

**VOICE FOR SPACE: *Using Debating to Improve Language Competency and
Empower Vulnerable Girls in Kenya***

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SUMMARY

Acquisition of language proficiency enables learners to express themselves freely and confidently – acquiring and amplifying their voice in their groups, schools, and community. The learners' presence and confidence are enhanced by practicing self-expression and logical articulation of issues and positions among peers and the larger school community. They can then articulate issues and inform and determine critical decisions within their classes and schools – thus claiming space within the decision-making process and activities. The project, hosted by the Elimu ya Kenya School (EYK), a mixed community school, sought to implement an experimental study using debate as a teaching method and school activity to improve language proficiency and articulation.

The project hypothesized that by promoting language proficiency and consistent usage through debate, girls can acquire comfort in learning and confidence in self-expression, thus improving their self-esteem and motivation to stay in school and learn more. Alternatively, failure to effectively participate in class and other school activities hinders their capacity to learn effectively by reducing their content acquisition and undermining their confidence and self-esteem. The results are poor class progression and performance, especially in languages and sciences, leading to rampant school dropout and child marriage, early pregnancy or drug addiction, and child sex work.

The intervention was designed to be 3-dimensional: English language competency (literacy); self-esteem, increase in confidence(psychology); and gender empowerment through increased participation in decision making. Girls in classes five and six were taught the English language, facilitated to use and practice coherent, logical, and informed self-expression during debates, and compete during campaigns for school leadership. However, the effect of the COVID 19 outbreak that led to the closure of schools and interaction restrictions after they opened affected

the project implementation plans. As a result, the debates (as the project's interventions) were neither used as teaching methods nor conducted as extracurricular activities by the pupils.

The COVID 19 outbreak and the government's immediate intervention actions permanently disrupted the study's implementation. It disorganized the school calendar by closing them and restricting movements and interactions. Once the schools were opened (after almost one year), the COVID 19 management regulations mandated new forms of interaction within the school (social distancing) and school-community relations. In particular, the re-opening regulations prohibited any non-essential staff members and outsiders (like the research team) from entering the school or interacting with school pupils. Despite all the efforts made by the research team to find alternative ways of implementing the project's core interventions, it was not possible. As a result, the study was not implemented according to its design. The team's efforts to delay activities (hoping for a return to normalcy), change plans, and even explore alternative modes of implementation, including virtual meetings, did not yield much. As a result, the only activities implemented as designed were the training and orientation to debating for teachers conducted before the pandemic. Ultimately the team's data was inadequate and unreliable to enable accurate analysis; thus, this report presents an incomplete project.

Despite the technical failure of the project, the study made critical systemic findings that though tangential to the scope of the planned study, bear significant import to the nature and structure of learning and teaching in Kenya. The pandemic experience exposed how intersecting factors affect effective and learner-centred learning in Kenyan public schools. First is the heavy teacher-dependent syllabus that demotivates teachers and learners from exploring and experimenting with child-centred methods and techniques because they require more time than the traditional lecture methods. Secondly, the efforts to launch virtual learning flopped in the school, thus exposing the connection between school, community, and poverty that disadvantages marginalized communities, especially their children, to compromised access to

education and technological opportunities. Thirdly, the pandemic also brought the vulnerability of adolescent girls to the vagaries of a gendered social-cultural normative framework that dictates their sexual and reproductive health rights to light. There was a rapid increase in teenage pregnancy, especially in the coastal region. As a result, many girls did not return to school after the re-opening; among them were those who had been sampled for the study.

Based on this turn of events, the team recommends conducting the study afresh to generate meaningful and credible data and results—consequently, they propose to revise and resubmit the research project proposal to Context Matters. Because of the devastating effect of the COVID 19 pandemic on the intervention activities, the current state of the study cannot provide adequate data and outputs to build a credible case study of the use of debating in enhancing language literacy and girls' empowerment. A do-over provides an opportunity for implementation since there is an increasing return to normalcy, especially by the end of 2022 when the school calendar would have streamlined the current backlog of classes and syllabi coverage.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Like in many developing countries, the education system in Kenya has prioritized enhancing access over the quality of education. Studies indicate that in Kenya's education system, teaching and learning practices result in low functional literacy levels evidenced by poor communication skills (read, write, speak and listen). There is also a growing feeling that the education has low relevance or application in the learned content to contextual experiences and everyday lives (Uwezo Trust Report, 2015- pp. 2-17). Teachers carry socio-culturally embedded power relations and norms to class; thus, the predominant use of teacher-centered methods: teacher demonstrations, question-answer, and problem-solving techniques with limited learners' participation and identification with the content (Odaga and Heneveld, 1995-pp. 29-65). There

