

Educational Interventions in the Midst of Reforms: Strategic Initiatives to Foster Change

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ABSTRACT

East African education systems face continuous volatility driven by global demands, regional integration, and systemic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper analyzes the Foundations for Learning (F4L) project, a multi-country professional development initiative for Teacher Educators navigating mid-project shifts from Certificate to Diploma qualifications and the adoption of Competency-Based Curricula (CBC). Utilizing a qualitative case study design triangulating policy analysis, stakeholder dialogue, and primary interviews (N=92), the study explores how project fidelity was maintained amidst radical transitions. Anchored in Adaptive Management and Resilience theories, the findings reveal that while policy volatility and human resource instability posed significant risks—including institutional memory loss and pedagogical misalignment—strategic leveraging of institutional assets fostered systemic resilience. These assets include ICT integration, action research, reflective practice, mentorship, and leadership development. The paper concludes that educational reforms should be viewed as "learning moments" for building adaptive capacity, offering transferable lessons for interventions in volatile, low-income contexts.

Keywords: Adaptive Management, CBC, Educational Interventions, Project Implementation, Resilience, Teacher Education.

INTRODUCTION

The East African education sector exists in a state of "permanent reform," a necessity driven by internal demographic pressures and the external demand for globally competitive human capital (World Bank, 2023). However, the rapid tempo of structural and pedagogical changes, compounded by the profound shock of the COVID-19 pandemic, creates a precarious environment for long-term educational interventions. Often, projects designed under one policy regime find themselves implemented under another, leading to what is commonly termed "implementation failure" or "reform fatigue."

The significant role of college tutors in preparation of teachers places them at the centre of implementation of educational reforms. It is therefore imperative that they are involved in the continuous professional development programmes. This follows that continuous professional development is hypothesized to influence teaching effectiveness (Kagema & Irungu, 2018).

This paper examines the Foundations for Learning Project (F4L), a multi-country initiative designed to enhance the quality of teacher preparation in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. F4L found itself navigating a highly complex landscape where the ground beneath the intervention was shifting even as it sought to embed new practices aimed at retooling the teacher educators in the colleges. The central theme explored is the challenge of maintaining the fidelity and relevance of a targeted intervention when national policies undergo radical transformation. By examining the F4L experience, specifically its professional development (PD) for Teacher Educators, this analysis identifies strategic initiatives that allowed the project to move beyond risk mitigation toward fostering sustainable systemic change.

Research Questions

To explore the intersection of project implementation and policy volatility, this study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. How do rapid national policy reforms and human resource instabilities impact the implementation fidelity

- of targeted educational interventions in Teacher Training Colleges?
2. What strategic institutional assets can be mobilized to maintain pedagogical momentum during periods of systemic disruption?
3. How can Adaptive Management and Resilience frameworks be utilized to transform policy risks into opportunities for institutional growth?

Context and Drivers of Reform

Educational reforms are complex, policy-driven shifts that alter the fundamental structure, content, or governance of an education system. They are typically initiated by a confluence of national needs and global pressures (OECD, 2020), leading to systemic instability but also creating opportunities for profound change. Historically framed by global mandates such as "Education for All" (UNESCO, 1990) and more recently by Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) (United Nations, 2015), these reforms aim to broaden participation while ensuring quality learning is adequate to meet developmental goals. In the East African context, this translates into intense pressure to upgrade teacher qualifications and standardize curricula to ensure a human capital base that can compete regionally and globally.

Beyond global mandates, reforms are increasingly driven by the pursuit of equity and economic competitiveness. Equity-driven reforms, such as those addressing Gender, Diversity, and Disability Inclusion (GDDI), require targeted pedagogical innovations to reach historically marginalized groups (Global Partnership for Education, 2025). Simultaneously, the move toward Competency-Based Curricula (CBC) represents a direct national response to labor market demands for critical thinking and digital literacy over rote memorization (World Economic Forum, 2025). Most recently, systemic shocks like the COVID-19 pandemic have introduced resilience as a non-optional driver, forcing rapid innovation through remote teaching and accelerated learning (UNICEF, 2021; Mutura et al., 2024). While well-implemented reforms can significantly improve student teacher performance, as observed in the F4L project, they also encounter resource constraints and cultural resistance, necessitating a holistic and adaptive approach to educational transformation (Adeniyi et al., 2024; Zajda, 2021).

