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**SOCIETY OF
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AND
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IN KENYA**

Parental Engagement and Foundational Learning in Kenyan Primary Schools

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Abstract

Kenya's competency-based curriculum repositioned parents and communities as co-producers of early-grade learning, a commitment formalised in the Ministry of Education's Guidelines on Parental Empowerment and Engagement. How far primary schools convert that policy into routine practice, and which engagement dimensions track with foundational learning, has remained unclear. This study examined the implementation of the guidelines and its association with parent-reported foundational learning. A cross-sectional survey of 49 parent representatives, one drawn from each of 49 public primary schools in nine sub-counties across four counties, supported the construction of five guideline-aligned domain indices covering participation and governance, informing the community, shared decision-making, accountability for improvement, and learning-at-home support. Each index was tested against two parent-reported proxies for foundational learning using correlation, regression and group comparison. Governance structures were almost universal, with a Board of Management reported in 98% of schools and a Parents' Association in 94%. Operational routines lagged well behind. Communication was predominantly termly (61%), written notices reached 46% of respondents against 93% for meetings, and only 49% of schools were reported to engage parents actively in supporting struggling learners. Shared decision-making was the strongest correlate of perceived end-of-Grade-3 reading proficiency and the only significant predictor in regression, while schools taking concrete steps for struggling readers were rated substantially higher on overall performance. The study concluded that Kenya has largely established the structures of parental engagement but has not yet routinised the participatory practices that most plausibly drive foundational learning. The findings are exploration and hypothesis-generating.

Keywords: parental engagement; parental empowerment; foundational learning; shared decision-making; school governance; competency-based curriculum; Kenya

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to study

Foundational learning refers to the basic literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional competencies acquired in the early primary grades. It is the platform on which all later schooling and much of adult life depends, and its absence has become one of the defining development problems of the present decade. The most recent global accounting estimated that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 57% of ten-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries could not read and understand a simple text, a figure that rose to roughly 70% in pandemic-affected simulations (World Bank et al., 2022). The shortfall is sharpest in sub-Saharan Africa, where an estimated 86% of children were learning poor in 2019 (World Bank et al., 2022). More recent continental evidence puts the position starkly: only 10.8% of African children reach the minimum proficiency level in reading and mathematics by the end of primary school (UNESCO, 2025). Kenya entered this period with comparably weak early-grade reading outcomes, and it was the documented shortfall



of early-grade pupils against national fluency benchmarks in English and Kiswahili that prompted the country's subsequent investment in structured early-grade reading (Piper et al., 2018).

Kenya's policy response has been substantial and, by regional standards, unusually evidence driven. The Primary Math and Reading randomized trials and their national successor, Tusome, showed that a coherent package of structured teaching materials, teacher coaching and routine monitoring could raise early-grade reading at national scale across more than 22,000 public schools (Piper et al., 2018). The subsequent transition to a competency-based curriculum extended that reform logic beyond the classroom by positioning parents and communities as active partners in learning rather than as passive recipients of schooling. To operationalize the ambition, the Ministry of Education, through the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development, issued the Guidelines on Parental Empowerment and Engagement (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2019), which set out what schools are expected to do in empowering caregivers, communicating with them, sharing decisions and remaining accountable for learning.

Policy intent, however, is not implementation. A recurring lesson from the comparative literature on community participation in education is that the formal existence of a participatory structure, whether a board, a committee or an association, is a weak predictor of whether that structure changes anything that matters for learning (Banerjee et al., 2010; Westhorp et al., 2014). The decisive question is not whether a Board of Management exists, but whether it convenes regularly, deliberates about learning, communicates in ways that reach all caregivers, and converts parental voice into action. This paper takes up that question for Kenya. Drawing on survey data from parent representatives, it estimates how far sampled primary schools have moved from the establishment of engagement structures to the institutionalisation of engagement routines, and it identifies which dimensions of engagement track most closely with perceived foundational-learning outcomes.

The question is timely. The 2024/5 Global Education Monitoring Report distinguishes four leadership dimensions that education systems must cultivate, namely setting expectations, focusing on learning, fostering collaboration and developing people, and reports that fostering collaboration, the dimension that encompasses the engagement of parents and communities, is the most neglected in leadership preparation worldwide (UNESCO, 2024). That emphasis is carried into the African context by the third cycle of the Spotlight series, Lead for Foundational Learning, a partnership between the African Union and the Global Education Monitoring Report that is organised around seven factors shaping early-grade outcomes, among them community and parental engagement, and that examines how leaders at school and system level convert those factors into learning (UNESCO, 2025). Community and parental engagement is therefore treated not as a peripheral courtesy but as one of the levers of instructional leadership for foundational learning.

1.2 Parental involvement, engagement and the learning-at-home gap

The foundational framework for thinking about home and school relations remains Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence, which holds that children learn best when school, family and community share responsibility for their development (Epstein, 1995). Epstein's widely used typology distinguishes six categories of involvement, namely parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2001). Two features of the model matter for the present study. First, the categories are not interchangeable. Meta-analytic evidence consistently finds that the forms of involvement closest to learning, particularly academic socialization and structured learning-at-home support, associate more strongly with achievement than school-based presence or generic communication (Boonk et al., 2018; Hill & Tyson, 2009). A second-order meta-analysis of 23 earlier meta-analyses covering 1,177 primary studies confirms a positive but modest overall association, with a mean effect of 0.18, and finds that parental expectations carry the strongest effect while homework help produces mixed and sometimes null results (Kim, 2022); a synthesis of Scopus-indexed studies reports a comparable pooled coefficient of 0.224 (Sujarwo & Herwin, 2023). The type of engagement therefore matters more than its volume.

Second, the categories vary in who holds agency. Goodall and Montgomery (2014) reframe involvement and engagement as a continuum running from school-led activity towards genuine parental agency, and Jeynes (2018) stresses that home-based engagement carries much of the explanatory weight for achievement, a pattern that attendance-oriented programmes can miss. Later work presses the point further: Devlieghere et al. (2022) argue that policy definitions encode what is convenient for institutions to count rather than what is useful for families, while Brown et al. (2022) show that participation visible to schools is only loosely related to the deeper forms of engagement supporting learning at home.



