

Social Integration, Mentorship and the Retention of Teachers in Public Senior Schools in Garissa Sub-County, Kenya

Fatuma Kune Mohammed¹, Aden Ali Abdi¹, and Njoka Muriithi¹

¹*School of Education, Arts and Social Sciences, Garissa University, Garissa, Kenya*

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.16.09.2026.p17730

<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.16.09.2026.p17730>

Paper Received Date: 24th August 2026

Paper Acceptance Date: 21st September 2026

Paper Publication Date: 30th September 2026

Abstract: Teacher retention in Kenya's arid and semi-arid counties is conventionally explained by remuneration, infrastructure and insecurity, yet these accounts do not explain why teachers who are neither materially disadvantaged relative to peers elsewhere nor personally exposed to threat nonetheless leave. This study examined how teachers deployed from other counties to public senior schools in Garissa Sub-County perceive their social integration into the host community, and how that perception bears on belonging and retention. Working within an interpretive–constructivist paradigm, the study used a Mult perspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis design. Twenty-six purposively sampled participants six principals and deputy principals, fifteen deployed teachers and five teachers whose home county is Garissa were interviewed in depth, and each strand was analysed ideographically before cross-strand comparison. Integration was found to be bounded rather than total, with the school gate recurring in participants' own language as the outer limit of achieved belonging. Where integration advanced it did so through structured mentorship rather than elapsed time, and the effective inductor was a peer in the same structural position as the newcomer rather than an administrative superior. Deployed teachers built compensatory belonging among themselves, which sustained retention while producing a mechanism of correlated exit. Cultural expectation also supported retention, since visible effort was reciprocated warmly. The study concludes that retention in culturally distinct postings is less a problem of cultural compatibility than of institutional reliability.

Keywords: Teacher retention; sense of belonging; social integration; job embeddedness; mentorship; arid and semi-arid lands; Kenya.

I. INTRODUCTION

Global projections indicate that 44 million additional teachers are required by 2030, with 15 million needed in sub-Saharan Africa, and the deficit is driven substantially by exit rather than expansion (UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030, 2024). Such shortages concentrate in rural and marginalized districts, so the general problem of supply is experienced locally as a problem of retention in particular places. Reviewing 399 outputs from more than 60 countries, D. Nguyen et al. (2023) concluded that the leadership approaches most consistently associated with retention are prioritising teacher development, building relational trust and improving working conditions, which complements the finding of T. D. Nguyen et al. (2020) that turnover correlates more strongly with organisational and contextual variables than with individual attributes alone.

Garissa County renders these dynamics acute. Insecurity has repeatedly driven non-local teachers to request transfers or abandon assignments since 2013, leaving many schools operating with a fraction of the staff they require (Abdimalik, 2026). Working in the same county, Abdi and Kharbiryimbi (2020) documented how principals absorbed acute teacher shortage through

untrained temporary staff, enlarged and combined classes and multi-grade teaching, and formulated school-level sanctions explicitly to protect teachers who did not originate from the region. Their evidence establishes that the protection of deployed teachers already operates as improvised administrative practice rather than as a policy entitlement. What remains undocumented is how those teachers experience their place in the schools and communities to which they are sent.

Scholarship converges on belonging as the mechanism through which school culture acts on retention. Wator et al. (2025) established that belonging is sustained by collegial interaction, value alignment, supportive leadership and recognition rather than by material provision, while Kachchhap and Horo (2021) and Karnopp and Bjorklund (2025) demonstrated that organisational structures rather than elapsed time produce it. Yip and Saito (2024) isolate cultural difference, rather than competence or workload, as the mechanism excluding culturally different teachers from informal collegial circles. Within Africa, Maseko (2024) found that relationships with learners, parents, colleagues and community, rather than resourcing alone, sustain rural teachers' careers, and Kirwa et al. (2024) established across five Kenyan counties that organisational culture moderates the relationship between reward systems and retention.

The study was framed by Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), which explains retention through links, fit and sacrifice and includes community-based alongside organisational embeddedness (Holtom et al., 2006); by acculturation theory (Berry, 1997, 2005); and by social and professional identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This article reports the first of four objectives of a larger study, asking how teachers from diverse home counties perceive their social integration into the host community and how that perception influences belonging and retention.

