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What works in values-based education? Evidence from basic education in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Kenya's transition to Competency-Based Education (CBE) renews emphasis on values and life skills alongside academic learning, yet little evidence exists on their integration across formal, non-formal, and informal dimensions of school life. This study examined how Values-based Education (VbE) is understood, integrated, and assessed in 16 of 79 schools in a Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development (KICD) pilot across Nairobi, Kajiado, Isiolo, and Bungoma counties. Data were collected through key informant interviews (education officers, school heads), focus group discussions (teachers and Grade 4–6 learners), and paired classroom observations of trained and untrained teachers. Participants commonly recognised core values such as love, respect, responsibility, and unity, and these were most visibly enacted in informal and non-formal school spaces: teachers modelled responsibility and integrity in 93% of observed classrooms, and learners displayed collaborative, respectful behaviour during breaks in 86% of schools. By contrast, formal lesson-level integration was less consistent, values-oriented pedagogy was observed in 89% of lessons, but structured assessment tools such as rubrics or reflective journals were used in only 29%. As a cross-sectional, purposively sampled pilot evaluation, these findings are descriptive rather than causal. The study recommends school-embedded coaching, simple standardized assessment rubrics/checklist, pragmatic resourcing, stronger parent–community partnerships, and routine monitoring with incentives for good practice to enhance reliable VbE integration at scale.

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1. Introduction

Values-based Education (VbE) has emerged worldwide as a cornerstone for holistic learning, moving education beyond mere academic content to nurture ethical, emotional, and social competencies. Huang et al. (2024) frame this shift within a sustainability lens, linking VbE to education for sustainable development, Ngwacho (2024) situates it within Kenya's Competency-Based Education (CBE) reform specifically, Shobha and Kala (2015) trace its roots in youth-empowerment and holistic-development literature while Syafika and Marwa (2024) document how global VbE insights are being adapted to local practice contexts. This international evidence base is substantial. Recent syntheses situate values-based approaches as a well-established and effective pathway to holistic learning outcomes across cognitive, social, and emotional domains (Lovat, 2023; Miller, 2023; Nielsen & Ma, 2023).

Global education frameworks now emphasize the need for schools to prepare 'well-rounded individuals' with values and socio-emotional skills to thrive in a rapidly changing world (Care et al., 2024; Otieno et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2021). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and international bodies underscore that quality education should foster learners' empathy, resilience, respect for diversity, and ability to navigate complex societal challenges – essentially the need to educate for sustainable development (Khatri et al., 2024). This broad consensus has its roots in both

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longstanding traditions of moral education, dating back to foundational analyses of education as an inherently value-laden and ethical enterprise (Peters, 1966; Pring, 2005), and modern research on social-emotional learning (Dussault & Thompson, 2024; White et al., 2023).

Across East Africa, this international trend toward holistic education has taken shape as a shift toward CBE that embeds life skills and values into national curricula (Kasuga & Kalolo, 2025; Thukia, 2025). Countries in the region have recognized that traditional exam-centric systems have not been adequately equipping youth with the practical skills and ethical foundations needed in the 21st century (Nansubuga et al., 2024). In fact, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda are among the over 100 countries worldwide that have introduced a 'breadth of skills' agenda, incorporating life skills referred to as core competencies and values into education policy (Shariff et al., 2024).

VbE plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion and driving economic growth by nurturing individuals who are ethical, responsible, and socially aware (Dillon, 2022; Malti et al., 2020). When learners embrace values like respect, responsibility, and empathy, they tend to build positive relationships with their peers, steer clear of conflicts, and help create peaceful environments in schools and communities (Ngina et al., 2024). Studies indicate that these values are the foundation of strong socio-emotional skills, which lead to better learning outcomes and enhance lifelong employability (OECD, 2024; Wang & King, 2025). On the economic front, employers are increasingly seeking soft skills such as responsibility, adaptability, and ethical decision-making in today's fast-changing job market (Salgarayeva et al., 2026).

In Kenya, the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BEFC) positions values-based education as one of its three foundational pillars (KICD, 2019) alongside knowledge and competencies. Under the vision '*Nurturing Every Learner's Potential*', the Kenyan competency-based education (CBE) emphasizes that instruction should impart core values, empower learners with key competencies, and build a base of knowledge – a three-legged approach to produce engaged, empowered, and ethical citizens (KICD, 2019). The BEFC names eight specific values drawn from Kenya's national ethos and constitution – including respect, responsibility, integrity, love, unity, social justice and patriotism – and urges that these be woven through all learning areas and levels (KICD, 2019).

Despite strong policy support and enthusiasm for VbE, early implementation reviews have highlighted several gaps and challenges. As seen in many educational reforms, the shift from theory to practice is not automatic (Government of Kenya, 2023). One major issue is that while 'values' are now part of the school discourse, many teachers feel ill-equipped to deliberately integrate or assess them in lessons (Wanyama, 2025). In Kenya's CBE context, where teachers are accustomed to syllabi focused on knowledge and skills, adding a values lens requires new pedagogical techniques, such as storytelling, class discussions on moral dilemmas, and role-modelling activities, among others (Ngaruiya, 1970).

To address these challenges, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), in partnership with Mizizi Elimu Afrika (Mizizi) through the Action for Life Skills and Values in East Africa (ALiVE) initiative, has recently piloted a whole-school VbE approach in 79 schools across 19 counties. This pilot involved producing resource materials and training teachers to integrate values into formal (lesson-based), non-formal (clubs and co-curricular), and informal (daily interactions and routines) dimensions of family, school and community life.