The Rationale for Professional Development

Educational quality is intrinsically linked to the efficacy of its educators. Professional development (PD) programmes are critical mechanisms for translating policy ambitions into classroom realities (Guskey, 2000). The F4L project was conceived to address identified deficits in early childhood and primary education instruction by focusing on Teacher Educators (Tutors), aiming for a cascade model where enhanced tutor skills would directly impact student teacher competence.

Shifting Policy Targets

Mid-way through the intervention life cycle, partner governments initiated simultaneous, sweeping reforms:

1. **Qualification Upgrades:** Teacher colleges were mandated to transition from Certificate to Diploma qualifications. In Kenya, the Diploma in Primary Teacher Education (DPTE) replaced the P1 certificate. In Uganda, the National Teacher Policy (2019) had mandated that all teachers possess a bachelor's degree, phasing out Grade III and Grade V certificates. In Tanzania, the Education and Training Policy (2014, 2023 Edition) similarly prioritized higher-tier certifications.
2. **Curriculum Paradigm Shifts:** The adoption of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) replaced traditional content-centric models (like Kenya's 8-4-4). The CBC structure emphasizes 21st-century skills—critical thinking, creativity, and digital literacy among others—requiring a fundamental shift in pedagogy and related assessment procedures. The main rationale was that CBC is designed to better prepare teachers for the modern classroom, with a focus on practical skills and hands-on training in line with expectations of the 21st century learning outcomes. This means that the teacher graduates will be better equipped to meet the needs of their students and to adapt to changing educational environments. In addition, the new diplomas are more in line with international standards, which will make it easier for the qualifying teachers to work abroad if they choose to do so.
3. **Cross-Cutting Integration:** National focuses on Gender, Diversity, and Disability Inclusion (GDDI) and other contemporary issues including implementation of Life Skills and Values Education, demanded that

these themes be consciously integrated into teaching practice rather than treated as optional modules.

Conceptual Framework: Adaptive Management and Resilience

This analysis is anchored in the synergy between Adaptive Management Theory (AMT) and Resilience Theory. AMT, originally rooted in ecological systems (Holling, 1978; Walters & Hilborn, 1978), treats implementation as an iterative cycle of "learning by doing." In this framework, policy shifts are not viewed as roadblocks but as new data points that require tactical adjustment.

Resilience Theory complements this by focusing on transformative adaptation (Walker et al., 2004). Rather than simply "bouncing back" to a pre-crisis state, resilience in an educational context involves "bouncing forward"—leveraging disruptions to achieve a higher state of systemic functioning (Rachmad, 2022). This dual framework allows for an analysis that moves beyond descriptive narration into a deeper synthesis of how institutions navigate ambiguity.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative research approach using an embedded, explanatory case study design (Yin, 2014) to investigate the dynamic adaptation of the Foundations for Learning (F4L) Project amidst major educational reforms. The design was embedded within the project's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework, allowing for the concurrent investigation of implementation challenges and the strategic responses adopted by partner colleges.

Data were triangulated from three primary sources:

- **Document Analysis:** Internal project reports, curriculum policy documents from the respective Ministries of Education, and quality assurance frameworks were critically analyzed. The policy documents include national education sessional papers, strategic plans (2017–2024). Analysis of artifacts, action plans, and reflective journals produced by the participants during the professional development sessions, tracked the practical application of new pedagogies.
- **Stakeholder Dialogue:** Synthesis of insights from high-level workshops with Ministry of Education officials, Curriculum regulators and Quality Assurance officers across Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. These yielded insights into policy rationale, implementation friction points, and adaptation requirements.
- **Primary Qualitative Data:** Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) using a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the F4L professional development programme and their roles in implementing the educational reforms.
 - **Semi-structured Interviews:** 60 Tutors and 8 College Administrators.
 - **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** 4 sessions with a total of 24 Student Teachers.