is an inadequate linkage between the formal and informal curriculum through interactions and activities designed to facilitate learning, social development, and interpretation of everyday experiences (Okebiro, 2019, pp. 38-45). The study aims to link teaching methods with research in gender empowerment through debating. Its linkage with existing literature is three-fold: debating and language acquisition, debating and teaching, and debating and empowerment.

English is the official language of instruction in Kenya; hence proficiency in the language is often the indicator of the efficacy of the learning and instruction process in schools and classes and, ultimately, levels of literacy in the school and community. Language proficiency determines their class performance, progression, school retention, and completion for girls in poor urban neighbourhoods in Mombasa and the hard-to-reach rural villages across Kenya's Coastal region. Due to their low English language proficiency, coastal schoolgirls lack adequate ability to express themselves, suffer embarrassment, and lack self-confidence and esteem as members of class and school. Beyond language competency, the instructional techniques employed by teachers also alienate and marginalize girls due to their teacher domination (often male) and textbook-centredness without opportunity for active learner participation and engagement with the curriculum content. As a result, their class performance is poor, school attendance intermittent, and school dropouts common. The girls' school and community experiences are enmeshed in a socio-cultural backdrop of retrogressive gender practices and social norms that condone a continuum of sexual and gender-based violence forms and exploitations against them. Furthermore, they experience linguistic, classroom, school, and community barriers and marginalization as adolescent school-going girls. A combination of the barriers, conditions, and norms creates an ecosystem that often contributes to high school dropouts, child marriage, and teenage pregnancy¹.

¹ Girls Education and Child Marriage in *Girls Not Brides thematic Brief*, 2021. [www. Girlsnotbrides.org/](http://www.Girlsnotbrides.org/) Accessed- April, 25th 2022.

To remedy this, this research sought to use debating as an intervention to enhance girls' language proficiency, self-esteem, and confidence (getting a voice) and thus build their capacity to actively participate in school activities, including leadership and decision-making (carving our space). The study held the hypothesis that debating could enhance language acquisition in class (when used in teaching) and proficiency (when engaged in a competitive extracurricular activity). This will enhance the girls' comfort in learning (class participation) by improving their esteem and confidence. Proficiency and confidence will motivate self-expression, active participation in decision-making, and school leadership, thus incentivizing school retention and completion. It adopted a multi-disciplinary 3-dimensional approach- English language competency (literacy); self-esteem, increase in confidence (psychology); and gender empowerment through increased participation in decision making (sociology). It also conceived empowerment as an intertwined process linking the school experience with the larger social-cultural practices (Monkman 1-13).

1.2 Context

The Voice for Space project aimed to explore the usage of debating as a teaching method and school activity to improve language proficiency and articulation, thus giving girls the voice to claim space in schools. The project conceptualizes debating as a method of teaching and learning through a structured process of formal discussion on a particular topic by adopting and vigorously presenting opposing viewpoints in respectful, informed, and supported arguments to debate effectively (Aclan, Noor, and Valdez 213-230)². Participants need language, information on the debate topic, and self-confidence to address an audience. The project intervention pathway holds that if language proficiency and consistent usage are promoted through debate, girls can acquire comfort in learning and confidence in self-

² Aclan, EM, Noor, HAA, and Valdez, NP. 2016. Debate as a Pedagogical Tool to Develop Soft Skills in EFL/ESL Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study. *Pertanika Journal of Social Science & Humanities*, Vol. 24 (1) 213-240.

expression, thus improving their self-esteem and motivation to stay in school and learn more. The intervention is focused on three dimensions of the girls' school and community experience and empowerment- English language competency (literacy); self-esteem, increase in confidence; and gender empowerment through increased participation in decision making.

This study targeted a purposively sampled cohort of 60 girls between the ages of 10 to 13 years in grade 5 and grade 6 (known as an upper primary school in Kenya) from one primary school, Elimu ya Kenya. The school is situated in the underprivileged region of Kisauni Sub-County of Mombasa County. The school serves many children, especially girls from socio-economically vulnerable households, many of them profoundly religious and patriarchally conservative. A total of 12 teachers were engaged and trained on the application and use of debating as a language learning technique and as an extracurricular activity in the school. The training included various processes and procedures for forming debating clubs and participatory teaching- transforming teachers into facilitators.