These distinctions matter for policy evaluation because they imply that a school can score highly on the visible, school-controlled forms of engagement, such as committees, meetings and notices, while underperforming on precisely the home-learning dimension that the achievement literature identifies as most consequential. Kenya's guidelines, like Epstein's framework, encompass both, which makes their differential implementation an empirical question worth measuring directly.

1.3 Leadership as the enabling mechanism

Whether engagement structures become engagement routines depends substantially on school leadership. The synthesis by Leithwood et al. (2004) concluded that leadership is second only to classroom teaching among school-level influences on learning, and that its effects operate largely through mediated pathways, by shaping school climate, focusing attention on instruction and organising the participation of staff and stakeholders. Robinson et al. (2008), in a meta-analysis of leadership effects, showed that those effects are strongest when leaders engage directly with teaching and learning rather than confining themselves to administration.

Recent evidence tempers rather than overturns this position. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 20 evaluations of school management interventions in low- and middle-income countries estimated a statistically significant but small average gain of 0.04 standard deviations in student learning, and identified three factors that limit programme effectiveness: low take-up, the absence of incentives or structure for implementing recommendations, and the long causal chain that links management practice to learning (Anand et al., 2023). Applied to parental engagement, this work implies that head teachers and Boards of Management are the proximate agents who determine whether communication is predictable, whether parental voice is solicited and acted upon, and whether the agenda of governance meetings includes early-grade learning at all. Leadership, in short, is the hinge between the policy text and the lived routine, but only where the chain from meeting to classroom is short enough to hold.

1.4 Community participation and accountability: comparative evidence

The international record on community participation in education is instructive precisely because it is mixed. In Kenya, the school-based management experiment reported by Duflo et al. (2015) found that empowering local school committees to monitor and manage contract teachers improved pupil outcomes, but that the effect depended on training committees to exercise their oversight role rather than merely constituting them. In Indonesia, interventions that strengthened the linkage between school committees and existing village institutions improved learning, whereas interventions that simply elected or trained committees in isolation did not (Pradhan et al., 2011). In India, a widely cited randomised evaluation found that information about committee rights and school performance, on its own, failed to mobilise communities or improve outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2010). A realist review of community accountability across low- and middle-income settings reached a consonant conclusion, namely that such interventions improve learning only under specific conditions, where communities hold real authority, where information is actionable, and where participation connects to decisions that schools can implement (Westthorp et al., 2014). The broader experimental literature on Kenyan and East African schooling reinforces the point that inputs and structures rarely translate into learning without the complementary routines and incentives that put them to use (Glewwe et al., 2009; Mbiti et al., 2019).

Evidence from Kenya itself now speaks directly to the mechanism. A cluster-randomised trial of a parental empowerment and engagement intervention across 24 early childhood centres in Embu County recorded gains of 40.6% in parental participation in creative learning activities, 28.1% in the development of home learning materials, 27.2% in engagement with reading and writing activities, and 26% in parent-teacher communication (Muriithi Gitonga et al., 2026). The intervention worked on behaviour rather than on structure, which is consistent with the pattern the present study sets out to examine. The Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel similarly classifies parent-directed early stimulation and the provision of actionable information among the more cost-effective options available to low- and middle-income systems, while placing generic community mobilisation lower in the ranking (Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel [GEEAP], 2023).

Participation is therefore necessary but not sufficient, and its returns to learning are conditional on functionality. This study applies that lens to Kenya's guidelines, treating the existence of structures and the functionality of routines as separable and separately measurable constructs. Figure 1 presents the resulting conceptual framework.



Conceptual Framework: From Engagement Structures to Routines for Foundational Learning

Participation is necessary but not sufficient: its returns to foundational learning are conditional on functionality.

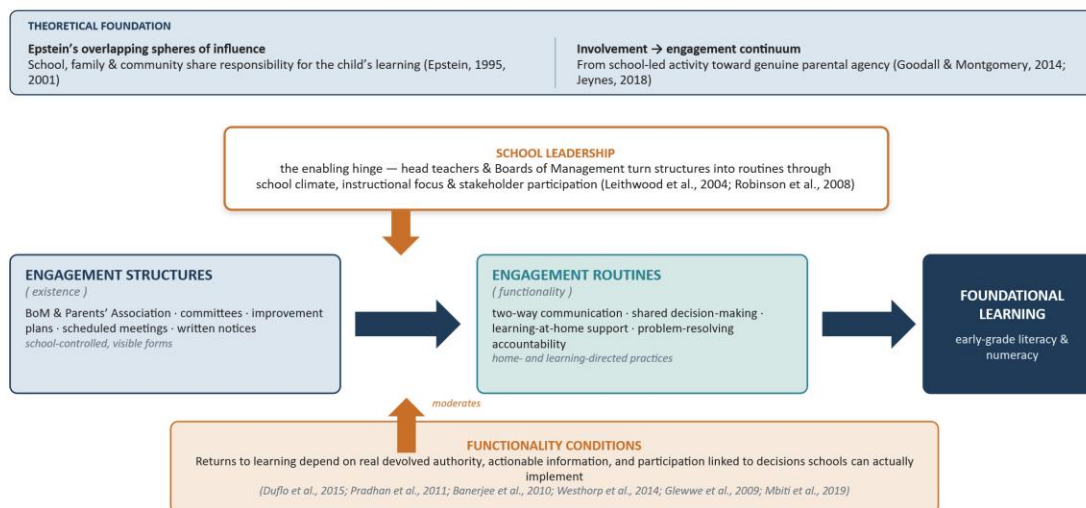


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking parental empowerment and engagement structures, school leadership, and foundational learning.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking parental empowerment and engagement structures, school leadership and foundational learning

The framework takes Epstein's overlapping spheres and the involvement-to-engagement continuum as its base, treats school leadership as the hinge that converts structures into routines, and specifies the functionality conditions under which routines can plausibly reach early-grade literacy and numeracy. The measures described in Section 2 are designed to capture that distinction.

