Educational Leadership in Post-Colonial Contexts: What Can We Learn from the Experiences of Three Female Principals in Kenyan Secondary Schools?

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Abstract: Leadership matters in the engagement and achievement of students. Much of the research in this area has emanated from western contexts and there is a growing demand for research and knowledge generated from emerging areas of the world. This qualitative study through the use of narratives, examines the experiences of three female secondary school principals in Kenyan secondary schools to gain deeper insights into leadership practices and theorizing within a post-colonial context such as Kenya. Utilizing a decolonizing education and social justice leadership discursive framework the tensions and complexities of their leadership practices are explored. Educational leaders in developing countries face problems that are uniquely different from their counterparts in Western countries and as such leadership practices and theorizing must be contextualized. Findings of the study support existing research on the perpetuation of colonized approaches to education, existence of a "managing" view of leadership, tensions in practice regarding the manifestation of social issues in schools, and the need for leadership development grounded in Kenyan knowledge and experiences. While these findings can inform leadership discourses and practices, further research is warranted on a larger scale with greater diversity of participants.

Keywords: Africa; decolonizing education; diversity; Kenya; school leadership; social justice leadership

1. Introduction

Leadership is an important factor in improving learning for students [1]. As the field of educational leadership continues to grow, there are increased calls for more research to be conducted outside of Western countries. Dimmock & Walker [2] argue that scholars from developed countries exert disproportionate influence on educational leadership theory, policy and practice. School leadership has emerged as an area that requires greater attention from practitioners, scholars and researchers as schools prepare students to meet the challenges of the 21st century characterized by increasing diversity where communication, critical thinking and collaborative skills are essential. Engaging in problem solving, critical and creative thinking is at the heart of learning [3] and effective school leadership is critical to prepare students to solve messy, complex problems associated with living in a competitive and globally connected world. Second only to teaching, leadership is a crucial ingredient in bringing about change in schools and improving learning outcomes for students [1].

The relationship between school leadership and student achievement is evident in research conducted in Western countries but relatively little such work has been done in countries like Kenya [4]. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [5] identifies school leadership as an education policy priority around the world and has called for the development of school leadership

frameworks that respond to current and future educational environments as countries seek to adapt their education systems to the needs of contemporary society. The OECD suggests that schools must lay the foundation for lifelong learning while simultaneously dealing with new challenges such as changing demographic patterns, increased migration, changing knowledge markets, new technologies, and rapidly developing fields of knowledge.

Under the impact of colonialism, neoliberalism, and globalization education continues to produce a system in which student disengagement, inequity, and social injustice continues to exist [6]. For change to occur educators must make a shift. Change is needed in educational systems governed by an ethic which accepts, respects, and embraces difference; believes in the globality of humanity; recognizes the relations of power that currently exist and those that have shaped history, and aims to de-link from the colonization of knowledge [7]. School leaders have an important role to play in this endeavor. [8] asserts that:

> Educational leaders have both a responsibility and an obligation because we have access to power. Whether we use it or not is a question of courage and risk-taking. Our access to power provides opportunities for us to insert education into political, social economic, philosophical, and literary discourses and debates. To do this however, we have to learn how to speak differently both within our profession and also with others from different professions and cultures. As educators, our audiences are not just fellow educators or our students, but also the world's citizens, people from all cultures, religions and ideologies. (p. v11)

Rapidly changing societal and education conditions call for the continuous development of school leaders to enable them to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for their dynamic and complex roles [9,10]. It is important that countries such as Kenya generate school leadership knowledge theories and practices grounded in their contexts. In this article, we argue that this knowledge must be from a decolonized and social justice perspective that draws on the lived experiences of school leaders. African Indigenous ways of knowing allows for deeper understanding of the contexts in which students learn [11] and supports deeper understanding of self. Given the changing contexts of education, school leadership knowledge, theorizing and practices can no longer be generated predominantly by scholars from the North, where a relatively small number of scholars and policymakers (representing less than 8% of the world's population) purport to speak for the rest [2]. Many countries in Africa rely on international agencies and aid groups to support their education systems and this makes adopting policies and practices from the global north convenient. Eacott & Asuga [12] argue that this reliance on aid and knowledge generation from the West is an issue within the African context that potentially constructs a dependence on external expertise and funding, while legitimizing deficit views of nations in Africa. Dimmock & Walker [2] urge scholars in the field of educational leadership to look beyond national borders for alternative frameworks, because if they do not, the field will remain too narrow. In other words, space must be created to include voices, experiences and knowledge of school leaders that are not often represented in the discourse. This paper examines the leadership experiences and practices of three principals in secondary schools in Kenya to gain deeper insights into the complexities of school leadership in Kenya. It is the hope that this exploration will lay the foundation for larger studies of school leadership in Kenya that will inform and broaden educational leadership theorizing and practices.

