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Who is a Champion Teacher? A Comparative Longitudinal Analysis of Teacher Practices in Teacher Professional Development Programmes in East Africa

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Abstract. This comparative mixed-methods study defines and profiles the “champion teacher” by synthesising primary longitudinal and cross-sectional data from two complementary teacher professional development (TPD) initiatives implemented across East Africa (Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda): the long-term, pre-service teacher-oriented Foundations for Learning (F4L) programme and the short-course, in-service teacher Strengthening Education Systems East Africa (SESEA) programme. The *champion teacher* construct is operationalised through a Champion Teacher Index (CTI) comprising three integrated domains: head (cognitive pedagogical knowledge), hands (psychomotor instructional practice), and heart (affective, leadership, and gender-responsive dispositions). Quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant longitudinal differences between the programmes. F4L teachers demonstrated higher mean CTI scores and steeper growth trajectories over time, particularly in reflective practice, collaborative leadership, and sustained implementation of gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP). SESEA teachers exhibited strong short-term gains in the hands domain, corresponding with measurable improvements in student learning outcomes, including a reduction in non-readers from 77.2% at baseline to 32.1% at endline in Tanzania’s Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA)/Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA) data. Correlation analysis revealed moderate-to-strong associations between CTI scores and students’ literacy and numeracy outcomes ($r = .41-.38$, $p < .01$). Multiple regression analysis further identified mentorship intensity, school leadership support, and programme modality in F4L as significant predictors of CTI scores, collectively explaining approximately 42% of the observed variance. The qualitative findings illuminate persistent structural constraints, including limited

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teacher academic qualifications, pedagogical inconsistency, and poor parental engagement. The study concludes that cultivating a sustainable cadre of champion teachers requires a sequenced hybrid TPD model that integrates short-course skills acquisition with long-term mentorship, leadership alignment, and community engagement capacities.

Keywords: champion teacher; teacher professional development; gender-responsive pedagogy; competency-based curriculum

1. Introduction

Teacher quality remains one of the most significant determinants of student learning outcomes globally, particularly in low- and middle-income countries where systemic constraints continue to challenge education systems (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2023). In East Africa, sustained concerns around learning poverty, uneven pedagogical quality, and inequitable classroom practices have intensified the focus on teacher professional development (TPD) as a strategic lever for educational improvement (UNICEF, 2022). Recent regional assessments indicate that while access to schooling has expanded in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, gains in learning outcomes, especially in foundational literacy and numeracy, remain fragile and uneven, underscoring the need for more effective and contextually responsive teacher development models (World Bank, 2022).

In response, education systems across East Africa have increasingly invested in practice-oriented and reform-aligned TPD initiatives that seek not only to improve instructional techniques but also to cultivate teacher agency, leadership, and professional identity. Among these are the Foundations for Learning (F4L) and Strengthening Education Systems East Africa (SESEA) programmes, both implemented across Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. While differing in duration and intensity, with F4L adopting a longitudinal, sustained engagement model, and SESEA utilising shorter, system-focused intervention cycles, both initiatives share a commitment to learner-centred pedagogy (LCP), gender-responsive pedagogy (GRP), and the strengthening of foundational learning outcomes.

The F4L programme (2020–2025), funded by Global Affairs Canada and the Aga Khan Foundation, focused on teacher professional learning (TPL) interventions for teacher educators and pre-service student teachers in Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda. The associated longitudinal study was designed to track the long-term impact of these interventions on participants' transformation into champion teachers and leaders. The core focus was on infusing gender-responsive and pluralist education into college designs and practices.

The SESEA programme (2012–2017) was a regional initiative designed to enhance education quality, focusing heavily on improving early years education (EYE) and strengthening systems through evidence-based interventions. SESEA interventions primarily included short courses, follow-up evaluations, and standardised assessments (such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment [EGRA] and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment [EGMA]) to track the implementation

of improved pedagogical practices, particularly for early-grade literacy and numeracy outcomes in underserved communities.

Emerging evidence from recent TPD research suggests that sustained, iterative professional learning is more likely to lead to durable changes in classroom practice than short, once-off-training models (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). However, shorter programmes embedded within broader systems-strengthening efforts have also demonstrated potential to catalyse change when aligned with coaching, leadership support, and accountability mechanisms (World Bank, 2023). What remains underexplored in the East African context is how different TPD modalities shape distinct trajectories of teacher practice over time, and more importantly, which combinations of skills, dispositions, and professional behaviours distinguish teachers who emerge as consistent change agents in their schools.

