

The Role of Opinion Leaders in Advancing Teenage Education Through Behaviour Change Communication: Evidence from Mount Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT: Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) plays an important role in influencing knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that affect educational outcomes among teenagers. Within rural communities, opinion leaders can serve as important communication actors because of their familiarity with local contexts and the trust placed in them by community members. However, limited empirical evidence exists on how opinion leadership communication approaches contribute to advancing teenage education in rural settings such as Mt. Elgon Sub-County. This study examined the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to students, parents/guardians and teachers, while qualitative data were obtained through interviews with community leaders and RADA staff and focus group discussions with students and parents/guardians. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data were organized thematically. The findings indicated that opinion leaders were perceived to play an important role in advancing teenage education through encouraging teenagers to remain in school, influencing education-related decisions, providing trusted educational information and helping to change attitudes towards teenage education. Questionnaire findings showed generally positive perceptions of opinion leaders, with agreement across the four indicators ranging from 73.6% to 78.7%. Community leaders were particularly identified as important links between RADA, parents and teenagers through community meetings, sensitization activities and direct engagement with families and young people. Religious leaders also communicated educational messages through sermons, worship settings and informal community discussions. The study concludes that opinion leadership communication approaches were perceived to provide an important mechanism through which BCC messages could be communicated, interpreted and reinforced within the community. The study recommends strengthening the involvement of trusted community and religious leaders in education-focused communication initiatives and enhancing their collaboration with RADA, parents, schools and teenagers to support continued school participation.

KEYWORDS: behaviour change communication, community leaders, opinion leaders, teenage education, religious leaders, RADA, Mt. Elgon.

INTRODUCTION

Education is an important foundation for individual development, social transformation and economic development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning. However, educational participation and retention among teenagers continue to be affected by social, cultural and economic factors, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2022).

Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) provides a framework for addressing attitudes, beliefs, social norms and behaviours that influence educational participation. BCC emphasizes not only the provision of information but also interaction, persuasion and community involvement (Schiavo, 2019). Within such interventions, opinion leaders, including community and religious leaders, can influence how people interpret and respond to education-related messages because of their familiarity, credibility and established relationships within communities.

In rural African contexts, challenges such as poverty, early marriage, teenage pregnancy and negative perceptions of education can affect teenagers' continued participation in school. Opinion leaders can help address these challenges by encouraging parents to support education, promoting school retention and challenging attitudes that may contribute to school withdrawal. Their role is particularly relevant in communities where local leaders are trusted sources of information and guidance.

In Kenya, these challenges remain evident in rural and economically vulnerable communities. Mt. Elgon Sub-County in Bungoma County provides an important context for examining the role of community-based communication in teenage education. Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) has implemented BCC initiatives in the area, including the engagement of community and religious leaders to communicate educational messages through community meetings, sensitization activities and interpersonal engagement.

Despite the use of opinion leaders in community-based interventions, limited empirical evidence exists on how their communication approaches contribute to advancing teenage education in rural Kenyan contexts. This study therefore examined the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by RADA in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. It focused on their perceived role in encouraging school retention, influencing education-related decisions, providing trusted educational information and changing attitudes towards teenage education.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite continued efforts to improve access to education in Kenya through policies such as free primary education and subsidized secondary education, inequalities in educational outcomes persist, particularly in rural areas. In Bungoma County, transition to secondary education has been reported to remain below national averages, while dropout levels have remained relatively high. These challenges have been associated with social, economic and cultural factors, including poverty, early marriage and teenage pregnancy. However, less attention has been given to how communication processes within communities' influence perceptions, educational decisions and social norms surrounding teenage education.

In Mt. Elgon Sub-County, where traditions and community values strongly influence social behaviour, Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) has increasingly been used by community-based organizations such as Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) to address educational challenges. Opinion leaders are among the communication approaches employed to influence how educational messages are communicated, interpreted and acted upon by community members. However, limited empirical evidence exists on the effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches in advancing teenage education in rural community settings. Existing studies have often emphasized the outcomes of educational interventions without adequately examining the communication mechanisms through which messages are delivered, the credibility of communicators and the influence of trusted local leaders on community attitudes and decisions.

This gap makes it difficult to establish the extent to which opinion leaders contribute to encouraging teenagers to remain in school, influencing education-related decisions, providing trusted educational information and changing attitudes towards teenage education. Therefore, this study examined the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County of Bungoma County, Kenya.