A critical entry point for the pilot was the limited evidence on what works, how, why, and in which contexts. Before scaling VbE nationally, stakeholders needed to know which aspects of the approach are effective and sustainable in Kenyan schools. Questions abound:

- RQ1. How do learners and teachers understand and recall the core values promoted under the VbE pilot? (Learner/teacher FGDs; thematic analysis)
- RQ2. How, and to what extent, are these values integrated into formal (lesson-based), non-formal (co-curricular), and informal (everyday interaction) dimensions of school life? (Classroom/school observations; descriptive statistics and Tukey HSD comparisons; triangulated with FGD/KII themes)
- RQ3. What tools and practices, if any, are used to assess values acquisition? (Classroom observations; teacher FGDs)
- RQ4. What challenges do teachers, school heads, and education officers report in implementing VbE? (KIIs and FGDs with teachers, heads and officers)

This study was designed to answer these questions by evaluating the implementation of CBE and integration of VbE across a subset of pilot schools. It focused on how values are understood by learners and teachers, how they are integrated into teaching and school culture, which tools are used to assess, what training is being provided or needed, and what support is needed to strengthen the program. Ultimately, the objective of the study was to assess *what is working well, what is not working, and why*. This evidence would be vital in informing the next steps – whether it is in improving the program design, providing additional support where needed, or determining the feasibility of scaling up VbE training to all Kenyan school teachers.

The current study is framed by a whole-school approach (WSA) to values learning, which holds that values and social-emotional competencies are not effectively taught as an isolated subject but are best cultivated when embedded across the curriculum, co-curricular activities, relationships, leadership practices, and the wider school culture, so that what learners are taught, what they observe modelled, and what they practise are aligned (Weare, 2000). Within values education specifically, this whole-school orientation works most effectively when paired with quality teaching practices that make values explicit, deliberate, and assessable in everyday pedagogy, rather than left to incidental exposure (Lovat & Toomey, 2009).

2. Methodology

2.1. Study design

The study adopted a mixed-methods, cross-sectional design that combined interviews and observational data to evaluate the implementation of the VbE pilot. This approach provided a comprehensive view of VbE integration, capturing both the lived experiences of learners, teachers, and school leaders, as well as system-level perspectives from education officers (Campbell et al., 2017). Framing the study through a constructivist perspective highlights how values are co-created through interactions within schools and communities. This enables us to explore how individuals negotiate, adapt, and internalize the intervention, revealing variations in implementation, challenges faced, and context-specific outcomes that may not be visible through quantitative measures alone.

The study was conducted in 16 schools across four diverse counties: Nairobi, Kajiado, Isiolo, and Bungoma. These counties were purposively selected to cover a wide range of socio-economic, cultural, and educational contexts, and to build on ongoing ALiVE activities in teacher training, curriculum support, and VbE. By working across these varied locations, the study could capture regional differences in the implementation of VbE, offering descriptive insights to inform policy.

Nairobi County (Kenya's commercial and political capital) represented an urban context with relatively better infrastructure, teacher access to training, and exposure to diverse pedagogical practices. Schools here provided an important benchmark for what values' integration might look like in better-resourced settings. Kajiado County offers a semi-urban and pastoralist mix, where schools face challenges such as large class sizes and cultural practices (Maasai) that shape how values are perceived and taught. ALiVE has been active in Kajiado through programs that strengthen teacher capacity and support learner-centered pedagogy and has been a frequent site for donor- and government-led education interventions, making it a critical site for testing the VbE pilot's adaptability.

Isiolo is an arid county inhabited by culturally-diverse pastoralist communities, and brought in perspectives from underserved (low-resource) regions. Isiolo serves as a case study for examining how VbE can work in fragile, resource-constrained settings. Bungoma County represented a populous, mixed rural setting with deep-rooted community structures and active engagement in teacher retooling efforts. It provided insights into how strong community-school linkages can either support or hinder the adoption of values-based approaches.

The VbE-WSA pilot itself was implemented in June 2025, following school selection undertaken in February the same year. Training of teachers and school heads on the whole-school VbE approach was delivered over 3 day(s) in selected county, covering the three-dimension framework, lesson-embedding techniques, and use of the resource materials described in sub-section 2.3. Schools had an implementation period of approximately 3 months between training and this study's fieldwork.

2.2. Study sample and tools

The study engaged a diverse group of respondents to capture perspectives from those implementing, experiencing, and overseeing the VbE pilot. Sixteen comprehensive schools (enrolling learners from Pre-primary through Junior Secondary) were selected purposively from the 79-school pilot pool, four per county, to reflect variation in school size and location while ensuring active participation in the pilot; this a priori four-county design, rather than formal saturation testing, set the qualitative sample size, though the research team monitored for diminishing new codes in later transcripts within each county as an informal saturation checks.

At the county level, Key Informant Interviews (KIs) were held with two education officers or Curriculum Support Officers (CSOs) per county, offering insights into policy oversight and systemic challenges. At the school level, KIs with 16 heads of schools explored leadership strategies for embedding values, while Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 64 teachers captured how they integrated life skills and values into education programs and reflected on the effect of their training on VbE. Teacher FGD participants were purposively recruited through school teacher lists and facilitated in English by two researchers.

Learners' voices were central to the study, with FGDs involving 10 learners (5 males and 5 females) from Grades 4–6 in each school, totaling 160 learners, who shared their understanding of values and how they practice them. Grade 4–6 was chosen because learners at this level have sufficient literacy and articulation to engage meaningfully in group discussion while remaining within the age range covered by the pilot's primary-level materials. Grade level was rotated across schools within each county (e.g. Grade 4 in school one, Grade 5 in school two, Grade 6 in school three) to broaden coverage.

Classroom observations¹ complemented these perspectives, with two lessons observed per school (one with a VbE-trained teacher and one with a non-trained teacher), totaling 32 lessons. As part of the pilot design, VbE-trained teachers were formally required to cascade the training content to their untrained colleagues within the same school. Therefore, 'untrained' teachers in this study should be understood as not having attended the formal KICD training directly, rather than as having had no exposure to VbE at all. The study sought to establish whether and how values were embedded in lesson plans, teaching methods, and interactions. KoboCollect was used to capture KIs and classroom data, while FGDs were recorded and transcribed, ensuring a rich, triangulated dataset that blends policy insights, teaching practices, and learner-lived experiences.

2.3. Whole school approach description

The VbE study in Kenya utilized a WSA that views values learning as a holistic process woven into every facet of school life, including curriculum, co-curricular activities, relationships, leadership, and community engagement. Rather than teaching values as a separate subject, this approach integrates them into teaching methods, school culture, and interpersonal interactions, ensuring alignment between what learners are taught, what they practice, and what they experience. This strategy reflects broader VbE principles that emphasize role modeling, reinforcement through school norms, and the involvement of all stakeholders such as teachers, learners, parents, and school leaders in fostering learners' character and ethical development.