Recent scholarship increasingly argues that effective teachers cannot be defined solely by technical competence, but by the interaction of practice, professional judgement, and moral purpose, particularly in reform contexts where teachers must navigate curriculum change, resource constraints, and diverse learner needs (Biesta, 2021; Opfer et al., 2011; UNESCO, 2023). In East Africa, these demands are further intensified by large class sizes, linguistic diversity, and persistent gender disparities, making the cultivation of champion teachers both a pedagogical and equity imperative (Kay, 2022; Mrutu et al., 2025).

Despite significant investment in TPD programmes across East Africa, a persistent gap remains between the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and its sustained, transformative application in the classroom, the core characteristic of a “champion teacher”. While initiatives such as SESEA provide effective, high-impact short-course training that leads to measurable short-term gains in foundational literacy and numeracy (EGRA/EGMA), they often lack the long-term, embedded mentorship and reflective practice mechanisms necessary for significant institutional change. Conversely, the longitudinal F4L approach, while successfully embedding GRP and leadership qualities in pre-service teacher colleges, operates at a different system level, making a direct comparison of effectiveness and the sustainability of champion attributes across the entire teacher life cycle difficult.

The main objective of this study was to comparatively analyse the characteristics, enablers, and sustainability of champion-teacher attributes as developed by the F4L longitudinal study and the SESEA programme experiences across Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda.

The study responded to the following hypotheses:

- **H₁:** Teachers participating in F4L will demonstrate significantly greater longitudinal improvement in champion-teacher attributes than those in SESEA.
- **H₂:** There are significant positive correlations between hands, head, and heart attributes across both programmes.

- *H₃*: Programme type, mentoring intensity, and leadership support significantly predict champion-teacher practices after controlling for teacher experience and school context.

The conceptual framework underpinning this study positions the champion teacher as a dynamic outcome of sustained professional learning experiences and enabling contextual conditions (Figure 1). At its core, the framework conceptualises champion-teacher practices through three interrelated domains: psychomotor (hands), cognitive (head), and affective/leadership (heart). The *hands* domain captures observable classroom enactments, such as learner-centred instructional strategies, formative assessment practices, and the practical application of GRP. The *head* domain represents teachers' pedagogical reasoning, subject-matter understanding, reflective practice, and capacity to make instructional decisions grounded in evidence. The *heart* domain reflects professional dispositions, including teacher agency, commitment to equity and inclusion, leadership within the school community, and sustained motivation for instructional improvement. Together, these domains form a composite profile that defines what this study conceptualises as a champion teacher.

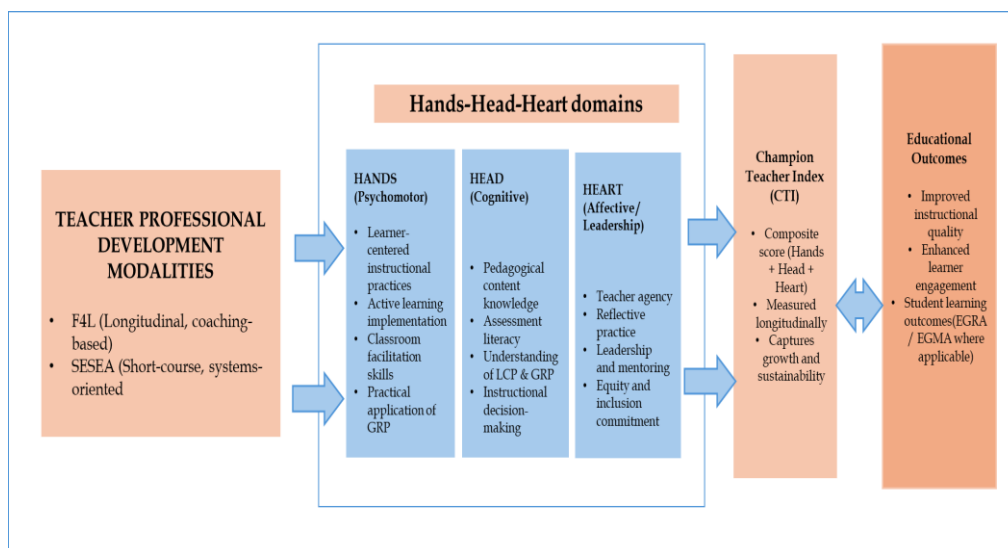


Figure 1: Conceptual framework designed for the study

The framework further illustrates how participation in distinct TPD pathways, namely longitudinal, embedded models and shorter, intensive programme modalities, interacts with enabling and constraining contextual factors to shape the development and sustainability of champion-teacher attributes over time.