1.3 Conceptual Rationale of the Study

The study adopted an empowerment conceptual framework in which students are empowered to become aware, skilled, and thinking citizens who are change agents and social critics (Shor, 1992, p.16). The framework assumes that integrating existential experiences into teaching methods through debating can help learners link subject matter and experiences (Horn, 2017; pp. 526-528). Debating as an instructional strategy aims to do this. In practice, the empowerment framework guiding the study avers that debates are excellent for engaging students and livening up the classroom curriculum. Debates in the classroom can help students grasp essential critical thinking and presentation skills. Among the skills classroom debates can foster are abstract thinking, citizenship and etiquette, clarity, organization, persuasion, public

speaking, research, and teamwork and cooperation³. This view aligns with the International Debate in Education Association (IDEA) position, which postulates that debating promotes interactive instruction and cooperative learning, which enables learners to apply knowledge and develop listening and communication skills (Clayton, 2008: 1).

Debating and language competency: Language learning is affected differently by in-class and out-of-class activities. Thus, activities that can link the two have more significant potential for enhancing language competency (Enright, 2011, pp. 80-89). Debating offers an excellent opportunity and activity for language learning because it engages learners in various cognitive and linguistic ways. It enables them to improve listening, speaking, and writing skills through preparation and practice (Alsamar and Ahmed, 2013, pp. 147-152). The study will generate evidence to link, validate or improve these assertions and enhance the application of debating as a teaching and learning technique.

Austin in Butler (1997; pp.2-3)⁴ distinguishes "illocutionary" from "perlocutionary" speech acts: the former are speech acts that, in saying, do what they say and do it in the moment of that saying; the latter are speech acts that produce specific effects as their consequence; by saying something, a particular effect follows. The illocutionary speech act is itself the deed it affects; the perlocutionary merely lead to certain effects that are not the same as the speech act itself. The link between debating and language competency is that debating provides a continuum between the two forms of speech, thus facilitating the transition from mere speech to actions, demonstrating the ultimate state of empowerment in effect enabling the debaters to have a "total speech situation".

³ Educationworld.com 2021. [Strategies that Work: Debates in the Classroom | Education World](#)

⁴ Butler, Judith. 1997. **The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection**. Stanford.

Debating and teaching: Debating encourages class participation, active learning, cooperation, critical thinking, and reading before class meetings (Elliot, 1993, p.35). The use of debating can increase learner motivation in class because it expands their knowledge and intellectual curiosity beyond the curriculum; and exposes them to competitive and collaborative learning (Cui and Zhao, 2015- pp. 1-3). Studies have shown that competitive methods positively impact learners' motivation and performance (Lam, Yim, Law, and Cheung. 2004, pp. 3), while others prefer collaboration (Kiraly, 2000). This study sought to take it further- using debating as a method combining competitive and collaborative teaching and learning frameworks; it aimed to explore whether a combination of frameworks can be more effective in optimizing learners' performance. By organizing the pupils into internally collaborative but externally competitive groups, and training and engaging them in debate contests, the study sought to foster collaboration and competition concurrently, thus linking and engaging with the findings of Maguire's (2006) analysis of the American spelling bee contests.

Debating and gender empowerment: There are clear conceptual and practical linkages between gendered community norms/practices and rural girls' education, with the home norms of pupils and teachers dictating girls' attendance, performance, and retention in school (Aungo, 2012, pp. 9-16). To address this Monkman (2011, p.2) calls for a situated reading of the social dynamics surrounding girls' empowerment and interventions that link pupils' school experience to the broader policy and socio-cultural contexts. Debating can shake learners free of socio-culturally established views, norms, and perceptions of issues, thus allowing them to appreciate diverse and complex issues (Doody and Condon, 2012, pp. 232-237).

1.4 Objectives of Voice for Space Study

This study aimed to explore the use and efficacy of debating as a strategy to empower girls by enhancing language acquisition and confidence in self-expression. The study was anchored on the following three questions:

- i. How can debating be used as a language teaching method in Kenyan schools?
- ii. Can debating contribute to girls' improvement in language proficiency and literacy?
- iii. Can debating in and out of class enhance girls' awareness, confidence, and self-expression?