1.5 Statement of the problem and study objectives

Kenya has issued a clear policy instrument on parental empowerment and engagement and has built the governance architecture it presumes. What is not known is how far that architecture operates as a set of routines, which dimensions vary across schools, and which track with early-grade learning. Monitoring systems that count committees and plans record near-universal compliance and therefore miss the variation that matters. The problem addressed here is the absence of disaggregated, domain-level evidence on the functionality of parental engagement in Kenyan primary schools.

Against this background, the study pursued four objectives:

1. To profile the parent representatives who staff Kenya's school engagement structures and to characterise the structures themselves.
2. To estimate levels of adherence to five domains aligned to the Guidelines on Parental Empowerment and Engagement, namely participation and governance, informing the community, shared decision-making, accountability for improvement, and learning-at-home support.
3. To test the association between these engagement domains and two parent-reported proxies for foundational learning, namely perceived school performance and perceived end-of-Grade-3 reading proficiency.
4. To identify the highest-leverage implementation gaps and to derive policy-relevant recommendations for strengthening community involvement in foundational learning.

2. Research Methods

2.1 Design and data source

The study was a secondary analysis of cross-sectional survey data collected in 2025 as part of the Spotlight series on basic education completion and foundational learning, undertaken in Kenya through a partnership involving the Ministry of Education, the Kenya Education Management Institute and UNESCO (UNESCO, 2026). Survey instruments were contextualised with technical assistance from the participating agencies, and fieldwork was carried out between 26 May and 4 June 2025. Schools were selected through purposive stratified sampling designed to reflect



diversity of location, size and performance. The community questionnaire was administered to one parent representative per school, preferably a member of the Board of Management, immediately following a parallel interview with the head of institution. Administration was in English, with clarification in Kiswahili where required.

The analytic sample comprised 49 parent representatives drawn from 49 schools in nine sub-counties across four counties: Tongaren and Bungoma South in Bungoma County; Tharaka South and Maara in Tharaka-Nithi County; Kisauni and Mvita in Mombasa County; and Mathare, Kibra and Westlands in Nairobi County. The sample was approximately balanced between rural ($n = 26$) and urban ($n = 23$) settings, which supported limited geographic contrast while remaining a purposive, non-probability sample. One parent representative was surveyed per school, and the individual was identified by the school from among its Board of Management members rather than sampled by the research team, so the respondents are best understood as nominated informants rather than a random draw from the parent body. Because the analysis worked from an anonymised dataset of aggregated survey outputs, the response rate and the criteria schools applied when nominating a representative could not be reconstructed.

2.2 Measures and construction of domain indices

Each section of the questionnaire mapped onto a domain of the guidelines, and the analysis exploited that correspondence by constructing five additive indices, each scaled from 0 to 1. Binary items were coded 1 for the presence of the engaged practice and 0 otherwise. Ordinal frequency items covering meeting and communication frequency were linearly rescaled. Likert items on decision-making were oriented so that higher values denoted stronger shared governance, and the item stating that the head teacher makes most decisions alone was reverse scored. For each respondent, a domain index was the mean of its non-missing constituent items, and an overall adherence index was the mean of the five domain indices. The construction is transparent and tolerant of item-level missingness, although it assumes equal weighting within domains, an assumption revisited in the limitations. Because the indices deliberately combine item types of different kinds, namely binary presence items, rescaled ordinal frequency items and Likert items, internal-consistency coefficients such as Cronbach's alpha are not an appropriate reliability model for them; the indices are composite indicators of policy adherence rather than reflective scales measuring a latent trait. Item-level data were not available in the aggregated dataset, so no dimensionality checks could be run, and the indices are therefore treated as descriptive composites rather than as validated instruments. Table 1 sets out the mapping between survey items, domains and the constructs they were taken to measure.

Table 1: Mapping of survey items to guideline domains and index construction

Guideline-aligned domain	Constituent survey items	Construct measured
Participation and governance	Existence of Board of Management and Parents' Association; reported meeting frequency of both bodies	Availability of participation structures
Informing the community	Whether regular updates are provided; update frequency; use of meetings and of written notices	Regularity and inclusiveness of information flow
Shared decision-making	Head teacher does not decide alone (reverse scored); staff take raised issues seriously; parents and Board have capacity to act; school improvement plan exists; Board and Parents' Association involved in shaping it	Translation of voice into planning and action
Accountability for improvement	Action taken on flagged resource problems; communication between Board and Sub-County Education Office; Board monitors learning outcomes	Capacity to surface and respond to constraints
Learning-at-home support	Remedial or catch-up classes; tutoring groups; differentiated teaching; engaging parents to support learning; referral for specialised support	School practices that directly enable early-grade progress



Note. All indices scaled 0 to 1. The overall adherence index is the unweighted mean of the five domain indices. $n = 49$, except learning-at-home support ($n = 43$) owing to filter logic in the questionnaire.

Table 1 shows that the five domains differ in how much institutional agency they require. Participation and governance is satisfied by the existence of a body, whereas learning-at-home support requires a school to change what teachers and caregivers do between school days. This is the asymmetry Devlieghere et al. (2022) identify in policy definitions of involvement, and it is why the domains were kept separate rather than collapsed into a single compliance score.

2.3 Outcome measures

Two parent-reported proxies for foundational learning were used. The first was a global rating of overall school performance on a scale of 1 to 10. The second was perceived end-of-Grade-3 reading proficiency, an ordinal measure with five levels ranging from none to all children able to read. Neither is a direct assessment of literacy, and both were interpreted as perceptions held by an informed community stakeholder rather than as objective attainment. Their use is consistent with the purpose of the original questionnaire, which was to capture how the community perceives and supports learning, and their limitations are addressed explicitly in Section 5.