Table 1: Participant distribution and purpose

Participant Group	Data Collection Method	Number (N)	Gender Distribution	Purpose in the Study
College Tutors/Educators	Semi-structured Interviews	60	42 Male / 28 Female	To capture insights on pedagogical challenges, adoption of new practices (e.g., action research, Makerspace), and the direct impact of the curriculum shift.
College Administrators	Semi-structured Interviews	8	6 Male / 2 Female	To understand institutional responses to reforms, resource deployment (ICT), leadership capacity, and dialogue with national regulators.
Student Teachers	Focus Group	24 (4 groups of 6)	12 Male / 12 Female	To gather feedback on the changes in instructional quality, the effectiveness of new pedagogies, and

	Discussions (FGDs)			the relevance of the updated Diploma curriculum.
Stakeholders (Government officials, Curriculum regulators, Representations from Quality Assurance Offices of the Ministry of Education)	Learning and Dialogue during Knowledge sharing.	3 groups (Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania)		Share knowledge and outcomes of the intervention and receive feedback from stakeholders to inform way forward.

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns of risk, adaptation, and systemic change. This allowed the findings to speak directly to the conceptual framework of Adaptive Management and Resilience. In the process, attention was paid to several factors: accurate transcription and familiarization of all interview and FGD recordings, systematic coding of texts, and identification and reviewing of themes.

Trustworthiness was established through methodological triangulation (using documents, dialogue, interviews, and FGDs) and peer debriefing among researchers to ensure consistency in coding and interpretation, thereby lending credibility to the resulting themes discussed in the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Impact of Policy Volatility and HR Instability

The primary finding was that project fidelity was challenged by a critical confluence of curriculum overhaul and human resource (HR) churn.

Pedagogical Misalignment and Reform Fatigue: The transition to CBC introduced a high degree of cognitive and professional stress for tutors. As national policies mandated new teaching standards, tutors found themselves in a state of "pedagogical limbo," where some of the content they were trained to deliver became obsolete overnight. One tutor reflected: *"We are not sure we have the competencies expected of us... I personally just depend on what I learnt previously from college and from my experience."* This misalignment is not merely a technical issue but a psychological one, leading to reform fatigue where educators feel overwhelmed by the pace of change.

Institutional Memory Loss and the Fragility of the Cascade Model: Compounding the curriculum shifts was the mass redeployment of personnel. In Uganda, the steps to phase out Grade III/V qualifications as part of the 2019 National Teacher Policy led to the closure of colleges and the displacement of staff. In Kenya and Tanzania, promotions of "Champion Tutors" to administrative roles meant that the capacity built by F4L was often fragmented. When a trained individual is transferred or retires, the "institutional memory" of the training often leaves with them, rendering the cascade model fragile. The situation became more complex when newly redeployed tutors needed to be brought on board the activities of the intervention. One new tutor lamented – *"we came here and found our colleagues talking about concepts we were not accustomed to such as makerspace, portfolio, and champion tutor. We felt really left out."* The study found that HR instability must be managed as a primary risk factor, rather than a secondary administrative concern.

Strategic Adaptation: Leveraging Institutional Assets

In response to this volatility, the project shifted toward an Asset-Based Approach, leveraging institutional strengths to foster resilience:

1. Action Research (AR) as a Bridge: Tutors were encouraged to use Action Research to solve immediate classroom challenges. By treating their classes as laboratories, tutors tested CBC-aligned methodologies. AR served as a critical bridge between theoretical policy and practical instruction, allowing tutors to regain a sense of agency amidst the chaos of reform.

2. Digital Resilience via Makerspaces: The pandemic necessitated a shift to blended learning. F4L maximized available ICT infrastructure and "Makerspaces" creative zones for developing low-cost teaching aids. Student teacher feedback confirmed this shift: *"We have noticed increased use of ICT by our tutors... They give us*

asynchronous activities and we have online discussions.” This digital adaptation ensured that learning continued despite physical college closures.

3. Reflective Practice as a Core Competency: Reflective practice was institutionalized using Reflective Journals and Teaching Portfolios. Tutors were required to document their pedagogical journeys, moving beyond a "check-list" approach to PD. By reflecting on what worked and what failed during the CBC transition, tutors developed a "growth mindset" essential for navigating permanent reform. This practice shifted the focus from the *what* of teaching to the *how* of professional growth.