1.5 Justification and Relevance of the Study

The research was conducted in a marginalized community school with some of the highest teenage pregnancies and dropout rates in Kenya, located in Mombasa county's poor neighbourhoods. Using a stepwise experimental operational research design, the project trained and supported schoolteachers to use debating as an instructional methodology and extracurricular activity in the classroom and school, respectively, for pupils aged between 12 and 15 years (classes 5-7 under the Kenyan education system). It would then study the impact of debating (as an instructional method and an extracurricular activity) on language competency, self-confidence, esteem, and participation in school leadership processes and decision-making by monitoring their performance and progress for three years.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study's intervention (the debating) combines contextual awareness and interaction processes, factual knowledge, and language training to enhance motivation and build confidence and skills to enable girls to be articulate and assertive in communicating, collaborating, or competing in and out of class. It explored the efficacy of debating to improve language literacy and girls' empowerment, thus ensuring school retention and completion.

During implementation, it sought to build their ability to discursively class content with activities and experiences in their community. Given the contextual gender dynamics – extreme inequality and rampant sexual and gender-based violence, including child marriage and teen pregnancy, the study also contributes to the re-evaluation of school-community relations and inculcation of progressive gender norms in the whole community. Because of its novel base in Kenya, the study brings a unique contribution to theoretical and conceptual articulation and understanding of the link between classroom practices and empowerment of girls in marginalized communities by elucidating the agency pathways: from language competency to self-esteem, self-expression, and active involvement in decision-making processes in schools and community. Thus, its contribution to the literature on education, literacy, and gender empowerment is prominent.

1.7 Definitions of Terms

In the study, the following key terms were used as follows:

Argumentation: a process of expressing oneself by reason-giving in communicative situations by people whose purpose is the justification of acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values

Debate: A formal argument where individuals or groups of people (learners) present opposing views about an issue according to a set of rules

English language competency: possession of adequate English language skills to use the language in writing, reading, listening and speaking correctly without any difficulties.

Persuasion: Communication intended to influence the acts, beliefs, attitudes, and values of others.

Empowerment: the process of enabling learners acquire the skills and ability to express oneself freely, participate in group activities, voice ones' ideas and thoughts easily and confidently.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The study was envisioned as a pilot quasi-experimental design aiming to link research in teaching methods and learning with research on gender empowerment through debating as a teaching methodology and learning activity. The study targeted pupils between 12 and 15 years old in one mixed primary school in the low-economic neighborhoods of Mombasa County in Kenya. The total estimated population of the school is about 300 pupils in the 8 classes. A cohort of female pupils in classes 5-7 was sampled and enrolled in the study and was to be tracked for three school terms. The school's teachers, parents, and community of the pupils were to form the larger ecosystem of the study. The study adopted a two-fold strategy: train teachers in the use of debating and engage a purposively selected group of girls in debating activities.

2.2 Description of the study intervention

Debating was conceived as an experimental intervention targeting about 10 subject teachers and 60 girls deliberately encouraged to use debating on top of the standard teaching, and extracurricular activity approaches. Though debating is one of the methods suggested in the Kenyan curriculum for teaching speaking and listening skills, it is hardly employed by the teachers. Therefore, the research engaged a tutor from a local teachers' training college and government quality assurance officer to re-orient and train the teachers on how to integrate debating into their lesson plans. The study trained teachers to use debating as a teaching method; establish a well-coordinated debating club in the school using a designed standard package consisting of a simple debating manual and assessment tools. The debating package was to be developed collaboratively and refined over time to be easy to use and relevant to the context of the learners. Using the package also enhanced the consistency of the experimental

procedures implemented by all the teachers in different classes. Teachers were taken through an initial orientation on using debates in the classroom teaching consisting of sessions on the history and structure of debating as a learning method.