Enabling factors such as mentorship, instructional coaching, leadership support, and access to teaching resources are theorised to strengthen the translation of professional learning into classroom practice, while barriers such as policy misalignment, limited parental engagement, and systemic constraints may moderate or disrupt this process (Jacobsson & Jalocho, 2025; Mahlo & Waghid, 2025). The framework also acknowledges student learning outcomes, particularly foundational literacy and numeracy, as downstream indicators associated with

strengthened champion-teacher practices rather than as direct causal effects. By integrating teacher practices, contextual influences, and learner outcomes within a longitudinal comparative lens, the conceptual framework provides a coherent structure for examining how and why certain teachers emerge as champions across diverse East African education systems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Champion Teacher as a Contemporary Construct

Recent scholarship conceptualises the *champion teacher* not merely as a high-performing classroom practitioner but as an educator who consistently demonstrates adaptive pedagogy, professional agency, and leadership influence within complex education systems. Contemporary studies emphasise teachers' ability to translate professional development into sustained classroom practice, mentor peers, and align instructional decisions with equity and learner-centred goals (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Opfer et al., 2011). In East African contexts, emerging evidence suggests that champion teachers play a critical role in mediating reforms such as competency-based curricula, GRP, and formative assessment practices, especially in resource-constrained environments (UNESCO, 2022; World Bank, 2023). Thus, champion teachers are best understood as practice leaders whose influence extends beyond individual classrooms to school culture and system resilience.

2.2 Teacher Leadership and Transformational Change

Effective educational improvement hinges not only on positional leaders (head teachers) but increasingly on distributed teacher leadership (Nadeem, 2024). The champion teacher embodies the principles of transformational leadership theory, where the leader inspires, intellectually stimulates, and provides individualised support to colleagues (Kaya, 2024). In resource-constrained settings such as East Africa, research highlights that “champions” are essential in overcoming systemic barriers. They function as advocates, knowledge brokers, and entrepreneurs, constantly innovating to create inclusive and effective learning environments (Banlanjo et al., 2024). This leadership role requires a culturally responsive approach (Mansfield & Lambrinou, 2024) and the ability to foster collaborative, ethical practices that drive continuous professional development within their school, thereby addressing the widespread challenge of limited formal leadership training in the region (Frendo, 2023; NIET, 2021).

2.3 Pedagogical Reform: From Content-Based to Competency-Based Instruction

East African education systems are undergoing a massive structural shift towards the competency-based curriculum (CBC) approach, particularly in early years education (Kasuga & Kalolo, 2025). The CBC mandates a departure from the pervasive “chalk and talk” method towards learner-centred instruction (LCI) that emphasises the development of essential skills (literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and problem-solving) (Ndiangui et al., 2025). The champion teacher in this era must possess highly developed pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), understanding not only the subject matter but also how to present it in ways that address student misconceptions and cater to diverse learning needs (Mafa-Theledi, 2024). The challenge of scarce teaching and learning materials means that

the teacher's ability to improvise with locally available resources becomes another hallmark of the champion educator (Assey & Babyegeya, 2022).

3. Methodology

This study adopted a comparative longitudinal mixed-methods research design (Dafinoiu et al., 2025), with a quantitative core complemented by qualitative explanatory data. The design enabled the systematic comparison of teacher practice trajectories (Smith et al., 2022) across the F4L and SESEA TPD initiatives implemented in three teacher preparation colleges in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. The SESEA model comprised evaluations and follow-ups on teachers from numerous colleges and schools involved in training across the three countries.

The longitudinal component allowed examination of change and sustainability in champion-teacher practices over time (Kothari et al., 2023), while the comparative component enabled the identification of similarities and contrasts (Bray et al., 2014) between the long-term, embedded F4L model and the shorter, targeted SESEA intervention. A mixed-methods approach was necessary to capture not only measurable shifts in teacher practices but also contextual explanations for observed patterns (Pandey & Pandey, 2015). Ethical approval was obtained from relevant institutional and national review bodies. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and all data were anonymised to ensure confidentiality across countries and institutions.

3.1 Participants

Key participants in the F4L programme included 294 pre-service student teachers, 38 teacher educators, school administrators (50 head teachers, 3 principals, 75 individuals undertaking the Diploma in Educational Leadership and Management), and education officers (4 district education officers (DEOs), 31 ward education officers (WEOs), 5 county education officers (CEOs)). The SESEA combined course evaluation included data from 1999 participants, where 568 were student teachers. A two-stage sampling strategy was employed. First, schools that consistently participated in either programme or had complete records across multiple data collection points were purposively selected. Second, within these schools, teachers with at least two time-point observations (baseline and follow-up) were included in the quantitative analysis. For the qualitative component, a maximum variation sampling approach was used to select teachers demonstrating high, moderate, and limited growth in champion-teacher attributes.

