The findings portrayed in the following rely on (a) what the teachers identified as diversity issues they have encountered in their classrooms and among learners in their schools; and (b) the teachers’ explanations of how they deal with these diversity issues as professionals in the classroom, and how the institutions they work in respond to diversity challenges. The aim is, therefore, to

- look specifically at classroom and school situations;
- connect the conditions and circumstances (why, where and when?) with the actions and interactions (by whom, how?); and
- interrogate the consequences of these actions and interactions (what happens because of these actions/interactions?).

By clustering phenomena into large diversity categories like ‘ethnicity’, and subsuming various experiences under them, awareness can be directed towards the conditions, actions and consequences of those phenomena, which could be, for example, an aspect of ethnicity or religion intersecting with gender or socio-economic status. So, the diversity of knowledge (different concepts
and attitudes towards formal education) that emerged as relevant to
a number of teachers can be understood as influenced by regional,
cultural and religious aspects as well as socio-economic status and
gendered role conceptions. At this stage, focus is on understanding
the diversity phenomena the teachers described by grouping similar
professional experiences together and looking at the responses
(actions/interactions and their consequences) of the teachers
and schools. As in Chapter 4, all names of ethnic communities,
languages and towns have been replaced randomly by African girls’
names to protect the identities of research participants and their
affiliations to particular groups.

Diversity in the schools

The various group affiliations, identities and divisions observable
in Kenyan society affect the professional lives of teachers as
members of schools, and in their roles as classroom teachers
and educators. The conditions that structure diversity for any
particular school (as a public institution located in a specific
community with its own history) are diverse in themselves. The
following is a collection of the teachers’ experiences of diversity
in their schools and classrooms – on structural, institutional
and individual levels. The focus is on how they, as professional
teachers in primary or secondary schools in Kenya, made sense of
phenomena they perceived as rooted in or related to diversity, and
how they dealt with them.

‘You go and teach in the schools where you come from’: Tribalism

Schools located in areas with a history of ethnic conflict, and which
were severely affected by the post-election violence of 2007/2008,
still see some of the effects today. Ana remembered that time and
the traumatic experience it was for learners and teachers:

After 2007, in fact I think my school was worst hit. This was a
provincial school then and the students were coming from all
over Kenya. Because this post-election violence was along tribal lines, it really affected it because the school that I teach is not very far from town. And I told you in town it is cosmopolitan and that is where the fighting was worst so you find a student coming to school in January he has lost both parents, another has lost one parent in the violence. It was bad, it was bad. The people were really affected even to have witnessed, they were traumatised. (1:106)

Similarly, Harald spoke about what he experienced, working in a semi-rural area not far from Ana:

The nearby school now was completely destroyed. That is my neighbouring school, the immediate neighbouring school, destroyed. And people say: ‘We no longer need this school’. Now, that is the Chipo community who came against the Arjana community now. Because ideally, the land belongs to the Chipo but the Arjana are many there, so it was like: ‘You people have come and you have taken our resources. So can you go back to your area?’ So later on the school was rebuilt. (8:16)

Both narrations describe the hostility that teachers and learners as members of a particular ethnic group experienced during that time in that region. Aggression was based on the notion that a traditional homeland or area belonged to a particular ethnic group because it had previously been allocated to them – and, consequently, members of other ethnic groups did not belong and were a threat to the local community.

After the political tensions had eased, schools had to cope with the trauma, anxiety and mistrust between members of different ethnic groups. Politically, it was decided to strengthen the guidance and counselling departments in schools to raise awareness of ethnic diversity and to prevent conflict. Teachers were prepared in workshops to counsel traumatised learners; the guidance and counselling departments organised peace activities, motivational talks and capacity building in psychological matters
for the teachers. Harald described the measures taken by his school management:

At least they started now trying to bring in some kind of cohesion and one of the most important things even that is done up to today is at least when you enter the school, there should be some peace messages – everywhere peace messages. So even when you enter you have a big board written: ‘This is a peace zone’, you see? So that that idea of you have this community, I am this is like at least tried to be watered down. But I can say that it has not completely stopped, at least, there is still that kind of ‘you are that and I am this’. (8:16)

Aiming to foster a peaceful space without tribal conflicts in the school compound, the intervention of the school management used visible signs and statements calling for peace in the school buildings. Apparently, these are not combined with remembering the victims of the post-election violence and how tribalism escalated earlier but, rather, as a motto for the present and the future.