OBJECTIVE

- To examine the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County of Bungoma County, Kenya.

RESEARCH QUESTION

- What is the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County of Bungoma County, Kenya?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two-Step Flow Theory

This study was guided by the Two-Step Flow Theory of communication, which was developed from the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet and later elaborated by Katz and Lazarsfeld. The theory proposes that communication and influence do not always move directly from a communication source to the wider audience. Instead, information may first reach influential

individuals, commonly referred to as opinion leaders, who interpret, reinforce and transmit the information to other members of their social networks (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Katz, 1957). Opinion leaders therefore serve as intermediaries through whom messages can acquire meaning and influence within a community.

The theory is particularly relevant to Behaviour Change Communication because it recognizes the importance of interpersonal relationships, trust and social influence in the acceptance of messages. Opinion leaders are often embedded within their communities and may have regular interaction with the people they influence. Consequently, they can explain messages in ways that are familiar to community members and encourage discussion and action. The theory has also evolved beyond the original linear two-step model, with subsequent scholarship recognizing that communication may involve multiple interpersonal and social-network interactions rather than only two distinct stages (Weimann, 2017).

In the context of Mt. Elgon Sub-County, the theory provided a basis for understanding how community and religious leaders could function as intermediaries between Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) and community members. The study identified chiefs, religious leaders, teachers, elders and other trusted community actors as important sources of information and influence. These leaders could communicate RADA's educational messages through community meetings, religious gatherings, sensitization activities and direct interactions with parents and teenagers. The theory therefore helped explain how messages concerning the importance of education could be communicated, interpreted and reinforced at the community level.

The relevance of the theory was also reflected in the study findings. Community members reported greater willingness to listen to educational information when it came from leaders whom they knew, respected and interacted with regularly. Similarly, religious leaders used their established positions within families and communities to encourage parents and teenagers to value education and continue schooling. These findings correspond with the role assigned to opinion leaders within the Two-Step Flow perspective, where interpersonal influence can mediate the relationship between communication sources and wider audiences.

The theory therefore provided an appropriate framework for examining the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by RADA. It helped the study assess how trusted community actors were perceived to contribute to encouraging teenagers to remain in school, influencing educational decisions, providing educational information and changing attitudes towards teenage education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Opinion leaders play an important role in influencing community perceptions, attitudes and behaviours because they are often regarded as credible and trusted sources of information. In Behaviour Change Communication (BCC), their involvement can facilitate the interpretation and dissemination of messages within existing social networks. Their influence is particularly relevant in rural communities where community members may rely on respected local actors when making decisions concerning education, family welfare and other social issues.

Marcus and Page (2019), in a multi-country study examining girls' education and social norms in Sub-Saharan Africa, found that religious and traditional leaders could influence community perceptions through communication activities conducted during religious gatherings, public forums and community meetings. The study indicated that when respected leaders communicated messages supporting girls' education, they could contribute to changes in community attitudes and greater acceptance of schooling. The findings demonstrate the importance of trusted communicators in challenging social norms and encouraging communities to support educational participation. However, the study relied largely on qualitative evidence and did not quantitatively establish the extent to which communication by opinion leaders was associated with educational outcomes.

Perkins et al. (2020) examined the role of social networks in the diffusion of behaviours and found that individuals may be more receptive to behaviour-change messages when these messages are communicated or reinforced by trusted individuals within their social networks. The study emphasized that interpersonal communication involves more than the transmission of information because it also communicates credibility and strengthens relationships between the communicator and the audience. Although these findings provide useful insights into the influence of trusted individuals, the study primarily examined health-related behaviours. Consequently, its applicability to teenage education and school participation requires further examination.

In Kenya, Mwangi (2023) examined the influence of community leadership on education outcomes in rural communities and reported a strong relationship between the involvement of community opinion leaders and improved educational outcomes. The study suggests that community leadership can contribute to school participation by mobilizing community support and influencing

attitudes towards education. However, the study focused more broadly on community leadership and educational outcomes and paid limited attention to the communication processes through which leaders exercise their influence. In particular, the types of educational messages communicated, the channels used and how community members interpret and respond to those messages were not examined in sufficient detail.