The implementation of WSA in the Kenyan pilot included capacity building, the provision of instructional materials, and system-level support. Training programs targeted teachers, school heads, and other stakeholders, equipping them with the skills needed to integrate values into pedagogy, school routines, and leadership practices. A comprehensive set of materials was developed, including teachers' resource books, head teachers' guides, caregiver manuals, training manuals, and communication tools to support classroom practices and whole-school implementation.

These training sessions emphasized practical strategies such as embedding values in lesson planning, employing participatory teaching methods, enhancing co-curricular platforms (e.g. clubs and community service), and cultivating a school culture through modeling and daily interactions. Furthermore, the approach encouraged ongoing engagement, peer learning, and monitoring, helping schools transition

from fragmented, informal practices to more intentional and coordinated integration of values across all learning environments.

This alignment between values pedagogy and whole-school culture is well established in the international literature: values-based education is widely regarded as possessing particular potential to inform and propel a whole-school approach, because it operationalises values not as a discrete subject but as the organising principle for curriculum, relationships, and school culture alike (Hawkes, 2023; Lovat, 2023; Toomey, 2023).

2.4. Data collection

Fieldwork for the VbE study was carried out across the four counties from 19/09/25 to 13/10/25. Before the exercise, the research team underwent a one-day training workshop to ensure consistency and quality in data collection. The training covered the study objectives, ethical considerations when engaging children, and practical sessions on conducting FGDs, KIs, and classroom observations. Attention was given to how to probe, for example, values in conversations with learners and teachers, as well as how to systematically capture observational evidence. This allowed the team to refine the FGD guides, KI questionnaires, and classroom observation checklists for clarity and cultural appropriateness.

Formal double-coding of the classroom observation checklist by a second, independent observer was not conducted. Consequently, we are unable to report a formal inter-rater reliability statistic (e.g. Cohen's kappa) for this round. To promote consistency across the four county-based observation teams, all observers completed the one-day training, which included calibration exercises applying the checklist to worked examples before fieldwork began.

Data collection was then rolled out by the research teams, supported by local education officers for introductions and logistics. Using KoboCollect for observations, and audio recordings for KIs and FGDs, the teams ensured comprehensive documentation of insights from learners, teachers, heads of schools, county officers, and classroom practices. In total, 24 interviews, 28 lesson observations² and 32 FGDs were conducted. Of the 32 FGDs conducted, 16 were teacher groups (four teachers per school) and 16 were learner groups (10 learners per school), one of each held in every sampled school.

Throughout the Results section, direct quotations are attributed with a bracketed tag giving participant type (teacher, learner, or education officer) and a school code combining a county-letter prefix with a number 1–4 (N1–N4 Nairobi, K1–K4 Kajiado, I1–I4 Isiolo, B1–B4 Bungoma), plus grade for learner quotations where reported.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Kenyatta University Ethics Review Committee on 12th September 2025 (Reference No. PKU/3351/E4072). Verbal consent was utilized in this study because it posed minimal risk to participants, and it was conducted in environments where getting written consent might have been impractical. Before we started collecting data, all participants were given thorough information about the study's goals, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to opt out or withdraw at any time without any repercussions. After that, participants were asked to verbally confirm their willingness to join the study and, if applicable, to be audio-recorded.

Teachers and headteachers provided verbal consent directly, while for learners, parental or guardian consent was sought in advance through school heads, with verbal confirmation collected by researchers on the day (or, where a parent or guardian could not be reached directly, confirmed by the school head). This was followed by the learner's own age-appropriate verbal assent immediately before their FGD and an explicit reminder that they could decline or withdraw without consequence. Learner FGDs were held in a private space away from teachers and other uninvited adults, with only the facilitator and note-taker present, to protect privacy and reduce power imbalances between adult researchers and child participants. This verbal consent process was reviewed and received approval from the relevant institutional review board and was documented by the researchers before data collection began. Audio

recordings were stored on password-protected devices and transferred to a secure server within 24 hours of each field visit, with access restricted to the research team.

2.6. Data analysis

All data collected were handled with strict attention to confidentiality and ethical standards. Study participants were anonymized at the point of transcription and data entry – no names or personally identifying information were linked to responses (Coffelt, 2017; Saunders et al., 2015). Audio recordings from FGDs and KIIs were transcribed verbatim within one week of each field visit, ensuring that the voices of learners, teachers, and education officials were captured accurately and while still fresh in context (MacLean et al., 2004).

Once transcription was complete, the team carried out a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This involved coding³ by a single member of the research team using the pre-agreed thematic framework described above. Coding followed a hybrid approach: an initial deductive set of codes was derived from the study's pre-agreed thematic framework (values understanding, integration, assessment, and implementation challenges), while additional codes were allowed to emerge inductively from the transcripts themselves. As coding was not distributed across multiple coders, no formal inter-coder reliability statistic (e.g. Cohen's kappa) is reported for the qualitative analysis.

Saturation was assessed informally by monitoring the emergence of new codes across successive transcripts within each county, in place of a formal saturation curve; coding continued until no substantially new themes were observed in the later transcripts reviewed per county. The coding framework deliberately made space for disconfirming and negative-case perspectives alongside affirming ones; the challenges reported by the study participants were retained and analysed as a counterpoint to the more affirming findings on values understanding and integration, rather than treated as noise.

The research team was engaged by KICD, in partnership with Mizizi Elimu Afrika through the ALiVE initiative, to evaluate the VbE-WSA pilot that these same organisations designed and implemented. This relationship—evaluators engaged by the pilot's own implementing partners—could have shaped both participants' responses and the research team's interpretation of the data. To mitigate this, data collection relied on structured, pre-piloted observation checklists and interview guides rather than open-ended impression-based judgement, coding retained disconfirming and negative-case accounts rather than only affirming ones, and findings are reported descriptively rather than evaluatively throughout. We acknowledge this positionality here rather than presenting the analysis as a neutral, disinterested account (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Holmes, 2020).