According to design, the teachers were to be facilitated with tailored debating materials and information to apply debating techniques in teaching selected topics- comprehension and sentence construction. They were to conduct one lesson per week for term one, then two lessons per week. The lessons were to be increased exponentially in the subsequent school term to a maximum of three lessons per week. Furthermore, after training, the teachers were to facilitate formation of debating clubs, how to allow learners to take charge, the rules of discourse and election of leadership among other participatory enhancing techniques. These clubs were to be the ultimate structural outcome of the skills learnt in class. To help shift the teachers' orientation to effective empowerment targeted teaching, a mentorship coach was hired to train them on how to be less of a teacher and more of a coach or a facilitator of free speech and interactive activities among the learners. In return the teachers were to train learners on speaking and communication skills, good debating skills, structuring good debating clubs, leadership in clubs and management of clubs. Learners would thereafter be guided to select their leaders, formulate club rules and norms, and propose current topical issues for debate.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

The study sought to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, using key informant interviews, participant observation guides and focused group discussions (qualitative) and questionnaires (quantitative). The study aimed establish a stratified sampling frame (with each class acting as a strata), and a sample of 60 female pupils. The teachers and parents of the school were targeted as key informants and discussants in focus groups. To enhance reliability, the sampling margin of error, confidence interval and confidence levels of the study was estimated at 5%. Quantitative data was be analysed to establish relations, differences and

patterns using descriptive and inferential statistics, summarizing the data, identifying, and establishing statistically significant differences between strata, baseline, midline and endline stages of the study, and relationships between key study variables. The statistical tools were to include frequencies and cross-tabulations (to summarize data); while chi-square, ANOVA and regression analysis would have been applied in detecting the difference and relations. Qualitative data was to be coded and themed continuously and reflectively as the study progressed. Data from literature review, school reports and Ministry of Education was to be integrated into the relevant themes and variables during triangulation. The study sought to consolidate the views and perspectives from the pupils while capturing the views of teachers, parents, and education policymakers to enhance the relevance and utility of the research in improving the education of girls in Kenya.

3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

3.1 Summary of Findings

The Kenyan curriculum presupposes those teachers employ interactive methodologies and techniques in teaching. In theory, the principal teaching instruction is learner centred. However, the study confirmed that many learners constrain the teachers' capacity to employ learner-centred methodologies effectively in class., the entrenched socialization of learners both at home and school, and the general competency in the language of instruction. The three- class sizes, socialization, and language competency inhibit learners' and teachers' readiness and willingness to embrace learner-centred learning fully.

3.2 Contextual dynamics of the study site

Preliminary observations at Elimu Ya Kenya school community and other schools in Kisauni revealed that teachers (predominantly male in upper grades) focus on revision of past papers and grammar rules rather than communication and learner engagement or participation.

Teachers' inability to communicate fluently contributes immensely to the learners' poor communication skills. A spot check at EYK shows that girls shy off from many activities due to the lack of confidence brought about by language proficiency compared to the boys. Additionally, cultural gender constructs and practices emanating from community traditions and other forms of discrimination have created an environment that puts girls in vulnerable positions rendering them 'voiceless' compared to boys. The boys are socialized to take active roles in groups, class, or even school decision-making. Based on this background, the study sought to explore and test the assumption that involving girls in meaningful discussions on topical and current issues can contribute to language skills development and enhance their competency and proficiency in the target language. Ultimately it is argued that through this, they can acquire the capacity to express themselves and engage in contesting for space.

3.3 Launching the Study

As part of the start-up schedule of the study, the team organized a series of meetings with the school management and the teaching staff. During the meetings, the team discussed with the school management their general approach to teaching and learning in the school and the preferred teaching methods employed by the teachers. Because philanthropists in Germany partially sponsor the school, it operates as a quasi-public school; hence the management has significant leeway in directing its teaching approaches. During the discussions, the management insisted that the school operates on a rights-based learner-centred framework. According to them, the philosophical framework of the school is anchored on four principles:

- i) Inclusion- it is non-discriminatory and promotes equality for all learners
- ii) Accountability to learners, the school, and the community as stakeholders in the learning process and environment
- iii) Participation and empowerment- views education as an avenue for active involvement and empowering of learners

- iv) Right to education- view education as a fundamental right for all, guiding all aspects of learning and interactions in the schools and with the community

According to the school management and the headteacher, the school espouses a learner-centred teaching philosophy- prioritizing each learner's interests, needs and aspirations. As a rule, the school encourages the teachers to support the learners to develop and grow and to maintain interest and motivation in learning and schoolwork. Collectively, the schools also endeavour to create a safe environment for the learners' physical development as active and future responsible members of the community.