UNICEF (2021) similarly reported that the involvement of opinion leaders in community-level communication activities, including community dialogues and advocacy campaigns, was positively associated with children's school attendance. The evidence demonstrates the potential value of involving trusted community actors in communication strategies aimed at improving educational participation. Nevertheless, the contribution of opinion leaders could not be separated completely from other programme components, including funding and institutional interventions. This makes it difficult to determine the extent to which observed educational outcomes resulted specifically from communication by opinion leaders.

The reviewed literature therefore demonstrates that community and religious leaders can influence educational attitudes, decisions and participation by communicating messages through trusted interpersonal and community networks. However, important gaps remain. Previous studies have established the general contribution of opinion leaders to education and behaviour change, but fewer studies have examined the specific communication mechanisms through which these leaders influence teenage education in rural Kenyan communities. There is also limited empirical evidence integrating quantitative perceptions with qualitative experiences to examine how opinion leaders encourage school retention, influence education-related decisions, provide trusted educational information and contribute to changes in attitudes towards teenage education.

The present study addressed this gap by examining the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County. The study specifically examined the roles of community and religious leaders in encouraging teenagers to remain in school, influencing education-related decisions, providing trusted educational information and changing attitudes towards teenage education. By combining questionnaire findings with interviews and focus group discussions, the study sought to provide a more context-specific understanding of how opinion leadership communication operates within the community.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The mixed-methods approach enabled the study to combine quantitative and qualitative evidence in examining how opinion leaders were perceived to communicate educational messages and influence community perceptions and decisions concerning teenage education. Quantitative data provided measurable patterns of participants' perceptions, while qualitative data provided detailed explanations of the experiences and views of community members and leaders.

The quantitative component involved the administration of structured questionnaires to students, parents/guardians and teachers. The qualitative component involved interviews with RADA staff and community leaders, as well as focus group discussions with students and parents/guardians. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and focus group discussions were analysed thematically. The analysis involved familiarization with the transcripts, identification of relevant statements, coding of data according to recurring ideas and patterns, and grouping related codes into themes corresponding to the study objectives. The themes were then examined alongside participants' accounts to identify similarities and differences in their experiences and perceptions.

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated during interpretation and discussion. Quantitative results from the questionnaires were compared with qualitative themes from interviews and focus group discussions to identify areas of convergence, complementarity and divergence. Quantitative findings provided an overview of participants' perceptions, while qualitative findings helped explain and contextualize the observed patterns. This integration enabled the study to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the perceived role of opinion leaders in advancing teenage education in the study area.

Population

The target population for the study comprised 3,700 participants drawn from Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The population included students, parents/guardians, teachers, community leaders and staff of Restore A Dream Africa (RADA), who were considered relevant to the study because of their involvement in or experience with teenage education and community-based

Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) activities. The population provided a basis for examining the role of opinion leaders in communicating and reinforcing education-related messages within the community.

Sampling Technique

The study employed stratified random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Stratified random sampling was used in selecting questionnaire participants to ensure representation of the main groups of students, parents/guardians and teachers. The participants were therefore drawn from the identified population according to their respective categories.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for the qualitative component because the study required individuals who possessed relevant knowledge and experience concerning RADA's communication activities and teenage education. Community leaders and RADA staff were selected for interviews because of their involvement in community mobilization and educational communication. Students and parents/guardians were selected for focus group discussions to obtain their experiences and perceptions concerning the communication activities implemented within their communities.

Sample Size

The quantitative component of the study targeted 320 participants drawn from students, parents/guardians and teachers in Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The study population comprised 3,700 individuals. The questionnaire sample was distributed across the three participant categories to ensure representation of the principal groups associated with teenage education. The planned allocation comprised 150 students, 120 parents/guardians and 50 teachers, subject to confirmation against the original sampling records.

A total of 288 completed questionnaires were received, representing a response rate of 90.0%. These comprised 135 students, 108 parents/guardians and 45 teachers. The distribution of the returned questionnaires reflected a 90.0% response rate across each of the three categories.

For the qualitative component, interviews targeted 40 participants, comprising 30 community leaders and 10 RADA staff. A total of 36 participants took part in the interviews, including 27 community leaders and nine RADA staff, representing an overall interview participation rate of 90.0%. In addition, 25 participants took part in focus group discussions, comprising 15 students and 10 parents/guardians. All targeted focus group participants took part in the discussions.

