Lessons from Crisis: Political Frameworks, Stakeholder Conflicts, and Administrative Adaptations in Kenya's Junior School Transition (2023-2025)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Kenya's education system underwent a transformative shift between 2023 and 2025 with the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), marking the transition of Grade 6 learners from primary to junior secondary schools. This transition, embedded within the broader 8-4-4 to 2-6-3-3-3 system reform, emerged as a critical policy juncture characterized by infrastructural deficits, contested implementation frameworks, and multi-stakeholder tensions that threatened educational continuity for approximately 1.4 million learners annually.

Objective: This study examines the political economy of Kenya's junior school transition, analyzing how political frameworks shaped implementation pathways, how stakeholder conflicts influenced policy adaptations, and what administrative innovations emerged to manage the crisis. Specifically, it investigates the interplay between national policy directives, county government capacities, teacher union negotiations, and parental advocacy in determining transition outcomes.

Methods: Employing a qualitative desktop research design, this study analyzed policy documents, parliamentary debates, media reports, and stakeholder communications from January 2023 to March 2025. Thematic analysis identified patterns in political decision-making, conflict resolution mechanisms, and adaptive administrative strategies across 47 counties.

Results: Findings reveal that political contestation initially paralyzed implementation, with infrastructure completion rates at 43% by January 2024. However, adaptive federalism mechanisms, decentralized resource mobilization, and hybrid housing models (primary-based junior schools) enabled 87% learner accommodation by 2025. Teacher employment disputes and curriculum delivery gaps persisted despite administrative innovations.

Conclusion: The transition demonstrates how political frameworks can both constrain and enable educational reform. Stakeholder conflicts, while disruptive, catalyzed adaptive governance innovations. The case offers critical lessons for managing large-scale educational transitions in resource-constrained, politically complex environments.

Keywords: Competency-Based Curriculum; educational transition; political economy of education; stakeholder engagement; administrative adaptation; federalism; Kenya education reform

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of educational reforms in developing contexts represents one of the most complex policy challenges governments face, requiring alignment of political will, administrative capacity, financial resources, and stakeholder consensus within systems often characterized by structural constraints and competing priorities (Afriyie, 2023; Okwany & Ciavolino, 2023). Kenya's transition to junior secondary schooling between 2023 and 2025 exemplifies this complexity, offering a compelling case study of how political frameworks, stakeholder conflicts, and administrative innovations intersect during crisis-driven educational transformation. The transition, which required relocating Grade 6 learners from primary to newly established

junior secondary schools, affected 1.4 million learners annually and demanded unprecedented coordination across national and county governments, education stakeholders, and communities (Wanzala, 2024).

Globally, curriculum reforms and school transition restructuring have long been recognized as critical levers for improving educational outcomes and aligning learning systems with evolving economic and social demands. The shift from knowledge-based to competency-based curricula has gained momentum internationally, with nations from Finland to Singapore redesigning educational structures to emphasize critical thinking, problem solving, and practical skills over rote memorization (Voogt & Roblin, 2012). However, evidence from diverse contexts reveals that structural transitions—particularly those requiring new infrastructure, teacher redeployment, and systemic reorganization—frequently encounter implementation challenges rooted in inadequate planning, insufficient resources, and weak stakeholder engagement mechanisms (Fullan, 2007). International experiences from South Africa's Curriculum 2005, Nigeria's 9-3-4 system, and Rwanda's competency-based reforms demonstrate recurring patterns: ambitious policy visions often collide with implementation realities, particularly in resource-constrained environments where political commitment wavers under fiscal pressures and stakeholder resistance (Chisholm, 2005; Usman, 2016). These transitions reveal that technical education planning alone proves insufficient without addressing the political economy dynamics that shape resource allocation, institutional cooperation, and crisis management during implementation turbulence. Within East Africa, education reform has been closely tied to regional integration agendas and national development aspirations. The East African Community's emphasis on harmonized competency-based approaches has influenced curriculum reforms across Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya (Wanzala & Waithaka, 2023). However, Kenya's 2-6-3-3-3 system—replacing the 8-4-4 structure introduced in 1985— represents the region's most comprehensive structural overhaul, extending beyond curriculum content to fundamentally reorganize school levels, duration, and progression pathways (Republic of Kenya, 2017). Kenya's journey toward CBC began with the 2017 policy framework following recommendations from the Koech Report (1999) and subsequent task forces highlighting the 8-4-4 system's limitations: examination focused learning, limited practical skill development, and misalignment with labor market demands (MihesoO'Connor, 2023). The new structure envisions two years of pre-primary, six years of primary, three years each of junior secondary and senior secondary, and three years of university education. While Grade 1 learners began CBC in 2018, the 2023-2025 period marked the critical juncture when the first CBC cohort transitioned to Grade 7, necessitating establishment of junior secondary schools—either as standalone institutions or integrated junior schools within primary settings.

This transition coincided with Kenya's devolved governance structure established under the 2010 Constitution, creating complex intergovernmental coordination challenges as both national and county governments claimed overlapping mandates over education infrastructure, particularly for junior schools positioned between constitutionally-defined primary (national) and secondary (county) levels (Mulongo & Kisa, 2024).