While activities aimed at peace and reconciliation were promoted right after the post-election violence, they soon lost momentum in many schools, according to Chris. His experience of measures taken by the government and NGOs in schools was ambivalent in terms of implementation:

There was every peace initiative to do that [reconcile] but then the problem was rolling it out. In schools, the minister has really tried to ensure that every problem is addressed but you must have a teacher who is concerned about guidance and counselling and you must have a teacher who is involved … that can bring social activities like clubs. You have to go to clubs but then little is done and in fact you go to most public schools, those things are not there. Maybe the head teacher does not support it or maybe it’s because the people who are concerned about that in the district don’t give financial support. (3:76)
The ministry’s peace initiatives required teachers to show commitment and become involved with extracurricular activities like peace clubs. As Chris pointed out, the scope and success of these activities depended on the level of commitment of the school principals and school management boards as well as individual teachers. In some instances, schools relied on private or corporate donors to support their peace initiatives, which meant the projects were compromised when support was discontinued. Perceiving the teacher to be central to changing learners’ attitudes and fostering acceptance of diversity, Ana said:

The most powerful tool is the teacher, as an instrument to manipulate the mind of the student to accept one another and promote diversity. I mean promote unity in diversity. But that is an extra mile for the teacher because when you are being trained as a teacher you are being trained with your two teaching subjects, educational courses, psychology but many teachers are there and they are like: I’m employed to teach mathematics and geography, that’s all, so who pays me for the extra job? (1:124)

The fact that teachers are only paid for teaching the subject fields they are trained to teach lowers commitment and undermines initiatives such as peace clubs aimed at instilling values in learners and building social coherence. According to Ana, teachers are overloaded with work, without extra activities like clubs, and are often unwilling to get involved in voluntary initiatives. Many only do their 40 minutes of teaching and then move to the next class without taking time to get to know the learners as children with their own stories and problems, and without trying to support them in coping with such. In schools that exhibit strong tendencies towards tribalism because of the area the learners are drawn from, and its specific set-up concerning ethnic communities, this extra mile can easily become a heavy burden on the backs of teachers.

Installing guidance and counselling departments and teachers in charge of these units, particularly after the post-election violence, can be regarded as an attempt to extend the professional
role of teachers to include psychosocial support and to initiate measures to prevent tribalism and conflict. However, as pointed out by Chris and Ana, it depends on the individual teacher and general situation in the school whether this unit truly provides support to the learners—and what kind of initiatives develop from it.

In some cases, teachers reported that the principals in the region would regularly meet and organise seminars on topics the teachers had raised as matters of concern. Harald reported:

We go out whenever there is a seminar on integration we go, whenever there is a seminar on issues of diversity we go. Now when we come back to school we bring the experiences we are able to handle these issues of, in fact, like in my school now once every month with my colleagues who we are in this department we bring together we talk to them about issues of diversity, we tell them the words they must be careful about and the language they must use. (8:28)

Sensitising learners about the language they use, and teaching them to avoid offending terms in order to combat tribalism was seen as a useful tool and strategy by this teacher. He pointed out that the seminars they participate in as teachers are very beneficial. However, Harald was the only teacher who reported the opportunity to participate in this type of professional development workshop driven by the school principals of the region.

Generally, the situation in the schools had mostly settled with respect to conflicts based on ethnic diversity. However, in some schools, the hostility against teachers and learners of certain communities continued after 2008 with ‘locals’ trying to chase the ‘foreigners’ out—albeit in a more covert way, as Ana experienced:

Though they were saying it silently but it was loud psychologically. It was like: ‘Why are you coming here to head our schools? We are here, go to your communities’. But slowly it has died but there are areas still. (1:114)
Ana still saw traces of the phenomenon in some schools, particularly related to the employment of teachers: applicants not considered ‘local’ in terms of their ethnic identity could be rejected. However, she emphasised that it has now become difficult for schools to reject teachers on the basis of ethnic group affiliation because the Teacher Service Commission (TSC), as employing body of most teachers, will not accept that. On the contrary, the TSC deliberately deploys teachers to regions that they do not come from. In Ana’s view, this is a positive move and strategy to create social cohesion among members of different ethnic groups. Yet, she and several other research participants confirmed that teachers prefer to work in the area they consider to be home and find ways to, for example, ‘bribe their way out’ (1:60) if the region to which they are deployed is unsafe for them as outsiders. Although the interviewed teachers welcomed the TSC’s deployment policy as a strategy to combat tribalism and foster social coherence, they personally chose to work in their home regions where their own ethnic group was the majority and their mother tongue, the dominant language.