2.4 Data analysis

Analysis proceeded in three stages. Descriptive statistics summarised the profile of respondents, the prevalence of governance structures and the distribution of each domain index. Bivariate associations between domain indices and the two outcomes were estimated using Pearson correlations for the continuous performance rating and Spearman rank correlations for the ordinal reading measure. Ordinary least squares regression then modelled each outcome as a function of the domain indices in order to assess their joint and independent contributions. Group differences were tested with Welch's t-test for unequal variances, and effect sizes were reported as Cohen's d . Given the modest sample, results were interpreted with caution, with emphasis placed on effect sizes and on the consistency of patterns across the two outcomes rather than on statistical significance alone. The analysis is framed as exploratory and hypothesis-generating. All computation was carried out in Python using the pandas, NumPy and SciPy libraries, and a two-tailed alpha of .05 was used as a reference threshold. Three qualifications attach to this strategy and are carried through the interpretation of every result. First, twelve bivariate coefficients were computed across five domain indices and two outcomes, so at a nominal alpha of .05 roughly one significant result would be expected by chance alone; no correction for multiple comparisons was applied, and under a Bonferroni-adjusted threshold of .004 neither of the coefficients reported as significant would survive. Second, with 49 cases and three simultaneous predictors, the regression models are under-powered by conventional standards and can detect only large effects reliably. Third, the domain indices are not independent of one another, since several draw on adjacent aspects of the same governance arrangements, so the individual regression coefficients are vulnerable to collinearity and are reported as indicative of the relative ordering of the domains rather than as precise partial effects.

2.5 Ethical considerations

The dataset analysed was anonymised and aggregated before it was made available for secondary analysis, and it contained no direct or indirect identifiers of schools, respondents or learners. Permissions for the original data collection, including national review board clearance, were obtained by the agencies that commissioned the Spotlight fieldwork. No additional contact was made with respondents for the purposes of this analysis.

3. Analysis Results

3.1 Profile of parent representatives

The parent representatives were predominantly male (30 of 49; 61%) and experienced, with a mean age of 47.4 years ($SD = 9.1$, range 30 to 71) and a mean of 5.2 years of service in school governance structures. Educational attainment was relatively high for the population they represent, since 45% held post-secondary qualifications, 43% had completed secondary school and 12% had primary education only. Only 24% had a child currently enrolled in Grades 1 to 3, which means that most respondents spoke about early-grade learning from a governance vantage point rather than from current parental experience. Table 2 summarises the profile.

Table 2: Profile of parent representatives ($n = 49$)

Characteristic	Category	n (%) or statistic
Sex	Male	30 (61%)
	Female	19 (39%)



Characteristic	Category	n (%) or statistic
Age (years)	Mean (SD)	47.4 (9.1)
	Median [range]	47 [30–71]
Years in governance role	Mean (SD)	5.2 (4.0)
	Median [range]	4 [1–23]
Highest qualification	Post-secondary	22 (45%)
	Secondary	21 (43%)
	Primary	6 (12%)
Has a child in Grades 1 to 3	Yes	12 (24%)
	No	37 (76%)

Table 2 indicates that Kenya's engagement structures are staffed by a governance elite rather than by a cross-section of caregivers. Brown et al. (2022) report the same concentration of formal participation among parents with higher educational attainment and greater institutional familiarity, and Devlieghere et al. (2022) argue that institutional definitions of involvement select for parents already legible to the school. The pattern also bears on measurement, since respondents distant from Grade 1 to 3 classrooms report on early-grade reading at second hand.

3.2 Adherence across the five guideline domains

The central empirical finding is the steep gradient across the five domains, presented in Figure 2. Adherence was near-universal for participation and governance, with a mean index of 96 out of 100, and very high for shared decision-making (90) and accountability responsiveness (82). It fell to a moderate level for communication (68) and dropped sharply for learning-at-home support (36).

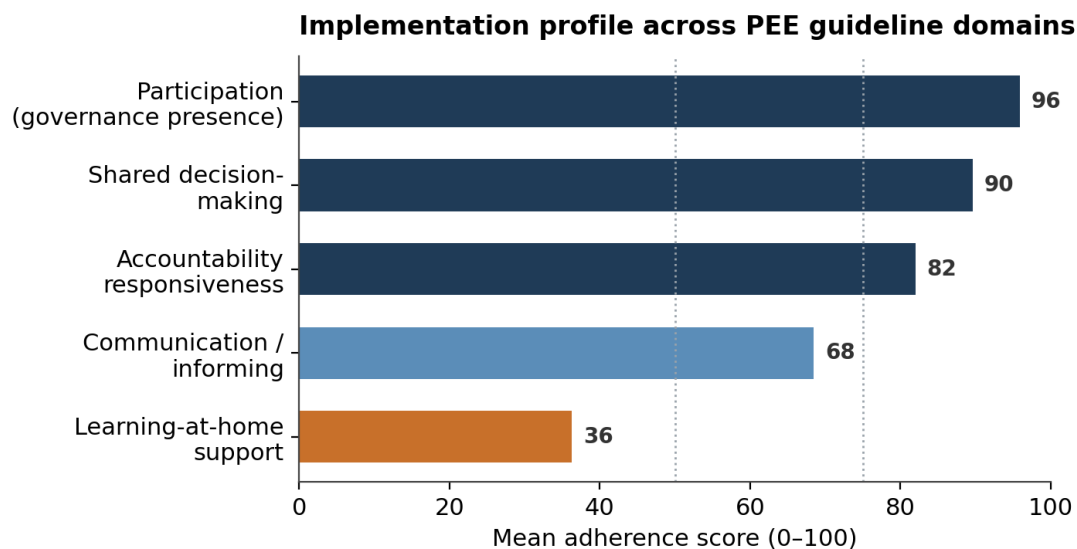


Figure 2. Mean adherence across the five guideline domains (0 to 100 scale)

The domains that schools control most directly and most visibly, namely constituting committees, holding meetings and taking issues seriously, were well implemented. The domain that the achievement literature identifies as most consequential for learning, structured support for learning at home, was the weakest by a wide margin. Disaggregating the underlying items confirms the picture. Almost all respondents reported a Board of Management (98%) and a Parents' Association (94%), whereas non-governmental or community development organisations were far less common (39%), which indicates that external community linkages are thinner than internal statutory structures. School



improvement planning was institutionalised, with 90% reporting an existing plan and Boards of Management (96%) and Parents' Associations (80%) heavily involved in shaping it, while external organisations were involved much less often (38%).