In practice, the study observed that the teachers predominantly employ teacher-centric methods, especially the lecture methods and directed textbook reading. During individual interviews, the teachers explained that they find it extremely difficult to employ learner-centred methods prescribed in training manuals because they face two critical challenges: large class sizes and the syllabus's breadth. The class sizes with over 40 pupils in any single 35-minute lesson defy efforts to give each learner individualized attention. On the other hand, the prescribed syllabus is broad and burdensome, with expectations by the schools and the Ministry of Education on the teachers to cover it within the year. To compound this, the teachers pointed out that due to socialization and familiarity with traditional teacher-learner relations, the learners get lost and confused whenever they attempt to use participatory learner-centred approaches. In the words of one teacher:

Many of them are afraid to talk or engage in discussions... they simply keep quiet... so you are left with long dead moments... you are finally forced to go back to lecturing and instructing them' (**Language Teacher 1**)

3.4 The Intervention Efforts and COVID 19 Pandemic and its Effects on the study

The research process commenced in late January 2020. In March 2020, COVID-19 hit Kenya. The government ordered all learning institutions closed and followed this by issuing

presidential orders banning any movements across the country, closing schools, and lockdowns of designated COVID 19 hotspot areas, among them Mombasa County, which was expressly declared one of the COVID 19 hotspots. The school closure directive stayed in place for almost a year, with learners and teachers staying home. At about the sixth month into the school closure, the Ministry of Education directed that schools open and conducted learning through online teaching.

The directive to launch virtual learning in public schools was vacuous since many schools lack adequate connectivity and preparedness to conduct off-site learning. Even after schools were open, the new regulations guiding school-community interactions- outlawed entry into schools by outsiders, except for teaching staff and any designated essential workers- hindered research activities within the school. These COVID-19-induced restrictions and resulting logistical complications disrupted and hampered the study's original design and methodology, making implementation difficult and near impossible. The overall effect of the closure on the study was this: it stopped all the research project activities, because the essence of debating required face-to-face and group interactions with teachers and pupils. The research team tried to institute alternative online and phone-based study strategies in vain. They proved to be difficult to implement and eventually impossible because the schools -both teachers and pupils did not have adequate access to sufficient internet connectivity. The other viable option explored was working with teachers through correspondence. After consultation and agreement with the school management, the team agreed to engage the teachers to double up as research respondents and assistants. Using WhatsApp, the research team formed a group through which instructions they relayed communications, conducted update meetings and refresher training for the teachers, as well as reinforced the project focus through short message service (SMS) and phone calls. We made routine calls and messaging to remind and incentivize the teachers to debate as much as possible by providing airtime and data bundles. Ultimately, all these

efforts did not produce any meaningful data- neither the teachers applied the debating methodology in class, nor did the pupils take up debating as an activity in the school.

The lead investigator invited the teachers and school administrator to an off-school meeting (at a local community hall) to determine the reasons or factors hindering them from applying the debating method and activities. All the teachers were willing to participate and apply the methods, and we soon realized that they could not apply to debate or conduct any debates in the school. From interviews, we learned that they faced three critical challenges:

- i) **Time and opportunity:** because the school year had been shortened, forcing teachers to focus on using traditional methods to cover the class syllabi in time for the annual examinations. The government's insistence that pupil had been taught online during the lockdown hence teachers had no reason to fail to cover the class syllabi also exacerbated the pressure on the teachers. As a result. The teachers were not able to apply the debating methodology adequately. Most of the time, however, they resorted to their default teaching techniques- lecturing and dictation. The pupils were equally under pressure to complete the syllabus and be ready for examinations. Thus, they often got confused and agitated whenever the teachers tried to engage them in discussions around a specific topic. According to the teachers, the pupils seemed to lose interest since debating is often associated with extra-curriculum activities.
- ii) **Positionality and roles:** The attempt to make the teachers play both the role of researcher and respondent felt flat because they found it difficult to dissociate them. Compounded by the heavy workload, they neither showed serious inclination to nor demonstrated the requisite skills and preparedness necessary. During an online meeting with them, many expressed their scepticism about making the approach work

'Doc, we are not researchers! We have tried to keep a journal of observations, but we end up tearing them up.... You feel like you are sharing your thoughts... which are not

really research.... It is best if you were actually in school with us (sic).... (teachers 1 and 2).

The researchers' efforts to boost their confidence and convince them to keep an activity journal were further derailed by their workload. In the end, it was apparent that the greatest challenge to keeping a journal or observation notes was due to lack of actual debating or use of debating. There was nothing to observe because they did not conduct any debate activities.