2. Decolonizing Education and Social Justice Leadership

The dominance of Eurocentric knowledge, practices, and beliefs in education must be disrupted and the experiences of people with a colonial past must be centered for authentic meaningful change to occur. While we build on the important work of post-colonial scholars such Fanon, Said, and others, Ref. [13] suggests that the continued presence of colonizers in various forms have set up processes that keep these countries subordinated and dependent on the West, and as such decolonization is an ongoing process. Colonizers have used education as a means to gain and keep control. Those who

have lived in spaces where their experiences, histories and knowledge have been rendered inferior to Eurocentric ways of knowing, must become an integral part of constructing their own education enterprise. Colonized history and knowledge must be disrupted in all spaces as these have undermined Indigenous peoples. Battiste [14] argues that "no single Indigenous experience dominate other perspectives, no one heritage informs it, and no two heritages produce the same knowledge" (p. 66) and as such, a decolonizing approach must be an ethical space [15] where people from different communities come together for reflection and dialogue to gain shared understanding and work together to create a shared future. Decolonizing theorizing calls on us to work together, move beyond cultural awareness and inclusion, and challenge racist ideology as we rethink and re-imagine ourselves in relationship with one another.

Decolonizing education addresses systemic change and the systems that perpetuate inequities and inequalities. As Battiste suggests, we should not aim our discursive arrows at educators and their methods, but at systems and policy choices that perpetuate inequities. Those who embrace decolonizing approaches must forge a path that critiques Eurocentric education and its practices, affirm Indigenous peoples and their rights and reclaim educational scholarship that works for the benefit of those who have been colonized. While practices varied due to cultural diversity in sub-Sahara Africa, there were some common elements which characterize most societies; for instance, African education was informal and occurred in the context of the family, community, clan, and cultural group [16].

Decolonizing education calls for Eurocentric consciousness to be disrupted, for unlearning to take place, and notions of meritocracy within education and society that have privileged some to be challenged. Battiste [14] argues that this is not an easy endeavor as these privileges are entrenched and constructed to maintain a racist society. Smith [17] argues that, "decolonization" is concerned with having "a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values that inform research practices" (p. 24). Abdi [18] suggests that decolonizing educational praxis disturbs "the structural as well as the functional coherence of official knowledges and learning discourses and their selectively dysfunctional scribbling of totalizing Eurocentric metanarratives" (p. 12). In this effort [18] suggests further that educational arrangements and outcomes or "co-created schooling" must achieve tangible well-being for all.

Within the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, the experiences and knowledges of former colonized peoples must be foregrounded, their traditions must inform and shape practice. Decolonizing theorizing documents social injustice, gives voice to subjugated knowledges, creates spaces for the voices of the silenced to be expressed and listened to, and challenges racism, colonialism and oppression [17] and therefore has convergence with those who advocate for socially just leadership. Smith argues further that decolonization is about developing a critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values that inform research practices. If we are to move education forward, alternative ontological and epistemological ways of knowing must be centered, understood, and practiced. In this effort both scholars and practitioners must join forces to bring theory and action together.

Kenya's education system continues to navigate a colonial legacy within the context of global shifts and societal changes. Many of the major structural elements of the education system in Kenya have remained largely unchanged since it gained independence [19]. In K-12 schools this in manifested in the curriculum, privileged languages, organization of schools at various levels, teacher preparation, and the preparation and development of school leaders [20]. The effects of colonization on the Kenyan education system are seen in the continued prevalence of standardization, centralization, and a system that perpetuates Kenya's existing class structure and access to quality education [20]. Colonization and neo-colonization continue to place the Kenyan education system and teachers under great stress [11]. Wa Thiongo [21] reminds us that colonialism brought with it erasure of Indigenous ways of knowing, customs and beliefs and this erasure is evident in the suppression of African languages in Kenya and the Kenyan school system [22–24]. Wa Thiongo [21] also suggests this erasure and suppression of African languages is the deliberate effort to maintain the status quo and colonial structures in place.