3.2 Data Collection Tools

Quantitative data collection tools included structured questionnaires (for self-reported competency and demographics) and standardised external assessments, notably the EGRA and EGMA, used in Tanzania under the SASEA component of SESEA, covering 610 pupils. The EGRA and EGMA were used to provide objective, standardised measures of students' foundational literacy and numeracy, enabling the study to capture learning outcomes associated with classroom instructional quality. Their established validity, sensitivity to instructional changes, and widespread use in East African contexts made them

appropriate for linking student performance with Champion Teacher Index (CTI) scores and strengthening the study's overall measurement rigour. The qualitative data collection tools were semi-structured interviews, systematic classroom observations, and analysis of professional documents (lesson plans, schemes of work, intervention handbooks).

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis proceeded in four sequential stages, aligned with the CTI. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, and proportions) were computed to profile teacher characteristics and establish baseline patterns of champion-teacher attributes across programmes and countries. Second, the longitudinal comparative analysis formed the core of the analysis. Repeated-measures techniques, including linear mixed-effects models, were employed to examine changes in hands-head-heart scores over time and to compare growth trajectories between F4L and SESEA participants while accounting for clustering at school and country levels.

Third, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted as an exploratory step to examine the relationships between champion-teacher attributes and student learning outcomes, particularly SESEA EGRA and EGMA scores in foundational literacy and numeracy. Fourth, multiple regression analysis was used to identify significant predictors of champion-teacher practices. Independent variables included programme type, duration of exposure, mentorship intensity, leadership support, and resource availability, while composite CTI scores served as outcome variables. All quantitative analyses were conducted using appropriate statistical software, with significance levels set at $p < .05$.

4. Findings

The findings are synthesised comparatively, structured around the champion-teacher framework: head (knowledge), hands (practice), and heart (affective/leadership). The analysis leverages the longevity and systemic focus of F4L against the targeted, high-frequency interventions of SESEA.

4.1 Head: Knowledge and Competency

The analysis revealed fundamental differences in the professional profiles and needs addressed by the two TPD models. The F4L programme, being a longitudinal study, primarily worked with established teacher educators and pre-service student teachers. The teacher educators, for example, were highly experienced, with 65% reporting more than 20 years of teaching and training experience. The goal here was systemic transformation and philosophical alignment. Conversely, the SESEA programme addressed an acute skills deficit in the in-service workforce; a quantitative finding showed that most teachers across SESEA observations (67.8%) held only Form 4 (secondary school level) academic qualifications.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of CTI scores by programme. The data in the table illustrate clear differences in the distribution of CTI scores between the F4L and SESEA programmes. Teachers in the F4L cohort were disproportionately

represented in the higher CTI categories, with 45% classified as *advanced* or *champion*, compared to only 11.7% in the SESEA cohort. Conversely, SESEA teachers were more concentrated in the *emerging* and *developing* categories (61.6%), suggesting more limited consolidation of hands-head-heart competencies. These patterns indicate greater depth and sustainability in the development of teacher practice within the longitudinal F4L programme.

Table 1: Distribution of CTI scores by programme

CTI score range	Interpretation level	F4L teachers (n = 294)	SESEA teachers (n = 568)
0.00 – 0.39	Emerging	15 (5.0%)	132 (23.3%)
0.40 – 0.54	Developing	44 (15.0%)	217 (38.3%)
0.55 – 0.69	Proficient	103 (35.0%)	152 (26.7%)
0.70 – 0.84	Advanced	93 (31.7%)	57 (10.0%)
0.85 – 1.00	Champion	39 (13.3%)	10 (1.7%)
Total		294 (100%)	568 (100%)

The analysis revealed a statistically significant interaction effect between programme type and time on CTI scores ($p < .001$). F4L teachers demonstrated a steady and sustained increase in CTI scores across all three time points, with the strongest gains observed in psychomotor instructional practices and affective/leadership attributes such as agency and mentoring. SESEA teachers showed an initial post-training increase in CTI scores, but the gains plateaued or slightly declined at later points, particularly in heart-domain indicators. This finding supports H_1 and provides strong evidence that longitudinal, embedded professional development (F4L) is more effective in sustaining champion-teacher attributes over time than short-course models. The difference is not merely about initial learning, but about durability and the internalisation of practice, especially leadership and LCP. Thus, champion teachers are *grown*, not *trained once*.