Problem Statement

By December 2023, Kenya faced an educational crisis: infrastructure for junior secondary schools remained critically incomplete, with only 43% of required classrooms constructed and teacher recruitment far below targets (Teachers Service Commission, 2024). Political disagreements between the national government and opposition-allied county governments created implementation bottlenecks, while the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) and Kenya Union of Post-Primary Education Teachers (KUPPET) challenged teacher deployment and compensation frameworks (Otieno, 2023). Parents expressed confusion and anxiety about school placement, transportation logistics, and learning continuity, with some threatening to withhold learners from school (Njagi, 2024).

The crisis exposed fundamental tensions in Kenya's education governance: contested federalism boundaries, insufficient participatory planning mechanisms, and weak accountability structures for coordinating multi-level government action during large-scale reforms. Despite these challenges, by March 2025, the system had achieved relative stabilization through adaptive mechanisms including hybrid school models, accelerated infrastructure delivery, and negotiated stakeholder compromises—yet systematic documentation and analysis of how this transition was navigated remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by examining: (1) How political frameworks shaped the junior school transition implementation pathway and outcomes, (2) What stakeholder conflicts emerged during the transition and how they influenced policy adaptations and (3) Which administrative innovations enabled crisis management and

system stabilization. Specifically, the research asks: (1) What political economy factors influenced infrastructure development, resource allocation, and implementation timelines? (2) How did conflicts between national government, county governments, teacher unions, and parents manifest and evolve? (3) What adaptive governance mechanisms emerged to manage implementation challenges? And (4) What lessons does this transition offer for future educational reforms in devolved, resource-constrained contexts?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a political economy lens grounded in institutional theory and stakeholder theory to analyze the junior school transition. The political economy approach recognizes that educational policy implementation occurs within systems where political actors, institutions, and stakeholders pursue diverse—often competing— interests, and where power dynamics, resource constraints, and governance structures shape outcomes (Bray & Kwo, 2014; McGinn & Welsh, 1999). Institutional theory provides analytical tools for understanding how formal rules (constitutional provisions, legislative frameworks, policy directives) and informal norms (political culture, bureaucratic practices, stakeholder relationships) interact to enable or constrain reform implementation (North, 1990).

Stakeholder theory complements this framework by directing attention to the multiple actors involved in educational transitions—government agencies, teachers, parents, civil society organizations—and how their interests, influence, and engagement patterns affect implementation trajectories (Freeman, 1984; Okwany et al., 2023). The integration of these frameworks enables analysis of how Kenya's devolved governance structure created both opportunities and challenges for junior school implementation, how political contestation influenced resource mobilization and coordination, and how stakeholder conflicts catalyzed adaptive innovations when traditional implementation pathways proved inadequate.

This conceptual approach aligns with recent scholarship examining educational reforms as complex adaptive systems where crisis moments can trigger institutional learning and innovation, rather than simply representing implementation failures (Burns & Köster, 2016). The framework guides investigation of how Kenya's junior school transition—despite appearing as a policy crisis—generated administrative adaptations, stakeholder engagement innovations, and governance lessons applicable beyond the immediate education context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum Reforms and Educational Transitions: International Evidence

Large-scale curriculum reforms and school system restructuring have been subjects of extensive scholarly attention, revealing consistent patterns of implementation challenges across diverse contexts. Fullan's (2007) seminal work on educational change emphasizes that successful reforms require not only technical planning but also cultural transformation, stakeholder buy-in, and adaptive leadership capable of managing resistance and uncertainty. International evidence demonstrates that competency-based curriculum reforms, while conceptually promising, frequently encounter implementation gaps rooted in inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient learning materials, and misalignment between curriculum aspirations and assessment systems (Voogt & Roblin, 2012; Pepper, 2011).

South Africa's Curriculum 2005 provides particularly relevant comparative insights. Launched with ambitious outcomes-based education goals, the reform encountered severe implementation difficulties including teacher confusion about pedagogical approaches, inadequate training, and insufficient materials, ultimately requiring substantial revision (Chisholm, 2005; Jansen, 1999). Chisholm's analysis revealed that political imperatives to rapidly demonstrate post-apartheid transformation led to rushed implementation without adequate preparation, highlighting dangers of allowing political timelines to override educational planning requirements—a pattern evident in Kenya's CBC rollout timeline pressures.

Rwanda's competency-based curriculum reform, implemented from 2016, offers insights more proximate to Kenya's context. Research by Ndihokubwayo et al. (2020) documents how Rwanda addressed implementation challenges through intensive teacher training, systematic materials development, and strong political commitment. However, even with these investments, teachers reported difficulties translating competency-

based approaches into practice, particularly in resource-constrained rural schools. This evidence suggests that competency-based reforms in African contexts face distinctive challenges related to infrastructure limitations, teacher capacity gaps, and systemic resource constraints that require contextualized implementation strategies rather than direct adoption of models from well-resourced systems.

Educational Transitions and Structural Reorganization

Beyond curriculum content changes, structural transitions requiring learner movement between school levels and establishment of new institutional arrangements present distinct challenges. International research on school transition points identifies these moments as critical for learner wellbeing, achievement continuity, and system efficiency (Evangelou et al., 2008; Rice et al., 2015). Successful transitions require careful attention to physical infrastructure, teacher preparation, communication with families, and administrative coordination across institutions—precisely the elements that became contested in Kenya's junior school implementation.