The combination of questionnaire participants, key informants and focus group participants enabled the study to incorporate numerical evidence and detailed accounts concerning the perceived role of opinion leaders in advancing teenage education.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Structured questionnaires were administered to students, parents/guardians and teachers to obtain quantitative data concerning their perceptions of opinion leadership communication. The questionnaire items were developed in line with the study objectives and conceptual framework. The instrument measured the extent to which community and religious leaders encouraged teenagers to remain in school, influenced education-related decisions, provided trusted educational information and contributed to changes in attitudes towards teenage education. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

The questionnaire was pre-tested with 20 participants to assess the clarity and suitability of the items before the main data collection exercise. Expert review was used to assess the relevance and adequacy of the questionnaire items in relation to the study objectives. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. A coefficient of 0.70 or above was considered acceptable for internal consistency. The actual coefficient obtained was to be reported to establish the reliability of the instrument. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with RADA staff and community leaders using interview guides aligned with the study objectives. The interviews explored communication activities employed by opinion leaders, approaches used to communicate educational messages and the perceived influence of these leaders on parents and teenagers. Each interview lasted approximately three minutes. The interviews were conducted in English, and information was documented through written notes.

Focus group discussions were conducted with students and parents/guardians using discussion guides developed around the study objectives. The discussions explored participants' experiences with community and religious leaders, their perceptions of

educational messages and the perceived contribution of opinion leadership communication to teenage education. Each discussion lasted approximately three minutes, was conducted in English and was documented through written notes.

The qualitative information obtained from the interviews and focus group discussions was organized into themes corresponding to the study objectives. The resulting themes were compared with the quantitative findings to provide contextual explanations of participants' perceptions of the role of opinion leaders in advancing teenage education.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. The researcher sought the necessary authorization before commencing data collection and informed participants about the purpose and procedures of the study. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to participate freely.

Informed consent was obtained from participants before data were collected. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process, and participants were not identified by their personal names in the presentation of the findings. Instead, pseudonyms and participant identification codes were used where qualitative quotations were presented. The information collected was used solely for academic purposes and was handled securely.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Response Rate

The study collected quantitative and qualitative data using questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 320 questionnaires were targeted, of which 288 were completed and returned, representing a 90.0% response rate. The completed questionnaires comprised 135 students, 108 parents/guardians and 45 teachers. For the qualitative component, 36 of the 40 targeted key informants participated in interviews, comprising 27 community leaders and 9 RADA staff. In addition, 25 participants took part in the focus group discussions, comprising 15 students and 10 parents/guardians.

Distribution of Respondents by Gender

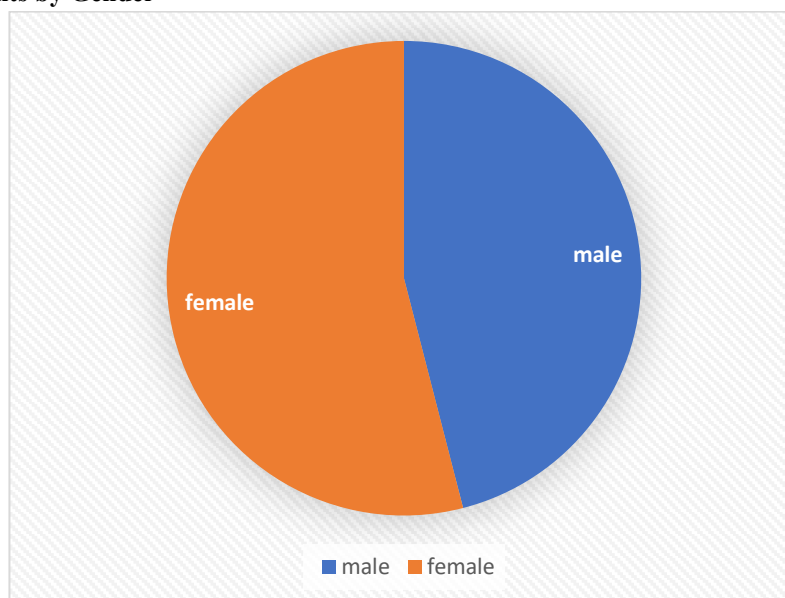


Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Distribution of Respondents by Age Group