The gradient in Figure 2 mirrors the ordering that the meta-analytic literature would predict is least favourable for learning. Kim (2022) finds that home-based involvement, and homework support in particular, yields inconsistent and sometimes null effects precisely because it is rarely structured, while Boonk et al. (2018) and Hill and Tyson (2009) report that structured academic socialisation at home carries the strongest association with achievement. Kenya's schools have therefore invested most heavily in the dimension with the weakest claim to a learning effect and least in the dimension with the strongest, an inversion also visible in the Embu trial, where the dimensions that responded to deliberate intervention were the home-learning and communication behaviours rather than the governance structures already in place (Muriithi Gitonga et al., 2026).

3.3 Communication routines

Communication routines revealed the first substantial gap. Although 94% of schools reportedly provided regular progress updates, the dominant rhythm was termly (61%), with only 20% communicating monthly and 6% weekly. The channel mix was similarly skewed. Meetings or barazas were near-ubiquitous (93%), but written notices reached fewer than half of respondents (46%). Infrequent, meeting-dependent communication systematically disadvantages caregivers who cannot attend convenings, including working parents, those with care responsibilities and those living at a distance, and it offers few asynchronous points of contact between terms. Measured against Epstein's communicating dimension, the schools had established that they communicate, but not that they communicate often, in writing, or in both directions.

The finding is consistent with the Kenyan intervention evidence. Parent-teacher communication in the Embu trial improved by 26% once it was deliberately targeted, which indicates that the deficit observed here is tractable rather than structural (Muriithi Gitonga et al., 2026). It is also consistent with the classification of low-cost information provision among the more cost-effective interventions available to constrained systems, provided the information is actionable rather than generic (GEEAP, 2023). Banerjee et al. (2010) supply the necessary qualification, since information that does not connect to a decision a community can influence produced no measurable gain in the Indian trial.

3.4 Support for struggling learners

The learning-at-home and remediation domain exposed the largest implementation deficit. Remedial or catch-up classes were widespread (79%), but the more individualised and home-connected supports were rare. Only 23% of respondents reported peer or teacher-led tutoring groups, 21% reported differentiated teaching adapted to learners' needs, and 9% reported referral for specialised assessment. Most consequentially, only 49% reported that their school actively engages parents or guardians to support learning at home, despite this being an explicit pillar of the guidelines. No school reported using grade repetition. Table 3 details the reported support.

Table 3: Reported school actions to support struggling readers (n = 43)

Action	Yes (n)	% reporting
Offer remedial or catch-up classes	34	79%
Engage parents or guardians to support learning at home	21	49%
Establish peer or teacher-led tutoring groups	10	23%
Adapt teaching to learners' specific needs	9	21%
Refer learners for specialised support services	4	9%
Ask children to repeat the grade	0	0%

Table 3 describes a remediation model that is group-based, school-bounded and undifferentiated. The 79% coverage of catch-up classes sits alongside 21% coverage of differentiated teaching, which is the practice that the evidence base treats as the more productive of the two. Targeting instruction by learning level rather than by grade is classified among the most cost-effective interventions available to low- and middle-income systems, whereas undifferentiated



additional instruction is not (GEEAP, 2023). The 49% figure for engaging caregivers in home learning is the sharper concern, since structured parent-child literacy activity is among the more reliably productive forms of home support (Steiner et al., 2022) and since the Embu trial demonstrated that this specific behaviour responds to short, targeted parental support in Kenyan conditions (Muriithi Gitonga et al., 2026). The gap between policy expectation and reported practice is therefore not a gap in what is known to work.

3.5 Accountability concerns

Asked to rate the severity of various problems, respondents located the binding constraints in infrastructure and learning materials rather than in teacher behaviour. Classroom repair needs were rated moderate or serious by 63% of respondents, insufficient textbooks by 51% and insufficient seats by 51%. Teacher management issues were comparatively minor, with lateness rated moderate or serious by 12% and absenteeism by 14%, and delayed salaries by 24%. Where resource problems reached at least moderate severity, 74% of respondents were aware of action having been taken. A corresponding figure of 86% was reported for action on teacher punctuality, but that percentage rests on the small subset who rated punctuality at least moderately problematic in the first place, which was 12% of the sample, or roughly six respondents; the exact denominator was not recoverable from the aggregated dataset, so the figure is unstable and is reported for completeness rather than as evidence. Taking the resource figure as the more reliable of the two, the accountability loop appears reasonably responsive once a problem is surfaced. The constraint is less the responsiveness of governance than the scale of the underlying resource deficits, which lie largely beyond the school's own means.

This qualifies the standard accountability argument. Westhorp et al. (2014) specify that community accountability improves learning only where participation connects to decisions schools can implement; here, governance responds well within its authority but faces deficits in classrooms, textbooks and furniture that exceed it. Anand et al. (2023) identify the same constraint from the management side. Responsiveness without resources is a ceiling, not a failure of will.

3.6 Engagement domains and the foundational-learning proxies

Two outcomes were modelled, namely the global performance rating and perceived Grade-3 reading proficiency, and the two diverged in informative ways. The single-item performance rating ($M = 7.47$, $SD = 1.34$) was not meaningfully predicted by any domain index, either bivariately or jointly, with a multiple regression R-squared of .06 and a non-significant F statistic. The reading-proficiency outcome was more discriminating. The shared decision-making index emerged as the strongest correlate (Spearman $\rho = .39$, $p = .006$), followed by participation and governance ($\rho = .29$, $p = .044$). In a regression of perceived reading on shared decision-making, communication and participation, shared decision-making was the only significant predictor ($\beta = 2.24$, $p = .044$), with a model R-squared of .14. Table 4 reports the correlation structure.

