

# Social Protection to Foster Inclusive, Resilient Early Childhood Education in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania

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Received: March 8, 2026

Accepted: May 5, 2026

Published: May 12, 2026

doi:10.5296/iss.v14i1.23760

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/iss.v14i1.23760>

## Abstract

In order to evaluate the efficacy of systems approaches in enhancing early childhood education (ECE), this study summarizes outcomes from the SESEA and F4L programs in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The study investigates how context-responsive ECE, social-emotional learning (SEL), and social protection (SP) interventions contribute to improvements in teaching practices, inclusion, and learner outcomes using mixed-methods data, including teacher surveys, classroom observations, and policy analysis. The findings show significant improvements in inclusive classroom practices, gender-sensitive pedagogy, and teacher confidence, especially when reflective peer learning and continuous mentoring are incorporated. Children's academic performance and well-being have been linked to the integration of SEL and SP initiatives, such as school nutrition and health checks; nevertheless, difficulties still exist because of limited resources, teacher shortages, and uneven monitoring and assessment systems. The study finds structural obstacles including packed classrooms, poor ICT infrastructure, and low parental involvement while highlighting successful practices like the inventive use of local resources, action research, and cooperative problem-solving. To guarantee equitable, high-quality ECE for all children, recommendations place a heavy emphasis on expanding context-specific TPL, investing in ICT and inclusive practices, bolstering accountability structures, and cultivating stronger community relationships. For policymakers, practitioners, and development partners looking to create robust, inclusive, and successful early learning systems in sub-Saharan Africa, these findings provide evidence-based recommendations.

**Keywords:** Social-Emotional Learning, Social protection, Teacher professional learning, Resilience, Inclusive education

## 1. Introduction

Early Childhood Education is a crucial foundation for lifelong learning and social fairness, and the quality and inclusivity of East Africa's educational institutions are closely tied to the region's human capital development trajectory (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2022). Even though access to education has significantly improved in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, enduring issues like poverty, inequality, and vulnerability still impair learning outcomes and prevent young students from developing critical life skills (UNICEF, 2023; Ng'asike & Swadener, 2019).

Due to food insecurity, poor healthcare, and unstable family environments, many children in these situations experience poverty-related "toxic stress," which severely hinders their capacity to learn and develop socioemotionally (Gallegos et al., 2021; Harms & Garrett-Ruffin, 2023; Yoshikawa et al., 2022). A comprehensive strategy that incorporates social and educational interventions is needed to overcome these obstacles (Britto et al., 2017).

In order to promote inclusive and resilient ECE in East Africa, this study explores the synergy between Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Social Protection (SP) initiatives. In particular, the study aims to close the ongoing implementation gap between classroom practice and progressive educational policies like Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), Uganda's National Teacher Policy (NTP), and Tanzania's Education Sector Development Plan (MoE Kenya, 2019; Ministry of Education and Sports Uganda, 2019; URT, 2022). The teaching workforce still lacks the capacity to effectively and sustainably deliver SEL, inclusivity, and resilience, despite policies' growing recognition of their significance (OECD, 2020; Mtahabwa, 2020).

This study offers both a systems-level framework and micro-level empirical evidence, drawing on a mixed-methods, longitudinal design within the framework of two key initiatives, Strengthening Education Systems in East Africa (SESEA) and the Foundation for Learning (F4L) Longitudinal Studies, carried out in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. It looks at how effective ECE interventions increase teacher competency, how integrating SEL and SP measures affects classroom environments and student outcomes, and how important structural obstacles like inconsistent mentorship, poor accountability, and deficiencies in ICT infrastructure hinder the equity and sustainability of ECE reforms (Pence et al., 2023; Oduol et al., 2022; Mugo et al., 2021).

This study attempts to provide solid, context-specific suggestions for institutionalizing inclusive, gender-sensitive, and resilient early childhood education systems in East Africa by combining data from the three national settings. The results provide empirical insight into how policy aspirations can be translated into quantifiable improvements in academic achievement and holistic child development when teacher professional development is placed within a larger social protection framework (UNESCO, 2023; Evans et al., 2021).

ECE systems in East Africa still have significant obstacles in attaining quality, fairness, and resilience despite recent legislative commitments and curriculum reforms in Kenya, Uganda,

and Tanzania. Although it is becoming more widely acknowledged that integrating SEL and SP measures is essential for promoting young children's holistic development, policy goals and practical realities continue to diverge. Social protection measures frequently remain fragmented or inadequately matched with educational aims, and many ECE teachers lack appropriate professional development opportunities to integrate SEL effectively. Systemic obstacles like inadequate data, governance issues, and resource limitations all make it difficult to scale and sustain integrated initiatives. Empirical understanding of how SEL and SP are reflected in national policies, the degree to which they are implemented in ECE, and the elements facilitating or impeding institutionalization in various East African contexts is desperately needed.

## 2. Literature Review

It is becoming more widely acknowledged that the interaction of ECE, SEL, and SP is essential to young learners' overall development, especially in low- and middle-income nations (Britto et al., 2017; Yoshikawa et al., 2022). Over the past ten years, ECE has received increased policy attention in East Africa; Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania have implemented reforms to increase access, enhance quality, and advance equity (UNESCO, 2023; Ministry of Education and Sports Uganda, 2019). Nonetheless, significant obstacles still exist, such as unequal access, poor teacher preparation, and the widespread impacts of poverty and vulnerability on children's development (Ng'asike & Swadener, 2019; UNICEF, 2023).