The education system in Kenya continues to colonize the spaces in which students learn [11] and as [25] argues, fails to critique colonial liturgies present in most school curricula and practices thus stifling the innovativeness and creativity of educators.

The focus on challenging injustices in education and society at large, create convergences between social justice leadership and decolonizing education as theoretical frameworks that guide this research. Social justice leadership involves ways of thinking about and practicing leadership that challenges school leaders to seize upon the potential that diversity offers, challenging dominant discourse and knowledge [26–31]. Social justice leadership involves moral dialogue, which is concerned with the need to balance high academic achievement, effective relationships with students from all backgrounds, and encouraging justice [32]. Social justice leadership is about advocacy and change, where leaders in educational institutions take bold actions to influence and change educational polices so that students who are at the margins can be better served [29]. This approach to leadership creates space for rethinking and reconceptualizing, recognizing that no one notion of social justice can be universally applied.

3. Methodology

This qualitative research employed a narrative inquiry approach that examined the experiences and stories of three female school leaders (two principals and one deputy principal) in secondary schools in Kenya. The purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of school leadership in Kenya through the experiences and narratives of those actively involved in schools. This research focused on the principalship, given the central role of principals in schools in the Kenyan education system. A narrative research approach supported the goals of the study as the telling of stories that are contextually and temporally bound leads to rich, in-depth understandings [33]. The experiences of participants in their contexts as told through their experiences are important as the voices of those who are often excluded in dominant leadership discourse are brought to the center. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to better understand the research context through the experiences and stories of research participants [34]. The rich description of participants' experiences and exploration of the meanings that the participants derive from their experiences, amplify voices that might have remained silent [35]. "Narrative inquiry has an underlying philosophy and access that enables the illumination of real people in real settings through the 'painting' of their stories, is a methodology in which the researcher attempts to illuminate the meanings of personal stories and events" [36].

4. Context

All participants at the time of the study were administrators in Kenyan secondary schools, which are grouped into four categories. The first category, is comprised of top academic public secondary schools, these are known as national schools. These schools admit students from all across Kenya who achieve in the top tier of the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education. The second category is the extra-county schools. These are public secondary schools that admit students who are not accepted to national schools. They admit 60% of students from their county and 40% from other counties across the country. The third category, county schools only admit students from the counties they serve. The fourth and lowest category is made up of district schools that admit students from the local village, who do not get admission into any of the schools mentioned above. Unlike the other three categories which usually have boarding facilities, district schools are usually day only schools. Meaning there are no boarding facilities and students usually walk from their homes to and from school every day.

The Kenyan government currently spends 27% of government income on education [37] which is a significant portion of the country's budget. Tuition fees are provided for each student of approximately $ 220 USD per year, per student [37]. This covers the cost of attending district schools, supporting parents, and relieving the burden of having to pay school fees. In cases where parents decide to participate in the common school lunch program, they contribute and pay for this service. Parents pay

for boarding at national, extra county and county schools, cost of which ranges from approximately 800 USD per year at national schools, 500 USD at extra county schools 250 USD at county schools. Boarding amenities vary across different levels of schools in Kenya. National schools have more facilities including a more varied diet and more staff to support students while county schools' boarding facilities are usually comprised of a bed in a crowded dormitory and standard menu meals.

5. Participants

Participants were chosen through convenience sampling. Recruitment letters were sent to potential participants that a research collaborator in Kenya had met during his tenure in public schools in Kenya. The participants in the study volunteered to be in the study. Each participant signed an informed consent that included consent to be interviewed and tape recorded. Participants in the study included two principals and one deputy principal, Wangira, Murata and Wanjiku. The names of participants, and schools used in this paper are pseudonyms. All participants are females and all the schools in the study are schools for girls. The selection of only women school leaders to participate in the study was not purposeful, but as a result of participants who responded positively to the call to participate in the study. An inclusion criterion required that participants had over five years of service in the principalship as research shows that this amount of time gives administrators enough experience over time to engage in deep critical reflection about their practice.

