

Understanding School Culture in Kenyan Primary Schools: Examining the Social Dynamics among Teachers and Students

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Although a large number of studies have been made on education and development in sub-Saharan Africa, little is known about the inner realities of school life, particularly from local perspectives. Majority of these studies have been carried out through policy analysis and quantitative methodologies, neglecting more in-depth, ethnographic approaches. School culture is a collection of beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, which characterizes a particular school. Deeper understanding of the school's social structure and its inner realities hold the key in grasping educational issues in the country.

This study investigated the school culture of Kenyan primary schools through the examination of the existing social dynamics among teachers and students. By employing ethnographic approaches, such as key-informant interviews and participant observation, the study identified two elements essential in defining the primary school culture in Kenya: mutual collaboration and exam-oriented competition. The former appears to play a significant role in mitigating teachers' workload and in curbing students' deviancy, thus creating a more comfortable and secure environment. The latter imprints the role of examination results on students in a society which places a high premium on good academic performance. There exists an assumption that better academic standing, particularly among female graduates of more traditional backgrounds, would generate better opportunities. However, this very high expectation on schooling may also cause a student's emotional distress.