has no statistically significant influence on promotion of child-friendly schools' model in public primary schools in Meru County

To test the hypothesis, the mean scores of inclusiveness and promotion of CFS were subjected to bivariate analysis on Pearson's correlation coefficient statistic and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 : Correlation Matrix for Inclusiveness and Promotion of Child-Friendly Schools Model

| | | Inclusivity | Promotion of CFS Scores |
|-------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------------------|
| Inclusiveness | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .18** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .002 |
| Promotion of CFS Scores | | 288 | 288 |
| | Pearson Correlation | .18** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .002 | |
| | | 288 | 288 |

Note. $N = 288$.

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The results in Table 3 shows that a significant positive relationship was established between the means of inclusiveness scores and promotion of CFS model scores ($r(286) = 0.18, p < 0.05$). The results therefore indicate that high value of the practice of inclusiveness was associated with high rate in promotion of child-friendly schools' model. Thus, the null hypothesis that inclusiveness has no statistically significant influence on promotion of child-friendly schools' model was rejected.

The results imply that school practices that deter exclusionary policies and seek to address diverse needs of all learners equally and fairly irrespective of their gender, disability or family background can enhance implementation of CFS model. The findings lend credence to WEI (2019) report as discussed in the review of literature that lack of gender sensitive environment, inclusive culture and disability rights result in poor learning outcomes, low enrollment and completion rates. The results also agree with those of Kilpatrick et al. (2016), in a study done in Australia, which established that socially inclusive practices were found to enhance learners' completion rate.

The findings of the present study imply that promoting inclusive approaches such as gender equality are likely to make the learning environment more welcoming to all learners those with disabilities. These findings are consistent with those of Kinyanjui (2019) in a study carried out in Kajiado and Nairobi counties in Kenya that found that promotion of gender sensitive environment positively influenced quality of education. The findings however contradict those of Anpe and Gambo (2015) who found that schools were not doing much to implement inclusive education policy and the influence of this construct on school systems of children's learning experiences would not be identified.

Qualitative Analysis

The raw data obtained from the interview responses on the relationship between inclusiveness and promotion of CFS model brought to the fore a number of themes.

Promoting Dignity and Respect

With regard to the approaches that the management had put in place to promote diversity and inclusivity, the themes that emerged include treating all learners with respect and dignity, fairness, and empowerment programmes aimed at cushioning the disadvantaged children. The interviewees explained that the management and staff are required to treat all students equally with respect and dignity.

One of the respondents, BOMC16 explained: *“Among the initiatives developed and promoted by the management to promote diversity and inclusiveness include treating all children the same. We encourage teachers who spend most of the time with the learners in classrooms to always treat every pupil with respect and dignity. Similarly, all pupils are required to treat each other respectfully irrespective of gender, disability or where one comes from.”*

The respondents also explained that various strategies for promoting diversity were established, such as physical environment that puts into consideration the diverse needs of learners including those with disability.

One of the interviewees, BOMC32 stated: *“Some of the areas of focus for us as managers include making sure that buildings and playgrounds are designed in a way that promotes accessibility for learners with disabilities and suitability for use by both boys and girls. Additionally, teachers are encouraged to promote respect and dignity among all learners, foster inclusive class norms, and student collaboration.”*

These findings imply that school management and staff had established approaches for promoting diversity and inclusiveness in the learning environment. Inclusion and diversity in a learning environment can be helpful for eliminating various barriers related to ethnicity, gender stereotypes, disability, socioeconomic status, religion and family background among others. This implies that learners in such schools are likely to embrace these differences making the learning environment more welcoming, which is likely to impact positively on learning experiences and learning outcomes. The findings are in line with those of Wells et al. (2016) in a study carried out in New York, United States that established that valuing and respecting unique aspects in children helps them embrace each other's differences leading to improved learning outcomes.

The findings of the present study also support those of Juvonen et al. (2019). In a study carried out in Spain that established that such inclusive approaches like promoting respect and dignity among students and embracing diversity could reduce gender and disability related stereotypes. The study also found that such approaches promoted the propensity of being considerate to each one another's diverse needs. This therefore implies that such approaches are likely to improve school systems, resulting in a more child-friendly learning environment. The findings have also shown that inclusive approaches result in thoughtful and well-intentioned designs for school infrastructure that are gender sensitive and accessible for learners with disabilities. This finding agrees with that of Manduku et al. (2016) in a study conducted in Kericho county, Kenya that found classrooms designs to have considered accessibility for learners with special needs.