From the measures against tribalism in schools described by these teachers, the following aims can be identified:

- to ‘water down’ ethnic group consciousness;
- to provide psychosocial support to victims of tribalism such as ostracism and stereotyping based on ethnic group affiliation;
- to sensitise learners about offending terms and how to use respectful language;
- to be attentive and alert towards tribalism to be able to intervene quickly;
- to create a space where tribalism does not occur; and
- to prevent conflicts between learners, in general, because conflicts between individuals easily develop into tribalised clashes through other learners taking sides along ethnic lines.

Research participants who worked in areas that had experienced tribalism in the past expressed concerns about another breakout
of tribal conflict. But tribalism was not perceived as a problem by those research participants who worked in schools in other areas. This suggests that not all schools are similarly prone to general sociopolitical developments and that schools in certain areas are more susceptible to spontaneous tribalism. Ana highlighted that there was a lot of mistrust after the post-election violence so that ‘you never know your friend’ (1:110) and that, since then, people are still afraid that tribalism will break out and impact the schools again. Similarly, Elsa concluded that, from her perspective and in the school where she teaches, ‘things are changing when it comes to empowerment of women. To do with tribes I don’t see any changes’ (5:71).

‘You will always try to assist them more’: Learners from ‘own’ and ‘other’ communities

One strategy to combat tribalism in schools was described as the attempt to diminish levels of ethnic group identity and awareness; yet certain phenomena and teachers’ practices suggest that them/us thinking is still present in some school contexts.

When you are teaching you’ll find that a parent he or she knows that you are a K and I am a K, she would feel better to come and tell me: ‘Can you assist my child in this?’ than tell that to somebody from a different community. (3:46)

Teaching an ethnically mixed group of learners, Chris found that parents from his community entrusted him with their children in a specific way – hoping he would particularly support them because they shared the same ethnic background. Chris confirmed that he did indeed pay more attention to these learners, especially

if you are in a group where you find maybe very few of your community, are there then you will always try to assist them more – it’s there, it is somehow there … Just give them more attention that is what I have found out especially if you’re in an area whereby
– because of the stereotyping thing, then you’ll always give more attention to them because you know they come from the community. … Maybe they come – they are the minority there then you always feel your rights are more like not taken care of. (3:46)

In his explanation of the phenomenon, Chris referred to the shared experience of his group, which held a weak position because they are small in numbers and, consequently, felt marginalised and neglected in school. In response to the stereotyping and marginalisation that the learners of his own ethnic group or sub-group experience (and that he also experienced as a student), he empathised with them and saw the need to ‘assist them more’.

The special support and attention paid to members of one’s own community that Chris described as common practice among teachers (especially in certain situations of power imbalances), reveals high awareness of ethnic group affiliation, as well as trust and bonding among members of the same group. However, he does not explain the reasons for the stereotyping and marginalisation apart from disparities in numbers, nor does he mention strategies to overcome thinking along tribal lines.

The cases outlined above on tribalism do not centre on specific differences along ethnic lines; they describe politically motivated demarcations. The next sections focus on language, cultural and religious diversity as a more visible or noticeable experience of difference experienced by some of the teachers.

‘We end up talking in mother tongue’: Language diversity

Grouping together along ethnic or, rather, language lines by learners and teachers is a phenomenon Elsa observed in her school, which is situated far from where Harald and Ana teach. She went back to teach in the region where she grew up and where the majority of people belong to the same ethnic or language group.

We have students that are Chiemeka and Bohlale and Adede, they are isolated. They have a hard time coping in that school due
to tribalism, yeah, because they’ll [learners of the majority ethnic group] attack you in Dayo [dominant language]. They’d say all sorts of things behind your back when you are still there, they are talking about you, saying very bad things about you. So that one I can still observe in the school where I am teaching. (5:30)

As a class teacher, she regularly encourages students to anonymously write about whatever bothered them. If a problem affects them severely and needs to be resolved, she calls on the guidance and counselling department to organise a whole-class discussion as well as sessions with the perpetrators.