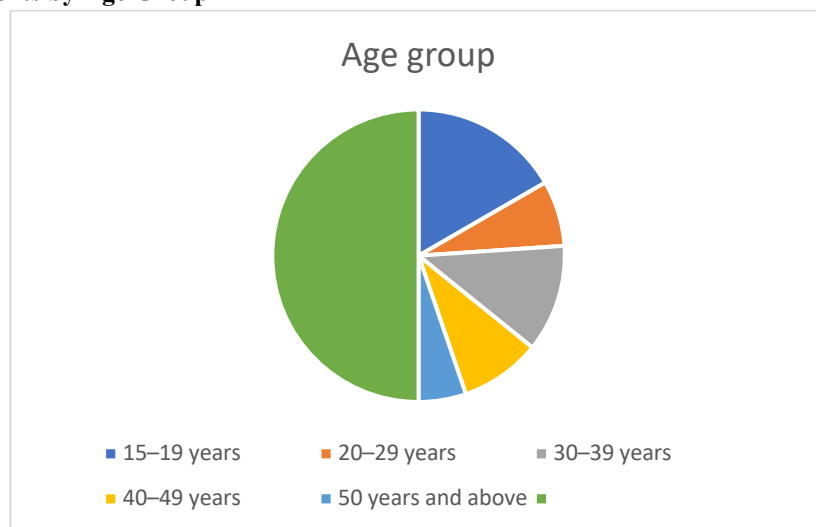


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age Group

ANALYSES OF STUDY VARIABLE

Opinion Leaders and Teenage Education

The objective sought to examine the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by RADA in advancing teenage education. Respondents rated four statements relating to school retention, educational decisions, trust in local leaders and attitude change. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Opinion Leaders and Teenage Education

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Community leaders encourage teenagers to stay in school	4.5%	7.0%	11.8%	44.5%	32.2%
Religious leaders influence educational decisions	5.2%	8.0%	13.2%	42.6%	31.0%
I trust information about education from local leaders	4.0%	6.5%	10.8%	45.1%	33.6%
Opinion leaders help change attitudes towards teenage education	4.6%	7.2%	12.0%	43.8%	32.4%

Source: Survey Data (2026)

The opinion leadership construct showed generally positive perceptions of the role of local leaders in advancing teenage education. Agreement across the four indicators ranged from 73.6% to 78.7%, while disagreement ranged from 10.5% to 13.2%. The highest level of agreement was recorded for trust in educational information from local leaders (78.7%). This was followed by agreement that community leaders encouraged teenagers to remain in school (76.7%) and that opinion leaders helped change attitudes towards teenage education (76.2%). Religious leaders' influence on educational decisions recorded the lowest level of agreement at 73.6%, although the finding still indicated substantial recognition of their role.

The pattern suggests that the credibility and familiarity of opinion leaders were important features of their communication role. Respondents were particularly likely to trust educational information received from local leaders, indicating that established

relationships between community members and local leaders could facilitate the acceptance of BCC messages. The findings also suggest that opinion leadership extended beyond information provision to encouraging continued school participation and influencing attitudes towards teenage education.

The qualitative findings provided further explanation of how opinion leaders were perceived to contribute to teenage education. Participants described community and religious leaders as important actors in encouraging teenagers to remain in school and helping parents understand the value of continued education. One student explained:

"They told us that education could help us have a better life in the future." (Student Participant 12)

Similarly, a parent explained that leaders helped families understand the consequences of early school leaving and encouraged them to support their children:

"Leaders helped us understand that when a child leaves school early, they may lose many opportunities in life. They encouraged us to support our children to continue with their education." (Parent Participant 21)

The qualitative evidence also indicated that opinion leaders were perceived to help parents and teenagers respond to educational challenges without resorting to school withdrawal. One student observed:

"When parents experienced difficulties, leaders encouraged them not to remove their children from school because the problems could be addressed without abandoning education." (Student Participant 13)

Trust emerged as an important mechanism through which opinion leaders communicated education-related messages. A student explained:

"We listened to leaders when they talked about education because they were people we knew. Sometimes their advice helped us understand why it was important to continue with school." (FGD Participant, Student 007)

This finding was reinforced by Key Informant D, who explained that community members were more willing to listen to local leaders because they knew and interacted with them regularly. The familiarity of the communicators therefore appeared to enhance the reception of education-related information within the community.

