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Beyond the 'Ideal Student': Young Carers' Schooling Experiences, and Recognition in Rural Kenyan Schools

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Abstract. Children identified as vulnerable are often prioritised in policies yet remain subject to exclusionary practices in schools and communities. Drawing on the lived experiences of young carers (YCs) in Kandara sub-county, this article examines the social and institutional factors shaping their school experiences and their implications for participation and recognition. Informed by the Reggio Emilia Approach and perspectives from the sociology of education, the study analyses how everyday school practices shape YCs' experiences. Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews with 19 young carers and 9 key informants, analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. The findings reveal three key themes: *disregard and invisibility of young carers' needs, experiences of stigma and humiliation,* and *schools as sources of respite and hope.* Young carers' responsibilities extended beyond emotional and physical care to include household survival tasks. Their school engagement and academic performance remained continually negotiated against these caregiving demands, often affecting their performance and attendance. Yet, such constraints were frequently interpreted as lack of motivation or ability rather than as structural consequences of caregiving responsibilities. Within these spaces, marginalization and broader cultural stigmas surrounding illness, poverty, and caregiving are reproduced through everyday educational practices and social interactions. This article contributes to sociology of education debates by demonstrating how schools continue to reproduce inequality through everyday practices and institutional arrangements that privilege certain forms of childhood, competence, and participation while systematically disadvantaging those whose structural constraints prevent them from meeting expectations of the 'ideal student'.

Keywords: Young carers, School Experiences, Recognition, Relational pedagogy, Educational Inequality, Groupanalytic matrix

1. Introduction

Despite frequent prioritisation in policy discourse, children identified as vulnerable continue to experience exclusionary practices within institutions designed to support them. Schools, in particular, occupy a paradoxical position: formally positioned as sites of inclusion and equal opportunity, they are embedded within institutional systems that reproduce inequality through their everyday practices and routines (Shih, 2026; Stahl & Mu, 2024). As Pierre Bourdieu argues, schooling is not a neutral space but a key mechanism through which social inequalities are reproduced — one that tends to recognise and reward students already equipped with dominant forms of cultural and social capital, while systematically disadvantaging those who are not (Stahl et al., 2023). Notably, educational institutions often legitimise inequality by presenting it as meritocratic, while obscuring the unequal conditions shaping students' participation. For children navigating multiple adversities, such standards can be both inaccessible and alienating, fostering a deep sense of mistrust toward schools and other institutions (Warming, 2019). Such contradictions underscore the ongoing disconnect between inclusive policy rhetoric and the lived realities of vulnerable learners. As highlighted by UNESCO (2026), despite growing policy attention to inclusion, the effectiveness of interventions remains uneven, leaving many disadvantaged learners insufficiently supported. This study examines young carers (YCs), a subgroup of children whose everyday lives are shaped by significant caregiving responsibilities within their families (Aldridge & Becker, 2022).

Young carers assume responsibilities for family members facing illness, disability, or other challenges, with daily routines that often include providing physical care, emotional support, and household assistance, alongside managing their own educational and social lives. Larkins (2014) shows that YCs themselves articulate desires for recognition, including greater voice, agency, and acknowledgment of the weight of their responsibilities.

While extensive literature has documented YCs' experiences and emphasised the need for targeted support (Aldridge, 2018; Evans & Becker, 2009; Skovdal et al., 2013), they remain structurally marginalised within welfare, service, and educational systems, where recognition is often conditional on visibility or perceived risk. As a result, they may be overlooked by adult-oriented services and are often less aware of their legal entitlement to assessment than adult caregivers, with their needs frequently failing to attract attention unless harm or significant vulnerability is evident (Thomas et al., 2003). This conditional visibility, where recognition depends on meeting certain vulnerability indicators, contributes to their exclusion and marginalisation, undermining their full participation in social life (Warming & Fahnøe, 2017). A persistent gap therefore remains between policy intentions

and practical support (Warhurst et al., 2022). This gap is particularly evident in educational settings, where schools are positioned within broader development and policy agendas as key sites for social justice, inequality reduction, and social mobility, yet operate within complex institutional arrangements that not only shape support but may also reproduce underlying social inequalities (Hart, 2019; McCarthy, 2025; Stahl & Mu, 2024). Rather than simply delivering education, they configure conditions under which participation becomes possible, sometimes enabling collaborative engagement but at other times reinforcing conformity, regulation, and passivity (Mineo, 2026).

For YCs, this tension becomes visible in their everyday school experiences. While education is often framed as a pathway out of disadvantage towards upward mobility and school as their respite, caregiving responsibilities frequently disrupt attendance, participation, and academic engagement (Reupert et al., 2026; Moore et al., 2009). Within this context, YCs encounter significant challenges in sustaining academic engagement, as caregiving responsibilities during parental health crises constrain their ability to complete homework and attend school regularly (Stamatopoulos, 2016). Consequently, they are more likely to experience lower academic performance, including reduced proficiency in reading and numeracy, and to fall behind peers without caregiving responsibilities (Hamilton & Redmond, 2020). The demands of caregiving are also associated with heightened anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and limited emotional resources (Stamatopoulos, 2016). Yet, while research highlights YCs' desire for greater recognition and support from school staff (Untas et al., 2022), schools occupy a dual role: they can provide belonging and support but also risk either failing to identify YCs or becoming overly intrusive in their interventions (Thomas et al., 2003). This highlights the delicate balance required in addressing the needs of YCs while avoiding unintended negative consequences.