Table 4: Correlations of guideline domain indices with two foundational-learning proxies

Domain index	Performance (Pearson r)	Reading (Spearman ρ)	n
Participation and governance	.11	.29*	48–49
Informing the community	.18	.05	48–49
Shared decision-making	.19	.39**	48–49
Accountability responsiveness	.04	.22	48–49
Learning-at-home support	-.12	.05	43
Overall adherence	.04	.21	48–49

Note. Perf. = perceived overall school performance (1 to 10). Reading = perceived end-of-Grade-3 reading proficiency (five-level ordinal). * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. Pearson coefficients were used for the continuous performance rating and Spearman coefficients for the ordinal reading measure.

Table 4 shows that the domains carrying signal are the deliberative ones. Shared decision-making and, more weakly, participation associate with perceived reading, whereas communication, accountability responsiveness and learning-



at-home support do not. Two of these null results are readily interpretable. Communication and learning-at-home support are the domains with the lowest reported adherence, so there is little variation at the upper end for an association to attach to. The negative coefficient for learning-at-home support against the performance rating ($r = -.12$) is small, non-significant and best read as noise. Both significant coefficients should be read against the multiple-comparison caution set out in Section 2.4, since twelve tests were computed and neither coefficient would survive a Bonferroni-adjusted threshold. The magnitude of the shared decision-making association is broadly consistent with the pooled parental-involvement estimates reported by Kim (2022) and Sujarwo and Herwin (2023), which is reassuring given the very different measures involved, and it corresponds to the finding of Duflo et al. (2015) that Kenyan school committees affected outcomes only where they were equipped to exercise judgement rather than merely to exist. Figure 3 displays the relationship.

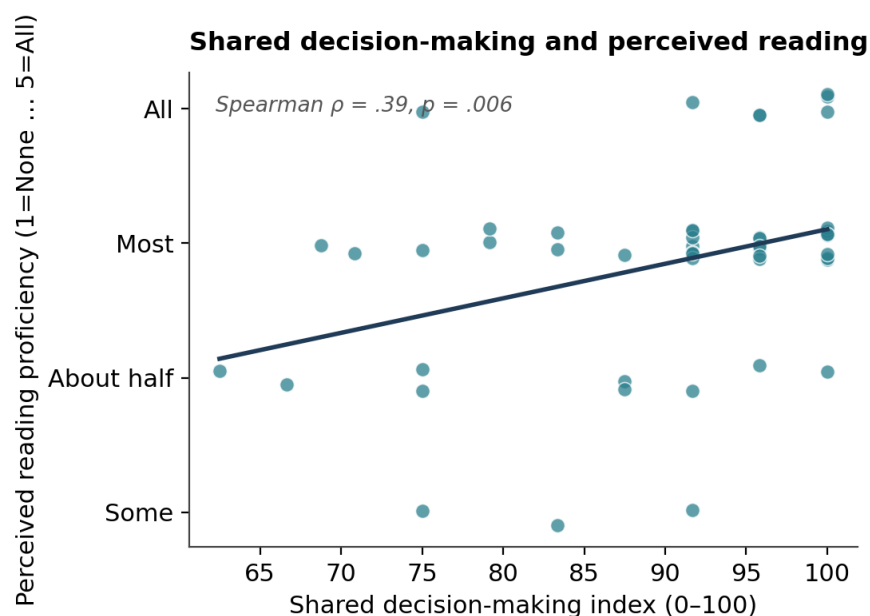


Figure 3. Association between the shared decision-making index and perceived Grade-3 reading proficiency, with linear trend

Points in Figure 3 are jittered vertically to reduce overplotting of the ordinal outcome. The trend is positive across the range of the index, but dispersion at high index values shows that strong shared decision-making is compatible with a wide range of perceived reading outcomes. The relationship is best described as a shift in the distribution rather than a deterministic gradient, which is what Anand et al. (2023) would predict given the length of the causal chain between a governance meeting and a Grade 3 classroom.

A second contrast concerns concrete action for struggling readers. Respondents whose schools were reported to be taking specific steps to help children who cannot yet read rated overall school performance markedly higher than those whose schools were not ($M = 7.63$, $SD = 1.31$, $n = 43$ against $M = 6.33$, $SD = 1.03$, $n = 6$; Welch $t = 2.77$, $p = .026$), a large effect (Cohen's $d = 1.01$). By contrast, urban and rural schools did not differ in perceived performance ($M = 7.52$ against $M = 7.42$; $t = 0.26$, $p = .80$), which suggests that the engagement gradients documented here are not simply a function of geography. Figure 4 displays the comparison.



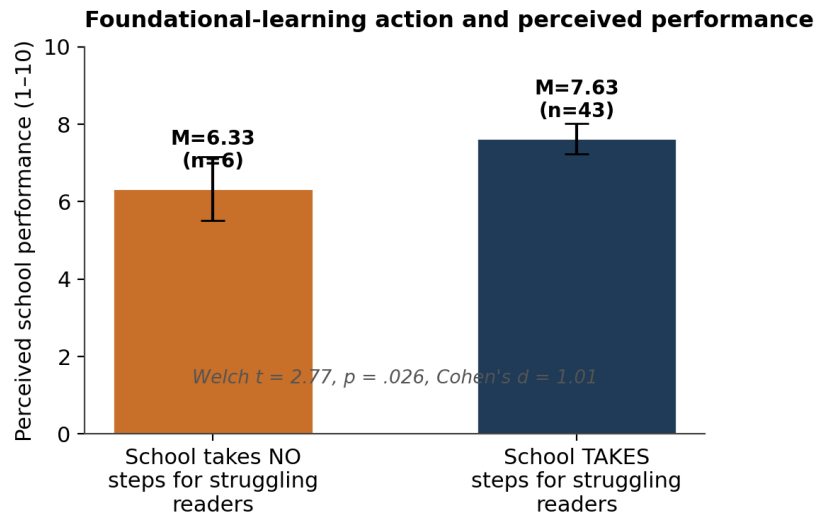


Figure 4. Perceived school performance by whether the school is reported to be taking concrete steps for struggling readers