II. METHOD

A. Research Design

The study was grounded in the interpretive–constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis design concerned with how individuals make sense of significant experience (Smith et al., 2022). IPA was applied within the multiperspectival framework of Larkin et al. (2019), in which groups sharing a relational phenomenon are analysed separately before being brought into dialogue. This was deliberate rather than convenient: the phenomenon is contested, and a single-strand design would have produced a more confident account than the evidence warrants.

B. Participants

The study was conducted in Garissa Sub-County, north-eastern Kenya, an area overwhelmingly inhabited by the Somali community with Islam as the predominant religion (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019) and with exceptionally high turnover among deployed teachers (Teachers Service Commission, 2021). From a target population of 100, participants were purposively sampled using criterion, maximum variation and intensity strategies, with size governed by information power (Malterud et al., 2016). The achieved sample comprised 26 participants: six principals and deputy principals (P1–P6, tenure 2.5 to 15 years), fifteen teachers deployed from diverse home counties (TDC1–TDC15, tenure under one year to 11 years), and five teachers whose home county is

Garissa (THC1–THC5, tenure one to 15 years). Tenure proved analytically consequential, since participants across strands identified the first twelve to twenty-four months as the period of sharpest adjustment.

C. Interviews and Analysis

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews of 45 to 90 minutes conducted in English or Kiswahili, using three parallel guides sequenced from descriptive through evaluative to interpretative questions. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and de-identified. Analysis followed the seven-step IPA procedure (Smith et al., 2022): whole-transcript reading, line-by-line exploratory noting across descriptive, linguistic and conceptual registers, reduction to experiential statements, development of Personal Experiential Themes case by case, and only then construction of Group Experiential Themes within and across strands. Quality was established through triangulation, peer debriefing, member reflection, an audit trail and reflexive journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), supplemented by the markers of Nizza et al. (2021). Ethical clearance was granted by the Garissa University Institutional Ethics Review Committee and a NACOSTI licence obtained; principals supplied contacts only, so participation was never disclosed to school leadership. In the extracts below, ellipses mark omitted material and square brackets mark insertions.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The finding that organises this analysis is that integration in Garissa Sub-County is bounded rather than total. Deployed teachers reported achieving genuine, workable integration inside the school while remaining, in a phrase several used independently, outsiders in the community beyond it. This matters because the literature tends to treat integration as a single condition a teacher either reaches or does not.

A. The School Gate as a Boundary of Belonging

Participants drew a sharp line between two social worlds an outside observer would treat as one. TDC2 stated it with unusual precision.

Slowly. I would say I have integrated into the school community reasonably well ... I have good relationships with my colleagues, both local and non-local. But in terms of the wider community outside the school gate, I remain largely an outsider. I do not have social relationships with community members beyond transactional interactions in shops and markets. This is partly the language barrier and partly the cultural distance.

(TDC2, teacher from a diverse home county)

The school gate functions here not as a physical threshold but as the outer edge of achieved belonging: inside it is professional community, outside it is transaction. TDC1, in her third year, drew the same line temporally, describing a difficult first year, gradual adjustment, and the judgement that she had “found my footing” without being fully integrated into the broader community even now. That phrase claims competence, not membership. The distinction between operating and belonging ran through the whole deployed strand, and it explains why length of service alone did not resolve the difficulty: teachers were becoming more competent without becoming more embedded.

Teachers whose home county is Garissa did not perceive the boundary identically. THC1 described staff relations as unproblematic, observing that local and non-local teachers work as a team and that “we are all Kenyans, and we function as one.” THC5 partly corroborated the deployed accounts instead.

It is broadly harmonious. However, there are moments ... particularly during national events such as elections ... when the grouping between local and non-local teachers becomes more visible. Non-local teachers sometimes feel left out during break times or lunch, keeping to themselves rather than integrating with local colleagues.