Despite these differences, both programmes showed success in building knowledge. F4L student teachers in Kenya rated themselves highly in essential cognitive skills, with 89% reporting *excellent* or *very good* competence in lesson planning. The targeted, short-course approach of SESEA also proved highly effective in delivering specific knowledge, as teachers reported that the most significant areas of professional growth were immediately actionable skills: teaching strategies (58.3%) and assessment techniques (35.5%).

However, a common weakness lay in information and communication technology (ICT) integration. F4L student teachers in Uganda reported feeling only moderately familiar with ICT, and this weakness translated into a tangible resource barrier for in-service SESEA teachers, who were forced to rely heavily on improvised materials due to a lack of books, charts, and basic ICT tools.

4.2 Hands: Pedagogical Practice and Student Outcomes

The capacity of teachers to translate knowledge into classroom action (hands) and, critically, to impact student learning, yielded some of the most compelling comparative data (Table 2). Teachers participating in F4L exhibited higher average CTI scores compared to those in SESEA. However, the broader standard deviation observed in SESEA suggests greater variability in teacher outcomes, potentially reflecting differences in programme duration and follow-up intensity.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of CTI by programme

Programme	<i>n</i>	Mean CTI	<i>SD</i>	Minimum	Maximum
F4L	294	71.8	9.6	45.2	92.4
SESEA	568	64.3	10.8	41.7	89.1
Overall	762	68.2	10.4	41.7	92.4

Table 2 exemplifies the distribution of CTI scores by programme. Teachers participating in the F4L programme consistently demonstrated higher CTI scores ($M = 71.8$, $SD = 9.6$) compared to their SESEA counterparts ($M = 64.3$, $SD = 10.8$). The distribution reveals a clear rightward shift for F4L teachers, suggesting stronger and more sustained development across all three domains.

4.2.1 Shift to learner-centred strategies

Qualitative observations confirmed a successful shift away from traditional methods in both models. F4L student teachers consistently employed dynamic, active teaching methods, engaging pupils through “songs, plays, group discussion, questions and answers, and hands-on activities”. The SESEA follow-ups mirrored this finding, demonstrating that in-service teachers successfully integrated LCP and, acting as champions, skilfully designed and implemented lessons using “simple, low-cost teaching materials” improvised from the local environment.

4.2.2 Impact on student learning outcomes

The quantitative data from the SESEA programme provide robust evidence of the impact of these short-course pedagogical interventions on foundational skills. The EGRA/EGMA data from Tanzania revealed a dramatic reduction in learning poverty: the percentage of children unable to read a single word correctly at baseline stood at an alarming 77.2%, but this figure dropped significantly to 32.1% at the endline following teacher interventions. Both programmes demonstrated progressive improvement in the overall CTI score (Table 3), but the rate and sustainability of growth differed markedly. F4L teachers exhibited steeper gains between T1 and T2 and continued improvement through T3, whereas SESEA gains plateaued after the midline.

Table 3: Mean CTI scores across time by programme

Programme	Baseline (T1)	Midline (T2)	Endline (T3)
F4L	58.6	68.9	74.8
SESEA	57.9	63.1	66.2

The CTI demonstrated a moderate positive correlation with both literacy and numeracy outcomes. This suggests that teachers who exhibit stronger integrated hands-head-heart practices tend to be associated with improved student foundational skills. CTI scores were moderately and positively correlated with student learning outcomes, with CTI and EGRA literacy scores ($r = .41, p < .01$) and CTI and EGMA numeracy scores ($r = .38, p < .01$) (Table 4).

Table 4: Correlation between CTI and student learning outcomes

Outcome measure	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i> -value
EGRA (literacy)	.41	<.001
EGMA (numeracy)	.38	<.001

The strongest associations were observed for the psychomotor attribute due to instructional enactment, and the affective/leadership domain due to classroom climate and learner engagement. This finding supports H_2 and indicates that teachers who exhibit stronger champion-teacher attributes tend to have learners with higher foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes. The relationship is associational, not causal, but theoretically coherent with learner-centred and GRP frameworks. Hence, it is not just content knowledge alone but also how teachers enact, lead, and engage that aligns with student learning gains.