Error bars in Figure 4 are 95% confidence intervals, and the comparison group is small ($n = 6$), so the estimate is imprecise even though the effect is large. The direction matches the wider evidence that visible, learning-directed action rather than structural presence distinguishes schools in the eyes of community stakeholders (Pradhan et al., 2011; Westhorp et al., 2014). Read alongside Table 4, the two results point one way: dimensions involving genuine deliberation and concrete learning-directed action track with better perceived learning, whereas the presence of structures, already near a ceiling, does not discriminate between schools.

3.7 Variation across sub-counties

Although structures were near-universal across the sample, the composite adherence index varied across sub-counties from approximately 60 to 79 out of 100, with the lowest scores in Tongaren and Maara and the highest in Mathare, Westlands and Mvita. Figure 5 presents the distribution.

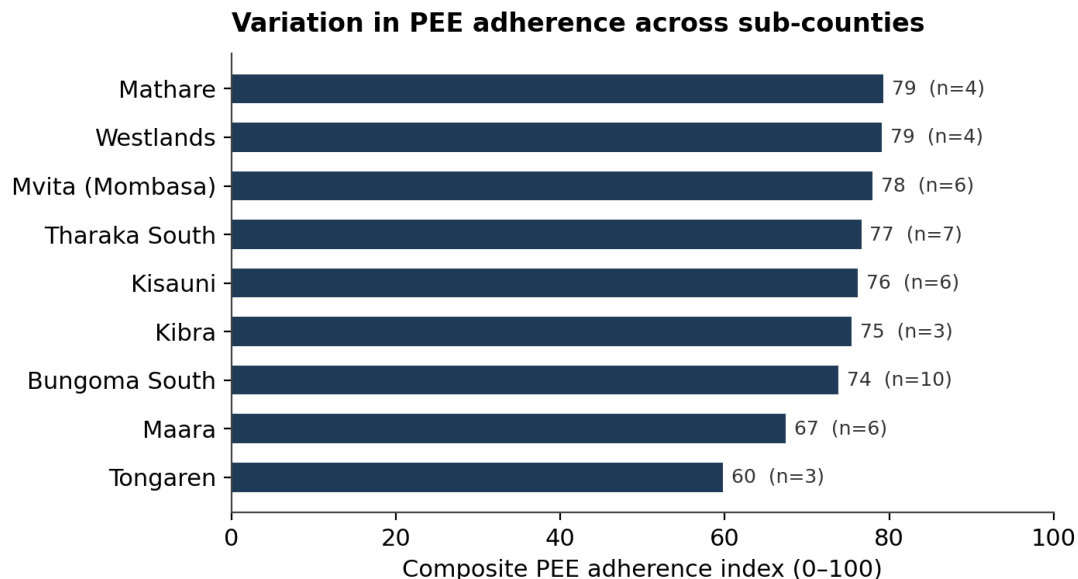


Figure 5. Composite adherence index by sub-county (0 to 100), with cell sizes in parentheses



Because sub-county cell sizes are small, ranging from 3 to 10, these rankings are indicative rather than conclusive and should be read as flags for follow-up rather than as precise estimates. They nonetheless suggest that the implementation gap is uneven and that targeted support could be directed to lower-adherence localities. The urban concentration at the upper end of Figure 5 sits alongside the null urban-rural difference in perceived performance reported in Section 3.6, which cautions against reading the ordering as a reflection of school quality. It is more consistent with the observation that formal engagement structures operate more readily where institutional density is higher (Brown et al., 2022), and with the continental finding that the middle tier of the system is itself a substantial source of variation in how schools are supported (UNESCO, 2025).

4. Discussion

This study set out to determine how far Kenyan primary schools have moved from establishing parental engagement structures to institutionalising engagement routines, and which dimensions of engagement associate most closely with foundational learning. Three findings stand out.

First, Kenya has largely succeeded at the structural task. Boards of Management and Parents' Associations exist almost everywhere in the sample, school improvement plans are nearly universal, and parents perceive that their voice is heard and that governance bodies have the capacity to act. Judged by the standard of structural establishment, the guidelines are well implemented. This is a genuine achievement and is consistent with Kenya's broader record of building functional system architecture for early-grade reform (Piper et al., 2018). The 2025 Spotlight analysis reports that Kenyan school leaders devote more time to instructional leadership than their counterparts in any other country in the series, which indicates that the architecture is not merely nominal (UNESCO, 2025).

Second, and in tension with the first, the routines that most plausibly drive learning are the least developed. Structured support for learning at home, the dimension with the strongest claim to an effect on achievement (Boonk et al., 2018; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Steiner et al., 2022), was reported in fewer than half of schools, and communication remained infrequent and largely one-directional. The forms of engagement that are easiest to legislate and audit are well in place, while those hardest to mandate but most valuable for learning lag behind. This is the central diagnostic of the paper: an implementation profile strong where it is visible and weak where it is consequential, which Devlieghere et al. (2022) would read as the predictable consequence of defining involvement in terms institutions can count.

Third, the dimensions that discriminate between schools are the deliberative and action-oriented ones, while the near-ceilinged structural indices carried little signal. This aligns with the comparative evidence that the returns to community participation are conditional on functionality, that is, on whether committees deliberate, whether information is actionable and whether participation connects to decisions schools can implement (Duflo et al., 2015; Pradhan et al., 2011; Westhorp et al., 2014). It also coheres with leadership theory, since the schools that convert structures into learning-directed routines are presumably those where leadership focuses governance on instruction rather than administration (Leithwood et al., 2004; Robinson et al., 2008). The small average effect of school management interventions reported by Anand et al. (2023) is a useful corrective here, in that it sets a realistic expectation for what improved governance alone can deliver.