Florence also identified among her colleagues the problem of drawing lines between ethnic groups by using language to exclude others in school:

I have not worked far away from my community. The furthest I have gone is Bamidele [town]. Bamidele is still dominated by the Adele community. You will realise that the majority of the people who will get jobs there will be these Ks because of the surroundings. They are the majority. Now the problem that we will have, even me, I am not an exception. You will find that we could be having an Adele, a Chipo, a Bohlale. Since we are many, we end up talking in mother tongue, you see, it just happens. And the others really feel offended … it happens with human beings, you see. (6:38)

Although some schools have a strict policy of no mother tongue speaking on school premises, in Florence’s primary and Elsa’s secondary school, speaking in the mother tongue is evidently common among colleagues and in class. Florence was aware that the practice excludes members of other ethnic/language groups. However, in her view, it is a human wish to use the mother tongue and she admitted that sometimes they would deliberately want to say something that the others did not understand. Although Florence identified this practice as exclusive and potentially offensive, neither she as a teacher nor the school as an institution
make an effort to stop it. Although the language of instruction policy requests schools to only use English and Kiswahili, these experiences show that, outside lessons, language diversity is practised in some schools.

The policy of languages of instruction being English and Kiswahili aims to provide everyone with the same chances to learn, and to prevent divisions based on different mother tongues in schools; yet it very much depends on the area where the school is located whether learning in English or Kiswahili provides or limits opportunities. In secondary school, some learners struggle to understand and express themselves in English, which Dora regularly experienced in her school.

However much you use the basic English, others do not even get it because I think they are not so much exposed to the language because you realise that we still have those teachers back in primary school who still use the native languages to explain things to the students. (4:56)

Ana’s explanation was that speaking English is easier for the speakers of some mother tongues than for others. In their professional practice, teachers try to meet that challenge by using very simple English to ensure that all learners understand. Elsa referred to disparities emerging between secondary school learners who come from rural or urban areas:

It is difficult because you find that, if you come from the rural areas you just speak vernacular and those people who come from the urban centres they are used to speaking either Kiswahili and even English from a young age. So you find that they have an easier time because they speak fluently English and Kiswahili. (5:66)

In two cases, research participants had to work in areas far away from their homes because that was the only job offered to them at the time. In that remote area, Beth found that the learners struggled with English right through school:
But even they can’t write a sentence [in English]. You get a Form 4 [final year] student who is completing secondary school cannot write a composition, cannot construct a sentence. And now, you see, that one has led to stealing exams in those areas. (2:62)

What she referred to as a common practice in that region is the stealing of exam papers so students can prepare themselves to write the national exams. Beth partly blamed this on the fact that students in remote communities (who have little chance to achieve a good command of English) have to write the same exams as everyone in else Kenya – in English. Even though Beth was very reluctant, she had to help her students by preparing them to pass the exam and cheat the system.

‘They are never given an opportunity’: Cultural and religious diversity

Similar to the case above, teachers’ professional experiences and practices concerning language diversity were sometimes accompanied by cultural and religious diversity. These are captured below to expand on the dimension of language.

The first example relates to a teacher employed in a remote part of Kenya. Beth, who took her first teaching post in the far north of Kenya, was the only person not originating from that community. Since this was the only opportunity for her to work as a teacher after finishing university, she accepted the deployment to a marginalised area. She explained that teachers often avoided employment in that remote, and in many ways hostile, area – often waiting some years for employment in a region they preferred. In that remote community, the language of instruction was a hurdle:

In the school where I was teaching in North Eastern, actually they don’t know how to speak Swahili, they just speak one word in English. Most of the language used, they used the mother tongue. Sometimes as you are in the class teaching, they talk about you as a teacher and you can’t even understand them. (2:58)
Beth was trained to use English or Kiswahili as languages of instruction but found herself in a community that rejected these languages and, hence, learners were not able to understand or speak them.