### 2.1 Early Childhood Education in East Africa

While recent studies show notable advancements in ECE enrollment and policy creation throughout the area, they also reveal enduring disparities in socioeconomic status, gender, and location (World Bank, 2022; Mtahabwa, 2020). Although Uganda's NTP and Kenya's CBC are steps toward inclusive and learner-centered ECE, their implementation is still uneven and frequently hampered by a lack of funding, inadequate teacher preparation, and shoddy accountability systems (MoE Kenya, 2019; URT, 2022; Oduol et al., 2022).

### 2.2 Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Child Well-Being

SEL is acknowledged for its capacity to improve children's resilience, self-control, and interpersonal skills, as well as their academic and life results (OECD, 2020; Evans et al., 2021). SEL interventions can lessen the negative consequences of "toxic stress" brought on by poverty, food insecurity, and unstable families in settings characterized by adversity, such those that many East African children face (Gallegos et al., 2021; Yoshikawa et al., 2022). It has been demonstrated that including SEL into ECE curricula enhances social, emotional, and cognitive skills, with long-term advantages for academic success and social inclusion (Harms & Garrett-Ruffin, 2023; Britto et al., 2017).

### 2.3 Social Protection Measures and Education

Social protection, which includes health interventions, school food programs, and cash transfers, is essential for fostering home resilience and allowing children to participate in

schooling (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2022). Research shows that SP interventions improve attendance, lower dropout rates, and establish safer, more supportive learning environments when they are integrated with educational efforts (Evans et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). However, poor implementation, fragmentation, and restricted access to the most disadvantaged individuals sometimes hinder the efficacy of SP interventions (Pence et al., 2023).

#### *2.4 Teacher Professional Development*

A key component of achieving policy goals is teachers' ability to provide inclusive, SEL-infused ECE. Ongoing, high-quality teacher professional development (TPL) is associated with better pedagogical practice, classroom environment, and student results, according to evidence from East Africa and similar contexts (Evans et al., 2021; Mugo et al., 2021). The sustainability of reforms is undermined by the fact that many educators report having little access to peer support, mentorship, and meaningful professional development (Mtahabwa, 2020; Pence et al., 2023).

#### *2.5 Systemic Barriers to ECE Reform*

The successful implementation of policy is hampered by structural issues such as poor governance, insufficient funding, deficiencies in ICT infrastructure, and uneven monitoring, even in the face of robust policy frameworks (Oduol et al., 2022; UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, there are still gender differences in teacher representation and student involvement, necessitating specific inclusion and equity efforts (UNICEF, 2023; World Bank, 2022).

#### *2.6 Synthesis and Gaps*

The potential of incorporating SEL and SP into ECE to support holistic child development and educational equity is confirmed by the literature. Nevertheless, little empirical study has been done on how these dimensions work together in East African institutions, especially when it comes to institutional sustainability and teacher professional development. By offering context-specific, longitudinal data on the effects of integrated SEL and SP approaches on ECE quality, teacher competency, and child outcomes in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, this study fills this knowledge vacuum.

### **3. Methods**

In order to integrate findings from a collection of longitudinal project reports and assessment papers pertaining to TPL treatments in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, this review used a qualitative document analysis technique. Comprehensive project assessments, research studies, and monitoring reports created under the F4L initiative between 2022 and 2025 were among the materials reviewed. These documents addressed a variety of topics, such as leadership techniques in early childhood and primary school settings, inclusive education, gender-responsive pedagogy, and teacher professional development.

The methodologies, conclusions, and lessons learned as presented in the reports were the main emphasis of the analysis. Purposively chosen documents included viewpoints from

teacher educators, student teachers, school administrators, and education officers in order to guarantee participation from all three nations. In order to enable a comparative knowledge of how TPL treatments were assessed in various contexts, the review paid particular attention to the sampling procedures, data collection instruments, and analytical approaches reported in each project document.

Sections of the documents pertaining to research design, sampling, data collection, and analysis were methodically coded as part of the data extraction process. Information on participant demographics, ethical considerations, and the use of mixed or single-method approaches were recorded when available. No new primary data was gathered for this review; the synthesis was based solely on the information provided in the documents that are attached.

The final analysis highlighted both similarities and contextual differences in research practice across Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda by triangulating themes and methodological insights from the individual reports. A secondary, integrative viewpoint on the execution and assessment of TPL interventions throughout the region is offered by this document-based examination.

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1 Policy Commitment, Teacher Professional Learning, and Capacity Building*

SEL, SP, and inclusive education are becoming more and more important in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania's early childhood and primary education policy frameworks. Tanzania's Education Sector Development Plan (ESDP), Uganda's NTP, and Kenya's CBC all express goals for child-centered, gender-responsive, and comprehensive approaches to early learning. Even while these pledges show a move in the direction of equity and resilience, it is still difficult to convert policy into successful teaching methods.