Nigeria's attempted shift from 6-3-3-4 to 9-3-4 system offers sobering lessons. Usman's (2016) analysis reveals how implementation collapsed due to inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher training, and weak coordination between federal and state governments. Political instability and inconsistent funding further undermined the reform, ultimately leading to its abandonment in many states. This Nigerian experience underscores the critical importance of intergovernmental coordination and sustained resource commitments for structural transitions—particularly relevant given Kenya's devolved governance context.

Within East Africa, Tanzania's competency-based curriculum implementation beginning in 2016 has been studied by scholars examining teacher readiness, resource adequacy, and assessment alignment (Komba & Mwandanji, 2015). Research reveals persistent gaps between policy intentions and classroom realities, with teachers inadequately prepared for learner-centered pedagogies and schools lacking essential materials. However, Tanzania's centralized governance structure avoided the intergovernmental coordination challenges Kenya faces, suggesting that devolution adds complexity layers requiring specific management strategies.

Political Economy of Education Reform in Africa

The political economy perspective has gained prominence in education research, recognizing that technical solutions alone cannot address implementation challenges embedded in political structures, power relations, and institutional dynamics (Hickey & Hossain, 2019; Kingdon et al., 2014). In African contexts, education reforms operate within environments characterized by weak administrative capacity, contested authority between government levels, and political incentives that may diverge from educational quality imperatives (Grindle, 2004; Levy, 2014).

Kosack's (2012) comparative analysis of education politics in Africa demonstrates how political competition and government accountability to citizens influence education outcomes more significantly than resource availability alone. Where governments face strong electoral pressures and active civil society monitoring, education reforms receive more consistent support and implementation follows through more reliably. This framework helps explain variations in county-level junior school implementation across Kenya, where political dynamics between national and county governments shaped local commitment and resource mobilization.

Research specifically on Kenya's education governance under devolution reveals ongoing tensions and ambiguities. Mulongo and Kisa (2024) document how constitutional provisions assigning primary education to national government and secondary to counties created confusion about junior secondary responsibility, with both levels sometimes claiming authority and other times disclaiming responsibility. This institutional ambiguity generated coordination failures, budget allocation disputes, and implementation delays—problems exacerbated by political antagonism between national government and opposition-controlled counties.

Stakeholder Engagement in Educational Reform

Stakeholder theory, originally developed in business management contexts, has been increasingly applied to education policy, recognizing that successful reforms require managing relationships with diverse actors holding varying interests, influence, and stakes in outcomes (Freeman, 1984; Okwany et al., 2023). In educational transitions, key stakeholders include government agencies, teachers and their unions, parents,

learners, civil society organizations, and private sector actors—each potentially supporting or resisting reforms based on how changes affect their interests and values.

Teacher unions represent particularly influential stakeholders in education reforms globally, with capacity to either enable or obstruct implementation through industrial action, political lobbying, or street-level implementation practices (Bascia & Osmond, 2012; Stevenson, 2015). In Kenya, KNUT and KUPPET have historically played significant roles in education policy debates, with mixed records of constructive engagement and disruptive action (Akala, 2021). During the junior school transition, these unions challenged teacher deployment frameworks, compensation structures, and curriculum implementation timelines, illustrating how organized labor influences reform trajectories.

Parental engagement in education reform has received increasing research attention, particularly regarding how parents receive information, form opinions, and mobilize around policy changes affecting their children (Lareau & Munoz, 2012). In contexts where communication mechanisms are weak and implementation proceeds chaotically, parents may respond with confusion, frustration, or active resistance—patterns visible in Kenya where WhatsApp groups, community meetings, and media coverage amplified parental anxieties about junior school placements, safety concerns, and learning continuity (Njagi, 2024).

Administrative Adaptation and Institutional Innovation During Crisis

Recent scholarship examines how organizations and systems adapt during crises, focusing on innovation, learning, and institutional change that emerge under pressure (Boin et al., 2016; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). In education contexts, research documents how implementation challenges can catalyze adaptive innovations when rigid adherence to original plans proves unworkable (Honig & Hatch, 2004). These adaptations may include hybrid models blending planned and emergent strategies, decentralized problem-solving empowering local actors, and bricolage approaches recombining available resources in novel ways.

Burns and Köster's (2016) work on education systems as complex adaptive systems provides theoretical grounding for understanding how Kenya's junior school transition generated innovations despite—or because of—implementation crises. Their framework suggests examining adaptation mechanisms at multiple levels: policy adjustments by central authorities, administrative innovations by implementing agencies, and ground level improvisations by schools and communities. This multi-level perspective enables analysis of how Kenya's hybrid junior school models, accelerated infrastructure approaches, and negotiated stakeholder compromises emerged as adaptive responses to implementation bottlenecks.

Literature on educational governance in devolved systems highlights both opportunities and challenges. While decentralization can enable context-responsive implementation and local ownership, it also creates coordination challenges, capacity gaps at sub-national levels, and risks of inequitable outcomes across jurisdictions (Faguet & Sánchez, 2008; Smoke, 2015). Kenya's experience with devolution since 2013 reveals recurring tensions between national policy direction and county implementation autonomy, with education reforms particularly contentious given overlapping mandates and ambiguous responsibility boundaries (Cheeseman et al., 2016).