They have their own rules … in fact, they were telling us: ‘You are telling us to learn English. God doesn’t know English. Allah doesn’t know English. Allah knows Arabic’. And we could laugh, yes. (2:60)

To force the learners to speak English, Beth used a practice she had learned in her training: punishing the speaker of mother tongue by branding or stigmatising to embarrass them. She organised an ugly brown sack for that learner to wear with the words ‘I’m stupid’ written on it. But

Now, again another challenge came. If a boy has spoken mother tongue and he has been given that sack. Next, if a girl speaks mother tongue in that same class, a girl cannot put on that sack because she cannot put on what a man has put on. Now it became a challenge because girls are a few in class, maybe there are two. How will you make a sack for boys and a sack for girls? (2:74)

The practice she had learned to meet this language challenge did not work out as it might have in other communities where boys and girls can wear the same clothes. The general community reluctance to speak English contributed to the fact that her efforts to promote English among the learners largely failed.

Although most learners in that school were struggling with speaking English or Kiswahili, one of the few girls in the class had moved to the region from a town where Beth had lived before:

So at least she could talk Swahili. And for them, anybody who talks Swahili is immoral. So this girl was discriminated. So she could sit alone. (2:78)
What Beth did was talk to the girl and encourage her:

I just called her. I told her: ‘Saadya, I want you to pass the exam. Despite the fact that these people say that you are immoral because you talk to us blacks, I want you to pass the exams. Just shock them by passing the exam better than them’. When they sat down, she started performing well. (2:78)

By providing the learner with a different perception of Kiswahili, and view of her knowledge of the language as an advantage instead of an immoral and unwanted skill, Beth’s intervention of individual encouragement was successful and the learner performed well in the final exams. The community attitude of rejecting the national language of Kiswahili originated, according to Beth, from the view that Kiswahili is only needed for mixing and communicating with black people who do not speak Arabic. Such mixing is considered immoral and undesirable and, therefore, Kiswahili is rejected. She found herself in a situation where she was made aware in her daily work that she did not belong to that area and did not share certain norms or values.

OK, we usually say that they [the people living in that area] are a crossbreed of the Arabs, because it [the school] was on the border of Somalia and Kenya. So there are those ones with that Muslim culture, the traditional culture, they are radical. (2:14)

Her words express great distance from the people living in that area. Beth was raised in a Muslim family herself but baptised as a Christian when a teenager. However, the way her family practised Islam was very different from what she encountered in the community where she worked as a teacher.

And there are morals. Those people simply they don’t have laws to govern them. They don’t even know to knock at the door, you know, their houses are these round houses without a door, so they are used to entering like that. Even now if they come, and
they carry it to the school, teachers were in class, they just enter. They don’t even knock. Even in the staff room, they just entered. OK, now, I saw that their culture is the one that allows them to do that. When it is time for their prayers, if you delay your class, they are leaving the class and they’ll go. (2:58)

The discipline and the respect she expected as a teacher was not shown by the learners of that community, hence, her impression that ‘they don’t have laws to govern them’ – at least, not the laws that she knew. Working in that community brought experiences of alienation that caused Beth to struggle with her professional identity as a teacher. Her concepts of knowledge, learning and education, and her professional self-image, did not match what she found in the school she taught at and what the learners, parents and other teachers expected from her.

Teaching in a more central region in Kenya, Gerald identified the phenomenon of different religious denominations and sub-groups as a dividing factor affecting schools:

Because in Kenya, the major religion is Christianity, then we have Islam but within Christianity, we have small denominations. Catholics, protestants and under the protestants and there are many others. So you realise, there are lots of issues there, in terms of people totally differing even sometimes to extreme ends, more than even the [ethnic] community issues, that I belong to this denomination, you belong to that and this is what I say and that is what you say. So apart from the issues of what is in the church they come and separate themselves even in community and it is like, if I have something to be done, I work with people of my denomination. Those ones, you are there, you work with your people there. Even these institutes – there are denominations that have come up with schools. (7:42)

Different religious denominations emerging and separating themselves from each other does not only affect life in the local communities, it is also visible in separate schools funded by
the denominations, often with support from the USA or other countries.

Gerald pointed to the divisions created by these denominations and he also found that, in many cases, they override ethnic distinctions. Identification with a particular church unites people from different ethnic groups and creates a community in which ethnicity and different mother tongues are not constructed as meaningful differences. However, Gerald perceived these new distinctions, demarcations and separations of particular denominations as problematic, particularly if they run their own schools.