(THC5, teacher whose home county is Garissa)

These are read here as accounts from different vantage points rather than as contradictions. THC1 was describing formal staff governance, where policy applies to everyone alike; THC5 was describing informal social behaviour, where clustering appears precisely because policy does not reach it. Integration operates on two levels at once, and institutional accounts collapse them. This aligns with Yip and Saito (2024), whose culturally different teachers were excluded from informal circles rather than from formal structures, and it suggests that management assurances about staff harmony may be accurate about the level they describe and silent about the level that matters for retention.

B. Mentorship as the Decisive Institutional Mechanism

Where integration advanced, it advanced because something was done, not because time passed. Deployed teachers who described a manageable first year almost invariably attributed it to being paired with an experienced colleague on arrival; TDC1 described a mentor who explained what to expect, where it was safe to go and how to handle parents, without whom her first year would have been much harder. Principals confirmed the mechanism independently and explained why it outperformed official communication.

We have a teacher mentorship system in which experienced non-local teachers who have lived in Garissa for a long time speak directly to newly posted teachers. These mentors share their experiences and reassure their colleagues that life here is manageable. This peer-to-peer reassurance has proven more effective than formal administrative communication alone.

(P4, school principal)

What P4 describes is a transfer of credibility. A long-serving deployed teacher can testify that the posting is survivable from inside the same structural position as the newcomer; an administrator cannot, because his own experience of the posting is not comparable. This qualifies the finding of D. Nguyen et al. (2023) that relational trust supports retention: in culturally distinct postings the trust that does the work may be lateral rather than vertical. The mechanism is not, however, systematized.

Honestly, the formal structures are weaker than they should be. When TSC headquarters posts a teacher here, the letter typically instructs them to report to the school directly. There is no standardised sub-county orientation programme. What exists is informal ... this varies enormously from school to school.

(TDC9, teacher from a diverse home county)

The one mechanism participants identified as decisive for early adjustment therefore exists as the discretionary practice of individual principals rather than as an entitlement attached to the posting, so that whether a newly posted teacher receives it depends on which school the letter happens to name. One school leader described having built the protocol himself, briefing each arrival on where to shop safely, appropriate dress and the prayer schedules structuring the school day, then assigning a mentor with at least

three years of local service. That such a protocol had to be constructed rather than inherited is the point. The finding aligns with Nogobo et al. (2025), who report school management teams in rural South Africa carrying the induction burden informally, and with evidence that school structures rather than elapsed time produce belonging (Kachchhap & Horo, 2021; Karnopp & Bjorklund, 2025). What this study adds is who must do the inducting: a peer in the same structural position, not a superior. This is a correctable failure of design, not an intractable cultural condition.

C. Peer Community as Compensatory Belonging

Where community integration remained bounded, deployed teachers built an alternative source of belonging among themselves. TDC1 identified that network as the reason she was still in post, describing colleagues who share meals and carry each other through difficult moments while acknowledging that the absence of deeper community integration still weighed on her. TDC2 drew out the fragility this introduces.

It is a significant factor. If I were deeply embedded in the social fabric of this community, I would probably not be thinking about a transfer. But right now, my sense of belonging is tied almost entirely to the school and my non-local colleagues. If that support structure were to weaken ... for example, if several of my colleagues were transferred ... I think my own desire to leave would intensify.

(TDC2, teacher from a diverse home county)

Read together, these accounts identify a structural vulnerability the retention literature has not adequately theorised. When belonging rests on a peer network rather than on community embeddedness, an individual's retention becomes contingent on the retention of others: the departure of several colleagues does not merely reduce collegial support, it removes the ground on which the remaining teacher's decision to stay has been standing. In Putnam's (2000) terms, what deployed teachers built is bonding social capital, dense but turned inward, absent the bridging capital that would connect them outward. The result is a mechanism of correlated exit in which turnover reinforces itself, so that transfer decisions taken one teacher at a time may have effects invisible one teacher at a time. This partly explains the mass departures reported after particular incidents (Abdimalik, 2026): some departures may be responses not to the incident but to the departures.