A methodological observation reinforces the substantive one. The two outcomes behaved differently. The global single-item performance rating was inert, while the more specific reading measure responded to the deliberative engagement dimensions. This divergence is itself a finding. It cautions against relying on global satisfaction ratings to evaluate engagement reforms and argues for outcome measures tied to specific learning constructs. The contrast that carries the signal is the presence of concrete action for struggling readers rather than the presence of a governance body, a distinction with direct implications for what schools should be encouraged to do.

4.1 Policy implications

If the binding constraint is functionality rather than structure, the marginal policy effort should shift accordingly. The more informative indicators are behavioural: how often two-way communication reaches all caregivers, whether structured home-learning activities are in routine use, and whether governance meetings carry early-grade learning as a standing agenda item. Reframing accountability around such indicators would direct attention to the dimensions this study finds both weakest and most consequential, at modest cost, since the interventions concerned sit at the lower-cost end of the available evidence base (GEEAP, 2023; Muriithi Gitonga et al., 2026).



5. Conclusions

Kenya has built the architecture of parental engagement. In the schools studied, the committees exist, the plans are written and parents feel heard. What is not yet built consistently are the routines through which that architecture would support early-grade learning, namely frequent two-way communication that reaches every caregiver and structured support for learning at home. The dimensions that vary across schools and that track with perceived learning are the deliberative and action-oriented ones rather than the merely structural. The implication for policy is clear and, by the standards of education reform, relatively tractable. The next phase of implementing the guidelines should be defined less by establishing structures and more by routinising the small number of high-leverage practices that turn participation into learning.

The study contributes domain-level rather than aggregate evidence on the implementation of a national parental engagement policy, which allows the presence-versus-functionality distinction to be tested rather than asserted, and it shows that the distinction is measurable with ordinary survey instruments and therefore available to routine monitoring rather than only to research.

Several limitations bound these conclusions. The sample is modest ($n = 49$) and purposive rather than nationally representative, which limits both statistical power and external validity, and the sub-county estimates in particular rest on very small cells. All measures are single-informant self-reports from parent representatives, and the outcomes are perceptions rather than direct assessments of literacy or numeracy, so the associations reported hold between an engagement perception and a learning perception offered by the same respondent, which raises the possibility of common-method and halo effects. The design is cross-sectional, so the associations are not causal, and it is equally plausible that better-performing schools cultivate stronger shared decision-making as the reverse. The domain indices use unweighted, equal-item aggregation, which is transparent but not the only defensible scheme, and because they combine binary, ordinal and Likert items they are composite policy indicators for which no internal-consistency or dimensionality evidence could be computed from the aggregated data. The regression models carry three further constraints noted in Section 2.4: they are under-powered at $n = 49$ with three predictors, the indices are not mutually independent and so the partial coefficients are vulnerable to collinearity, and the twelve bivariate tests were conducted without adjustment for multiple comparisons, such that neither significant coefficient would survive a Bonferroni-corrected threshold. Respondents were nominated by their schools rather than sampled, which introduces a further, unquantifiable selection risk. Finally, most respondents did not have a child currently in Grades 1 to 3, which may attenuate the accuracy of their early-grade reading judgements. These constraints make the study hypothesis-generating rather than confirmatory.

6. Recommendations

The recommendations below follow from the implementation profile reported in Section 3 and are framed as a small set of routinisable, monitorable practices rather than as new structures.

1. Routinise two-way communication. Schools should move from termly, meeting-dependent updates to at least monthly short communications that combine convenings with written and mobile channels, including SMS or messaging applications where feasible, so that caregivers who cannot attend meetings are still reached and can respond.
2. Embed structured home-learning support. Schools should provide short, curriculum-aligned take-home literacy and numeracy activities together with simple caregiver guidance, targeting the dimension that is currently weakest at 49% coverage and that is most strongly tied to achievement in the meta-analytic literature.
3. Make early-grade learning a standing governance agenda item. Boards of Management and Parents' Associations should be equipped with a simple dashboard covering attendance, early-grade reading progress and remediation coverage, and its discussion should be required at each meeting, which would convert existing deliberative capacity into a learning focus.
4. Broaden remediation beyond catch-up classes. Peer and teacher-led tutoring and differentiated instruction, both currently reported by roughly one in five schools, should be encouraged so that struggling readers receive individualised rather than only group-level support.
5. Coordinate on resource bottlenecks. Because the binding constraints of classroom repairs, textbooks and seats exceed schools' own means, communication between Boards of Management and Sub-County Education Offices should be channelled towards jointly resolving these deficits, which directly affect early-grade conditions.



6. Shift monitoring from compliance to functionality. Behavioural indicators covering communication frequency and reach, caregiver participation in learning support, and learning-focused governance should be integrated into routine monitoring and school improvement planning, replacing indicators that merely record the existence of committees.
7. Strengthen the evidence base. Future research should link implementation measures to direct, independent assessments of early-grade reading and numeracy, using longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs to test whether strengthening shared decision-making and home-learning routines causally improves foundational learning.

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Appendix A. Summary of Domain Indices

Table A1: Descriptive statistics for the guideline domain indices (0 to 1 scale)

Domain index	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Participation and governance	0.96	0.14	0.50	1.00
Informing the community	0.69	0.22	0.00	1.00
Shared decision-making	0.90	0.10	0.63	1.00
Accountability responsiveness	0.82	0.28	0.00	1.00
Learning-at-home support	0.36	0.18	0.00	0.60
Overall adherence	0.76	0.12	0.27	0.99

Note. n = 49 for all domains except learning-at-home support (n = 43), owing to filter logic in the questionnaire. Indices are unweighted means of constituent items rescaled to 0 to 1.