Schools are also key sites where peer relations, institutional expectations, and group dynamics shape identity formation and self-concept (Höjer & Johansson, 2013). These processes are central to understanding how institutional expectations become embodied in students' identities, shaping who is recognised as needing support and who remains overlooked (Warhurst et al., 2022). Given that YCs often spend substantial time at school when not fulfilling caregiving duties, schools serve as primary detection and support environments. However, these environments simultaneously operate within institutional logics that influence what is recognised as legitimate need and whose experiences become visible or remain obscured (Stahl & Mu, 2024). In fact, the institutional logics often prioritise measurable academic performance over socioemotional wellbeing, shaping how support is allocated and which student needs are foregrounded. As a result, schools may overlook

students' socioemotional needs, failing to fully engage with their individual identities and diverse backgrounds, and thereby reinforcing a gap between institutional expectations and lived experience (Paris & Alim, 2017). Academic achievement tends to take precedence, where limited systematic attention is given to emotional wellbeing, and school cultures remain shaped by ideologies of individualism and competition over community (Osterman, 2000). While the outcomes of YCs are well documented, they are often explained in relation to individual or familial circumstances, with less attention to how broader structural and institutional conditions shape these experiences. In Sub-Saharan Africa in particular, the cultural and systemic factors influencing YCs' lives remain underexplored (Ndungu et al., 2025), pointing to the need for more contextualised and relational analyses. Within educational settings, this also raises questions about how support is recognised, enacted, or overlooked in practice (Warhurst et al., 2022).

Grounded in the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA), which emphasises relational and context-sensitive understandings of children's agency and participation, this study examines how YCs experience both support and exclusion within school environments and how these experiences shape their psychological wellbeing. Specifically, the study seeks to (1) examine how social and institutional factors influence YCs' experiences in schools, and (2) identify how REA-informed practices may foster greater inclusion, recognition, and wellbeing. In doing so, it analyses how processes of support, exclusion, and (mis)recognition are enacted within schools and how they influence young carers' participation and wellbeing, while contributing to existing literature on educational inequality through a contextually grounded analysis in rural Kenya.

2. The Kenyan Educational and Social Context

Kenya has made significant policy commitments toward children's rights and access to education, including the ratification of international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. National policies have also introduced measures to expand educational access, most notably Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003 and Free Day Secondary Education (FDSE) in 2008. These reforms were intended to reduce financial barriers and increase school participation. However, despite these efforts, access to education remains uneven, particularly for children living in poverty. Families continue to bear substantial indirect costs, including uniforms, learning materials, transportation, and examination fees, which can limit sustained participation in schooling. These factors, compounded by other barriers continue

to prevent several orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) from attending school (King et al., 2015).

While national frameworks recognise OVCs as a broad category, YCs are not explicitly identified as a distinct group within policy or service provision. As a result, their specific experiences and needs remain largely unaddressed in both policy and practice (Ndungu et al., 2025). This lack of recognition contributes to gaps in support, particularly for children who assume caregiving roles but do not meet formal definitions of vulnerability. The education system itself has also been characterised by structural constraints. At the time of this study, many participants were enrolled in the 8-4-4 system, which has been widely critiqued for its exam-oriented structure and limited flexibility in responding to diverse learner needs (Matere, 2024). Although Kenya has since transitioned to a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which aspires to be more inclusive and learner-centred, implementation challenges, including resource limitations and uneven teacher preparedness, continue to constrain its effectiveness in practice (Nyaboke et al., 2021).

These structural conditions are further shaped by rural socio-cultural dynamics. In many communities, including the study area in Murang'a County, children's participation in household labour is a normative and socially valued aspect of family life (Evans, 2010). Caregiving responsibilities are often embedded within broader expectations of interdependence, reciprocity, and collective responsibility (Ndungu et al., 2025). While such practices can foster social belonging and resilience, they may also blur the distinction between routine household tasks and intensive caregiving, rendering YCs' roles less visible (D'Amen et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2020). At the same time, poverty and stigma shape how children's roles and experiences are perceived within both communities and schools. Close-knit social environments can facilitate support through kinship networks, but may also reinforce silence, misunderstanding, or judgment around illness and caregiving. For YCs, this can contribute to both the normalisation and concealment of their responsibilities, limiting opportunities for recognition and support. Taken together, these policy, economic, and socio-cultural conditions create a context in which YCs' experiences are simultaneously normalised within everyday life yet marginalised within formal systems of recognition and support. This tension is particularly evident within educational settings, where structural constraints and institutional expectations intersect with children's lived realities.

3. Theoretical framework

This study is primarily grounded in the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA), an educational philosophy rooted in principles of social justice, participa-

tion, and respect for children as active citizens and meaning-makers (Fraser, 2012; Edwards et al., 2012). Emerging in post-war Italy through efforts to rebuild society through democratic, child-centred education, REA offers both a pedagogical approach and an ethical-political vision of education as a space for inclusion, dialogue, and participation (Rigney & Kelly, 2023). While REA emerged as an approach to early childhood education, it has since gained wider recognition as a pedagogical philosophy that challenges dominant assumptions about childhood, learning, and participation. Children are viewed as competent and agentic individuals whose learning is shaped through relationships, environments, and lived experiences within their families and communities (Edwards et al., 2012; Robson, 2017). REA thus conceptualises education as a culturally responsive and relational endeavour, where children are recognised as active participants in social life and contributors to their broader communities (Rigney & Kelly, 2023).