Observation data from KoboCollect were summarized into frequency tables (Lakshminarasimhappa, 2022). To determine whether the proportion of schools observing each indicator differed significantly across counties, Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test was used for pairwise comparisons of means (Tukey, 1949). Tukey's HSD was selected over unadjusted pairwise t-tests because it controls the family-wise error rate when multiple group comparisons are made simultaneously, reducing the risk of false positives (Abdi & Williams, 2010). All comparisons were evaluated at the 5% significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$) using Stata's *pwmean* command (StataCorp, 2025). The findings are presented in Tables A1–A3.

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), in which quantitative classroom-observation data and qualitative FGD/KII data were collected concurrently and analysed separately before being merged during interpretation. In practice, this meant that the structured quantitative summaries were read alongside the qualitative insights from FGDs and KIIs to produce a comprehensive and nuanced picture of how VbE implementation (Noyes et al., 2019; Östlund et al., 2011).

3. Results

3.1. Capacity building and pedagogical transformation in VbE

Training under the VbE pilot was described by teachers and education stakeholders as a significant shift in their approach to teaching and learning. It marked a shift in pedagogical orientation reframing values

not as implicit or incidental to teaching, but as deliberate, teachable components of the curriculum. One teacher aptly summarized this transformation, saying, 'It shifted my thinking ... we can teach values, not just expect them from learners'. [Teacher, I2] A view echoed by 15 of 24 KII respondents. For many educators, the training was associated with practical strategies for values' integration, including storytelling, role-play, poster-making, and structured group discussions. Teachers reported that these methods made values more relatable to learners and easier to embed across different subjects.

Teachers particularly appreciated the training facilitated by the KICD in partnership with Mizizi, saying that its content and pedagogy aligned with CBE expectations. They noted that the training helped them connect values with competencies such as communication and collaboration.

3.2. Understanding of values

During the study, learners were asked to describe their understanding of values, provide examples, and indicate which values they most commonly learn at school and at home. The results are presented in [Figure 1](#). Across the 16 schools observed, both learners and teachers demonstrated awareness of the values promoted through the VbE pilot. Through FGDs with learners, it was evident that values such as love, respect, responsibility, and unity were part of the daily vocabulary, even if some were better recalled than others (see [Figure 1](#)).

Responsibility (21%) and respect (20%) stand out as the values learners remember most, indicating they're likely the ones emphasized. Following closely are love (14%), peace (13%), and unity (11%), which also show a good level of recall and might reflect the social or moral values often promoted. On the flip side, Integrity and Honesty (10%), social justice (7%), and patriotism (5%) seem to be less frequently recalled.

Learners associated love with acts of kindness and support. One female learner shared, '*I love my family, brothers and sisters, even neighbours*', [Learner, K3, Grade 5] while another male student said, '*I assisted my colleague with a pen when he didn't have one; that is what I consider love*'. [Learner, B2, Grade 5] Respect was largely seen as deference to authority and peers: '*When the teacher is passing, you give way. Also, listening and obeying the teacher is respect*', [Learner, N1, Grade 6] explained one female learner.

Responsibility was often linked to proactive behaviours: '*I helped my friend who was almost being run over by a motorbike*', [Learner, N1, Grade 4] recounted one male learner, while another connected it to academics: '*Responsibility- I finish teachers' homework on time*'. [Learner, B1, Grade 6] Unity and peace were described through conflict resolution and group activities – '*Unity – I stopped a fellow learner from fighting over a pen and resolved the conflict*', [Learner, K1, Grade 4] said one male child.

3.3. Integration of values

Findings indicate that values integration within the formal dimension was evident but uneven across schools. In most observed lessons, teachers employed participatory pedagogies such as discussions, storytelling, role play, and group work to promote values (89%), while value-oriented learning resources were used in 78% of lessons ([Figure 2](#)). Visual reinforcement was also widespread, with 86% of classrooms displaying posters and charts on core values, and 68% of schools having written behaviour policies aligned with values such as respect and responsibility. Overall, the findings in [Tables A1–A3](#) suggest that the practices for nurturing values are largely consistent across counties. A comparison by teacher training status ([Table A4](#)) found no significant difference on any of the six formal-dimension indicators (Fisher's exact $p > 0.05$ throughout)

Qualitative evidence supports these findings, with teachers noting the deliberate embedding of values in instruction: '*During assemblies and lessons, we emphasize the weekly theme (e.g. love) and remind learners to apply these values when conflicts arise*'. [Teacher, N1] However, important gaps were observed. Only 29% of teachers used structured assessment tools such as rubrics or reflective journals. As one teacher explained, '*We use observation to assess values ... you can tell whether a group is portraying values like love or peace just by watching their behaviour*', [Teacher, N2] highlighting the largely informal and inconsistent nature of assessment.

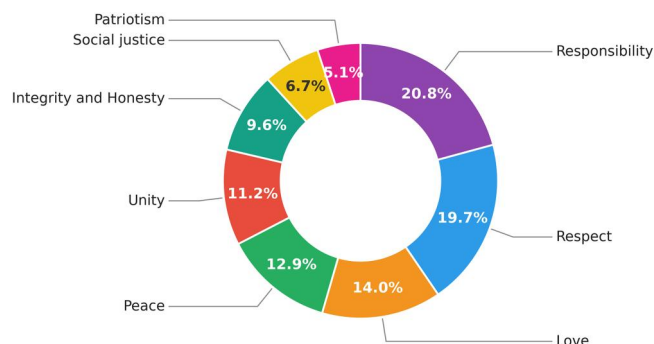


Figure 1. Learners and teachers' understanding of values.