We have the Adventists they go to church on Saturday to worship. So what happens in Kenya is if the school is an Adventist school and there are some students who have been admitted who are not Adventists, the condition is: ‘You people will not worship on Sunday. Because this school is an Adventist and we are supposed to worship on Saturday so you must worship on Saturday, you will not have your opportunity on Sunday’. While other schools now which are now not Adventists, some Protestants who actually worship on Sunday, if there are students in that school who are Adventists and wish to worship on Saturday they are never given an opportunity. (8:88)

Schools run by a specific religious denomination often only admit learners who belong to it, and find ways to only employ teachers who are also a member of that church. Gerald found this problematic because not all these schools are private schools. If the TSC allocates them teachers who do not belong to the denomination, such schools find ways to have them replaced by their ‘own’ teachers. Discrimination and separation arising from these schools is, according to Gerald, not conducive to the government’s attempt to create social coherence. He found that nondenominational public schools, including the boarding school where he teaches, usually accommodate different denominations and religions, giving members time to attend their service or
praying sessions as required. Chris also experienced in the schools where he taught, that Christians and Muslims had opportunity to participate in the services and praying as their religion demanded. This liberal practice is, in his view, appropriate to deal with religious diversity in schools.

A cultural practice that leads to conflicts and discrimination among male students, especially in Grade 9, is the circumcision of boys. Gerald, a teacher in a secondary boarding school, pointed out that boys admitted to the school in Grade 9 come from various ethnic backgrounds with different cultural traditions concerning circumcision. Some communities circumcise their boys at the age of 12 years, others at the age of 17 and yet others do not circumcise at all.

So we have had a lot of problems here that students who come to Form 1 [Grade 9] … We have these boys from this community who are circumcised – at least now there are so many communities that circumcise their boys in Kenya – then there are a few who don’t circumcise their boys. When these reach the school now, there is that kind of total discrimination that: ‘You people are not circumcised’. So these other communities, who are circumcised, turn up against those who are not circumcised … When the students come to school especially in Form 1, there are those who are in Form 2, Form 3 and Form 4 who are the senior students, so they will always tell them: ‘Remove your clothes we want to see if you are circumcised or not’. You see now? Such kind of terrible things. (8:74)

Boys who are not (yet) circumcised are stigmatised and socially excluded by those who have been circumcised.

And remember, these are the students, very young, but they already perceive, have concepts of: ‘What is wrong with you?’ So sometimes we have students getting traumatised, totally traumatised … Some boys, they were only there [at the school] for one month and when the students broke up for the half term,
they told their parents: ‘We are not going back there. If you want us to go back there, circumcise us now’. (8:74)

This seemingly thin line of cultural difference became a severe problem in that boarding school. In response to the problem, the teachers and school management prohibited talk about circumcision altogether, including the humiliating practice of senior boys telling younger ones to prove their circumcision when admitted to the school. Gerald explained that the school’s student records of every boy’s cultural and religious background helps in this regard too, particularly when problems of social exclusion and stigmatisation between students occur.

‘You keep forgetting us!’: Refugee learners

Accommodation of students’ different backgrounds and experiences when teaching them also arose in connection with learners whose families had fled war-stricken Sudan. Dora reflected on her classroom experience of when some of these students communicated how they were trying to cope with the images of war, what they had experienced at home and why they felt excluded in class.

At times they divert and start switching to: ‘You know, at night in our country, this is what is happening’ … And that is when they realise that: ‘You are not actually integrating us into the learning, it’s like you are forgetting us!’ And they become so, they are so sensitive. (4:68)

In this case, traumatised students living as refugees in Kenya demanded their history and background be acknowledged. One very articulate girl in Dora’s school grouped the other students from Sudan together and led them into a strike, saying the teachers did not listen to them, and were biased. To resolve the conflict, Dora and her colleague teachers organised a meeting to question the girl leading the others.
She told us: ‘The plain scholars never let me because I don’t come from here. The Principal believes that I am rude!’ (4:68)

The student felt excluded, misinterpreted and misunderstood as acting rudely by her classmates and the principal, and she blamed the teachers for being biased against her. Dora empathised with her, and resumed:

Being exposed to war back in their country, she has learnt to be brave and defensive all the time so actually I think the approach that we use on these girls is quite different than for the ones from Kenya, because they are very sensitive to matters. They are always ready to fight anytime because of the hostility that they are exposed to in their country. (4:68)