The interviews further indicated that repeated communication by opinion leaders could contribute to changes in parents' perceptions of teenage education. Key Informant B explained that opinion leaders encouraged parents to view education as an investment in their children's future rather than something that could be abandoned when families experienced difficulties. Similarly, Key Informant F observed that continued communication with parents contributed to changes in how some parents understood the need to support teenagers to remain in school.

The quantitative and qualitative findings therefore suggest that opinion leaders served not merely as sources of information but as interpersonal communication actors who interpreted, reinforced and contextualized RADA's BCC messages. Their influence was associated with encouraging school continuation, guiding parents' educational decisions, providing trusted information and reinforcing positive attitudes towards teenage education.

The findings are consistent with the Two-Step Flow Theory, which emphasizes the role of opinion leaders in receiving, interpreting and transmitting information within social groups (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In the context of this study, community and religious leaders provided an interpersonal link between RADA's BCC messages and members of the community. Their familiarity with local circumstances and regular interaction with families enabled educational messages to be communicated in forms that community members could understand and relate to.

The findings also correspond with Marcus and Page (2019), who highlighted the role of trusted community and religious actors in influencing social norms and attitudes towards education. Similarly, Mwangi (2023) emphasized the contribution of community leadership to education outcomes in rural Kenyan contexts, while UNICEF (2021) identified community engagement and trusted local actors as important elements of behaviour change communication in education programmes.

Overall, the findings indicate that opinion leadership communication was perceived as an important component of RADA's BCC approach in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County. The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that trusted community and religious leaders were perceived to help communicate and reinforce messages concerning school retention, parental support and the value of teenage education.

These findings should be interpreted with caution. The questionnaire data were analyzed using frequencies and percentages only, and they reflect respondents' perceptions rather than measured changes in school retention, attendance, transition or completion. The study therefore cannot establish that communication by opinion leaders caused or predicted educational outcomes. Other

explanations, including household poverty, bursaries and other material support, school-based interventions, other components of RADA's programme, and respondents' tendency to give socially desirable answers about respected leaders, may also account for the patterns reported. The findings are also drawn from one sub-county and one organization's programme, so their applicability to other contexts requires further testing. Finally, the Two-Step Flow Theory provided a useful lens for interpreting these perceptions but was not tested directly, and later scholarship suggests that influence may move through multiple social networks rather than a single opinion-leader stage.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study examined the perceived effectiveness of opinion leadership communication approaches used by Restore A Dream Africa (RADA) in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya. The findings indicated that community and religious leaders were perceived as important communication actors through whom Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) messages concerning teenage education were communicated, interpreted and reinforced within the community.

The quantitative findings showed generally positive perceptions of the contribution of opinion leaders to teenage education. Across the four indicators examined, combined agreement ranged from 73.6% to 78.7%. The highest level of agreement was recorded for trust in educational information from local leaders, at 78.7%, followed by the perception that community leaders encouraged teenagers to remain in school, at 76.7%. Opinion leaders were also perceived to contribute to changing attitudes towards teenage education, with 76.2% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. Religious leaders were perceived to influence educational decisions, with a combined agreement of 73.6%.

The qualitative findings supported the questionnaire results. Interviews with community leaders and RADA staff showed that community leaders mobilized parents, sensitized community members, identified teenagers at risk of leaving school and encouraged families to seek ways of keeping teenagers in school. The focus group discussions similarly indicated that students and parents experienced communication from community leaders as encouragement to continue education despite financial, family and other challenges.

Religious leaders were also identified as important actors in influencing education-related decisions. Their influence was associated with their regular interaction with families, credibility and established position within the community. Religious settings provided opportunities for educational messages to be communicated and reinforced among parents and teenagers.

Trust emerged as an important dimension of opinion leadership communication. The 78.7% combined agreement regarding trust in educational information from local leaders indicated that community members were generally receptive to educational information communicated by people they knew and respected. Interview and FGD findings further showed that familiarity with local circumstances and regular interaction with families strengthened the credibility of local leaders as sources of educational information.

The findings also indicated that opinion leaders were perceived to contribute to changing attitudes towards teenage education. Continuous communication was reported to encourage some parents to view education as an investment in the future of their children and to reconsider decisions to withdraw teenagers from school when families experienced difficulties. FGD participants similarly reported that leaders encouraged parents and teenagers to recognize the importance of continued schooling.