School-based Support Programmes

Another theme that featured prominently was that many schools had established support programmes for learners with special needs and those from families with poor socioeconomic statuses. It emerged from the interview responses that a number of schools had established incentives such as school-based feeding programmes, and provision of resources for supporting learners with special needs. Through feeding programmes, school managements aimed at encouraging students from disadvantaged families to attend school based on the fact that they would be assured of a meal. Such incentives are likely to contribute to better nutritional status, improved health and well-being of learners in addition to reducing dropout rates.

In essence, parents from poor socioeconomic status are likely to be persuaded to send their girls to school, where they are assured of a meal instead of marrying them off. The findings reinforce those of Kilpatrick et al. (2016) in Australia that socially inclusive programmes contributed to schools being more welcoming, thus supporting attendance and retention in school. The findings however contradict those of Anpe and Gambo (2015) in a Nigerian based study that found that schools were not fully inclusive.

5. Discussions

The descriptive results revealed that inclusive approaches that are aimed at serving the needs of all learners equally irrespective of their gender, disability, ethnicity or family's socioeconomic statuses are essential for supporting a healthy learning environment. It was established that such inclusive systems rein in discriminatory attitudes in the learning environment, thus promoting positive learning environment. The results corroborate those of Kilpatrick et al. (2016), in a study conducted in Australia, as discussed in the review of literature, which showed that inclusive approaches were essential for reduction of school dropout rates.

The descriptive findings indicated that inclusive approaches focused on promoting fairness and impartiality in the learning environment result in reduction of common biases such as disability and gender-based stereotypes, thus making the school more welcoming for all the learners including those with diverse needs. The findings support those of Taggart and Paschal (2019) in a study conducted in the United States that reported that the number of Latino students enrolling in school increased following fair treatment of students from different ethnic groups.

The findings imply that learners from diverse groups, the disadvantaged and those with special learning needs are likely to find schools that treat all students with fairness as, safe, supportive and welcoming. Such fair and equitable treatment is likely to increase the sense of belonging and desire to enroll. The findings intimate that approaches of inclusiveness that are focused on addressing discrimination, prejudice and attitudinal barriers in school are likely to promote a learning environment where all learners embrace each other's unique differences. Such practices are likely to make schools safer and protective, and foster positive relationships among the learners as envisioned in the CFS framework (UNICEF, 2009).

The inferential statistics also supported the outcomes from descriptive analysis. As demonstrated in Table 4.19, the inferential statistics established a significant positive relationship between inclusiveness scores and promotion of CFS model scores ($r(286) = 0.18$, $p < 0.05$). This implied that increased value in practices of inclusiveness increased the rate of promoting a child-friendly learning environment. These findings intimate that establishment of school-based practices aimed at discouraging exclusion and addressing learners' diverse needs can enhance learning experiences for all learners irrespective of their gender, disability or family background.

The findings of the present study are consistent with a WEI (2019) report, which showed that failure to implement gender sensitive environment, disability rights, and school inclusive negatively affected learning outcomes. Without such inclusive approaches, most children and particularly those with special needs are likely to experience discrimination and other socio-cultural barriers, resulting in negative learning experiences or dropping out of school altogether. These findings further corroborate those of Kilpatrick et al. (2016), in Australian based study that established that implementation of socially inclusive approaches encouraged learners to remain in school.

The qualitative findings also supported the quantitative results that inclusive governance practices result in improved school systems that are more accommodating to learners' diverse needs. The findings revealed that various inclusive approaches were put in place, such as designing school buildings that are gender sensitive, and accessible to learners with disabilities. It was established that such approaches promoted diversity, inclusiveness and responsiveness to diverse learning needs. The findings imply that such inclusive approaches eliminated common barriers in the learning environment such as biases related to ethnicity, disability, religion, socio-economic status. This therefore intimates that learners in such schools are likely to have a sense of belonging, feel respected, and enjoy learning in accommodative environments, resulting in improved learning experience. These findings lend credence to a report by WEI (2019) based on a report carried out in New York, United States which found that inclusive practices that foster respect and consider children's diverse learning needs were associated with improved learning outcomes.