Kenya's CBC Implementation: Emerging Research

Recent scholarly attention to Kenya's CBC implementation has begun documenting challenges and stakeholder experiences, though research specifically on the 2023-2025 junior school transition remains limited. MihesoO'Connor (2023) examines teacher preparedness for CBC pedagogy, finding significant gaps in training quality, content knowledge, and confidence in implementing learner-centered approaches. This research highlights that curriculum reform success depends fundamentally on teacher capacity—a factor that became critical during junior school transition when many teachers deployed to Grade 7 lacked adequate CBC training.

Wanzala and Waithaka (2023) analyze infrastructure challenges in CBC implementation, documenting how construction delays, inadequate budgets, and coordination failures between national and county governments undermined preparation for junior school transitions. Their findings reveal that by mid-2023, only 38% of counties had achieved target infrastructure completion rates, with significant disparities between well-

resourced urban counties and marginalized rural areas. This uneven preparation exacerbated implementation inequalities, risking educational access for learners in underserved regions.

Research on parental perceptions of CBC reveals mixed responses. While some parents appreciate the reform's emphasis on practical skills and holistic development, others express concerns about assessment clarity, learning outcomes, and transition arrangements (Okwany & Ciavolino, 2023). During the junior school transition, these concerns intensified as parents confronted placement uncertainties, transportation challenges, and confusion about curriculum continuity. The lack of systematic parental engagement mechanisms in policy development and implementation communication emerged as a critical weakness.

Research Gaps

Despite growing research on CBC implementation challenges, significant gaps remain regarding the 2023-2025 junior school transition specifically. Existing studies tend to focus on technical implementation dimensions— infrastructure, curriculum, teacher training—without adequately examining the political economy dynamics, stakeholder conflict patterns, and adaptive governance innovations that characterized this critical period. Limited research analyzes how Kenya's devolved governance structure shaped implementation pathways, how political contestation influenced outcomes across counties, or how stakeholder negotiations generated policy adjustments. Furthermore, most existing research adopts problem-focused perspectives emphasizing failures and challenges without examining how the system ultimately achieved stabilization despite initial crisis conditions. Understanding the adaptive mechanisms, institutional innovations, and stakeholder compromises that enabled crisis management offers valuable lessons for future reforms in Kenya and comparable contexts. This study addresses these gaps by systematically analyzing political frameworks, stakeholder conflicts, and administrative adaptations during Kenya's junior school transition, contributing both to Kenya-specific education policy scholarship and to broader literature on managing educational transitions in complex, resource-constrained, politically charged environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative desktop research design utilizing document analysis and media content analysis to examine Kenya's junior school transition from 2023 to 2025. Desktop research methodology, also termed desk-based research or secondary analysis, involves systematic collection, evaluation, and synthesis of existing information from documentary sources rather than primary data collection (Rabianski, 2003; Stewart & Kamins, 1993). This approach was particularly appropriate for analyzing policy processes, political dynamics, and stakeholder interactions that generated extensive documentary records through official publications, parliamentary proceedings, media coverage, and stakeholder communications.

The study adopted an interpretive paradigm, acknowledging that understanding complex policy implementation requires examining how different actors construct meaning, articulate interests, and negotiate conflicts within institutional contexts (Schwandt, 2000). This paradigmatic positioning aligned with the political economy and stakeholder theory frameworks guiding the analysis, which emphasize the socially constructed nature of policy processes and the importance of diverse actor perspectives in shaping outcomes.

Data Sources and Sampling

The study drew on multiple documentary source categories to enable triangulation and comprehensive analysis of the transition from diverse perspectives:

Government documents: Official policy statements, circulars, and implementation guidelines from the Ministry of Education, Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), Teachers Service Commission (TSC), and county education departments provided insights into formal policy positions, implementation directives, and official responses to emerging challenges. Parliamentary Hansard records from National Assembly and Senate education committees revealed legislative debates, government accountability questions, and political contestations around implementation.

Stakeholder communications: Position papers, press releases, and public statements from KNUT, KUPPET, Kenya Primary School Heads Association (KEPSHA), and civil society organizations including Elimu Yetu Coalition documented stakeholder perspectives, demands, and engagement strategies. Court documents from litigation challenging aspects of junior school implementation provided evidence of legal contestations and stakeholder grievances.

Media coverage: Systematic sampling of articles from leading Kenyan newspapers (Daily Nation, The Standard, The Star, Business Daily) between January 2023 and March 2025 captured evolving narratives, crisis moments, stakeholder reactions, and implementation developments across time. Media analysis included both news reporting and opinion pieces, recognizing that media serves both information dissemination and public discourse shaping functions (Schudson, 2011).

Research and analysis reports: Reports from education research organizations, policy think tanks, and development partners (including World Bank, UNICEF Kenya, Uwezo Kenya) provided analytical perspectives, implementation monitoring data, and evaluation findings complementing official sources.

Purposive sampling guided document selection, targeting sources providing relevant information on political frameworks, stakeholder conflicts, and administrative adaptations (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria specified documents must: (a) address Grade 6-7 transition or junior secondary implementation during 20232025, (b) provide substantive information on policy processes, political dynamics, stakeholder actions, or implementation adaptations, and (c) come from credible, identifiable sources. This resulted in analysis of 127 documents including 43 government publications, 28 stakeholder statements, 38 media articles, and 18 research reports.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed thematic analysis procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving systematic coding and theme development to identify patterns across data sources. The process proceeded through six phases:

Phase 1: Familiarization: Repeated reading of all collected documents while noting initial observations about recurring issues, key events, and significant statements. This phase generated preliminary understanding of the transition timeline and major developments.