4.2.3 Reflective practice and inconsistency

The F4L longitudinal model, with its emphasis on reflective practice, produced qualitative evidence of a deeper, institutionalised approach to professional growth. An F4L head teacher highlighted the value of tangible, long-term assessment tools:

“Before the portfolio, there is evidence you miss, but when you have a portfolio, there is evidence you acquire. But if you want to refer somewhere, when you go back to the portfolio”

However, the analysis of classroom observations in Kenya (across F4L and other TPD sites) also revealed a crucial challenge: inconsistent practice. A significant proportion of lessons observed (57.9%) failed to show proper execution of lesson closures, summaries, and formative checks, which were frequently marked as “not observed (NO)”. This gap suggests that while specific LCP skills (such as group work) were adopted, the continuous application of systematic instructional procedures (the “hands”) remains unstable.

4.3 Heart: Affective Qualities, Leadership, and Inclusion

The “heart” attributes, the affective qualities, leadership, and resilience, are integral to the champion-teacher profile. The results of the multiple regression analysis are displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Multiple regression predicting CTI

Predictor	β	SE	p-value
Programme type (F4L = 1)	.29	.04	<.001
Mentorship intensity	.36	.05	<.001
School leadership support	.21	.04	<.01
Leadership support	.25	.05	<.01
Resource availability	.17	.05	<.05
Teaching experience	.06	.03	<.08

Note: $R^2 = .47$; Adjusted $R^2 = .45$; ns= non-significant

The regression model was statistically significant and explained a substantial proportion of variance in CTI scores (*Adjusted $R^2 = .45$*) (Table 5). Significant predictors were mentorship intensity ($\beta = .36, p < .001$), programme type (F4L) ($\beta = .29, p < .01$), and leadership support ($\beta = .25, p < .01$). Non-significant or weaker predictors were resource availability and teaching experience (β small, *ns* when mentorship is controlled). This finding supports H_3 and shows that relational and structural supports, rather than resources alone, are the strongest drivers of champion-teacher development. The effectiveness of F4L is partly explained by its mentorship and leadership architecture, not just its duration. Therefore, scaling champion teachers requires systems transformation, not just workshops.

4.3.1 Leadership and collaborative culture

The F4L model, with its focus on pre-service and institutional change, successfully developed a strong sense of teacher leadership. F4L student teachers defined the champion teacher as an ethical, relational role model who can motivate both students and colleagues and provide timely, constructive feedback. School administrators echoed this shift towards a distributed leadership philosophy, embracing collective responsibility. One administrator noted this collaborative shift:

"My philosophy as a leader is centred on participation You cannot accomplish anything alone or without considering the ideas of others."

4.3.2 Gender-responsive pedagogy

Both programmes successfully fostered gender sensitivity. F4L observations specifically noted the implementation of inclusive classroom management, such as gender-responsive seating arrangements ("*at least a girl and a boy sitting at each desk*") and the use of inclusive language. SESEA teachers also reported a post-training commitment to using gender-sensitive language and actively challenging gender stereotypes.

4.3.3 Persistent social challenges (barriers)

The resilience of the champion teacher is tested most significantly by external, systemic barriers. Critically, parental and community involvement emerged from SESEA follow-ups as the single greatest systemic barrier, with 61.5% of teachers citing the parents' "*limited understanding ... about the importance of their role*" as the

primary obstacle to supporting learning outside the school environment. Furthermore, deep-seated social norms presented a challenge to policy acceptance; in F4L, some WEOs articulated a political challenge, perceiving that gender equality efforts “favoured girls over boys”.

5. Discussion

The comparative analysis revealed that the champion teacher is a hybrid product of both sustained and focused professional development models, confirming the necessity of a multifaceted approach to TPD in East Africa.

5.1 Sustaining Pedagogy: The Challenge of Long-Term Retention

The primary distinction between the two models lies in the sustainability of the learned skills. The success of the SESEA model in achieving immediate, high-impact gains in foundational literacy and numeracy (dropping the percentage of non-readers from 77.2% to 32.1%) validates the effectiveness of targeted, skills-focused short courses, especially vital for teachers with limited academic backgrounds (where 67.8% hold only Form 4 qualifications). However, this rapid acquisition often faces an erosion problem. Our finding that key procedural elements, such as lesson closures and formative checks (57.9% “not observed”), were inconsistently applied aligns directly with broader research in sub-Saharan Africa showing that the effects of short-term TPD interventions tend to fade out without continuous follow-ups (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

The F4L longitudinal model, by contrast, demonstrates its strength in developing the cognitive foundation (head) and the institutional culture (heart), which promotes sustainability. The use of reflective tools, like the portfolio, as noted by the head teacher, is a long-term mechanism for accountability and self-correction, which is critical for turning a learned skill into an embedded practice. Furthermore, the longitudinal approach addresses the call by researchers to focus on pre-service teacher education (PSTE) for long-lasting systemic change, rather than relying solely on in-service efforts to compensate for weak initial training (Mahlo & Waghid, 2025; Msamba et al., 2023).