Strong evidence that excellent TPL interventions can significantly improve teacher preparedness, attitudes, and instructional behaviors was presented by the F4L and SESEA projects. However, these improvements may be brittle in the absence of ongoing support and sufficient resources.

According to the F4L longitudinal survey, most student teachers in Tanzania expressed a high degree of knowledge and confidence in using the CBC. In particular, 72% of student teachers said they were "*very familiar*" with CBC lesson planning, and a comparable percentage said they were confident in their ability to employ learner-centered teaching techniques. This change was frequently emphasized in qualitative interviews: "*I was so impressed by the interactive strategies used by teachers in the teaching and learning process, such as the small group discussion, role plays, and interactive questions and answers,*" said a student teacher. "*The experience I have had is teacher teaching practically, teaching singing how to learn to write different letters and being able to pronounce letters*" (ST 30) is another reflection that highlights the training's practical, hands-on elements.

The data from Kenya was also positive. In terms of lesson design, evaluation, teamwork, and

reflective practice, over 80% of student teachers evaluated themselves as “*very good*” or “*excellent*.” The mentorship practicum for the F4L project was especially appreciated; 98% of student teachers expressed satisfaction with it, characterizing it as a chance to develop new abilities and self-assurance. “*In preparation and the use of teaching and learning resources, we were the ones preparing all the resources under the guidance of the teacher... she was ready to support us,*” a student teacher explained the importance of mentorship. “*The knowledge I get from various seminars, courses, and training is always shared when I go back to my teachers so that they can learn through me by doing,*” another person observed regarding the influence of this support. I have thus urged them to take advantage of the training provided by the Aga Khan Foundation and ADEM in order to enhance our educational institutions.

Gender and inclusion in TPL were especially important in Uganda. Over 87% of student teachers thought that gender equality was “*close to being achieved*” in their institutions, and 90% of teacher educators had received training in gender and inclusion, according to the F4L study. Teachers talked about becoming more conscious of their own prejudices and deliberate in establishing fair learning settings. “*We ensure that both boys and girls have equal roles in group activities,*” a teacher educator clarified. It is critical that students support and regard one another as equals. Student comments reflected this philosophy: “*I have learned that in order to support both boys and girls, I need to actively create an environment where everyone feels respected.*” Being fair is only one aspect of gender sensitivity; another is understanding the difficulties that each gender may encounter.

The gap between policy and practice persisted despite these significant improvements due to capacity and resource limitations. Both before and after training, the effectiveness of TPL was consistently mediated by the caliber and regularity of mentorship. While the majority of Kenyan student teachers indicated great satisfaction with their practicum mentorship, a sizable minority voiced dissatisfaction with sporadic or inadequate assistance. “*They just gave the pupils.*” One student said, “*The college is just there, and the students are here,*” emphasizing the gap that can arise when there is insufficient institutional support. In a similar vein, several educators in Uganda reported that following initial training, there was “*no follow-up or guidance from education authorities to help them apply the new knowledge,*” which resulted in ambiguity and uneven implementation in classrooms.

Table 1. Teacher Self-reported confidence and competency by country and intervention

Country	% “Very Familiar” with Curriculum	% “Very Good/Excellent” in Lesson Planning	% “Very Good/Excellent” in Assessment	% Reporting Satisfaction with Mentorship
Kenya	75%	81%	80%	98%
Tanzania	72%	79%	78%	92%
Uganda	68%	76%	74%	90%

Student teachers become more self-assured, cooperative, and introspective when mentorship

was strong. Even well-designed TPL treatments failed to bring about long-lasting, classroom-level change in situations where mentorship or institutional support was lacking. This was particularly true in environments with limited resources, where teachers' capacity to fully implement the goals of national policy was sometimes hampered by large class numbers, a lack of instructional materials, and restricted access to technology.

All things considered, the SESEA and F4L evaluations show that while high-quality TPL and policy commitment are essential, they are not enough to reform early childhood education on a large scale. Closing the policy-practice gap requires the availability of knowledgeable, well-supported mentors, a culture of ongoing professional development, and the useful tools to convert instruction into inclusive, interesting practice. *"I have learned that being a leader means not only improving myself but also helping my colleagues grow,"* one head teacher summed up. I set an example by demonstrating how to utilize M&E to monitor progress and create SMART targets. The secret to developing genuinely inclusive, resilient, and egalitarian early education systems in East Africa lies in this combination of policy, professional development, and daily leadership.

#### *4.2 Implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Social Protection (SP), and Impact on Learners*

The integration of SEL and Social Protection (SP) within early childhood and primary education settings in East Africa has produced measurable improvements in both academic performance and classroom climate, as evidenced by longitudinal data from SESEA and F4L project sites.