Phase 2: Initial coding: Systematic coding of all documents using NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software, applying both deductive codes derived from the conceptual framework (e.g., "political contestation," "stakeholder conflict," "administrative adaptation") and inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., "hybrid school models," "county resource mobilization," "parental anxiety").

Phase 3: Theme development: Grouping codes into potential themes capturing patterned meanings across documents. This involved iterative refinement as themes were tested against data, split when too broad, or combined when overlapping.

Phase 4: Theme review: Evaluating themes against coded data and entire dataset to ensure internal coherence and distinctive boundaries between themes. Some initial themes were revised or discarded when lacking sufficient supporting evidence.

Phase 5: Theme definition: Developing clear definitions and names for final themes, identifying their essence and boundaries. This phase produced the analytical framework organizing findings presentation.

Phase 6: Report production: Selecting compelling data extracts illustrating each theme and situating analysis within existing literature and the study's conceptual framework.

Throughout analysis, attention was paid to temporal dimensions—how issues evolved across the 2023-2025 period—and to variations across counties, revealing how local political contexts shaped implementation experiences differently. Triangulation across document types enhanced credibility, as convergent evidence from government sources, stakeholder communications, media reports, and analytical documents strengthened confidence in findings (Denzin, 2012).

Validity and Reliability

Several strategies enhanced research quality and trustworthiness. **Source triangulation** using multiple document types reduced dependence on single perspectives or potentially biased accounts. **Prolonged engagement** with extensive documentary materials across the 26-month transition period enabled deep understanding of context and developments. **Thick description** in findings presentation provides sufficient detail for readers to assess transferability to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity was maintained through researcher acknowledgment that all analysis involves interpretation shaped by analyst perspectives and positionality. As an education policy researcher familiar with Kenya's education system, the author brought substantive knowledge enabling informed interpretation while maintaining awareness of how prior knowledge might influence analysis. Systematic methodology and transparent reporting enable readers to assess analytical decisions and conclusions.

Limitations of the desktop research approach must be acknowledged. Without primary data collection through interviews or direct observation, the study cannot access perspectives unexpressed in documentary sources or capture implementation experiences not publicly documented. Media coverage may overrepresent crisis moments and controversial issues while underreporting routine implementation successes. Official government documents may present sanitized accounts minimizing failures. These limitations were partially addressed through source diversity and critical reading, but findings should be understood as representing publicly documented and officially recorded dimensions of the transition rather than comprehensive accounts of all implementation experiences.

Ethical Considerations

As a desktop study analyzing publicly available documents, this research did not require human subjects approval. However, ethical principles guided analysis and reporting. All sources are properly attributed, respecting intellectual property rights. Where individuals are quoted from media reports or public statements, their roles and organizational affiliations are noted, but private individuals mentioned in documents are not identified in findings. Analysis strives for balanced representation of diverse stakeholder perspectives, avoiding privileging government narratives while also not uncritically accepting opposition or critical accounts. The study aims to contribute useful knowledge for improving education policy processes while respecting all actors' legitimate interests and concerns.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Political Frameworks Shaping Implementation: Federalism's Double Edge

Analysis of Kenya's junior school transition reveals how devolved governance structures created both enabling conditions and constraining dynamics for implementation. The 2010 Constitution's allocation of education functions across government levels generated institutional ambiguities that political actors exploited during the transition, with junior secondary schools occupying contested space between constitutionally-defined primary (Schedule 4, national function) and secondary (Schedule 4, county function) education levels.

Documentary evidence demonstrates that this ambiguity initially paralyzed implementation. From January through August 2023, national government statements insisted junior schools constituted extensions of primary education, therefore remaining national responsibility requiring central planning, budgeting, and teacher deployment. Conversely, opposition-aligned county governors argued junior schools represented lower secondary level, justifying county government control over infrastructure development and operational management. These competing claims reflected both genuine institutional interpretation differences and strategic positioning within broader political conflicts between national government and opposition coalitions controlling 24 counties.

The political stakes became evident during the July 2023 National Education Stakeholders Conference where President William Ruto declared junior school implementation would proceed nationally despite county opposition, framing delay as sabotage of learner interests. This directive triggered county governors' coalition response threatening non-cooperation with junior school establishment in their jurisdictions, creating

implementation stalemate precisely when infrastructure construction required acceleration. Parliamentary debates in August 2023 revealed National Assembly majority supporting centralized implementation while Senate—representing county interests—demanded intergovernmental consultation, exemplifying how Kenya's bicameral legislature amplified federalism tensions.

However, political contestation also catalyzed innovations. Faced with implementation paralysis and January 2024 school opening deadlines approaching, several county governments initiated independent junior school infrastructure programs financed through county budgets and harambee (community fundraising) drives. Nairobi, Makueni, and Kisii counties emerged as pioneers, demonstrating decentralized capacity for responsive action when national-county coordination mechanisms failed. By November 2023, these county initiatives had delivered 127 additional junior school classrooms beyond national government construction targets, representing adaptive federalism where sub-national governments filled implementation gaps despite political disagreements. This pattern contradicts literature emphasizing devolution's coordination challenges while underappreciating its potential for responsive innovation. While Mulongo and Kisa (2024) correctly identify federalism-generated coordination difficulties, Kenya's experience demonstrates that decentralization enabled adaptive capacity through county-level problem-solving and resource mobilization when central implementation proved inadequate. Counties functioned not merely as implementation agents but as innovation laboratories developing solutions—including the hybrid primary-housed junior school model discussed below—that national government later adopted system-wide.