Within this study, REA provides the primary lens for conceptualising schools as relational spaces in which YCs may experience both recognition and misrecognition. Central to this approach is the "pedagogy of listening", an interpretive practice that values children's experiences as meaningful to learning processes (Massimelli et al., 2022). From this perspective, recognising children involves not only hearing their voices, but also engaging seriously with the social and familial realities shaping their educational participation. By valuing children's voices, relationships, and social realities, REA positions schools as democratic spaces where diverse experiences can be acknowledged, interpreted, and negotiated collectively. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding YCs, whose caregiving responsibilities often remain invisible within formal educational settings despite profoundly shaping their participation in school life. REA is therefore particularly relevant to this study, as it foregrounds relationality and lived experience in ways that allow YCs' caregiving roles to be understood as part of, rather than external to, their educational participation.

To further examine how schools may simultaneously support and constrain YCs, the study draws on Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of education. Bourdieu's work helps illuminate how institutional norms and everyday school practices can reproduce inequalities through processes of symbolic violence and misrecognition, particularly when students' lived realities fall outside dominant assumptions of the "ideal" learner (Hart, 2019; Mackenzie et al., 2022). From this perspective, YCs' caregiving responsibilities may become obscured or devalued within school environments that privilege normative forms of participation, attendance, and achievement. Bourdieu therefore complements REA by highlighting the structural and institutional dimensions that shape whose experiences are recognised within education and whose remain marginalised. Critical pedagogical perspectives of Paulo

Freire and Don Milani, are also drawn upon more briefly as complementary resonances within this framework. Freire's emphasis on dialogue (1970) and Milani's commitment to giving voice to marginalised learners (1967) reinforce REA's focus on participation, relational learning, and the recognition of children's lived experiences as central to educational practice. Bringing these perspectives into dialogue, the study conceptualises schooling as a relational and institutional space in which processes of recognition, participation, and exclusion are continuously negotiated. Within this framework, YCs' caregiving roles are understood not as external to education but as integral to their lived experiences, which remain insufficiently acknowledged within formal schooling.

4. Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study that aimed to explore the experiences of YCs in Kandara sub-county and the gaps existing in the identification and support for YCs in schools. The study procedures began after receiving a research approval from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), license number NACOSTI/P/22/22736. Letters of authorization were also received from the Kenyan Ministry of health, and Ministry of Interior and National Government, at the county and sub-county levels, to allow entry into the field.

The YCs were recruited through community health volunteers who worked with the public health officers, and local village elders who worked closely with administrative officers. Purposive criterion sampling was used to recruit YCs: *children were primary caregivers or offered substantial help to terminally ill parents and family members, as part of their daily life.* Initially, the goal was to work with children under 18 years old. However, this focus changed during fieldwork, to include young adults over 18 years old and still in high school, a basic education level, or had been carers before turning 18 years. Similarly, purposeful sampling was used to recruit key informants: professionals and stakeholders with direct or significant involvement with children.

4.1 Participants

The participants were nineteen YCs and nine key informants. The YCs were aged between 10 and 22 years (mean age = 16 years). Of the participants, 12 were male and 7 were female. The participants provided care to a diverse group of family members with varying needs, including mental and physical disabilities, and chronic health conditions. Most care recipients were mothers, though a few supported siblings and extended family, such as an aunt or grandparent. Most participants came from female-headed

households, a demographic shaped by divorce, death, neglect, alcoholism or migration of the other parent.

The key informants included 1 teacher, 2 public health officers, 4 social service workers, 1 community health volunteer and 1 administrative officer, all of whom are engaged in supporting the well-being of children and families within the community. They were purposefully selected based on their professional roles in child and family welfare, social support, and protection systems. Their insights were crucial in understanding the challenges faced by YCs and the broader social structures that shaped their experiences. This approach aligned with the REA's emphasis on recognizing the child not in isolation, but as part of a complex and interdependent community. Demographic data on the key informants was not collected.

4.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews designed to elicit participants' lived experiences and how they constructed meaning from key life events (Rejnö et al., 2014; Bruner & Haste, 1987). The interview schedule was developed using a thematic framework derived from literature on young carers and refined through pilot phase findings (Ndungu et al., 2025). Fieldwork entailed initial home visits to identify potential young carers, during which parental/guardian consent was obtained and interviews were scheduled. Interviews averaged forty minutes in duration and were electronically recorded on a secure mobile device, professionally transcribed, and stored in encrypted files. The interviews sought to elicit participants' past life events and personal experiences, as well as how they articulated and interpreted these events (Rejnö et al., 2014; Bruner & Haste, 1987). Emphasis was placed on their caregiving experience, including the duration, perspective, and thoughts on their responsibilities. Participants were asked to recall their experiences before and after they began caring responsibilities, as well as their ambitions and dreams. The key informant interviews aimed to explore the system's awareness, support, and recognition of YCs, issues that may not have been fully visible from the perspectives of the children themselves. Questions also addressed gaps in the provision of adequate support for YCs. Additionally, insights into the cultural and political positioning of the child emerged during these interviews. All key informant interviews were conducted in English and lasted approximately one hour.

Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted separately on each dataset collected (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative thematic analysis attempts to understand participants' lives by examining their verbal expressions to ground the interpretation within the study's specific context and the participants' viewpoints (Silverman, 2011). It identifies themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset concerning a research question (Braun & Clarke,

2013). Data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed to capture the key concepts within a dataset (Flick, 2014). The data analysis involved various steps including organizing the data, reading through all the data, initial coding, generating a description of themes, reviewing, defining and naming themes and writing up and finalizing the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). While the primary analysis was conducted by the researcher, the interpretation and refinement of themes were discussed collaboratively through ongoing dialogue with supervisors, allowing themes and meanings to be critically revisited and reinterpreted throughout the analytical process.

4.3 Ethical considerations

The participants were given clear information about the research and invited to participate voluntarily. The information sheet was read aloud in simple English, with additional clarification provided in the local language before they were asked to sign an assent/consent form. Before interviews, participants were informed and reminded that their involvement was entirely voluntary, granting them the option to withdraw at any point without consequence. Additionally, the utmost confidentiality and privacy of their shared information were assured. The child respondents were explicitly informed that their responses would remain strictly confidential and would not be disclosed to their parents, caregivers, or teachers (Evers et al., 2011). This assurance likely enabled participants to disclose their experiences and related frustrations, which they might have otherwise concealed. To preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used to identify the participants, and any details that could identify the participants were erased or changed. This informed consent process and confidentiality measures were also applied to the key informants involved in the study.

5. Findings

The findings of this study generated three major themes reflecting the complex and nuanced experiences of YCs within school settings. These themes highlight some of the dualities of the lived experiences of YCs, with YCs having both negative and positive experiences. The findings are interpreted and contextualized within the cultural and normative practices that shape schooling and childhood in the setting studied.

a. Disregard and Invisibility for the Young carers' needs

Majority of the participants faced significant educational risks due to challenges such as a lack of material and moral support, as well as time constraints. These difficulties led to missed school, poor performance, demoral-

ization, grade repetition, and delayed schooling, as experienced by Lawrence (19) who recalled:

> *You see now, you would be absent on some days, then they would make you repeat classes. Then you are absent, you work a little more and find something small, take it to school, then they take you back that the money is not enough…I had repeated school so many times. Like in grade 2, I was made to repeat so many times. Then, the head teacher felt pity for me and took me to class 3. And then my dad refused to pay my fees, ah, I just decided to end it there.*

While Lawrence identified the inability to pay tuition as the main reason for dropping out, his educational struggles were intricately linked to his role as a YC, including frequent absences, repetition of classes, and a lack of support from his healthy parent. Yet, for many participants, disclosure was not considered a viable option. Although it occasionally led to support, more often it was met with dismissal or indifference, reinforcing feelings of shame and discouraging further attempts to seek help. Several participants believed that seeking help or confiding in others was futile due to past instances of humiliation or disregard when seeking help. For instance, Eric, a 22-year-old whose schooling was delayed due to caregiving responsibilities, returned to school after a four-year absence while caring for his terminally ill mother. He shared:

> *You know if you do not pay fees, you are just told to go home but sometimes before, we did not. They used to read the register and if you have not paid the fees, you do not get lunch at school, you stay hungry. And you know you did not eat at night. You were hoping to eat at school, and you have been denied lunch, so you see you just stay hungry.*

Eric's account highlights how some school practices extend beyond exclusion from learning to the denial of basic needs, reinforcing stigma and deepening vulnerability. Such humiliating and stigmatizing practices reveal exclusionary practices at school, shaped by rigid policies that create social inequities and exacerbate already existing disparities. They overlook the realities of vulnerable children, such as YCs without stable social and economic support. As a result, schools were not always experienced as supportive environments, and many participants found no reason to disclose their situations, undermining the school's role as a safety net. Such experiences could impact the psychological well-being of YCs and leave them without a complete educational experience, particularly because all students were expected to clear their relevant fees to remain enrolled and access the full range of educational benefits. Such a policy implementation overlooked the challenges faced by students like Eric, who was orphaned, self-supporting, and caring for younger siblings. Despite making personal appeals schools rarely

showed flexibility on fee requirements, punctuality, or behavioral standards. Consequently, students like Jamal (17) caring for his chronically ill mother, felt there was little value in disclosing his circumstances to teachers, knowing sharing that no exception or support would be provided. He shared:

> *So, the moment you tell the teacher. For instance, maybe you go to school late, and you tell the teacher on duty that I had some issues at home, and not necessarily lateness, they will not listen to you. Okay they will but they will still make you do that punishment. You tell them but they don't believe that it is true. They do not even get moved. They will just listen but that is your problem. So, what do you expect me to do when you tell me? So, with this, I find no reason to talk about it.*