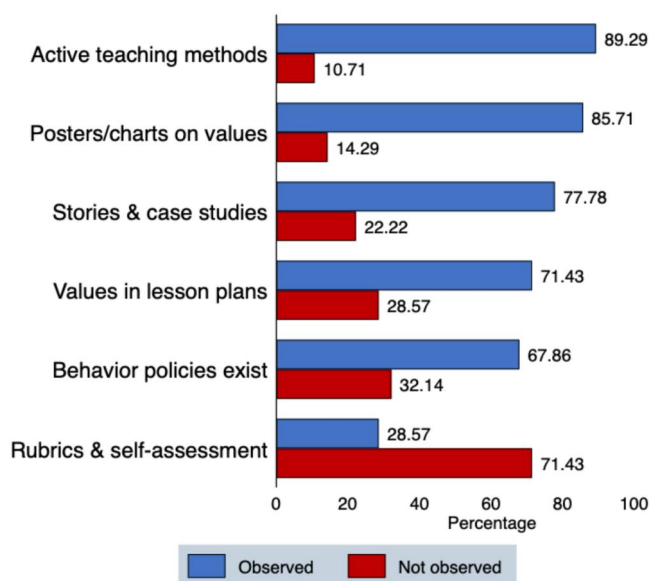


Figure 2. Observation of the formal dimension of Life Skills ($n = 28$ lessons; multiple indicators per lesson).

Values integration in the non-formal dimension was primarily facilitated through co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Daily routines and group work (25% each) emerged as key platforms for reinforcing values, followed by sports and club activities (21%), which strongly promoted teamwork, unity, and empathy (Figure 3). Moderate integration was observed in role play (8%) and lesson plans (6%). Lower levels are reported for poster making/display (5%), songs (5%), peer teaching (3%), and storytelling (3%), suggesting these methods are less frequently used or may be underutilized in promoting values.

Observations further showed that 89% of schools demonstrated sportsmanship during extracurricular activities, and 86% had functional student leadership councils that provided opportunities for learners to practice leadership and responsibility (Figure 4). An equal proportion (86%) had learners display values during breaks. Only 43% had active mentorship programmes in which teachers or older learners are formally assigned to guide younger learners. As with the formal dimension, none of the eight non-formal indicators differed significantly by training status (Table A5).

Qualitative findings reinforce these patterns. Learners emphasized the role of group-based activities, noting that *'In group work, we show kindness by helping someone who is stuck'*, while another shared [Learner, I4, Grade 6], *'During sports and clubs, we have unity and teamwork'*. [Learner, N2, Grade 5] Acts of empathy were also highlighted: *'During sports, because some of us fall, we help them, and that is showing kindness'*. [Learner, N1, Grade 4]

Schools use creative methods such as poster-making and role-play to make values engaging and memorable. These activities allow learners to explore and express values in interactive ways. As one teacher explained, *'We do poster-making activities where learners illustrate values like respect or honesty'*,

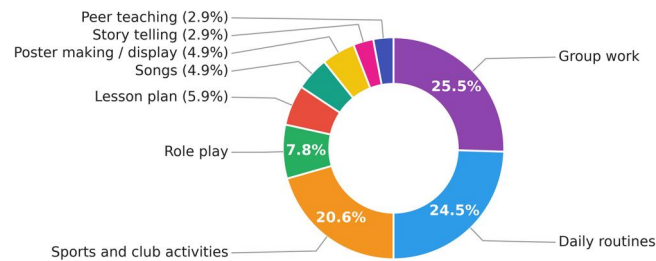


Figure 3. Methods used in the integration of values.

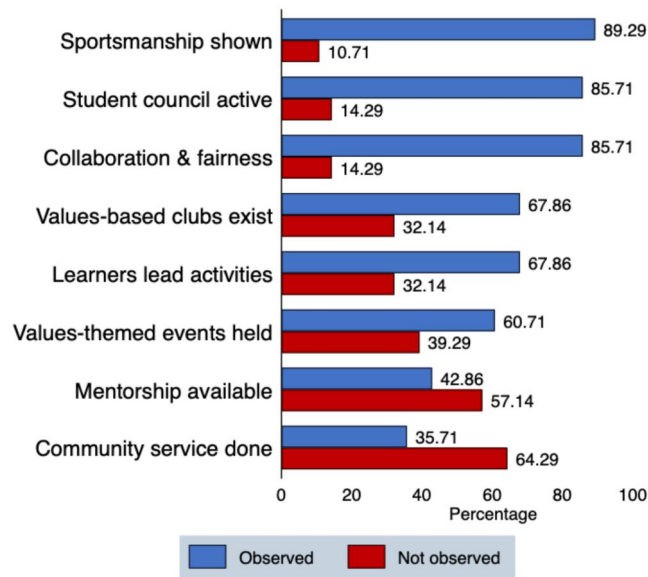


Figure 4. Observation of nonformal dimension ($n = 28$ lessons, multiple indicators per lesson).

[Teacher, I3] showing how art reinforces understanding of values (Figure 5). A learner recalled, *'One time I helped carry a chair for a teacher'*, [Learner, I2, Grade 6] as part of a role-play activity, demonstrating how such exercises translate values into tangible actions.

Group work is a key method for integrating values like unity, responsibility, and kindness in collaborative learning settings. Learners described how working together strengthens these values in practice. One student said, *'In group work, we show kindness by helping someone who is stuck'*, highlighting peer support [Learner, I4, Grade 6] as a value-driven outcome. Another teacher noted, *'I use group discussions where each learner takes a role... that brings out responsibility and teamwork'*, [Teacher, I2] underscoring the fact that structured tasks cultivate accountability and cooperation.

Songs and storytelling were found to be a strong medium through which values were integrated in a way that is both enjoyable and educational. These methods make abstract concepts more relatable for learners. A student shared, *'When we practice values in the form of songs, it is the most enjoyable time'*, [Learner, N4, Grade 5] indicating how music enhances engagement with values. One teacher added that, *'We use stories with moral lessons to convey values'*, [Teacher, K4] showing how narrative-based approaches help learners internalize lessons through memorable examples.

The informal dimension revealed a strong culture of values modelling embedded in everyday school interactions (Figure 6). In nearly all schools, teachers consistently modelled responsibility (93%), demonstrating fairness and care in their daily interactions with learners. They also affirmed good behaviors and addressed missteps with value-driven guidance in informal settings (93%), showing integrity and mentorship outside of structured lessons. Learners likewise reflected these values. Responsibility was evident in 75% of learners, who arrived on time, stayed on task, and completed assignments without direct supervision (see Figure 6). Learners also exhibited empathy and effective communication in 79% of schools, engaging in respectful dialogue and creating safe spaces for different voices to be heard. Similarly, 79% demonstrated self-control and inclusion by managing emotions, respecting shared spaces



Figure 5. Display of VbE materials at two different Primary Schools.