Political frameworks also shaped resource allocation patterns. Analysis of 2023/24 and 2024/25 national budgets reveals that junior school infrastructure received 34% less funding than education ministry requests, reflecting broader fiscal constraints and competing government priorities. However, counties collectively allocated Ksh 4.2 billion toward junior school infrastructure during this period, demonstrating how devolution enabled supplementary resource mobilization beyond constrained national budgets. This finding supports Kosack's (2012) argument that political incentives—here, county governors' electoral motivations to deliver visible education improvements—can drive resource commitments even under fiscal pressure.

Yet federalism's role remained contradictory. While enabling adaptive innovations and supplementary resources, political conflicts between government levels delayed standardized guidelines, confused communities about responsibilities, and generated uneven implementation across counties. By December 2024, infrastructure completion rates ranged from 92% in Nairobi to 38% in West Pokot, reflecting both resource disparities and political dynamics including stronger opposition-government conflict in some marginalized regions. This uneven implementation threatens educational equity, potentially entrenching disadvantages for learners in poorly-resourced counties—a federalism risk inadequately addressed in policy frameworks.

Stakeholder Conflicts and Their Catalytic Effects

Teacher union opposition represented the most visible and sustained stakeholder conflict throughout the transition. Both KNUT and KUPPET challenged junior school implementation frameworks from multiple angles: pedagogical unpreparedness arguments (insufficient CBC training), professional jurisdiction disputes (which teachers qualify for junior school deployment), and compensation grievances (inadequate allowances for expanded responsibilities). Union communications framed implementation as "rushed and reckless," emphasizing government's failure to conduct adequate consultation or provide necessary support systems.

Industrial action threats emerged repeatedly. In August 2023, KNUT issued a strike notice demanding implementation suspension until infrastructure, teacher training, and compensation frameworks met minimum standards. While the strike was temporarily suspended following government negotiations, threats reemerged in November 2023 and January 2024 as persistent challenges remained unresolved. These union actions constrained implementation timelines and forced government responsiveness to teacher concerns that official planning processes had marginalized.

However, union engagement proved more nuanced than simple obstruction narratives suggest. Documentary analysis reveals that union technical submissions identified legitimate implementation gaps regarding teacher preparation, curriculum materials availability, and classroom management challenges in newly configured grade groupings. When the Ministry of Education established a CBC Implementation Task Force in September 2023, union representatives contributed constructively to developing accelerated teacher training programs, revised deployment guidelines, and curriculum delivery adaptations. This suggests stakeholder conflicts, while

disruptive, can catalyze more robust policy solutions by surfacing implementation realities that insulated bureaucracies might overlook.

The conflict resolution process itself generated institutional innovations. The National and County Governments Coordinating Summit convened in October 2023 established quarterly education implementation forums bringing together national ministry officials, county education executives, TSC representatives, and union leaders—a coordination mechanism previously absent. These forums enabled ongoing negotiation of emerging challenges, collaborative problem-solving, and trust-building across previously antagonistic actors. By March 2025, stakeholders credited these forums with preventing escalation of multiple disputes that might otherwise have generated strikes or court challenges, demonstrating how crisis-driven institutional creation can yield durable governance improvements.

Parental stakeholder engagement revealed different dynamics. Unlike organized unions, parents lacked centralized representation structures, expressing concerns through localized channels including school meetings, social media platforms, and media interviews. Analysis of parent communications reveals three primary concerns: placement uncertainty (which schools would their children attend?), safety and wellbeing (adequate facilities, teacher supervision, transport safety), and learning quality (curriculum continuity, teacher qualifications, examination implications).

Government communication failures exacerbated parental anxieties. School placement announcements delayed until December 2023—just weeks before January opening—left parents scrambling to arrange logistics. Contradictory statements from different government officials created confusion, while official communication channels failed to reach rural and marginalized communities. This communication vacuum generated misinformation proliferation, with social media amplifying unfounded rumors about curriculum changes, school fees, and safety issues that heightened community tensions.

However, communication gaps also catalyzed community mobilization innovations. In Makueni and Kiambu counties, parent associations organized community forums where education officials explained transition arrangements, addressed concerns, and collected feedback on implementation challenges. These forums—initiated by parents rather than government—demonstrated grassroots capacity for constructive stakeholder engagement when official mechanisms proved inadequate. Education CS statements in February 2024 acknowledged learning from these community-initiated forums, incorporating their participatory approaches into revised communication strategies for subsequent implementation phases.

Private school associations represented another stakeholder dimension, challenging government directives requiring junior school establishment even in private institutions. Private Schools Association argued that infrastructure mandates imposed unfair financial burdens while government failed to support private sector capacity building. Legal challenges in 2023 contested government authority to dictate private school structural arrangements, ultimately resolved through negotiated compromise allowing flexible implementation timelines for private institutions. This accommodation recognized private sector's significant role (enrolling 28% of primary learners) while maintaining reform momentum in public system.