This experience illustrates how school responses, while formally acknowledging students' explanations, may fail to translate them into meaningful recognition or action. In this context, repeated experiences of non-responsiveness gradually discourage disclosure and help-seeking, as students learn that sharing personal circumstances does not lead to meaningful changes in institutional responses. From a REA perspective, this experience highlights how school practices may (un)intentionally negate children's embodied and relational realities. It also points to a lack of empathy and recognition of students' circumstances, where explanations are heard but not meaningfully considered. Such responses can discourage help-seeking and contribute to withdrawal. Consequently, rather than opening space for dialogue, these experiences reinforce distance, contributing to withdrawal over time. The teachers' failure to engage with the student's situation conveys a broader lack of institutional or systemic support for students who face hardships outside the school environment, negating the role of environments and lived experiences in the learning process. These dynamics were reinforced by hierarchical and unapproachable teacher–student relations, which limited students' ability to communicate absences or other difficulties. As a result, explaining non-attendance or related behaviours became increasingly constrained. Eric shared:

> *There is a teacher who used to ask about me, on why I refuse to come to school… Sometimes she asks me. Like today when she saw me, she asked me if I had come back and told me not to go missing again. But I cannot tell her that I go missing because of school fees, I have no ability to pay the fees.*

The focus on attendance, without attention to the reasons behind absence, meant that students' circumstances were not fully understood. As a result, their vulnerabilities often go unrecognized, and the absences interpreted as a lack of interest in schooling. Consequently, YCs remained invisible and misunderstood. Interviews with key informants confirmed this finding, high-

lighting that YCs were rarely recognized in schools due to poor academic performance or a tendency to isolate themselves. As one teacher indicated:

> *One, they [two participants] are not so good academically, and you see if you are not so good academically your chances are also slim among the teachers. Because normally, those students who are bright in school are usually liked a lot by the teachers, so sometimes you know if you have issues/problems, sometimes it appears as if you do not like school. So, you find yourself in trouble with so many teachers.*

However, when students' circumstances were recognised, responses could shift. This was evident in Eric's case, where the teacher explained that he initially misunderstood Eric's behaviour until he learned about his caregiving role, which led him to adopt a more supportive approach. Similarly, an administrative officer reported that sometimes YCs went unrecognized as they had no trouble with the authorities. The lack of information on the students compounded this invisibility. As the teacher reported:

> *We may not have that background information on the students. Sometimes you find that some cases also find us off guard. You come to realize later that oh, you mean that one has only one parent. So that interaction, that information directly related to the student's background. You know, when you rely on the teacher, sometimes there could be that disconnect, whereby maybe the teacher has learned about a case and then they keep it to themselves. Maybe the teacher does not live here, so actually they do not know much about the local community. You find that even what reaches us, it may also be filtered. Because you will only get to know what they want you to know. The rest you will not know.*

This illustrates how institutional practices marginalize and obscure students' lived realities, especially those facing adversity, limiting the school's ability to respond holistically and inadvertently sustaining systemic neglect.

Finally, the study revealed critical gaps in the identification and support of YCs within schools. These included insufficient resources, bureaucratic rigidity, overcrowded classrooms, poor collaboration with families and external stakeholders, and limited knowledge about students' personal circumstances. Teachers reported being demoralized by cumbersome bureaucratic processes that delayed interventions and restricted their actions to narrowly defined jurisdictions. Although welfare or class teachers were often the first to identify student concerns, they lacked the authority to act independently. One key informant noted that only school principals were permitted to refer cases to social services, regardless of who initially recognized the issue. Moreover, teachers were excluded from key policy discussions, which were typically attended only by school heads, further limiting their influence on systemic responses. These structural shortcomings reflect institutional norms that neglect relational and contextual awareness in favor of rigid

mandates and standardized performance metrics. As a result, children's lived realities remain peripheral to administrative systems, and even when teachers perceive a need, their efforts are often thwarted by procedural delays and jurisdictional constraints.

b. Experiences of stigma and humiliation

Participants reported experiences of societal stigma toward families affected by poverty and illness, which shaped their social interactions and self-perceptions. Families like Samuel's (17), characterized by multiple health conditions (mental illness, physical disability, and injury), were often labeled as "cursed" or ill-fated, reinforcing their marginalization. Similar accounts were shared by Jamal and Joshua, who described being treated with contempt. Even when not overt, such stigma undermined self-esteem, encouraged social withdrawal, and discouraged help-seeking. For example, although it was normative for friends and neighbors to visit such families, Jamal expressed reluctance towards avoided classmates' visits due to anticipated judgment and ridicule of his family's living conditions. He shared:

> *Cos you see, even the moment they [classmates] discuss that they can come here, no need of coming. Let me say that because they will come here, and then afterwards they will start to say about our home, how it is, how we are living in poverty, such things. After they leave, they start to say bad things, how we are poor, just a lot of talking of bad things.*

Here, Jamal expresses his anxiety about peers visiting their home, fearing that such visits will expose their family's poverty and lead to gossip or ridicule. This reflects how anticipated judgment led participants to actively manage their social visibility. Other participants expressed such sentiments as well. For example, Kim shared: *"I have to keep it a secret… [Otherwise] they will perceive me as something useless"*. These narratives suggest that stigma operates not only through direct discrimination but also through perceived scrutiny, producing shame, vulnerability, and psychological distress that can limit engagement in education. This self-silencing also extended to gender norms, as boys reported discomfort performing domestic tasks perceived as feminine, fearing ridicule from peers. Such stigma fosters an environment of anticipated judgment and social scrutiny, contributing to feelings of shame, vulnerability, and psychological distress among YCs. Stigma also influenced how illness was interpreted. It drove the YCs (and their families) to believe in superficial causes of disease, such as Mercy who believed that the diseases in her family were because of unfulfilled cultural practices, and that they had to fulfil these to overcome the diseases. Reflecting this belief, Mercy said, "*…But you can believe it, cos the situation of this home now… even if you look at it, it is unexplainable*". This highlights a strong intersection between cultural beliefs and the YCs experiences. Additionally, conditions such as mental illness and