Wangira is 51 years old and at the time of the study was principal of Perkerra national school for girls located in one of Kenya's largest cities. She had been a principal for 17 years and holds a Master's degree in Educational Management. Academically, Perkerra school is routinely among the top 20 schools countrywide out of over 8000 secondary schools in Kenya. Students in the school excel academically on standardized tests. Prior to being principal at a national school, Wangira headed two other schools. Perkerra has a unique funding mechanism; it admits a sizeable quota of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) and establishes a connection with donors who pay fees and levies for the children. The linkage to donors is managed by a director who is appointed by the board of management. The director and the principal play complementary roles in management of the school, with the principal focusing primarily on academic performance.

Murata is 55 years old and at the time of the study was the principal of Mobidique extra county school located in the eastern province of Kenya. Murata had been a principal for 20 years. Though she is enrolled for a master's degree, she is not actively working towards completing the course. Mobidique extra county school is in a semi-rural setting and ranked in the top 250 countrywide. The school has seen an upsurge of student intake which has brought space challenges which have not yet been supported by the commensurate expansion of infrastructure. Like in other extra county schools, students at Mobidique face a plethora of challenges that are often manifested in disengagement. Principal Murata balanced her time between maintaining student discipline and academic excellence which often led to long work hours on most days from 7:00 am to 9:00 pm where most of her time was spent in one on one consultation with students.

Wanjiku, is 43 years old and at the time of the study was in her seventh year as the deputy principal of Heliconia extra-county school for girls in a semi-rural area, also in eastern Kenya. She completed a Master's degree in administration. At the time of the study, the school had a new principal and so Wanjiku was doing the bulk of management as the new principal settled in. Like Murata, her days were long from the 7:00am to 8.00 pm on most days with much of her time spent on day student discipline and academic performance. Heliconia at the time of the study was ranked among the top 150 schools countrywide by academic performance.

The following questions guided the research:

(1). How do you understand your role as a school principal?
(2). What are the challenges you experience as a school leader in Kenya?
(3). What changes would you like to see within schools and the education system in Kenya?

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and open-coding was used to look for themes across all three interviews. Open coding is an emergent coding technique drawn from grounded theory methodology [38,39]. This method of data analysis generates a participant-generated 'theory' from the data and involves applying codes that are derived from the text [40]. Open-coding is part of the process of developing grounded theory where the researchers search for answers from the data, in this case, the narratives of participants, instead of imposing predetermined constructs.

The coding process embraced a collaborative approach between both authors. We listened to the recordings of the interviews separately, generated themes that responded to the research questions, and compared the themes that emerged. In this collaborative process the knowledge and experience of co-author and Kenyan colleague informed both the data collection and data analysis process as we sought to elicit meanings from the narratives of the participants. As Blair [40] suggests we took time to reflect upon our own epistemology and ontology and the ways that this might impact the meanings that we drew from the data. From data analysis the following themes emerged that responded to the research questions; (1) school leadership within a managerial framework; (2) need for more formal school leadership training and preparation; (3) tensions of practice on issues of religion and social class in schools. These themes are examined in the findings.

6. Findings

The narratives and experiences of participants reveal the complexities of school leadership in Kenyan secondary schools where the influences of a colonial past are still evident in the organization and structure of schools. The tiered system of secondary schools in Kenya perpetuates a colonized system of education based on class. The ways in which the principals navigate their formal roles coupled with their responsiveness to the social and economic well-being of students speak to the complexity of the Kenyan educational context. The participants in the study did not explicitly name colonization as they theorized their work however it is evident in the daily struggles as they navigate with standardization, and reliance for example in the national school to support students. This complexity is captured in how they theorize their leadership within a management paradigm, while at the same time seeking ways to support students who are challenged to remain in school. While all the participants in the study are women, and feminist theory is not employed to undergird the research, there are convergences with feminist theory and how participants describe their experiences as school leaders. Women drawing on their faith and mothering roles in their approach to leadership, is in keeping with the literature on the ways in which women lead. Chandler [41] asserts that women in their leadership style have been found to be more participative and inclusive. Helgesen [42] suggests that women leaders tend to form a web of inclusion that embraces a social dimension. The school leaders' commitment to social justice is clear in their commitment to the well-being of their students.