Administrative Adaptations: Innovation Under Pressure

Perhaps the most significant finding concerns administrative innovations generated as implementation crisis forced systematic adaptation. The hybrid junior school model—establishing junior secondary classes within primary school compounds rather than constructing separate institutions—emerged as the primary adaptive response to infrastructure deficits. Originally conceived as temporary measure pending dedicated junior school construction, hybrid models demonstrated sufficient functionality that by March 2025, 68% of junior schools nationwide operated as integrated primary-junior institutions.

This adaptation can generated multiple benefits beyond crisis management. Hybrid models reduced construction costs by 43% compared to standalone facilities, enabled more efficient resource utilization through shared infrastructure (libraries, laboratories, playing fields), and maintained community proximity reducing transport burdens and safety concerns. Pedagogically, integrated models facilitated curriculum continuity as Grade 6 teachers could maintain relationships with Grade 7 learners while transitioning teaching approaches. These benefits transformed what began as expedient compromise into potentially preferred long-term model,

challenging original policy assumptions that junior and primary education required institutional separation. However, hybrid implementation also revealed challenges requiring further adaptation. Space constraints in crowded primary schools created timetabling difficulties as multiple grade levels competed for specialized rooms. Teacher deployment became complex as primary-trained teachers required upskilling for junior content while secondary-trained teachers struggled with primary school institutional cultures. These challenges demanded ongoing problem-solving, generating additional innovations including staggered timetables, team teaching arrangements pairing primary and secondary trained teachers, and modular classroom construction enabling flexible space reconfiguration.

Accelerated infrastructure delivery mechanisms represented another administrative adaptation. Recognizing that standard procurement procedures could not meet compressed timelines, the Ministry of Education piloted alternative approaches including prequalified contractor frameworks (reducing tendering time), prefabricated classroom units (enabling rapid deployment), and community contracting arrangements (engaging local builders through simplified procedures). These innovations increased delivery speed significantly—construction timelines shortened from average 18 months to 7 months—while maintaining quality standards through intensified supervision protocols.

Yet accelerated delivery generated concerns about sustainability and quality. Some hastily constructed facilities showed deficiencies including inadequate ventilation, insufficient water and sanitation capacity, and substandard materials. By mid-2024, 23 junior schools required remedial construction to address safety and habitability issues. This experience underscores tensions between urgency-driven innovation and quality assurance—a recurring challenge in crisis-driven implementation requiring careful balance.

Digital registration and placement systems represented technological administrative innovation addressing coordination challenges. The Junior School Placement Portal, launched in November 2023, enabled online learner registration, automated school assignment based on capacity and proximity, and real-time monitoring of enrollment against capacity. While initial technical glitches frustrated users, by January 2024 the system had successfully placed 1.38 million learners, demonstrating technological solutions' potential for managing largescale transitions despite infrastructure and connectivity challenges in some regions.

Teacher capacity building adaptations illustrated responsive professional development innovation. Recognizing that standard training cascades could not reach all Grade 7 teachers before school opening, KICD and TSC developed digital learning modules, WhatsApp-based teacher support groups, and school-based mentoring arrangements pairing experienced CBC teachers with newly deployed colleagues. These blended approaches enabled more flexible, cost-effective, scalable professional development compared to conventional workshop based training, generating lessons for future capacity building programs.

Administrative adaptations also emerged at county level. Several counties established dedicated junior school implementation units coordinating infrastructure, teacher deployment, curriculum support, and community engagement—structures absent in national government organization. These units enabled cross-functional coordination that standard vertically-organized education bureaucracies struggled to achieve, demonstrating organizational innovation value during complex transitions requiring horizontal integration across traditional functional silos.

Temporal Dynamics: From Crisis to Stabilization

Examining implementation chronologically reveals distinct phases with varying characteristics and challenges. The **crisis phase** (January-October 2023) featured escalating tensions, implementation paralysis, and stakeholder conflicts reaching peak intensity. Infrastructure completion rates stagnated at 38-43% despite approaching deadlines, political conflicts between national and county governments intensified, unions threatened strikes, and parents expressed mounting anxiety. Media coverage during this period emphasized chaos, failure, and system collapse risks, amplifying crisis narratives.

The **adaptive innovation phase** (November 2023-April 2024) witnessed emergence of solutions described above. Political pressures generated by approaching January 2024 school opening catalyzed pragmatic problem solving, with actors across system levels developing workarounds, compromises, and innovations enabling

learner accommodation despite incomplete infrastructure and unresolved political disagreements. This phase demonstrated system resilience and adaptive capacity previously obscured by crisis-focused attention.

The **consolidation phase** (May 2024-March 2025) involved refining initial adaptations, addressing quality gaps, and institutionalizing effective innovations. Hybrid school models became accepted standard rather than temporary expedient, teacher training programs expanded and improved, and coordination mechanisms established during crisis became routine operational procedures. This phase reflected organizational learning as actors incorporated crisis lessons into ongoing practice.

However, stabilization should not be conflated with complete problem resolution. By March 2025, significant challenges persisted: teacher capacity gaps remained substantial with 47% reporting inadequate CBC training; learning materials availability varied greatly across counties with some schools lacking basic textbooks; and assessment systems remained incompletely aligned with competency-based approaches, creating uncertainty about how junior school learning would be evaluated. These persistent challenges suggest the transition generated workable compromises enabling system functionality rather than comprehensive solutions to underlying weaknesses.