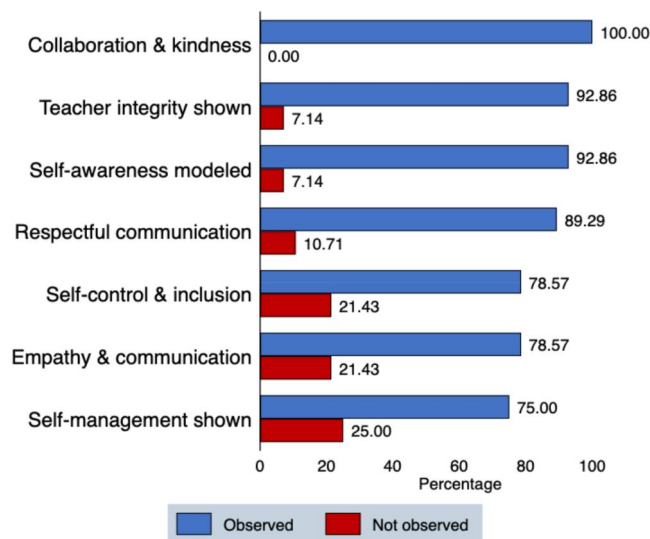


Figure 6. Observation of informal dimension (n = 28 lessons, multiple indicators per lesson).

and property, and ensuring peers felt accepted. The informal dimension showed the same pattern. No item reached significance by training status (Table A6).

Qualitative findings further illustrate how values are internalized through lived experiences. Teachers and learners alike emphasized that regular activities reinforce values such as responsibility and love. A teacher noted, 'During assemblies and lessons, we emphasize the weekly theme (e.g. love) and remind learners to apply these values when conflicts arise', [Teacher, N1] showing how routines embed values in the school culture. A learner added, 'I washed dishes without being told; that was a responsibility', [Learner, 14, Grade 6] highlighting how routine tasks reinforce values beyond formal instruction.

Beyond the classroom- and activity-level dimensions, school-level indicators further corroborate a whole-school approach to values integration (Figure 7). Nearly all schools (96%) had a documented mission or vision statement reflecting core values, and 89% displayed posters, murals, or learners' work promoting values in shared spaces such as corridors and assembly areas. Mutual respect among learners, teachers, support staff, and visitors was observed in 86% of schools, and 79% provided a safe and inclusive environment in which all learners could participate. Parental participation in school programmes such as values days and talks was comparatively low, evident in only 46% of schools.

3.4. Assessment of values

The assessment of values in VBE remains one of the most complex and underdeveloped aspects of its implementation, as highlighted by both quantitative and qualitative findings. Although schools make significant efforts to integrate values into teaching and school life, the tools and methods for assessing

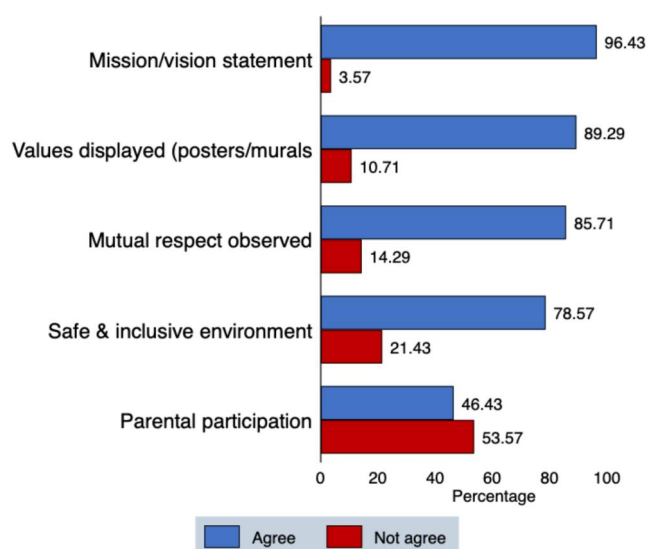


Figure 7. Institution-level integration of values.

these values are largely informal, inconsistent, and insufficiently standardized. Observational data show that only a small percentage of teachers (29%) utilize structured assessment tools like rubrics, self-assessment forms, or reflective journals. As a result, values assessment is not systematically incorporated into instructional practices, hindering the ability to track learners' development over time.

Instead, teachers primarily depend on observational methods, where learners' behaviors during classroom activities and daily interactions are used as indicators of value acquisition. Qualitative narratives support this trend. For example, one teacher remarked, 'We use observation to assess values ... you can tell whether a group is portraying values like love or peace just by watching their behavior'. [Teacher, N2] This reliance on informal judgement is borne out in the coding, the large majority (78.6%) described informal observation of learner behaviour, while formal checklists were mentioned far less often (21.4%), reinforcing the pattern already seen in the classroom-observation data. Another teacher pointed out the lack of formal tools, stating, 'Assessment is a big issue', [Teacher, I4] while others expressed intentions to enhance their practices, such as 'We plan to use a checklist at the end of the term to assess specific indicators of values'. [Teacher, N1] These testimonies underscore the reliance on intuitive judgment and the recognition among educators that more structured approaches are necessary.

A few schools have begun to implement checklists and end-of-term evaluations, indicating a gradual shift toward more systematic assessment. However, their limited adoption reveals gaps in teacher capacity, guidance, and the availability of standardized tools. Furthermore, the findings indicate minimal use of learner-centered approaches, such as self-assessment and reflective journals, which are essential for fostering the internalization of values. In the absence of these tools, learners have few opportunities to reflect on their own behaviors and value development.

3.5. Challenges in implementing VbE

The implementation of the VbE pilot encountered several systemic and practical challenges, as reported by teachers, school heads, and county education officers. Teachers expressed frustration over the absence of VbE-specific resources, including textbooks, visual aids, and structured lesson materials. As one teacher explained, 'Putting into practice the VbE is hard as some books are silent on values'. [Teacher, B1] Some teachers lacked access to sample lesson plans or storybooks that integrate values, making it difficult to embed values in daily instruction.