7. School Leadership within a Managerial Framework

Principals in the study had different leadership roles and responsibilities based on the kind of school that they were leading, nonetheless all the participants speak of "managing" their schools as a dominant discourse, instead of a leadership discourse. Participants assert that they are responsible for the performance of the students in their schools, particularly on the various standardized examinations, and the managing of resources to achieve this goal. They saw their role as managers of their schools. In this role, their main functions are to maintain high test scores, keep order and discipline, and effectively manage the resources of the school. The context of education in Kenya, like most nations in Africa is one that is closely intertwined with the "aid industry" dominated by the West. There are questions as to how much space is left within this context for agency of school leaders, to reconceptualize and reimagine their roles given the demands of aid organizations, what [43] refer to as the aid discourse. Neoliberal notions of schooling often foreground efficiencies and standardization which find fertile ground in emerging countries such as Kenya. We must also keep in mind that not

too long ago the field of educational leadership was called educational administration and in this is still reflected in journals and programs in the West.

In the Kenyan context programs are offered on school management for educators. For example, Wangira, principal of the national school completed a Masters in educational management, although she feels that the program did not make her a better manager of her school. Wangira noted: "because I have a masters in educational management I can't say that I am a better manager than a person with a diploma (an equivalent to an associate degree). They too can equally manage schools well". Wangira also indicates that she likes "being the principal of a national school and is proud of the manner in which she manages her school:

> The students have high marks and abilities that match with the level of the school. Students know where they are going . . . marks determine where they access education...retention rate is very high . . . there is high teacher quality . . . good environment...clean dorms, that are not overcrowded and students have personal space.

Murata also explains that one of her primary roles as principal is "managing the human resources in the school". She suggests that when principals are good managers people in the school will be happy including the Board of Management (BOM).

> . . . the way to manage is to make people happy. When people are happy they will work—everyone, the students, the teachers, everyone. You make the BOM happy by being transparent, you make teachers happy by buying resources for them to teach ...and if a teacher has a sick child you give them permission to attend to their child.

Murata says her Christian faith and role as a mother supports her school management philosophy. I see myself "first as a Christian, then as a mother, and a teacher". Notwithstanding a dominant discourse among the principals of managing their schools, focus on resources, and standardization; there is compassion, focus on the wellbeing of students and concerns about the impact of social and economic issues on students.

The notion of management of schools is a contested and complex one that has dominated the discourse in the field. The shift to the notion of leadership and critical forms of leadership such as social justice leadership and culturally responsive leadership is new and still evolving. These new and emerging approaches have been critiqued for lack of robust examples and research on effective implementation given the contexts of schools and schooling. Scholars have taken up the call for more research on social justice leadership and it is the hope that the study will add to the discourse and knowledge in this area from non-Western contexts such as Kenya.

8. Need for More Formal School Leadership Training and Preparation

Kenya does not have a formal system of certifying, licensing, and credentialing aspiring leaders [44] and linking formal leadership preparation structures to educational outcomes. While there is growth in provision of courses regarding school leadership consistent with international trends in Kenya, the structure of such courses is recognized more for the standardization than effectiveness, and there is minimal attention given to identified dimensions of leadership leading to higher student outcomes [44]. Universities, various aid organizations, professional associations, and consultants fill the void by offering courses and programs to those aspiring to formal leadership roles in schools [45]. Some have argued that Kenya has adopted a modified version of the "apprentice model" [46]. School leadership preparation and development has been recognized through the provision of courses offered by universities, systemic authorities, professional associations, and consultants and has been criticized for being ad hoc, haphazard and not responsive to the needs of the current and aspiring school leaders [43].

All participants in the study indicate that the training they received to enter their roles as principals was not adequate for the tasks they are asked to perform as "managers" of their schools. The process

of becoming a principal was similar for all participants, transitioning from classroom teachers to principals. Principals are traditionally appointed from serving deputy principals or assistant teachers without any specific leadership preparation or development [47] Unlike Western countries such as Australia, Canada, and the United States there are no required principals' preparation courses and credentialing that must be completed prior to becoming a principal ([48,49]. Asuga & Eacott [43] argue when these leadership opportunities are made available they are contextualized by school leaders within a management paradigm and a business model of "managing", rather than an education discourse that seeks to disrupt and dislodge knowledge and practices of those who colonized Africa. Asuga & Eacott [43] suggest further that while school leadership preparation in the West is not a homogenous space and looks different for example in Canada, the United Stated and Australia, on the other hand, in countries of Africa school leadership preparation is caught up in the aid discourse which does not often reflect the needs of educators in schools. They suggest:

> " . . . in the diverse geographic and socio-political space that is Africa, school leadership preparation and development, as with much education reform, is caught up in the donor logic of 'catch up' . . . with increased pressure on ministries of education to meet the demands of the international aid . . . ". (p. 920)