Overall, the convergence of questionnaire, interview and FGD findings indicated that opinion leadership communication was perceived to operate through encouragement, information provision, interpersonal engagement, advocacy and reinforcement of positive attitudes towards education. The findings were consistent with the Two-Step Flow Theory because community and religious leaders were perceived to function as intermediaries through whom RADA's BCC messages reached and influenced parents and teenagers.

The study concluded that opinion leadership communication approaches were perceived to constitute an important component of RADA's Behaviour Change Communication efforts to advance teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County. Community and religious leaders provided locally accessible channels through which educational messages were communicated and reinforced among families and teenagers.

The findings particularly indicated the perceived importance of trust, credibility, familiarity and continuous interpersonal communication. Community leaders were perceived to contribute to encouraging teenagers to remain in school, while religious

leaders were perceived to influence education-related decisions. Local leaders were also trusted sources of educational information, and opinion leaders were perceived to contribute to changing attitudes towards the value and continuation of teenage education. The integration of questionnaire, interview and FGD findings further showed that opinion leadership extended beyond the simple transmission of information. Leaders interpreted educational messages within local circumstances, engaged parents and teenagers directly, encouraged families facing challenges and reinforced the importance of continued schooling. In this respect, opinion leaders provided a link between RADA's formal BCC interventions and the everyday experiences of community members.

The findings therefore indicated the relevance of the Two-Step Flow Theory to the study context. Opinion leaders were perceived to serve as intermediaries who helped translate and reinforce communication messages within their social networks. Their established relationships and credibility within the community provided an important mechanism through which BCC messages concerning teenage education could gain acceptance and relevance.

CONCLUSION

The study found that opinion leadership communication approaches were perceived to play an important role in advancing teenage education in Mt. Elgon Sub-County. The findings indicated that community and religious leaders were perceived as trusted communication actors through whom education-related messages were communicated, interpreted and reinforced within the community. Questionnaire findings indicated positive perceptions across all four indicators, with agreement ranging from 73.6% to 78.7%. Trust in educational information from local leaders recorded the highest level of agreement at 78.7%, while religious leaders' influence on educational decisions recorded 73.6%.

The qualitative findings further indicated that opinion leaders were perceived to have encouraged teenagers to remain in school, guided parents in making education-related decisions, provided information that community members considered familiar and credible, and contributed to changes in attitudes towards teenage education. Their regular interaction with parents, teenagers and other community members created opportunities for education messages to be discussed within existing social relationships. The findings therefore indicated that opinion leadership was perceived to provide an important interpersonal communication mechanism through which RADA's Behaviour Change Communication messages reached and engaged the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY

Based on the findings, the study recommends that organizations implementing Behaviour Change Communication programmes should strengthen the involvement of trusted community and religious leaders in education-focused communication initiatives. Their established relationships with families and young people can provide useful channels for communicating messages on school continuation and the importance of teenage education.

RADA and similar organizations should also strengthen collaboration between opinion leaders, schools, parents and teenagers. Regular community dialogues, sensitization meetings and interpersonal communication activities can provide opportunities for these actors to discuss challenges affecting teenage education and identify appropriate responses.

Training and capacity-building for opinion leaders should also be incorporated into education-focused BCC programmes. Such training can equip community and religious leaders with appropriate information and communication skills for addressing issues such as school dropout, negative attitudes towards education and challenges affecting teenagers' continued participation in school. Finally, education and BCC programmes should strengthen mechanisms for identifying and engaging families and teenagers who may be at greater risk of leaving school. Opinion leaders can support early identification, referral and follow-up by linking affected families with schools, community organizations and other relevant support services.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research should examine the role of opinion leaders in promoting teenage education in other sub-counties and counties in Kenya to establish whether similar communication patterns occur in different social and cultural contexts.

Future studies could also investigate the long-term effects of opinion leadership communication on school attendance, retention and completion among teenagers. Such research could combine longitudinal approaches with qualitative evidence to examine changes in attitudes and educational behaviour over time.

Further research could also examine how opinion leadership communication interacts with economic interventions such as bursaries, scholarships and cash assistance in addressing barriers to teenage education. This would provide a broader understanding of how communication and material support can work together to promote continued participation in education.

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