A recurring challenge across counties was the limited time teachers have to effectively integrate values into the academic content. An education officer observed, 'Some teachers are willing to execute the VbE, but the time is limited, making only a few values achievable'. [Education officer, E1] Teachers reported the pressure to complete examinable subjects, and values especially those not directly linked to

curriculum outcomes were sometimes ignored. This tension reflects a broader structural issue on the need to leverage the non-formal and informal dimensions.

Many teachers and education officers noted that in some cases, there are contradictions between what is taught in school and the values children encounter at home or in the community. As one teacher put it, *'There are contradictions between school and society. We teach respect, but some learners go home to environments that do not support that'*. [Teacher, B1] Cultural dynamics also surfaced, particularly in relation to gender and respect norms. One county officer reported that, *'Cultural values interfere with what is expected in VbE especially among boys who sometimes refuse to respect female teachers'*. [Education officer, E2] This suggests that the challenge is rooted in underlying societal constructions of gender roles, which may shape interactions within the school environment more generally. As a result, the consistent internalization of values promoted through VbE becomes complex, as these gendered expectations can influence behaviour across different teacher–learner interactions.

Stakeholders expressed concern over limited parental involvement in reinforcing values outside of school. One education officer remarked, *'Some parents seem to be relieved when learners are in school. They do not care much to follow up on what they are learning'*. [Education officer, E4] In some areas, learners were reported to be living with grandparents or guardians who may not actively engage with or reinforce school-taught values. Teachers felt that this lack of alignment hindered the sustainability of VbE messages beyond the classroom. As one teacher noted, *'Some parents do not practice the values we are trying to nurture, and learners therefore get mixed messages'*. [Teacher, N3].

While some schools used checklists and informal observation to assess uptake of values, many lacked standardized tools or rubrics to guide systematic monitoring. As one teacher noted, *'Having tools for assessing and monitoring would help us track progress the way we do with literacy or numeracy'*. [Teacher, B2].

3.6. Support needed for effective implementation of VbE

Study respondents from across the counties shared concrete, actionable recommendations to strengthen the implementation of VbE in schools (see Figure 8). Their insights reflect the lived experiences of teachers and education officers, pointing to systemic and practical areas where support is urgently needed.

Resource materials (43%) emerged as the most critical need, indicating that a large proportion of respondents lack adequate teaching and learning materials to effectively promote values (Figure 8). This is followed by more training (26%), suggesting a strong demand for capacity building to improve knowledge and skills in values integration. Rewarding champions (17%) also ranks relatively high, implying that recognizing and motivating individuals who promote values could strengthen implementation efforts. In contrast, assessment training/tools (7%) and financial assistance (5%) are less frequently mentioned, though still relevant. Parental engagement (2%) is the least cited need, suggesting it is either less prioritized or possibly overlooked as a support mechanism.

Teachers emphasized the effectiveness of the initial VbE training but highlighted the need for ongoing capacity building. Many called for refresher sessions and broader teacher involvement to embed VbE more deeply. As one officer put it, *'More training on VbE is needed, even though the initial training was good'*. [Education officer, E1] Teachers also suggested that more practical examples and modelling of classroom integration techniques be included in future trainings.

A critical gap identified was the absence of standardized tools for assessing values acquisition among learners. Teachers expressed the need for instruments akin to those used in literacy or numeracy assessments to monitor learners' progress in values acquisition. One remarked, *'Having tools for assessing and monitoring would help us know how well learners are internalizing values'* [Teacher, B2].

Education officers strongly advocated for greater engagement with parents and local communities to reinforce values beyond the classroom. They recommended strategic collaborations with county governments, community-based organizations (CBOs), and other local leaders to sustain VbE practices at home. As one officer emphasized, *'Collaboration with other CBOs, county governments, and county commissioners can help enhance VbE even when learners are at home'* [Education officer, E2].

Both learners and teachers benefit from affirmation and incentives. Teachers proposed that schools recognize exemplary efforts in implementing VbE through certificates for teachers and visible awards

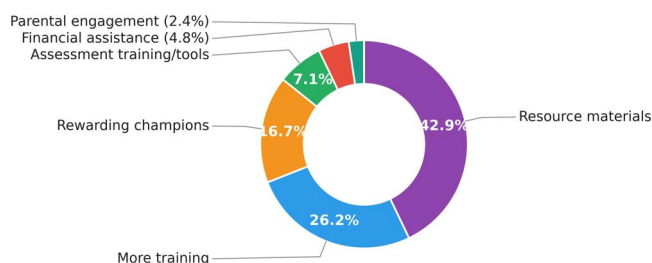


Figure 8. Support needed for effective implementation of VbE.

such as badges or tags for learners. One participant suggested that ‘Champion teachers should be awarded with certificates while learners who excel in VbE should be given badges or tags for identification’ [Teacher, N8].

4. Discussions

This study aimed to explore how VbE is being established in Kenyan basic education within the broader context of CBE reform. Using a mixed-methods design, the study evaluated the effectiveness of the VbE-WSA pilot, aiming to identify what works well in schools and where improvements are needed. Three key patterns have emerged. First, values are widely recognized and are most apparent in informal and non-formal settings. Second, formal lesson planning and assessment practices are lagging behind actual implementation. Third, while training does enhance teacher perspective on how values are acquired and potential of the pedagogical intervention, it is often too brief, with challenges arising from time constraints, class sizes, resource availability, and sociocultural factors.

There is a shared understanding and a supportive school climate for VbE. Across various counties, both learners and teachers identified core values such as love, respect, responsibility, and unity and demonstrated them through everyday actions, including helping peers, queuing, cleaning, and resolving conflicts. Observational data support this culture. Respectful communication, teacher modeling, and daily acts of kindness were commonly noted. These findings resonate with previous research indicating that a supportive whole-school relational climate is crucial for fostering social-emotional learning and prosocial behavior (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2011; Thapa et al., 2013).