##### 4.2.1 Academic and Behavioral Outcomes

After integrating SEL-focused teacher professional learning and related SP interventions, quantitative assessment data, especially from Tanzania's SESEA locations, showed notable improvements in foundational literacy and numeracy. Children's mean phoneme recognition scores rose from 3.0 at baseline to 5.2 at endline in the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), while their mean number identification scores improved from 5.7 to 10.1 in the Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA). The percentage of kids who could not read a single word changed dramatically, from 77.2% at baseline to 32.1% following intervention. According to one evaluator, *"the decrease in reading stoppage from 77.2% to 32.1% is a significant indicator of success... continued efforts are needed to address performance variability and provide additional support to struggling learners."*

Both SESEA and F4L's qualitative school-level results supported these quantitative gains. In addition to academic improvements, SEL-integrated classes showed a 30% decrease in documented behavioral violations and a 12% improvement on standardized exams when compared to non-SEL schools. These improvements were credited by educators and school administrators to the development of empathy, collaboration, and conflict-resolution abilities. *"I have changed the way I approach teaching,"* said a teacher from Lindi, Tanzania. I now concentrate on encouraging the kids to share their views, ask questions, and engage in group discussions. They become more engaged and learn more effectively as a result. *"When I let*

*the students talk more, they come up with interesting ideas that I never thought of,”* noted another educator from Arua, Uganda. The lessons become much more engaging as a result. These observations highlight the crucial role that SEL plays in developing encouraging, interactive learning environments that promote both academic success and socioemotional growth.

Table 2. Learner Outcomes Before and After SEL/SP Integration (Tanzania, SESEA)

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Baseline (Pre-intervention)</b>	<b>Endline (post-intervention)</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Mean Phoneme Recognition Score	3.0	5.2	+73%
Mean Number Identification Score	5.7	10.1	+77%
% Unable to Read a Single Word	77.2%	32.1%	-58%
Academic Performance (Overall Gain)	-	+12%	
Behavioral Infractions (Reduction)	-	-30%	

#### 4.2.2 Role of Social Protection (SP) Measures

When combined with SP treatments meant to lessen the impact of poverty, food insecurity, and “*toxic stress*” on students, SEL’s efficacy was frequently increased. For the most vulnerable children, school nutrition programs, social service referrals, and basic health or hygiene help have been shown to boost attendance, improve wellbeing, and lessen anxiety. “*We have emphasized to parents the importance of children receiving meals at school,*” said one head teacher. Preschoolers are being served oatmeal here, unlike in the past when parents had difficulties. Every child now gets porridge. The F4L and SESEA frameworks firmly support the idea that this concrete support helped give kids the psychological and physical stability they needed to control their emotions and be open to learning.

The findings do, however, also point out that SP interventions were frequently disconnected from core ECE service and had unequal coverage. The scope and impact of SP services were limited in certain circumstances because they were provided as parallel programs rather than being methodically incorporated into everyday routines. Teachers and leaders talked about ongoing challenges such as uneven funding, practical difficulties, and poor collaboration between social services and education. “*Parents want to be involved, but many work long hours,*” a teacher worried. Aligning SP assistance with the realities of low-income families is a larger problem, as seen by the difficulty of scheduling meetings when they can attend.

Additionally, school administrators noted that “action research was used when there was an outbreak of diseases such as cholera by educating the community, visiting children with special needs, and advising their parents to change their mentality about their traditional beliefs,” highlighting the continued need for a more comprehensive, integrated approach. However, these initiatives continued to be the exception rather than the rule, and many children, particularly those with disabilities, long-term medical conditions, or unstable home environments, were unable to receive the entire range of SP supports required for the best possible learning.

The results clearly show that when SEL and SP are combined, students improve academically and behaviorally, and schools become more welcoming and supportive. According to one SESEA evaluation summary, *"The intervention effectively supported the development of early reading skills."* However, more work is required to raise literacy rates and assist difficult students because more over one-third of the kids (32.1%) are still unable to move above the first line. In order to guarantee that every kid, regardless of background, has the chance to flourish, the reports advocate for a change from disjointed support systems to a more thorough, school-anchored strategy that completely combines SEL, SP, and inclusive pedagogy. Maintaining and growing these benefits will depend on the continued dedication to teacher professional development, community involvement, and systemic resource allocation.

### 4.3 Gender Sensitivity, Inclusion, and Equity

#### 4.3.1 Marked Progress on Gender-Sensitive Pedagogy

The SESEA and F4L initiatives found that both student teachers and school administrators in Tanzania and Kenya have made notable progress in implementing gender-sensitive teaching methods. According to observations and interviews conducted in the classroom, the majority of teachers actively support mixed-gender seating arrangements, purposefully placing boys and girls together to promote respect and cooperation. For instance, a Tanzanian classroom observer observed, *"There was at least a girl and boy sitting at each desk... the findings suggest that student teachers are aware of gender-responsive pedagogy, particularly in classroom seating arrangements."* Teachers reported making a deliberate effort to utilize gender-inclusive terminology in their lessons, thus this change went beyond only physical arrangements. *"The language we use in class right now is more responsive to gender,"* one instructor explained, while another said, *"We make sure that both boys and girls have equal roles in group activities."* It is critical that students support and regard one another as equals.

Another area of improvement was the equitable distribution of leadership positions. Instructors described instances where they purposefully switched work assignments, group leaders, and class monitors between boys and girls. *"I am a class teacher,"* a Kenyan educator clarified. I ensure that if there is a male class secretary, there must be a female one. As we categorize students, we create content that encourages gender sensitivity. We also pay close attention to gender. Students of both genders were encouraged to participate, take the lead, and succeed in the classroom as a result of these practices.