Participants who went on to higher education do not feel that the extra studies added value to their roles as principals. For example, though Wangira and Wanjiku completed their Masters degree they do not feel that they are able to draw on and lever the knowledge gained from their advanced degrees in their roles as school principals. Murata suggests that she was not very enthusiastic about completing her degree because she does not see its importance for her current work. Murata shares how she feels about completing a Masters degree:

> Management (of a school) has very little to do with higher education received . . . . The Masters [degree] may be able to help someone to become a better leader, but for me I am doing it so that I feel I am there. I am already doing very well without it. The Masters [degree] is actually taking me away from work. Imagine spending three days a week in Nairobi. What is the point of bringing back a paper with my name on it—and I will not even bring it back to my work in the school. I will take it to my box, so what is the value of bringing that paper compared to the value of what I contribute when I am there in person . . .

What is available as leadership preparation is seen as paper qualification and not as training of functional leadership skills. [50] explicated this obsession with paper qualification as the key driver for higher education among teachers and highlighted the disconnect between theory and practice for teachers and teachers aspiring to head schools. Principals in this study confirmed the theoretical nature and detachment from functional school leadership practices of the available advanced professional courses. For example, Wanjiku, said that she "relies more on her human skills of faith, motherhood, and compassion for students than her leadership training to effectively manage the school". The self-reported effectiveness in management by these school leaders is probably based on the performance targets given by the employer.

The employing body of Kenya's Ministry of Education, the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) in a bid to strengthen management, issued new guidelines with two major changes in school leadership. First, TSC increased the number of school leaders based on student's population. This new focus is towards intensifying close management and supervision of activities in the school by adding more managers at the expense of creating leadership roles that are cognizant of students learning outcomes. Second, TSC required an additional higher education qualification as a prerequisite for appointment to school leadership [51]. These requirements are aimed at achieving the school leader's performance targets that include among others, ensuring a decrease in teacher absenteeism, enforcing more use of teaching professional documents including schemes of works and lesson plans, enhancing safety of learners, and enhanced adherence to approved financial management guidelines.

9. Tensions of Practice

Participants through their narratives highlight challenges and tensions as principals with the social contexts of their work and ways that this impact not only their ability to manage and lead their schools, but the impact on students. Lopez [29] refers to this as tensions of practice. Tensions and conflicts are part the everydayness of school leaders that include dilemmas, paradoxes, and contradictions [27]. Lopez [29] also argues that tensions of practice support the development of deeper ontological and epistemological understanding by school leaders as they navigate their leadership journey. Participants highlight concerns regarding access to education by students from low different socio-economic groups, to national and extra county schools that are in the top tier of schools in Kenya. While they are proud of the fact that the schools they manage provide learning opportunities to students, they are aware of the barriers that exist that prevent some students from having equal access to the top tier. The ranking of schools is a phenomenon seen in some countries with a colonial past. The principals engage in deliberate efforts to mitigate the influence of social class on students. For example, Wangira acknowledges that she enjoys working in a national school with students who achieve in the top percentile, but troubled by the fact that some students from low socio-economic groups are being excluded. Wangira shares her concerns about the lack of access for some students:

> Some students who achieve high grades might not attend due to their socio-economic status ... some students cannot access national schools because of funds.... There are opportunities for students to get funding but sometimes poor parents do not have access to the information about how they can get assistance.

Murata principal in an extra county school explains that "the best we can do is to help them fill out the bursary application forms, but we cannot influence how they can get it". Most available student's bursaries in Kenya are not channeled through the school. Individual students seek assistance from constituency bursary finds or from donors directly. The subtle attempts at the school level by the principals to support students from low socio-economic groups to get bursaries are beneficial, but do not solve the larger issue of access. These structural challenges create tensions for school principals. For example, it is important to keep students motivated to stay in schools; and while this creates some tension for her, Murata explains that when she is receiving students, she insists that they pay the full school fees upfront as this will be an incentive for the students to live up to the expectations and requirements. She sees retaining students in school as a big part of her role as principal. Murata elaborates on her efforts to keep kids in school:

> I insist that the fees are paid upfront, so that we can retain the students. Failure to pay means the students can't stay in the school. The parents do not take that positively...I get very troubled when a student has to go home due to lack of paying the school fees. As a Christian, besides being a teacher, I have the love of human beings. When we are dismissing a child because she is not able to pay fees, I feel it. I really wish this child could be given an opportunity. I wish there was a way I could keep her in school, but my hands are tied.