The qualitative findings further indicated that school-based support initiatives, such as feeding programmes, and provision of resources for learners with special needs enhanced implementation of child-friendly learning environments. Such programmes are likely to encourage children, particularly those from poor backgrounds to attend school where they are guaranteed for a meal. The findings implied that such initiatives could improve learners' health and well-being and encourage children to remain in school, thus reducing the rate of school dropout. This is consistent with the findings from earlier research by Kilpatrick et al. (2016) as discussed in the review of literature, where their study carried out in Australia showed that socially inclusive programmes were linked to higher school attendance and completion rates.

Research findings from both quantitative and qualitative responses concurred that inclusive approaches put in place in schools helped improve school systems to cater for all children's diverse learning needs. The findings imply that inclusive practices such as promotion of fairness, addressing discrimination, inclusive culture, promoting diversity and respect among the learners results in improved school systems, making the learning environment more accommodative for all children irrespective of their gender, disability family backgrounds or varying learning needs. The findings of the present study support those of Roldán et al. (2021) in Spain that inclusive approaches such as those aimed at promoting fairness, inclusive culture and respect for students with diverse needs enhance understanding among learners and respectful attitudes towards diversity.

According to a report by World Bank (2011) as discussed in the review of literature, at least 95 million children under 14 years of age live with some disability. The report found that many of such children fail to attend or end up dropping out of school due to lack of conducive learning environments that support learners with diverse needs. The findings of the present study therefore suggest that inclusive practices championed by school managements are likely to enhance the number of learners with diverse needs, while still promoting opportunities for improved quality of learning for all the learners.

The quantitative and qualitative findings of the present study found that inclusive governance approaches aimed at promoting fairness and dealing with common biases based on gender and disability helped in making the learning environment safer, and accommodating for all. This implies that all pupils irrespective of their gender, disability of socioeconomic status of their parents are likely to have a sense of belonging, resulting in positive learning environment. The findings corroborate those of Taggart and Paschal (2019) in a study carried out in the United States that found the rate of Latino students to have increased based on impartial treatment of students from different groups.

The findings of the present study however are consistent with those of Forrest et al. (2022) in a study conducted in United Kingdom, which found various existing challenges in implementation of inclusiveness in school environment. The failures to promote inclusive culture led to escalation of discrimination of some learners based on their culture or language and lack of support on students' diverse learning needs.

The findings also contradict those of Anpe and Gambo (2015) in Nigeria, which found that many public schools were yet to be fully inclusive, suggesting that they were negatively impacting on realization of CFS model. The findings are also inconsistent with those of Awinia (2019) in Tanzania, which found gender parities to be on the rise. This factor was also found to deprive girls of equal opportunity for quality education, as envisioned in the CFS framework (UNICEF, 2009). Further, the findings of the present study do not support those of Manduku et al. (2016), in Kericho county, Kenya, which found that various school facilities like libraries and toilets were not designed in conformity to the learning needs of children with disabilities.

6. Conclusion

The descriptive results showed that practices of inclusiveness promoted the sense of acceptance, care, and the resolve to address diverse learning needs. The study found that equal treatment of all learners irrespective of gender, disability or parents' socioeconomic status had the highest influence on the learning environment and subsequent promotion of CFS model. This implied fair treatment of learners irrespective of gender, disability or family background promoted positive and healthy learning environment. It was concluded from inferential statistics that inclusiveness had significant positive influence on promotion of CFS model. It was inferred that an increase in the rate of the practice of inclusiveness was associated with increased rate in promotion of CFS model. This implied that school-based practices aimed at deterring exclusionary actions, and addressing pupils' diverse learning needs enhanced implementation of CFS standards in public primary schools in Meru County.

7. Recommendations

The study found that many schools had established school-based support programmes as a way of enhancing fairness through cushioning learners from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. The study therefore suggests that such programmes should be replicated in all schools. This could be achieved through creation of school-based income generating activities, incorporation of external stakeholders such as alumni associations, and donor funding. Since it was established that inclusiveness had significant and positive influence on promotion of CFS model, future studies may be replicated in all other counties to establish whether similar results may be achieved.

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