Despite these developments, there were still issues and gaps. The lack of official grievance or anti-discrimination procedures at their practicum institutions was reported by 44% of student teachers in Kenya. This research highlights the need for stronger institutional mechanisms to address prejudice based on gender or other factors. *"There are no student-grievance management procedures for discrimination... I would not know where to go if I was treated unfair,"* said one student, expressing a widespread worry. Even though many teachers in Tanzania and Uganda demonstrated a high level of gender awareness overall, unconscious bias persisted, especially in fields like science and math that are often associated with one gender. *"Some teachers, even with good intentions, exhibited unconscious biases that inadvertently favored boys, particularly in subjects traditionally associated with males, such*

*as mathematics and science,*” noted a Tanzanian education official. Differences in support, attention, or expectations for boys and girls were occasionally indicative of this subtle bias.

#### *4.4 Inclusion of Children with Disabilities and Diverse Needs*

Children with disabilities and other unique learning requirements were included in efforts to promote inclusion, which went beyond gender. Eighty percent of student teachers surveyed in Uganda agreed that most schools were *“friendly to students with disabilities.”* Differentiated teaching techniques, course material customization, and classroom adjustments were frequently mentioned. One instructor from Uganda, for instance, said, *“We make sure that students with disabilities are not overlooked.”* We offer extra assistance to students who struggle with reading. Ensuring that everyone can engage in learning is the goal of inclusivity. *“When I was in class and noticed a learner with hearing impairment, I brought them closer to the front bench so they could follow better,”* said another educator.

Additionally, several schools installed ramps or modified classroom designs to assist children with physical disabilities as part of efforts to provide accessible infrastructure. Teachers are becoming more conscious of the need to recognize and assist students with special needs, utilizing a combination of tailored instruction, individualized attention, and peer support. *“We were taught to look for resources which will be well suited for someone with hearing problems, for a trainee with visual problems, and for trainees with different learning difficulties,”* one educator explained.

However, a lack of resources and expertise frequently hindered these efforts. The absence of specialized resources, suitable evaluation instruments, or focused professional development were often mentioned by educators as significant obstacles. The capacity to consistently offer students with disabilities with high-quality support in schools with limited resources frequently depended on the initiative and resourcefulness of individual instructors. *“We do not really have enough resources for learners with disabilities... sometimes we just have to improvise and do our best,”* bemoaned one educator. Others stressed the necessity of system-wide training and more organized assistance to guarantee that all educators felt comfortable using inclusive practices.

#### *4.5 Ongoing Challenges and the Need for Systemic Change*

Although significant progress has been made toward gender-sensitive, inclusive education, gaps in policy implementation, institutional support, and teacher competence still exist, according to the results of the SESEA and F4L evaluations. When it comes to instances of discrimination or exclusion, students and instructors in many schools lack clear remedies due to the lack of official grievance procedures. Furthermore, even though the majority of educators today understand the importance of inclusive pedagogy, their best efforts may be undermined by ingrained cultural standards and a lack of resources, especially when it comes to STEM topics and helping students with impairments.

Teachers’ opinions, such as *“It can be challenging to openly discuss gender issues, especially in front of students who may have traditional views about boys and girls.”* *“I try to encourage them to be open-minded, but it is a gradual process,”* emphasize the continued necessity of

community involvement, policy reform, and focused training. The lessons from SESEA and F4L highlight the significance of combining professional development with well-defined institutional frameworks and sufficient resource allocation to guarantee that all children, regardless of gender, ability, or background, can thrive as the region continues to develop more equitable and inclusive early learning systems.

Table 3. Gender and Inclusion Indicators by Country

Country	% Mixed-Gender Seating	% Use Gender-Inclusive Language	% Schools “Friendly to Students with Disabilities”	% Teachers Reporting Absence of Grievance Procedures
Kenya	85%	90%	78%	44%
Tanzania	88%	92%	81%	37%
Uganda	80%	87%	80%	39%

#### 4.6 Systemic Barriers to Integration and Scale

##### 4.6.1 Systemic Barriers and Resource Constraints

The complete realization of high-quality, equitable early childhood and primary education in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda is nevertheless hampered by enduring institutional impediments, despite significant advancements in inclusive pedagogy and teacher development. These obstacles are intricately linked and have an impact on both the quality of education and the welfare of educators and students.

##### 4.6.2 Overcrowded Classrooms and Teacher Shortages

Overcrowding in classrooms and a persistent teacher shortage were two of the most often mentioned issues in Tanzania and Uganda, making it very challenging for educators to give each student targeted attention or use learner-centered approaches. Teachers in a few of Tanzanian schools reported having to oversee more than 100 pupils in each class, which made group projects and interactive exercises all but impossible. “*Our classroom is overcrowded, and we only have a few textbooks,*” one Lindi teacher said. We make an effort to share resources, but this is not always feasible, which makes teaching challenging. Similar complaints were voiced by Ugandan educators, who emphasized how big class numbers “*become difficult to give each student the attention they need.*” It is difficult to keep the classroom in order when students are disruptive, which affects both learning outcomes and classroom management.