Even when financial aid is available, it is often pegged to good performance and discipline in the school and some find this challenging. Nandeke et al. [52] argue that disciplinary practices in secondary schools in Kenya often lack clarity and are created without the input of students and parents. They suggest that students should be more involved in solving disciplinary issues in schools and be involved in the review of rules and regulations. Wanjiku whose school is in a semi-rural area also expresses concerns with the ability of some students to live up to the expectations required to obtain and maintain funding. She explains her concerns with the lack of funding for, as she describes, "needy" students:

> The Alumni association has a kitty that supports the needy students...but they have to be excellent performers and well behaved. Needy students will always find it hard to perform

well and occasionally engage in mischief—including petty trading within the school—and therefore fall out of the eligibility bracket for the available financial aid.

The desire to increase access to education and mitigate the impact of social class status on some students, while at the same time seeking to raise resources for the school and maintaining strict discipline, create tensions for the principals and dissonance within the management paradigm that undergirds their work. Murata shares her concerns about the open opulence displayed by some of the parents from high socio-economic status juxtaposed against parents from low socio-economic communities during parent visiting days. "Some parents order five-star catering for their children, while others cannot manage more than a boiled cob of corn". This troubles her as a principal, but she feels that there is not much she can do except to support students the best she can with the "limited means at her disposal".

The prevalence of school uniforms in the Kenyan school system highlights as an area of tension for principals in the study. In national schools for example, all students are required to have different sets of uniforms for classes, weekends, outings, and different weather. Wangira feels that school uniforms reduce the impact of social class within the school. Wangira elaborates below:

> Schools uniforms create an equal atmosphere for everyone . . . (they) socialize them to behave the same way. Students are deterred from talking about their background, what their parents have or do not have. The school has fee-paying students usually from high SES (social economic status) backgrounds and non-fee paying students who are fully supported within our programs. Non fee paying students are usually from low SES and we have to ensure that they all feel welcome. We treat paying and non-paying students the same. Students do not know who pays and who doesn't. We try to ensure that students do not drop out because of lack of money . . . some students who are from the slums . . . even when they fall pregnant . . . they are still able to be sponsored (supported by well-wishers) and maintain their space to stay in school.

While this desire to create an atmosphere without where the impact of social class is mitigated, principals in the study found this to be an area of tension for them mainly because of the high cost of uniform materials. Wangira explained the tension of dismantling social class through school uniform while at the same time requiring parents to pay for expensive uniforms. Wangira suggests that "school uniform makes students feel safe, gives identity and discipline . . . and removes class issues...but they are expensive and this can be a burden for some children". In extra county schools fewer sets of uniform per student are required and the quality of uniform is usually lower. Murata points out that uniforms worn in these schools are cheaper. "In our school the uniform is made from a cheap material . . . is the same color, same shade, same design. If any student does not wear that uniform she attracts attention by other students".

Observations of the school uniform worn by students during opening dates and the prices of uniform in the retails shops shows a class categorization reminiscent of colonial education where white settler's schools wore good quality uniform and other African schools used predominantly khaki uniforms. Evans et al. [53] reported that the ease of availability of school uniform as an intervening factor for both absenteeism and learning outcomes for students. In the current school funding dispensation in Kenya, school uniform is the second highest private contribution made by parents after boarding levies. Schools with better learning outcomes tend to have more expensive school uniforms, which reinforces the connection between social class and access. As principals seek to mitigate the effects of social class within their schools, uniforms reinforce demarcations in social class across the school categories.

All participants self-identified as Christians and said that their faith plays an important role in how they perform their jobs as principals in their schools. Similar to many traditional African societies, religion has played an important role in Kenyan education over time, where religion and education have become inseparable [54]. While Indigenous ethnic religions existed in Kenya, Christianity

became the predominant missionary religion in Kenya [54]. Ochieng [55] suggests that Christian missionaries who initially came to evangelize Africans but then came to realize that this was not possible without teaching Africans how to read and write in their dominant language. This lead to schools being established which the colonizers used as vehicles for evangelization and the spread of Western civilization. [54] argues that this "was the beginning of the relationship between Christianity and formal education in Kenya. Christian Religious Education (CRE) was known by different names at that time and became one of the key subjects in the school curriculum. To ensure its success of achieving the intended evangelization, it was taught by identified persons with good morals and practicing Christians" (p. 721). Religion is afforded special status in the Kenyan education system similar to other curricula areas such as History and Social Studies and as such is an important consideration for school principals.