4. Mentorship and Knowledge Transfer: To combat HR churn, the project prioritized internal mentorship. When "Champion Tutors" were identified, they were tasked with mentoring newly deployed staff. This created a horizontal knowledge-sharing network that mitigated the loss of institutional memory. Mentorship transformed PD from a one-off event into a continuous, peer-led process that anchored the project's goals within the college's social fabric.

5. Leadership for Change Management: Leadership training occurred at two levels: for the Practicum school administrators in the "Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management," and for the College administrators in response to the organizational capacity assessment (OCA) done. Training administrators in adaptive leadership created a layer of "change managers" capable of leading staff through ambiguity. Administrators reported that pairing new tutors with project-trained mentors was vital for institutional stability.

Synthesis: Fostering Systemic Change

The analysis reveals that systemic change occurs when interventions move from "project-based" to "process-based" logic. F4L's longitudinal data served as a feedback loop, allowing for real-time adjustments to PD content. By broadening stakeholder buy-in to include regulators, the project increased the perceived relevance of the new Diploma qualifications, helping to overcome cultural resistance to continuous assessment and other related forms of competency-based assessment.

Breaking the Cycle of Implementation Failure

The policy impact analysis reveals a chronic challenge in the education sector: cyclical patterns where reform initiatives generate initial enthusiasm and investment but consistently struggle with sustained implementation and quality maintenance. This finding reinforces the critical need for the adaptive and data-driven systems introduced by F4L, which act as corrective mechanisms designed to prevent the systemic collapse of new pedagogical practices after initial investment has ended. These adaptive capacities are crucial for moving beyond the pattern of "reform fatigue" to achieve true institutional change.

Contribution to Global Literature

This case study adds a critical perspective to the global literature on educational reform in the Global South. While much of the existing literature focuses on the *reasons* for implementation failure—often citing lack of resources or political will—this study highlights **Adaptive Management** as a viable methodology for overcoming these barriers.

Beyond the F4L context, this research demonstrates that **Resilience Theory** can be applied to educational systems to move beyond "crisis management" toward "transformative adaptation." It challenges the global discourse that views reforms and crises as linear disruptions, suggesting instead that they are cyclical opportunities for institutional self-improvement. For other low- and middle-income contexts (LMICs), this study provides a blueprint for how "soft assets" (mentorship, reflection, and leadership) can compensate for "hard asset" deficiencies during periods of volatility.

CONCLUSION AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

This study affirms that reforms are inevitable in streamlining the future of education in African countries and as the countries continue to navigate the complex terrain of educational reforms, ongoing research, stakeholder collaboration, and evidence-based policymaking will be essential. Through a collective commitment to overcoming challenges and building on success stories, educational reforms can truly become catalysts for

positive and lasting change, shaping a future where every student has the opportunity to thrive and realize their full potential (Adeniyi et al 2024).

The F4L project serves as a compelling case study of how educational interventions can thrive in volatile environments. Success lies in building systems such as mentoring networks, reflective practice, and data-driven management, that transcend individual staff changes and policy shifts.

Strategic Recommendations

1. **Institutionalize HR Continuity Policies:** Ministries must develop and adhere to “staffing continuity frameworks” to govern staff transfers during reforms, ensuring that training investments are preserved through clear qualification pathways and hand-over protocols.
2. **Align National Standards with Resilience Pedagogies:** Resilience strategies (e.g., Accelerated Learning and Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning (ITL)) should be moved from "emergency response" to mandatory components of teacher training curricula. If possible, the strategies should be integrated into national teacher standards and initial teacher education curricula.
3. **Mandate Evidence-Based Professional Evaluation:** To ensure long-term pedagogical growth, participation in Action Research, and the maintenance of Professional Teaching Portfolios should be mandatory requirements for tutor promotion and annual evaluation. Engagement in Action Research and Reflective Portfolios should be linked to career progression, incentivizing a culture of lifelong learning and pedagogical innovation.

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