##### 4.6.3 Inadequate Access to Teaching/Learning Materials and ICT Resources

Lack of fundamental teaching and learning materials and restricted access to digital/ICT resources were examples of resource scarcity that went beyond human capabilities. According to 38% of Kenyan educators, inadequate ICT infrastructure makes it difficult for them to incorporate technology into their courses or obtain current instructional materials. “*We have tablets, but we do not know how to incorporate them into our lessons,*” said a

Kenyan educator. It would be really beneficial to have training on how to use technology in the classroom. Just 9% of Ugandan educators said they were “*very familiar*” with ICT integration, and many said that digital gadgets were either unavailable or unreliable because of sporadic power and poor connectivity. A Tanzanian instructor said, “*We need more textbooks and learning aids.*” “*Students lose out on significant learning opportunities due to a lack of resources.*”

#### 4.6.4 High Teacher Workloads and Insufficient Planning Time

Another recurring element was high teacher workloads. Teachers in all three nations reported that they had little time for lesson planning, evaluation, or providing individualized support for problematic students due to administrative responsibilities, large class sizes, and extracurricular activities. A teacher in Arua, Uganda, stated, “*The workload is overwhelming.*” “*There are too many students and administrative responsibilities to properly focus on.*” Students do not receive the attention they require since I tend to rush through lessons. Despite having received training in more interactive or inclusive approaches, teachers were frequently compelled by this temptation to return to traditional, teacher-centered learning.

#### 4.6.5 Limited Community/Parental Engagement

The low level of community and parental involvement, especially in rural and lower-income areas, was another enduring obstacle. Strong home-school connections are sometimes hampered by socioeconomic constraints, low literacy among parents, and a lack of awareness of the importance of early learning, according to educators and school administrators. “*Many parents do not understand how much their involvement can help their child succeed,*” noted an Arua teacher. They will not know how to assist their kids at home if we do not actively include them in the educational process. Participation was frequently minimal even when schools hosted parent-teacher conferences or community events, particularly when those events clashed with parents’ work schedules or cultural conventions.

#### 4.6.6 Inconsistent Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Practices

The results also show that Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) techniques vary significantly between schools and geographical areas. Action planning, frequent reflection, and the application of M&E methods were strong aspects that supported professional development and instructional improvement in some SESEA and F4L project schools. Benefits like “*setting clear goals for my class and tracking progress through M&E has helped me focus my efforts and improve my teaching*” were mentioned by teachers. Now I know what works and what doesn’t. However, M&E was either shallow or nonexistent in many other institutions, frequently those that lacked ongoing mentorship or follow-up support. “*During the first session, we learned about action planning, but there was no follow-up to help us improve our strategy.*” A teacher from Arua, Uganda, said, “*I feel like I am on my own when it comes to tracking progress.*”

The sustainability and scalability of changes in teacher practice and learner outcomes are nevertheless threatened by the continuation of these systemic hurdles, overcrowding, resource limitations, heavy workloads, little community engagement, and inconsistent M&E. One

Tanzanian school leader stated it this way: *“We need policy reforms that support schools in terms of teacher support and resource allocation.”* It is challenging to achieve long-lasting benefits without these adjustments. Coordinated, system-level interventions that enhance the climate that supports inclusive, high-quality education while also supporting teacher development will be necessary to address these issues.

Table 4. Key Systemic Barriers Reported by Teachers

Barrier	Kenya	Tanzania	Uganda
Overcrowded Classrooms	62%	74%	81%
Teacher Shortages	55%	70%	77%
Insufficient ICT Access	38%	51%	61%
High Workload	60%	65%	69%
Limited Parental Engagement	45%	59%	63%

#### 4.7 Best Practices and Lessons Learned

The transforming effect of active, continuous professional development and mentorship on teaching quality and classroom climate is a crucial lesson that has emerged from the SESEA and F4L projects. Teachers who regularly received mentorship and engaged in context-specific training reported feeling more confident and used more effective teaching strategies. *“The knowledge I get from various seminars, courses, and training is always shared when I go back to my teachers so that they can learn through me by doing... what we get can improve our schools,”* a Kenyan educator explained this development. In addition to improving individual practice, this kind of cascading knowledge-sharing supported the development of an ongoing learning culture at educational institutions.

Peer learning, teamwork, and reflective practice were frequently cited as effective means of fostering teacher development. Teachers discussed the importance of keeping reflective notebooks and sharing observations with their peers, pointing out that these activities helped them better understand the needs of their students and pinpoint areas in which they needed to improve. A Tanzanian teacher said, *“I have learned to be more reflective about my teaching, and I use these reflections to plan better lessons and adapt to what my students need.”* One teacher noted, *“We have regular meetings where teachers present their action plans and discuss how they are tracking student progress.”* Peer collaboration promoted a sense of shared responsibility and mutual support. This has enhanced the quality of our instruction and made M&E seem more like a team effort than a solo endeavor.

Another great practice that surfaced was the inventive use of locally accessible materials and improvisation, especially in situations with limited resources. Teachers explained how they used bottle tops, leaves, and objects from the community to teach literacy, science, and counting in the absence of textbooks or electronic gadgets. A Tanzanian teacher said, *“We use whatever is around us, and it helps the children see the relevance of what they are learning.”* These creative methods reduced reliance on expensive resources while making lessons more

interesting and approachable.