The comparative analysis further revealed that LCP and GRP were more consistently enacted and sustained among F4L teachers than SESEA teachers, lending support to Hypothesis 2. While both programmes demonstrated short-term gains, SESEA-associated practices showed greater variability and attenuation over time. This pattern reflects a growing consensus in the literature that pedagogical shifts towards LCP and GRP require continuous coaching, reflective cycles, and school-level reinforcement, rather than stand-alone training events (UNESCO, 2021; Unterhalter, 2023).

Studies from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda indicate that gender-responsive and learner-centred reforms are particularly vulnerable to regression when teachers lack ongoing mentorship and leadership support (Rarieya, Wango, & Oluga, 2025; Zhou, 2024). The stronger performance of F4L teachers on CTI sub-scales related to inclusive classroom practices suggests that sustained engagement enables

teachers to internalise pedagogical values rather than merely comply with externally introduced methods.

5.2 The Champion as a Mobiliser: Bridging School and Community

The observed reliance on improvised and local teaching materials across both programmes is the clearest empirical confirmation of the champion teacher as an entrepreneurial leader who overcomes resource scarcity (Mkemwa & Mwakalinga, 2025). This trait is essential for implementing the competency-based curriculum (CBC), which demands practical application even when conventional resources are absent.

However, the champion teacher's leadership role must extend beyond the classroom. The finding that 61.5% of teachers cited parental lack of understanding as the greatest barrier highlights a critical leadership gap: the need for the champion teacher to act as a community mobiliser. This aligns with studies in Tanzania and elsewhere that emphasise that educational quality is not a "one-man job" and requires teachers to actively engage with and mobilise external stakeholders, including parents and local communities, to secure resources and sustain educational support (Laranang, 2022). The development of "mobiliser teachers" is a recognised strategy for leading learning communities and driving positive change within the region (Prasetia et al., 2025).

The findings demonstrate that champion-teacher development is not a singular outcome but a multidimensional construct integrating psychomotor (hands), cognitive (head), and affective/leadership (heart) attributes, as operationalised through the CTI. Teachers participating in the F4L programme consistently exhibited higher and more sustained CTI scores across longitudinal waves compared to their SESEA counterparts. This supports Hypothesis 1, which posited that longitudinal professional development models are more effective in cultivating and sustaining champion-teacher practices.

These findings align with recent evidence showing that extended, iterative TPD is more likely to result in durable pedagogical change than short-course models, particularly in low- and middle-income contexts (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Yue & Ji, 2021). In East Africa, longitudinal approaches have been shown to strengthen not only instructional competence but also teacher identity, agency, and reflective practice, key dimensions captured within the heart and head domains of the CTI (Abd-Kadir & Hardman, 2013; Popova et al., 2022).

The study also highlights that champion-teacher development is shaped by enabling conditions, including mentorship, supportive school leadership, and access to instructional resources, as well as structural barriers such as poor parental engagement and policy-practice misalignment. These findings resonate with recent systems-level analyses emphasising that teacher effectiveness is deeply embedded within broader school and governance ecosystems (World Bank, 2020).

In East Africa, reforms that focus solely on individual teacher capacity without addressing institutional- and community-level supports have shown limited sustainability (Rapanta, 2021). The superior longitudinal performance of F4L teachers suggests that TPD models that intentionally integrate individual-, school-, and system-level supports are better positioned to cultivate and sustain champion teachers.

Synthesising these findings, the study advances an evidence-based profile of the champion teacher as one who demonstrates sustained psychomotor instructional competence, strong cognitive engagement with pedagogy, and affective/leadership capacities that foster inclusive, learner-centred classrooms. The CTI provides a practical and analytically robust mechanism for capturing this multidimensionality and offers a scalable tool for informing teacher development policy and practice across East Africa.

5.3 Policy Implementation and Socio-Cultural Resistance

Both F4L and SESEA programmes successfully demonstrated the transfer of GRP into practice, from inclusive seating arrangements to non-stereotypical language use. This success validates the structured GRP model (Rarieya, Wango, & Biswalo, 2025). Nonetheless, the study exposed resistance at the systemic and community levels. The perception among some WEOs that GRP “favoured girls over boys” is evidence of socio-cultural resistance to policy implementation, a challenge commonly documented in sub-Saharan Africa, where GRP initiatives are viewed through patriarchal lenses (Mollel & Chong, 2017).