Additionally, informal settings like clubs, assemblies, and sports teams were strongly associated with teamwork and sportsmanship. This aligns with research suggesting that co-curricular activities provide real chances to practice collaboration and responsibility (Kiyangi, 2025; Rahman et al., 2021). When it comes to lesson implementation and constructive alignment, we noticed that while tools such as posters, class rules, group work, and storytelling were frequently used (e.g. discussions, role-plays, and value displays), only 71% of lessons integrated values into their plans. Otherwise, structured assessment tools such as rubrics and self-reflection tools were present in only about 29% of the classes we observed.

This discrepancy strong execution but weaker documentation reflects a common issue in competency-based education reforms: while outcomes are clearly stated, the assessment framework often lacks clarity (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Without shared criteria, examples, and brief moderation routines, teachers tend to rely on their instincts, which can limit reliability and comparability (Brookhart, 2010). Our findings suggest a shift from ‘assessment by observation’ to ‘assessment by design’. This means using clear, level-defined rubrics for the targeted values and skills, co-creating success criteria, and incorporating light moderation during staff meetings (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Training is important, but factors like dosage, cadence, and spread play a role. Participants often praised the practical workshops for helping shift their mindsets ‘we can teach values, not just expect them’ and for providing strategies such as modeling, role-playing, and defining group roles and indicators. However, teachers reported that the two-day training format was demanding, leaving limited time to practise new techniques before returning to the classroom. This aligns with what we see in the professional learning literature: short, one-off workshops tend to have limited, fleeting effects, while ongoing, job-embedded coaching cycles lead to more significant, lasting changes (Balta et al., 2023; Kennedy, 2016; Kraft et al., 2018).

A formal comparison of trained and untrained teachers' lessons found no statistically significant difference on any of the 20 observation indicators, likely because trained and untrained teachers were observed within the same 16 schools. This is consistent with the pilot's design: VbE-trained teachers were formally required to cascade the training content to their untrained colleagues within the same school, so the 'untrained' teachers in this study were not naïve to VbE but had received indirect, peer-led exposure to the approach.

When it comes to resources, time, and scale, teachers and education officers pointed out that tight schedules (coverage, assessments, co-curricular activities), large class sizes, and limited materials were significant barriers to deliberate practice and personalized feedback. Education officers echoed these concerns and added parental disengagement and sociocultural tensions (for example, gender norms that can undermine respect) as additional challenges. These constraints reflect findings from international implementation studies: reforms struggle when schools don't have dedicated time for practice, feedback, and reflection, and when assessments and resources aren't aligned with the intended teaching methods (Alonzo et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021).

The system has made some promising strides in formal, nonformal and informal enactment. The next step is to embed formal alignment this means planning, teaching, and assessing the same values and skills with clear artifacts and routines. Specifically, schools can (i) adopt a couple of shared rubrics along with annotated examples, (ii) include five-minute moderation sessions in staff meetings, (iii) set aside short practice blocks (like micro-projects or small-group clinics), and (iv) implement coaching cycles that focus on modeling and providing feedback. National and county education officers can create standardized monitoring checklists to look for these artifacts, as well as climate indicators. It is also important to build partnerships with parents and the community to extend these practices beyond the school this aligns well with whole-school social-emotional learning and values-based education frameworks (Bergin et al., 2024; Thapa et al., 2013; White et al., 2023).

This study has three main limitations. First, the purposive selection of study schools and counties—chosen partly because they had ongoing ALIVE activities and were accessed through education-officer-facilitated introductions to schools—together with the small and uneven classroom-observation sample, limits the generalisability of findings; officer-facilitated entry in particular may have oriented the sample toward schools and staff already predisposed to engage with VbE, introducing a positive selection bias that should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design, absence of baseline or independent comparison data mean that observed differences cannot be interpreted as causal evidence of the VbE-WSA pilot's impact. Third, reliance on single-visit observations, FGDs and KIs may have introduced social-desirability bias. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive evidence to inform, rather than conclusively justify, decisions on wider scale-up of the VbE-WSA approach.

5. Conclusion and policy implications

This study examined how Values-Based Education is understood, integrated, and assessed across 16 purposively sampled schools in four Kenyan counties following a whole-school VbE pilot. Learners and teachers across all four counties commonly recognised core values such as love, respect, responsibility, and unity, and these values were consistently enacted in informal school interactions and non-formal co-curricular activities. Formal, lesson-level integration was more uneven: values-oriented pedagogy was observed in the large majority of lessons, but structured assessment tools were used in fewer than a third, and this gap between informal/non-formal enactment and formal assessment held broadly across counties and school locations.

The study's principal contribution is descriptive and diagnostic rather than causal: given the cross-sectional, purposively sampled design, findings should be read as evidence of how VbE is currently being practised and perceived in these schools, not as proof that the pilot caused the reported outcomes. Within that scope, the findings point to a clear implementation priority, moving from an 'assessment by observation' culture to 'assessment by design', through shared rubrics, brief moderation routines, and sustained, job-embedded coaching rather than one-off training.

Future research should build on this descriptive study with a quasi-experimental or longitudinal design incorporating a baseline measurement and, where feasible, a comparison group, to test whether VbE-WSA training produces measurable gains in classroom practice over time.

Notes

1. Classroom and school-level observations were conducted using a structured observation schedule developed to assess the implementation of VbE through the whole-school approach. The tool captured observable practices across three dimensions. Observations were carried out during lessons, co-curricular sessions, and general school routines, with each item rated using a binary scale (1 = observed, 2 = not observed). This numbering follows the KoboCollect multiple-choice question format, in which response options are numbered starting at 1 by default. All indicators were recoded to a standard 0/1 (not observed/observed) format prior to analysis. In addition, observers recorded contextual notes to provide qualitative insights into how values were nurtured within the school environment, including aspects related to leadership, inclusivity, and overall school culture.
2. Although two lessons were planned per school, yielding 32 planned observations, complete and analysable observation records were available for 28 lessons, as four planned observations could not be conducted because the respective teachers were absent during data collection.
3. QDA Miner software was used for coding (Derobertmeasure & Robertson, 2014).

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Author contributions

CRedit: **Jackline Nyerere**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Paul Nyangau**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **John Kabutha Mugo**: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available on Zenodo (<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20527954>).

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