Action research and cooperative problem-solving, particularly among head teachers and school administrators, further improved school adaptation and improvement. Teachers and leaders were better equipped to address local issues when they participated in school-based research projects, tried out novel strategies, and together analyzed the findings. “*We conduct research in education and disseminate reports... we are always looking for ways to solve problems together,*” one headteacher summed up. This evidence-based, iterative method promoted adaptability and resilience to shifting conditions.

## **5. Discussion of Findings**

Targeted ECE combined with SEL SP interventions can result in quantifiable improvements in teacher capacity, classroom practice, and student results in ECE, according to the evaluation of the SESEA and F4L projects in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. These results are consistent with the larger body of research highlighting the importance of inclusive pedagogy, high-quality teachers, and comprehensive support networks for foundational learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Piper et al., 2022).

### *5.1 Bridging Policy and Practice*

The disparity between progressive national policy frameworks, like Tanzania’s ESDP, Uganda’s NTP, and Kenya’s CBC, and their full implementation in classrooms is a significant discovery. Although SEL, SP, and inclusive education are becoming more and more required by policy, their practical adoption depends on strong TPL and regular, practice-based mentorship (UNESCO, 2022). Teachers who engaged in context-responsive professional development reported notable gains in competences like lesson planning, assessment, gender-responsive teaching, and inclusive practice, according to the SESEA and F4L studies. This is consistent with international studies that shows that learning outcomes and instructional quality are linked to continuous, practice-based professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; OECD, 2021).

### *5.2 SEL, SP, and Learner Outcomes*

Improvements in learners’ conduct and academic performance were closely linked to the integration of SEL and SP. The percentage of children in Tanzania who were unable to read a single word decreased from 77.2% to 32.1%, while SESEA’s EGRA/EGMA examinations showed notable improvements in phoneme recognition (mean score increased from 3.0 to 5.2) and number identification (mean increased from 5.7 to 10.1). These results are consistent with research from comparable settings, where structured SEL interventions have been demonstrated to reduce toxic stress and enhance academic performance, particularly when combined with SP measures like school feeding or psychosocial support (Yoshikawa et al., 2020; RTI International, 2022; Britto et al., 2021).

However, the assessments emphasize that SP interventions frequently remained fragmented and inconsistently supported, which limited their reach and lasting impact. This is consistent with the literature’s need for more systematic, school-anchored implementation of social

protection inside ECE (World Bank, 2023; UNICEF, 2022).

### *5.3 Gender Sensitivity, Inclusion, and Equity*

Gender-sensitive pedagogy has made significant strides, with the majority of educators and head teachers in Tanzania and Kenya actively supporting gender-inclusive language, mixed-gender seating, and equal leadership positions. These developments align with recent international and regional studies demonstrating that gender-responsive instruction is associated with increased engagement and performance for both boys and girls (Aikman & Halai, 2021; UNGEI, 2021). Nonetheless, there are still persistent gaps: 44% of Kenyan student teachers reported that there were no official grievance procedures, and some educators in Tanzania and Uganda continued to exhibit unconscious gender bias, particularly in STEM disciplines. These difficulties are consistent with larger research showing that systemic and attitudinal transformation required both continuous training and strong institutional protections (Muthukrishna et al., 2020).

The majority of schools made an effort to be “*friendly to students with disabilities*,” demonstrating efforts to incorporate students with various learning needs and disabilities. However, inconsistent outcomes were caused by a lack of resources and specialized training, which supported findings from recent evaluations on the necessity of increased funding and professional capacity in inclusive education (Muthukrishna et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2022).

### *5.4 Systemic Barriers and Resource Constraints*

Notwithstanding these developments, implementation and sustainability are still threatened by structural obstacles like packed classrooms, teacher shortages, a lack of resources, poor ICT infrastructure, and excessive workloads. The research has extensively established these difficulties as significant barriers to fundamental education in low- and middle-income nations (Bold et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2023). The need for more regular follow-up, coaching, and data-driven reflection was further highlighted by the variation in M&E procedures (OECD, 2021).

### *5.5 Best Practices and Lessons Learned*

Sustained professional development and mentoring, reflective practice, peer learning, creative adaptation of local materials, and cooperative problem-solving among educators are some of the finest methods that have been identified. Research has shown that these methods are successful in scaling and maintaining instructional progress (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Piper et al., 2022; OECD, 2021).

The SESEA and F4L experience demonstrates that integrated, context-specific TPL, SEL, and SP can result in transformative change, but only in the presence of enabling system circumstances, such as sufficient resources, a culture of accountability and learning, strong leadership, and coherent SP delivery. To guarantee that all children benefit from inclusive, resilient ECE, policymakers and practitioners are therefore recommended to make investments in ongoing professional development, systematic SP integration, thorough M&E, and context-appropriate community participation.

## 6. Recommendations

### *6.1 Scale Up Context-Responsive F4Land In-Class Mentorship*

Expanding context-specific, continuous TPL that is grounded in the realities of teachers' daily work and is supported by strong in-class mentorship is crucial to bridging the gap between policy and classroom practice. SEL, SP, gender-responsive, and inclusive pedagogy should be the main topics of instruction, with a focus on practical application, introspective learning, and peer cooperation. Teachers who receive regular, embedded mentorship will be better able to use newly acquired skills in long-term practice, particularly in rural and resource-constrained environments.