D. Where Cultural Expectation Supported Retention

It would misrepresent the data to report only what culture made difficult, since the same participants who described exclusion also described local practice as a resource. The most consistent example concerned the reception given to visible effort. TDC3 attended community meetings when invited, greeted people in Somali and refrained from eating or drinking publicly during Ramadan fasting hours although he is not Muslim, and reported that "these small acts of respect have been reciprocated by the community in meaningful ways." These accounts describe a cultural environment with a low threshold for admitting good faith, indicating that the boundary documented above is permeable at the level of gesture even where it is not permeable at the level of membership.

A second example concerned the standing of the teacher as such. P2 observed that non-local teachers "may at times receive a degree of sympathy from the community rather than facing disadvantage," and several participants described parents and elders

treating the teacher's role with a deference that made discipline and instruction easier. The dilemma is therefore not that culture obstructs while institutions assist. It is that the same setting extends respect to the teacher as an office-holder while withholding membership from the teacher as a person, an asymmetry that locates the retention problem outside the domain hardship allowances and security provision address.

E. Theoretical Interpretation

These findings confirm and complicate Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001). Links, fit and sacrifice are clearly visible, with organisational links accumulating while community links did not. What the data question is the treatment of community embeddedness as a single dimension: participants exhibited strong on-the-job and weak off-the-job links simultaneously and durably, a configuration the model does not readily accommodate but which is consistent with evidence that the two behave differently under insecurity (Peltokorpi & Allen, 2024). The corollary is that they should be treated as separately actionable rather than as contributors to a single index of attachment.

Read against Berry (1997, 2005), the pattern corresponds to integration in the school domain and separation in the community domain, in the same person at the same time. Berry's model, and its re-testing by Abu-Rayya et al. (2023), treats strategy as a property of the person; Bierwiazzonek and Kunst (2021) have questioned its explanatory reach, and these findings suggest that where institutional boundaries are sharp, strategy is better understood as a property of the domain. Social and professional identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) illuminates the asymmetry above, in which the teacher is honoured as office-holder while unincorporated as person. Yan (2024) notes that this literature has attended more to identity formation than to ratification by others; in culturally distinct postings it is ratification, and specifically institutional underwriting of the teacher's standing, where the retention consequences lie. Each framework locates the explanatory action in the person; these findings locate it in the institution.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social integration for deployed teachers in Garissa Sub-County is bounded rather than total, and the boundary is institutional rather than temporal. Teachers achieve genuine belonging inside the school and remain outside the community beyond it, and this condition is stable rather than transitional. Retention here therefore does not require community assimilation, which is unlikely within a normal posting; it requires that the school supply the belonging the community does not. Where integration advanced it did so through institutional action, and mentorship by a peer who has served in the same posting was the mechanism participants identified most consistently. The compensatory peer network that sustains retention meanwhile introduces a mechanism of correlated exit invisible to staffing decisions taken teacher by teacher, while cultural expectation also works in favour of retention.

Across these findings one pattern recurs: in every case the mechanism participants regarded as effective operated informally, unfunded and at the discretion of individual leaders rather than as an entitlement attached to the posting. What most differentiated those who intended to stay from those who did not was less the intensity of cultural distance than whether an institutional response to it was reliably available. Retention in culturally complex settings is, on this evidence, less a problem of

cultural compatibility than of institutional reliability. The Teachers Service Commission should therefore establish a structured induction entitlement for arid and semi-arid postings, attached to the posting rather than the receiving school and including a mentor with at least three years of local service; school leaders should formalise the mentorship their more effective colleagues already improvise; and transfer decisions should be appraised for their effect on peer networks rather than teacher by teacher. The design was cross-sectional and captured intention to remain rather than observed turnover, so longitudinal study of deployed cohorts through the decisive first two years is the obvious next step.