HIV/AIDS were associated with labels of abnormality or immorality, intensifying experiences of shame. Kenny, a 12-year-old who cared for his mentally sick mother expressed his distress, humiliation, and shame in school due to his mother's condition:

> *I hear people talking about their parents, I just feel like crying when I remember I have no father it's just my mum. And my mum, I don't know what happened. My mum is not normal…In my former school, my friends would see that that is my mother and start talking and laughing about it. I would just leave and go hide in the toilets.*

Kenny's account reflects how stigma intersects with adolescent identity formation, where belonging is strongly shaped by peer comparison and perceived social evaluation (Komarova et al., 2023). Beyond peer interactions, stigma was also embedded in broader social hierarchies that devalue poverty. As a chief explained, there is a pervasive tendency to *"hate the poor"* and privilege those from wealthier backgrounds, resulting in systemic disadvantage across settings such as schools, churches, and health facilities. He said *"But if also you look at the social setting, people also tend to hate the poor (…) So in any social setting, children from the poor are exposed at a disadvantaged position."* Consequently, stigma operated across multiple levels: interpersonal, institutional, and cultural, producing environments in which YCs felt compelled to conceal their circumstances, withdraw socially, and avoid disclosure within school contexts due to anticipated judgment and ridicule.

c. Schools as respite and hope for the young carers

Almost all YCs came from poverty-stricken households. The sickness of the family members and the economic struggles experienced at home caused distress and thus school was a safe place. For example, Mercy, who helped cared for the three family members with terminal conditions expressed "*Honestly, I like it better in school… Cos man! When you get home, you see so many things and start throwing yourself a pity party, you start asking so many questions".* While this respite was temporary and sometimes impossible to mentally separate oneself from the situation at home, the carers were able to focus on something meaningful to their personal lives. It was a conviction that one aspect of their life was moving forward. Other participants such as Joshua reported food insecurities at home, thus they would sleep hungry or in some cases go to school without food. He shared: *"We're 8, but now the flour is little. So, you eat today and at times you don't…actually I get lucky when I am in school because I can eat in school…"* In secondary schools where meals were provided, school food offered essential relief. However, in primary schools where students were expected to bring their lunch from home, participants like Benson a 19-year-old boy, who cared for his mother,

reported that when he was in school, he had to sacrifice for the sake of his younger siblings and sick mother:

> *The food is not even enough for us to carry to school, this one is small, when you carry, you leave her and mum with nothing to eat. So you just decide that it is better to just leave it, just go and endure the few hours at school and come in the evening. However it will be.*

This illustrates how limited household resources forced YCs into difficult trade-offs, where "enduring" reflects both coping and constrained agency within conditions of scarcity. Despite these hardships, school emerged as an important site of respite from domestic pressures. In some instances, social service workers noted that teachers informally supported students by providing food prepared for staff, offering moments of relief from hunger. More broadly, school provided a structured environment temporarily removed from the demands of caregiving and household strain. It also represented the only consistent space for peer interaction, enabling social connection and a sense of normalcy that was otherwise limited in their home environments.

Finally, schools were also framed as spaces of aspiration and future possibility, with education widely seen as a pathway to social mobility and household improvement once the children grew up. As a Public Health Officer explained, education was expected to enable children to improve their livelihoods and eventually support their families economically through formal employment. Against this backdrop, schools became a major source of hope for YCs. Many participants believed education would enable them to better support their families in the future. For instance, Kenny (12 years M) aspired to become a doctor to treat people like his mentally ill mother and grandfather, who was struggling with sight. Benson also hoped that his younger siblings would manage to complete school, unlike him. Having faced stigma and limited educational attainment himself, he was determined to support their schooling to reduce future household burden. He believed that if they completed school, they would be in better positions and would ease the economic burden of care. This aligns with research demonstrating that YCs actively work hard to reconcile the demands of school and caregiving, to preserve their caring identity both in the present and the future (Rose & Cohen, 2010). However, this framing also reflects a dominant social discourse in which children are valued primarily for their future economic potential rather than their present contributions. In this way, YCs' current agency and contributions though caregiving are overshadowed by a societal and institutional emphasis on education as a pathway to future productivity and household economic advancement. This reflects a form of future-oriented valuation in schooling, where children's worth is largely constructed through anticipated economic productivity rather than present relational and caregiving roles.