### *6.2 Systematically Integrate Social Protection (SP) Measures within ECE*

School nutrition, health examinations, and social service referrals are examples of SP interventions that should be methodically included into early childhood education programs rather than being offered as separate or concurrent programs. For the most vulnerable kids, incorporating SP into essential ECE routines lowers absenteeism, toxic stress, and learning obstacles while promoting engagement and attendance. Effective implementation requires cooperation between the social, health, and education sectors.

### *6.3 Invest in ICT Infrastructure, Teacher Digital Training, and Resource Provision*

In order to equip children with 21st-century skills, it is imperative that the digital divide be addressed. Invest in reasonably priced, dependable ICT infrastructure for schools and teacher preparation programs, including devices, connectivity, and electricity. Assure continuous technical support and give educators actual, hands-on training on how to incorporate digital technologies into instruction and evaluations. Give priority to low-tech solutions and local adaption of digital material for underserved and rural areas.

### *6.4 Strengthen Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), Grievance Redress, and Accountability Systems*

Create reliable, user-friendly M&E systems, such as action planning, progress monitoring, and frequent instructor reflection. In order to guarantee that all educators and students have equitable and transparent recourse in situations of bias, abuse, or exclusion, grievance resolution systems and anti-discrimination procedures should be strengthened. Both district and school accountability systems should have the resources and authority to address new issues and promote data-driven development.

### *6.5 Promote Greater Community and Parental Engagement through Flexible, Context-Appropriate Strategies*

Motivate community leaders and parents to take an active role in creating learning environments and early learning interventions. Develop engagement strategies that consider family work schedules, reading levels, and cultural context, such as after-hours workshops, house visits, or community-based activities. Stress the value of early education for both boys and girls and offer parents practical guidance on how to support their children's learning at

home.

### *6.6 Prioritize Inclusion of Children with Disabilities and Diverse Learning Needs*

Invest in infrastructure, resources, and training that promote inclusive education for kids with special needs and disabilities. Boost teachers' proficiency with assistive technology, universal design for learning, and differentiated instruction. Make that all children are routinely identified, supported, and tracked for involvement and progress, and that schools are physically accessible.

### *6.7 Foster a Culture of Reflective Practice, Teamwork, and School-Based Innovation*

To foster creativity and ongoing development, support and facilitate teacher-led action research, reflective journaling, and frequent peer learning sessions. Encourage school administrators to foster cooperative, participatory school cultures where educators are encouraged to try new things, contribute, and work together to solve problems.

### *6.8 Recommendations Emerging from Findings*

Building on these lessons, the results recommend a number of practical goals for upcoming policy and programming:

First, it is evident that context-responsive F4L and in-class mentorship needs to be expanded, with an emphasis on inclusive pedagogy, gender, SEL, and SP. Teachers stressed time and time again that customized training and regular, school-based mentoring had the biggest impact. According to one assessment, *"the mentorship practicum was overwhelmingly supported... teaching practice offered valuable new learning experiences."* Another teacher confirmed that mentoring is crucial in the teacher preparation college as a means of generating champion tutors.

Second, ECE programs should incorporate SP measures including school feeding, health examinations, and social service referrals in a more methodical manner. These approaches *"ensured the child achieves the psychological and physical security required for emotional regulation and learning reception,"* according to educators and leaders. The need for more cohesive, school-anchored support systems resulted from the unevenness and dispersion of SP services, which restricted their reach.

Third, in order to assist the development of 21st-century competences, investments in ICT infrastructure, teacher training on digital technologies, and resource provision are crucial. One Kenyan teacher said, *"We have tablets, but we do not know how to incorporate them into our lessons... training on how to use technology in teaching would be very helpful."* Teachers and school administrators recognized inadequate ICT infrastructure as a significant barrier. To close the digital divide, targeted investment in both devices and capacity-building is required.

Fourth, the results highlight the necessity of bolstering district and school-level Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E), grievance redress, and accountability systems. One common obstacle to long-term improvement was the inconsistent use of M&E. One Ugandan instructor said, *"We were introduced to action planning during the initial training, but there was no follow-up to*

help us refine our approach.” When it comes to monitoring my development, I feel like I am alone. Continuous development requires reliable, user-friendly systems for monitoring learning, handling complaints, and guaranteeing accountability.

Lastly, encouraging increased parental and community involvement through adaptable, situation-appropriate tactics is still crucial. “*Many parents do not understand how much their involvement can help their child succeed... if we do not actively involve them in the learning process, they do not know how to help their children at home,*” educators and leaders said. Particularly in low-income and rural areas, programs like parent education seminars, home visits, and community gatherings should be created to take into account the schedules and reality of families.

In conclusion, SESEA and F4L’s experiences show that ongoing professional development, peer learning, mentoring, innovative resource usage, and cooperative problem-solving can result in significant, equitable advancements in early education. However, infrastructure expenditures, systematic SP integration, strong M&E, and sincere community involvement are necessary to guarantee that these best practices reach every school and student. “*We need policy reforms that support schools in terms of resource allocation and teacher support,*” as one headteacher succinctly stated. Long-lasting changes are hard to achieve without these measures.

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