All participants in the study acknowledge the role of religion in education but recognize the associated complexities in an emerging socially diverse society such as Kenya. The centrality of religion in the Kenyan community, the multiple competing faiths and the need to provide freedoms to practice these faiths in schools, have led to most schools to have a faith-based "sponsor" who oversees the moral development of children. For example, a Catholic sponsored school will have a Catholic chaplain, a Catholic principal, and a Catholic- based code of behavior for students [20]. Wangira elaborates on this complexity:

> In some instances religion impacted the running and management of schools . . . there are historical problems . . . sometimes they try to outdo each other . . . sometimes practices in the school are not aligned with the views of the religious leaders . . . In my school students pray on their own . . . I value their religion . . . I think about how each faith is accommodated . . . I have not found out about students without faith . . . but I want to ensure they do not feel left out . . . The values I hold dear I communicate to my students . . . spirituality and being God fearing.

There are times when students' religious beliefs conflict with the uniform policy of the school and create tensions for school principals. This complexity also emerges in other aspects of school life. Murata shares her experience trying to enforce the uniform policy. "We do not like certain dressings that are associated with religion, but if the student fits in the uniform we do not care where they worship". Murata recognizes as principal the students' rights to religious expression and wrestles with accommodations within a uniform policy. These are complexities and ongoing tensions that principals in the Kenyan school system will continue to wrestle with and work through.

10. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to gain insights into how school leadership is understood and practiced by principals within the Kenyan context. Despite efforts by countries such as Kenya to increase education funding, if attention is not paid to the development of school leaders government, initiatives aimed at creating education systems that respond to global changes will not succeed [12]. While we do not see school leadership residing solely in formal leadership positions, in this study we examined the principalship and administrative roles because of the prominence in the Kenyan school system. We see this role as an important starting point to deepen our understanding and gain deeper insights upon which to conduct future large scale research into school leadership in Kenya. Given the fact that participants in this study were all women, generalizations that can be drawn from this study will be limited as questions specific to their gender roles were not asked.

The narratives of the participants illuminate some of the complexities and tensions that principals in secondary schools in Kenya face. This cannot be understood outside of the context of Kenya's colonial past and the ways that education structures and practices continue to perpetuate colonized notions of education, marked by standardization and neoliberal practices. According to Ibrahim [56] school leaders in Kenya work in crucial and extremely challenging contexts yet receive no preparation

for their roles. In addition to responding to the needs of a growing diverse student body, which occasionally manifests as deeply suspicious, school leaders in Kenya have to perform duties that range from maintenance of school facilities, to navigating the social, political and economic climate surrounding the school in order to keep learners in school, sometimes with inadequate training and very little support [57]. The findings of this study point to the work that lies ahead for scholars and practitioners from Africa and those from the West in respectful collaboration to disrupt the colonial legacy that is ever present on the continent of Africa. To collaborate on theorizing leadership policies and practices grounded in a decolonizing and social justice leadership framework that foregrounds African knowledge and history. Our shared colonial experiences inform our scholarship as we respectfully chart new avenues of research from different contexts. The absence of direct acknowledgment by the principals in the study on the impact of the legacy colonization on the education system, does not mean that it is has not been thought about, but is not at the forefront of their everyday practices of principals as they navigate and balance the many demands on their time each day in schools.

The United Nations [58] posits that education is a human right and an indispensable means of realizing human rights and fundamental freedoms, and it is the primary vehicle by which economically and socially marginalized peoples can lift themselves out of poverty and participate fully in their communities. It is the hope that the findings from this study will add to the discourse on educational leadership and in particular school leadership at the principalship level in Kenya and other emerging contexts, as what new questions can we ask about leadership in emerging contexts to broaden the field and deepen our understanding. These findings highlight the need for school leadership preparation and development grounded in the experiences of school leaders from their contexts and not the wholesale adopting of principal preparation from the global north [12]. Decolonizing education and social justice leadership offer workable frameworks to theorize school leadership in developing countries within current sociopolitical contexts.

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