6. Discussion

The findings reveal a fundamental institutional paradox: in rural Kenya, schools function simultaneously as sites of refuge and exclusion. The young carers experienced schools as spaces that provide material relief, emotional respite, and hope for the future, yet these same institutions systematically rendered their caregiving roles invisible and judged them against standards of the "ideal student", leaving little room for the complex realities of their lived experiences. From a REA perspective, schools are ideally understood as democratic and participatory spaces in which children are recognised as competent social actors and co-constructors of meaning. However, the experiences of YCs in this study reveal a gap between this democratic ideal and the lived reality of schooling, where participation is often conditional and recognition unevenly distributed. This gap reflects how schooling is embedded within broader systems of structural inequality. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence captures how institutional expectations around attendance, academic achievement, and normative behavior are naturalised as legitimate standards, obscuring the structural conditions shaping students' participation (Jönsson, 2025; McCarthy, 2025). For many participants, school represented a rare space of reprieve from caregiving demands and domestic hardship. However, this respite was often fragile and conditional, coexisting with fear of judgment, shame, and social exposure. Participants repeatedly encountered rigid institutional expectations tied to fee payment, attendance, academic achievement, discipline, and normative behaviour, while the structural constraints shaping their participation remained largely unrecognised. Moreover, schools came up as sites where broader cultural stigmas surrounding illness, poverty, and caregiving (Ndungu et al., 2025) were reproduced through every day educational practices and social interactions.

Most participants came from low-income households, positioning them within pre-existing structural disadvantage (Ndungu et al., 2025). In the absence of a healthy adult provider and within contexts of economic deprivation, caregiving responsibilities extended beyond emotional and physical care to include sustaining household survival through tasks such as farming and fetching water. These competing demands made school attendance, engagement and completion of assignments uncertain and continually negotiated (Joseph et al., 2020; Skovdal, 2010) and contributing to cycles of vulnerability (Roschanski, 2007). Yet these constraints were frequently interpreted as lack of motivation or ability rather than consequences of caregiving and other constraints. This disadvantage is not only material but also social, as poverty is often accompanied by stigma and moral judgment, shaping how these students are perceived and responded to within educational settings. In this regard, Don Milani's critique of schooling is particularly relevant, as

he emphasises how education systems reproduce inequality by privileging dominant cultural and linguistic forms while marginalising children from disadvantaged backgrounds, thereby transforming social disadvantage into moral judgement within everyday school practices (Milani, 1967) . As Bourdieu argues, schooling systems privilege students already equipped with dominant forms of cultural and social capital while systematically disadvantaging those without, then legitimize this inequality by presenting it as meritocratic (Shih, 2026).

Although Kenya's education policy frames schooling as "free", mandatory costs such as examination fees and other levies continued to operate and this requirement is applied rigidly across all learners (Ngwacho et al., 2016). Consequently, those unable to pay are routinely sent home or excluded from classroom participation. While intended to expand access, such rigid implementation and limited sensitivity to students' caregiving and socio-economic contexts may simultaneously reproduce marginalization and constrain equitable access to education (King et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2026). These structural conditions, combined with the caregiving responsibilities, disrupt educational participation and wellbeing of the YCs (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2025), contributing to heightened mental health vulnerabilities and social challenges (Schweiger, 2025). School dropout, often shaped by the intersection of caregiving and economic hardship, further constrained access to valued educational trajectories and future opportunities (Hart, 2019). In this way, institutional expectations situate YCs along constrained educational and social trajectories that limit future opportunities for mobility and participation.

These constraints extend beyond individual educational outcomes and reflect broader processes of social stratification. Such disruptions are reinforced by implicit institutional norms of the "ideal" student, which privilege academic excellence while marginalising those whose experiences and achievements do not align with these expectations. As a result, structural disadvantage translates into unequal educational trajectories and constrained life chances. Over time, many YCs internalised these inequalities, perceiving their academic struggles and limited opportunities as personal failings or inevitable outcomes rather than as products of structural conditions. Schooling, therefore, legitimised inequality through routine practices that privileged normative forms of participation while rendering caregiving experiences and vulnerabilities invisible (Shih, 2026; Bolin, 2017). From a Reggio Emilia perspective, this reveals a constrained understanding of learning, where children's lived experiences are not recognised as integral to processes of learning and meaning-making. Rather than treating learning as relational and situated, educational assessment is narrowed to observable

performance outcomes, limiting opportunities to recognise children's lived contexts as epistemic resources.

Caregiving was further obscured by broader social norms that blur distinctions between routine household chores and intensive care work (Abimanyi-ochom et al., 2017; D'Amen et al., 2021). At the same time, dominant expectations that children should be productive in the future and contribute to family uplift further obscure their present caregiving contributions. Moreover, marginalization is enacted through institutional practices, including students being sent home for unpaid fees, being denied food due to outstanding balances, or being labelled as "not interested in school." These practices communicate moral judgments about poverty and responsibility, reinforcing exclusion while positioning disadvantaged learners as lacking commitment rather than facing structural constraint. Such practices also reinforced silence and secrecy, as YCs became increasingly reluctant to disclose their circumstances for fear of stigmatization or anticipated lack of meaningful support, thereby further limiting their access to support.