- iii) **The explosion of teenage pregnancy during the lockdown:** Several girls were reported pregnant and did not report back to school once they opened. Some parents also reported experiencing increased socio-economic tensions at home due to difficulties caused by food shortages, extended stays at home by the children, loss of work, and government restrictions on movements. Between 2016 and 2020 there were 2365 cases of teenage pregnancy reported in Mombasa. During the COVID 19 lockdowns, studies by civil society organizations showed that about 4000 girls got pregnant with about 98% of them were not in school (Plan International, June 2020). Due to the explosion of teenage pregnancy, many girls dropped out of school. When the schools resumed, parents were more concerned about the state of the girls in schools and the interactions with out-of-school community members hence their reluctance to allow them to engage in after-school activities like debating during the evenings and weekends. According to the teachers... *the parents were worried and afraid for the girls... they took no chances... it was school- home, home -school (sic)*'. This eliminated any possibility of conducting the study activities during after school hours (including weekends).
- iv) **Inequalities in accessing education in Kenya:** in response to public concern over the disrupted teaching and learning, the government proposed to launch virtual learning

using radio, computers, and mobile phones. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development designed and transmitted learning packages through radio and television. In reality, the government's mooted virtual (technology-assisted learning) was an attempt to catch up with private schools that had long begun providing such teaching and learning platforms to their learners. Unfortunately, the government did not have adequate infrastructure and training for teachers to undertake virtual learning. Virtual teaching and learning modes disadvantaged learners in many public and community schools like Elimu ya Kenya because most public schools (and homes) do not have computers, internet connectivity or functional radio and TV sets. Because the school hosting the study is located in a marginalized urban community, any efforts of teaching and learning virtually were severely impeded. This generated sudden urgency and anxiety among the teachers to work extra hard to catch up with the syllabus and compensate for the lost time, given that other better endowed schools had conducted virtual learning hence covered more during the lockdowns. The language teacher summed up the feeling among the rest of the teaching staff:

'... we were behind... other schools with better resources had conducted some form of teaching.... We did not. When we resumed, we had to make up for lost time... we were disadvantaged.... The time was short.'

3.5 Final Analysis

Based on the experiences and circumstances caused by the COVID 19 outbreak, it was impossible to conduct the study in a credible manner. All efforts made came to naught and the study impeded completely. Whereas all the key participants were willing to continue, the circumstances were not conducive for the study to move forward.

4. STUDY CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

4.1 Conclusion

The Voice for Space project sought to implement an experimental study that used debating as a teaching method and school activity to improve language proficiency and articulation in debate hosted by the Elimu Ya Kenya School (EYK), a mixed community school. The girls were to be taught the English language, facilitated to use, and practice the coherent, logical, and informed expression of views and opinions during debates, and encouraged to engage in public discussions and compete during campaigns for school leadership. The project's interventions aimed to support girls' acquisition of English language competency through the usage of debating techniques for instruction (by 12 trained teachers) and practical routine participation in debating bees through well-structured and networked debating groups (by the students). It targeted a sample of 60 female pupils in classes 5 and 6 from the intervention school (Elimu ya Kenya) of Mombasa County in Kenya.

In March 2020, COVID-19 hit Kenya. The government ordered all learning institutions closed and followed this by issuing presidential orders banning any movements across the country, closing schools, and lockdowns of designated COVID 19 hotspot areas, among them Mombasa County, which was expressly declared one of the COVID 19 hotspots. As a result, the school closure directive stayed in place for almost a year, with learners and teachers staying home. At about the sixth month into the school closure, the Ministry of Education directed that schools open and conducted learning through online teaching. For schools like EyK, virtual learning was impossible. As a result, when schools opened, the teachers and learners were under enormous pressure to cover the syllabus hence were not able to participate in the study activities. Consequently, the study was not conducted as planned despite many efforts and investments in alternative avenues by the team. Therefore, the team is not able to use the little data collected to make any definitive findings from the study.

4.2 Recommendation

Due to the effects of the pandemic that hindered effective implementation of the project, we recommend that the study be redone. Thus, the team will be resubmitting the project proposal for reconsideration by Context Matters with a view to fund it once again. There has been progressive loosening of the school restrictions which are likely to be completely done away with by the end of 2022 when the staggered school calendar will be done away with and replaced with the normal school routine. This will be the appropriate time to conduct the study.

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