In Dora’s interpretation, the conflict arose from the teachers’ handling of the refugee students – treating them like everyone else and disregarding their specific background of having fled civil war and being foreigners in Kenya. Their response was to listen to the student’s perspective and attempt to understand her background and viewpoint better. Dora also realised she needed a different educational approach for the traumatised students because, within the approach she used for Kenyan students, the students from Sudan appeared ‘very sensitive’ and became aggressive easily. However, she had never learned how to deal with students who are refugees and traumatised from war, or which alternative educational approaches would be appropriate. Thus, her practice in response to the conflict was to try to empathise with the students from Sudan to inform the way forward. Although she and her fellow teachers seemed concerned about the situation, she did not mention whether they included the ‘plain learners’ from Kenya in looking for better integration of the students from Sudan, or whether they helped them to understand their background. However, it became clear that teaching the ‘normal’ way as foreseen by the curriculum was not adequate to accommodate all students.
'They portray a different picture of who they are':
Knowledge, learning, formal education

The teachers reported on a number of incidents in which they were asked to respond to different concepts of knowledge, attitudes towards formal education or access to learning. These did not relate to any single aspect of difference and, rather, can be considered as expressions of regional, ethnic, cultural, political, religious and socio-economic variations in Kenya.

In teaching content-specific knowledge, Ana’s experience was that the way students learn, and how they connect new information with their own concepts and morals, differs according to the ethnic community they grow up in, with those specific mother tongues, religious beliefs and morals.

But you know, when you come from this community it does not only affect language as a subject it also affects other subjects such as Christian religious education because morals in the Chiemeka community may not be necessarily be morals in the Rudo community. (1:54)

She thinks the school curriculum should reflect the different sociocultural backgrounds of the students and include aspects that connect to these backgrounds.

I think it matters, because … what is taught in the curriculum, coming from this community or that community, influences how you take in information, it influences the instruction … I mean mother tongue influence in the learning and in the instructional language. (1:46)

She suggested – and this is what she tries to do – that teachers be responsive to students’ sociocultural backgrounds in their teaching and instruction techniques. She also sees the need for the curriculum developers to integrate various indigenous concepts
and knowledge systems in order to explain specific content and root the new knowledge in the experiences and perceptions of the learners.

Feelings of alienation concerning perceptions of knowledge and attitudes towards formal education occurred in cases where the trained professional teachers were deployed to remote rural or disadvantaged areas. Beth reported her struggle to be recognised as a professional at the school where she first taught after training to be a secondary school teacher in one of Kenya’s urban centres. She felt unprepared to deal with the negative attitude towards school education, and rejection of what was perceived as foreign knowledge that she represented. The professional role of a teacher in that school was different than in schools that Beth had known before:

People there do not value education. So, there was not that pressure that you must teach a child and it must pass. Ours was just to go to school. If you don’t go to class, in fact, the students will love you. If you go to class frequently, they will hate you. Our time for going to class was at 8:00; it ends at 4:00 p.m. And there was no extra work. And you see, if we give assignments to students, they don’t do. And even when they don’t do, we don’t bother. Because if you call a student and beat that child you will not sleep at night. The whole community will come. So we were living freestyle, so long as you just go to class and come back. (2:34)

While it is common in many Kenyan schools to discipline students using corporal punishment, the community where her school was located did not allow it and would collectively punish her if she did so. The parents and community did not care whether their children learned in school or not because they generally rejected formal education. With no pressure to achieve a certain performance by students, Beth spent time in the school during the day trying to adapt to this different professional role.
Assignments given to students were either not done at all, or one student completed them and the others copied the work. Beth did not only attribute this phenomenon to the general rejection of school education; she explained that the concept of individual ownership or achievement did not exist in that region. Instead, every achievement was considered as rooted in, and emerging from, the whole community and hence, was a public good. With no means to assess or discipline the students, her role was essentially reduced to being at school and spending time with the students.

When it came to the final year, however, the learners still requested their school-leaving certificates.

Now what they usually do, when the exams are about to be done, they usually call, in Kenya we say, harambee, togetherness, they call people to come and contribute money. They say: ‘Contribute!’ After contributing they get somebody in that community who is educated, who will go up to the National Examination Office, get a big person there and give him money, saying: ‘Here is money, what we want is the examination’. And after that he is given exams, he brings, we teach the students the exams! But when the day for exams comes, they copy one another, they copy even the name of another person, they just copy, copy, copy. Now, you see, that is a culture, which is not in other communities. (2:60)

Beth struggled to accept that she was expected to be complicit in cheating and prepare the students for their exams against her conscience.