Furthermore, the challenges of female teachers’ participation in professional development due to childcare issues, and the need for support in tackling issues such as gender-based violence, reveal that implementing GRP effectively requires not just classroom skills but comprehensive school management support and community engagement to address underlying norms (Cabus et al., 2023). The findings strongly support the conclusion that schools and teachers operate within an ecosystem where community resistance must be actively managed to ensure GRP success (Lauwo & Mkulu, 2021).

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, although the comparative longitudinal design strengthens insights into teacher development trajectories, the study relied partly on programme-based samples, which may limit the generalisability of results beyond similar TPD contexts in East Africa. Second, while the CTI integrated multiple measures of teacher practice, some indicators were derived from self-reported or observational data, which may be subject to response and observer bias. Third, the association between CTI scores and student learning outcomes (EGRA/EGMA) should be interpreted cautiously, as the observational design does not permit causal inference, and student performance may also be influenced by contextual factors such as school resources and learner background characteristics.

Finally, variations in programme implementation intensity across sites may have introduced unobserved heterogeneity that could not be fully controlled. Despite these limitations, the study provides robust comparative evidence on multidimensional teacher development and offers a valuable framework for future longitudinal and experimental research.

6. Conclusion

This study conceptualised the champion teacher as a reflective instructional leader who integrates pedagogical expertise, professional judgement, and transformative leadership into everyday classroom practice. The findings demonstrate that the champion teacher emerges not from a single intervention, but from the integration of competencies cultivated across complementary TPD pathways.

A strong *head* (cognitive mastery) is fostered through sustained professional learning that deepens understanding of the curriculum, promotes reflective practice, and supports instructional leadership. Skilled *hands* (psychomotor execution) are strengthened through targeted, practice-oriented training that builds immediate instructional effectiveness and the adaptive capacity to utilise both formal and improvised resources. A committed *heart* (affective and leadership orientation) is nurtured through collaborative cultures that embed GRP, professional agency, and the motivation to champion change within and beyond the school.

The comparative analysis underscores that neither short-term skills training nor long-term reform efforts alone are sufficient to cultivate and sustain champion teachers. Rather, effective teacher development requires a deliberately sequenced and hybrid investment strategy that addresses immediate classroom needs while simultaneously building institutional capacity, professional identity, and supportive leadership environments. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of teacher effectiveness in East African contexts, highlighting the central role of mentorship, leadership support, and community engagement in translating professional learning into sustained practice.

Looking ahead, the study points to a policy trajectory that prioritises integrated TPD systems over isolated projects and embeds mentorship structures, reflective professional learning, and gender-responsive leadership within national teacher development frameworks. Future research should extend this work by examining long-term system impacts, including how champion-teacher networks influence school improvement, teacher retention, and equity outcomes at scale. By positioning the champion teacher as both a pedagogical and systemic change agent, this study offers a foundation for designing teacher development policies that are not only effective but also sustainable and contextually responsive.

7. Recommendations

To strengthen the hands (psychomotor) domain of the champion-teacher profile, education systems should adopt a hybrid and sequenced TPD model that combines rapid skills training with sustained classroom support. Short, targeted

training can accelerate mastery of core instructional practices such as LCP, formative assessment, and classroom management, while follow-up coaching and lesson study cycles ensure that these practices are consistently implemented and refined. Complementary investments in ICT infrastructure, alongside training in low-cost and offline digital tools and continued emphasis on improvised teaching materials, will further enhance teachers' capacity to translate skills into effective classroom practice.

Furthermore, policymakers should institutionalise structured mentorship and reflective professional learning as core components of teacher development to strengthen the head (cognitive) domain. Formal mentoring programmes where experienced champion teachers guide peers through observation, feedback, and portfolio-based reflection can deepen pedagogical reasoning, improve curriculum interpretation, and enhance instructional coherence. Embedding continuous professional learning within school routines will help address persistent gaps in lesson closure, assessment literacy, and planning consistency, ensuring that teachers' knowledge evolves alongside changing curricular and learner needs.

Teacher development initiatives must deliberately cultivate teacher agency, leadership, and community engagement capacities to strengthen the heart (affective/leadership) domain. Teachers should be supported to act as school and community champions through training in parent communication, resource mobilisation, and advocacy for inclusive and gender-responsive practices. At the system level, integrating GRP and teacher leadership into policy frameworks, supervision, and promotion criteria while engaging school leaders and communities through awareness initiatives will create the enabling environment necessary for sustaining motivation, professional identity, and long-term reform commitment.

8. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no known financial or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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