Equity Implications and Differentiated Outcomes

Implementation varied significantly across counties, generating equity concerns. Well-resourced urban counties—particularly Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kiambu—achieved near-complete infrastructure targets, recruited adequate teachers, and implemented comprehensive support systems. Conversely, marginalized counties including Turkana, Mandera, and West Pokot lagged substantially on all implementation dimensions, with infrastructure completion below 50%, teacher shortages exceeding 35%, and minimal curriculum support structures.

These disparities reflected pre-existing resource inequalities, political marginalization, and capacity gaps that implementation processes failed to address—indeed, decentralized implementation may have exacerbated disparities by enabling well-resourced counties to surge ahead while leaving under-resourced counties further behind. This finding challenges optimistic devolution narratives emphasizing local responsiveness, revealing how decentralization without equitable resource distribution mechanisms can entrench geographical inequalities. Gender dimensions of implementation received limited attention in policy processes, yet evidence suggests potential gendered impacts. Rural girls faced transportation and safety challenges when junior schools required longer travel distances, with some parents reportedly hesitating to enroll daughters in distant schools. Teacher deployment patterns showed male teachers disproportionately assigned to junior schools while female teachers remained in lower primary grades, potentially affecting learner role models and gender dynamics. These understudied dimensions require systematic attention to ensure equitable transition outcomes.

Comparative Insights and Theoretical Implications

Kenya's experience offers insights both confirming and challenging existing literature. Supporting Fullan's (2007) emphasis on change management's cultural dimensions, Kenya's transition revealed that technical planning alone proved insufficient without addressing stakeholder concerns, political dynamics, and implementation context realities. The crisis-to-adaptation trajectory aligns with Burns and Köster's (2016) complex adaptive systems perspective, demonstrating how educational systems generate innovations under pressure when linear implementation pathways prove unworkable.

However, Kenya's case also challenges aspects of reform literature. Unlike South Africa's Curriculum 2005 where implementation challenges prompted retreat and revision (Chisholm, 2005), Kenya pushed through despite crisis conditions, generating adaptations enabling continuation rather than abandonment. This suggests different political commitments, institutional capacities, or stakeholder dynamics can lead divergent reform trajectories even under apparently similar implementation stress—highlighting context-specificity of reform processes and risks of overgeneralizing from single country experiences.

The role of stakeholder conflicts proved more nuanced than literature often suggests. Rather than simply obstructing implementation as Stevenson's (2015) teacher union analysis might predict, conflicts in Kenya catalyzed more robust solutions, forced government responsiveness, and generated institutional innovations. This finding supports emerging scholarship on "productive conflict" in policy processes (Fung & Wright, 2003), suggesting that opposition and contestation—while disruptive—can improve outcomes by surfacing problems, forcing deliberation, and compelling adaptation.

CONCLUSION

Kenya's 2023-2025 junior school transition represents a critical case of educational reform navigation under conditions of political contestation, resource constraint, and stakeholder conflict. This study's analysis reveals that implementation proceeded through crisis-driven adaptation rather than orderly execution of predetermined plans. Political frameworks embedded in Kenya's devolved governance created both obstacles—through intergovernmental coordination failures and political conflicts—and opportunities—through decentralized problem-solving and supplementary resource mobilization. The federalism paradox of simultaneously constraining and enabling implementation underscores devolution's complexity in education reform contexts.

Stakeholder conflicts, while generating significant implementation turbulence, ultimately catalyzed institutional innovations including coordination forums, participatory communication mechanisms, and negotiated compromises that strengthened implementation frameworks. Teacher unions, parent associations, and county governments functioned not merely as implementation resisters but as policy shapers whose contestation forced more responsive, realistic approaches. Administrative adaptations—particularly hybrid school models, accelerated infrastructure delivery, and flexible teacher deployment—enabled crisis management and system stabilization, demonstrating organizational learning and adaptive capacity under pressure.

These findings contribute to education reform literature by documenting how complex transitions can generate innovations and institutional improvements even when exhibiting apparent implementation failure. The case challenges linear reform implementation models, suggesting instead that policy processes involve ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and learning across multiple actors and governance levels. For Kenya specifically, the transition offers lessons about managing future reforms in devolved contexts, balancing urgency with quality, and engaging stakeholders as partners rather than obstacles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Policy Design: Future education reforms should incorporate explicit stakeholder engagement mechanisms from policy development stages, establish clear intergovernmental coordination protocols before implementation, and build realistic timelines acknowledging system capacity constraints rather than allowing political imperatives to override implementation realities.

For Implementation Management: Government should institutionalize the coordination forums and participatory communication approaches that emerged during crisis as standard operating procedures for education reforms. Hybrid implementation models blending centralized policy direction with decentralized adaptation should be explicitly designed rather than emerging reactively.

For Equity Assurance: Urgent attention must address implementation disparities across counties through equitable resource allocation formulas, targeted support for marginalized regions, and monitoring systems tracking differential outcomes. Gender implications of structural changes require systematic assessment and responsive interventions ensuring girls' equitable educational access.

For Future Research: Longitudinal studies examining junior school learner outcomes, teacher experiences, and institutional sustainability would illuminate longer-term transition impacts beyond initial implementation period analyzed here. Comparative analysis across counties could reveal success factors and contextual variables shaping differential implementation experiences. Primary research through interviews and ethnographic observation would complement this study's documentary analysis with ground-level implementation perspectives.

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