Consistent with studies from other countries (Gaolaolwe et al., 2021; Mascayano et al., 2015), YCs often concealed their caregiving roles due to stigma or fear of judgement. This contributed to their invisibility, with educators often failing to connect observable signs to caregiving roles. Student struggles were therefore interpreted in individualized terms, obscuring their structural and relational dimensions (Kaiser et al., 2024). Educational spaces thus risk reinforcing rather than challenging inequality (Bolin, 2017; Freire, 1967). Experiences of dismissal and lack of recognition significantly undermined YCs' sense of belonging, leaving them feeling excluded and misunderstood (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2023). When students are penalized for circumstances beyond their control, educational environments risk becoming sites of exclusion rather than support. This not only reinforces isolation but also erodes trust in educational institutions. This reflects a failure of "listening" as a relational and interpretive pedagogical and ethical practice (Massimelli et al., 2022), where children's experiences are not meaningfully engaged with in shaping educational responses and action. Such conditions discourage help-seeking and contribute to withdrawal over time. This reflects the absence of dialogical education, where students' lived experiences are not treated as valid knowledge within the learning process. Instead, schooling risks resembling a "banking model" of education in which knowledge is deposited rather than co-constructed, limiting opportunities for critical awareness of structural inequality (Freire, 1970).

However, these dynamics must also be understood within the broader systemic pressures under which schools operate, constraining relational responsiveness and inclusive practices (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Similar to other research, this study has highlighted that teachers were often demoralized by

bureaucratic processes, overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and jurisdictional constraints that prevented them from acting on their awareness of students' needs (Kaiser et al., 2024; Wahuna et al., 2025). The inconsistency of support documented in the findings, where some teachers provided informal assistance while others maintained rigid enforcement of policies, reflects not individual teacher failure alone but institutional structures that privilege standardization and measurable performance outcomes over relational responsiveness. From a Freirean perspective, these constraints illustrate how the possibility of dialogical education is structurally limited when schooling is organised around bureaucratic and performance-driven logics, rather than relationships and critical engagement. Meaningful transformation thus requires systemic, not just individual, change. Calls for greater empathy or student-centred practice must therefore be accompanied by structural changes in how schools define participation, support, and educational success.

The Reggio Emilia Approach offers a framework for this reconfiguration, with its emphasis on listening, dialogue, and the co-construction of meaning enabling educators to recognise and respond to students' lived realities (Edwards et al., 2012). Practically, this might include flexible responses to school attendance, workload, and assessment demands, alongside more adaptable curricula that allow young carers' caregiving roles to be recognized as forms of lived citizenship rather than obstacles to learning (Warhurst et al., 2022; Komarova et al., 2023; Munford & Sanders, 2020). Moreover, strengthening connections between schools, families, and communities and treating education as a collaborative process that values children's agency is essential in making hidden caregiving roles visible and enabling more responsive forms of support (Edwards et al., 2012; Fraser, 2012). By situating caregiving within everyday educational life, this study contributes to ongoing debates on educational equity by challenging normative assumptions of the "ideal student" and advocating for more relational, context-responsive understandings of learning and participation.

7. Conclusion

Young carers exist in rural Kenyan schools yet systematically rendered invisible. They experience schools as paradoxical spaces, offering material support and hope while simultaneously reproducing exclusion through processes of misrecognition and normative ordering. They are judged against standards of the "ideal student", failure to meet these standards is interpreted as personal failure and disinterest. Beyond documenting these experiences, the findings illuminate a fundamental tension within schooling systems: the gap between inclusive institutional rhetoric and standardizing practic-

es that privilege certain forms of participation and capability while rendering others invisible. The study demonstrates that educational inequality is not simply a matter of unequal resource distribution but operates through symbolic and relational mechanisms that shape whose experiences count as legitimate within educational settings. This finding contributes to broader conversations within sociology of education about how institutions reproduce social hierarchies and offers a critical perspective on the role of recognition in shaping students' trajectories and sense of belonging. In doing so, it contributes to debates on equity, recognition, and the transformative potential of educational institutions in either reproducing or challenging social hierarchies. This study thus reveals that meaningful educational inclusion requires transforming the norms through which schooling defines value, participation, and success, shifting from frameworks that marginalise students' lived realities toward those that recognise them as integral to learning and belonging.

8. Limitations of the study

This study has several limitations. First, while it provides in-depth insights into the lived experiences of YCs in rural Kenyan schools, the findings are based on a relatively small sample and a limited number of school contexts. As such, they may not be fully representative of the broader national educational landscape. In addition, the participating schools were relatively under-resourced, which likely shaped the experiences reported and may limit the transferability of the findings to more resourced settings. Second, the study adopts the Reggio Emilia Approach (REA) as a conceptual and interpretive lens. While REA offers valuable principles for understanding children's agency, participation, and relational learning, it remains largely unexplored in relation to young carers and in educational contexts beyond early childhood. Its use in this study is therefore exploratory and interpretive, and caution is needed in extending these insights to other age groups or educational systems without further empirical validation. Future research should focus on adapting and contextualising REA principles to better align with the socio-cultural realities of Kenyan schooling contexts. Third, the study captures a snapshot of YCs' experiences at a particular point in time. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand how caregiving responsibilities shape educational trajectories and life outcomes over time. Finally, the interpretive nature of the study, including the application of REA as an analytical lens, may have introduced a degree of analytical bias. While reflexivity was maintained throughout, readers should consider how these interpretive choices shaped the analysis.

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Authors' contributions

Ndungu conducted the fieldwork and drafted the manuscript. Mineo supervised the fieldwork and contributed to the manuscript's interpretative framework and structure.

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