REFERENCES

- Abdi, A. A., & Kharbiryimbai, B. B. (2020). Coping with administrative working conditions by Kenyan principals and head teachers. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 5(3), 559–563.
- Abdimalik, F. (2026, February 10). Why North Eastern children deserve more than condolences. *The Kenya Times*.
<https://thekenyatimes.com/opinions/teachers-safety-ne-kenya/>
- Abu-Rayya, H. M., Berry, J. W., Sam, D. L., & Grigoryev, D. (2023). Evaluating the integration hypothesis: A meta-analysis of the ICSEY project data using two new methods. *British Journal of Psychology*, 114(4), 819–837.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12656>
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 46(1), 5–34.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Berry, J. W. (2005). Acculturation: Living successfully in two cultures. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(6), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2005.07.013>
- Bierwiazzonek, K., & Kunst, J. R. (2021). Revisiting the integration hypothesis. *Psychological Science*, 32(9), 1476–1493.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976211006432>
- Bjorklund, P. (2023). “I kind of have that place to sit”: First-year teachers’ experiences of belonging. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 131, Article 104187. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104187>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Holtom, B. C., Mitchell, T. R., & Lee, T. W. (2006). Increasing human and social capital by applying job embeddedness theory. *Organizational Dynamics*, 35(4), 316–331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2006.08.007>
- Kachchhap, S. L., & Horo, W. (2021). Factors influencing school teachers’ sense of belonging. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(4), 775–790. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2021.14444a>
- Karnopp, J., & Bjorklund, P., Jr. (2025). Collaboration, connections and confidence: The influence of school structures on new teacher sense of belonging. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 63(6), 520–535. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-12-2024-0416>
- Kenya National Bureau of Statistics. (2019). *2019 Kenya population and housing census: Volume I*. KNBS.
- Kirwa, E. W., Ngugi, P. K., & Ng’ethe, J. M. (2024). The moderating effect of organizational culture on the relationship between reward system and retention of teachers in public secondary schools in Kenya. *American Journal of Business and Strategic Management*, 3(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.58425/ajbsm.v3i1.299>
- Larkin, M., Shaw, R., & Flowers, P. (2019). Multiperspectival designs and processes in interpretative phenomenological analysis research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 16(2), 182–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2018.1540655>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.

- Malterud, K., Siersma, V. D., & Guassora, A. D. (2016). Sample size in qualitative interview studies: Guided by information power. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(13), 1753–1760. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315617444>
- Maseko, N. (2024). Understanding the relational well-being of primary school teachers in rural South Africa. *African Journal of Career Development*, 6(1), Article a115. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajcd.v6i1.115>
- Mitchell, T. R., Holtom, B. C., Lee, T. W., Sablinsky, C. J., & Erez, M. (2001). Why people stay: Using job embeddedness to predict voluntary turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(6), 1102–1121. <https://doi.org/10.5465/3069391>
- Nguyen, D., See, B. H., Brown, C., & Kokotsaki, D. (2023). *Reviewing the evidence base on school leadership, culture, climate and structure for teacher retention*. Education Endowment Foundation.
- Nguyen, T. D., Pham, L. D., Springer, M. G., & Crouch, M. (2020). The correlates of teacher turnover: An updated and expanded meta-analysis of the literature. *Educational Research Review*, 31, Article 100355. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100355>
- Nizza, I. E., Farr, J., & Smith, J. A. (2021). Achieving excellence in interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): Four markers of high quality. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1854404>
- Nogobo, M., Mtshatsha, N. D. M., & Seleke, B. (2025). Mentoring newly appointed teachers in rural South African schools. *Journal of Education and Learning Technology*, 6(9), 890–905. <https://doi.org/10.38159/jelt.20256913>
- Peltokorpi, V., & Allen, D. G. (2024). Job embeddedness and voluntary turnover in the face of job insecurity. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 45(3), 416–433. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2728>
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2022). *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- Teachers Service Commission. (2021). *Annual report and staffing returns*. TSC.
- UNESCO & International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030. (2024). *Global report on teachers: Addressing teacher shortages and transforming the profession*. UNESCO.
- Wator, J., Patrick, P., & Yip, S. Y. (2025). Teachers' sense of belonging in school: A scoping review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 52(6), 4269–4297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-025-00897-3>
- Yan, Y. (2024). Bibliometric review of teacher professional identity scholarship over two decades. *SAGE Open*, 14(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241241173>
- Yip, S. Y., & Saito, E. (2024). “I want to be a part of their conversation”: Asian immigrant teachers navigating belongingness in Australian schools. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2024.2332894>