And now you know it is wrong … But what will you do? If you refuse, they say you don’t want to help them. If you refuse, they come to beat you. And even the principal comes in and says: ‘Go and teach them because in other parts of Kenya they are also stealing exams’. (2:60)

Resistance to this practice was literally impossible; her colleagues, principal and the community would not accept it when she
explained that in other parts of Kenya exams were not stolen but that the students studied hard to pass them. Hence, Beth found herself limited in her professional practice. She had to adapt to hegemonic attitudes and practices of rejecting school education and cheating the system.

Looking for explanations for this community’s alienation of the central government’s policies, curricula and institutions, she referred to the culture and traditional – Muslim conservative – values that govern the community and provoke negative attitudes towards formal education and learning. According to Beth, the only possible strategy was to adapt and play the role the community wanted her to play during the years that she taught in that school. The power structure between the teacher and the learners/community was upside down with the learners and parents determining how and what they learned. Hostility against teachers, especially those from outside, increased and became life threatening:

Now, that time they slaughtered teachers … I had just left the previous day. And then the next day they slaughtered teachers. (2:16)

Beth saved her life at the last minute by getting on the bus to Nairobi just before the killing of teachers started.

This case shows that knowledge and the formal education system with its curricula and language of instruction are not accepted by all people living in the diverse regions of Kenya. There is a strong perception of formal education being foreign and colonising and something that does not belong to the people and their culture.

Another professional experience and practice points to the need for a variety of educational approaches, teaching strategies, arts-based and practical subjects in school education for the purpose of including all learners and nourishing their talents. Florence had a group of students in her primary school class who were not from the same ethnic community as most of the others who were from the local neighbourhood. This group always had difficulty keeping up with regard to literacy and numeracy and
Florence wondered how she could support them given that they were obviously disadvantaged by lack of support from home and their low position at school.

She observed that these students were stigmatised and marginalised in her class and had difficulty in studying and learning in the way expected of them. However, when they had the chance to participate in drama, music and singing activities, she remembered:

Those children who could do really very well are those that don't come from the neighbouring community, you see. Now, we had children who could really memorise choral verses so fast, they could express themselves so quickly, they could also act out something. They came from this other community. So we don't have to use only the classroom situation, the pen and the paper thing, but you see, these children have an inner thing and they can really show it out. And tell the others that: 'Look at us, we are here, we can do better things', you see. So they are good when it comes to stories, narratives, good when it comes to drama, good when it comes to public speaking. Tell them: 'Come forward and greet the assembly, address the assembly today. Wow, you will like it'. You see. So there are these situations where sometimes it is the way these ones are being favoured a lot. At times now, they come out and portray a different picture of who they are. (6:46)

Florence found different approaches to teaching and learning to support learners who were lagging behind the others in the examination and academic-orientated pen-and-paper teaching strategy. She discovered the learners’ talents in music, drama and public speaking and made sure to integrate these educational approaches into her teaching by assigning leading roles to those who were otherwise marginalised.

Similarly, Harald pointed at the importance of going beyond educational approaches that aim at knowledge acquisition at the expense of practical skills and values.
In the past we used to have technical subjects being embraced, we used to have music at primary level, home science, arts and crafts – those creative subjects that are there. But when you look at it currently, they are not there. (7:25)

Harald and Florence pointed out that for education to be inclusive and not discriminatory or favouring only some learners, schools need to embrace a diversity of teaching and learning approaches instead of focusing only on cognitive knowledge acquisition and examinations. They both try to integrate creative, arts-based and practical elements in their professional practice but see limits due to the curricula where this is not accommodated.

‘You don’t have a word against the men’: Female teachers in school leadership positions

Gender emerged as a relevant diversity category in a number of instances, particularly for some of the female teachers. For example, when some female teachers were responsible for certain aspects of school management or particular school activities – and consequently faced discrimination in various ways. Elsa saw her authority undermined by her male colleagues:

My experience … if you are a female teacher, you don’t have a word against the men. If you have a position in the school and you have to lead men, they don’t adhere to your deadlines, they don’t adhere to anything, you don’t have a word, they are just rude to you. (5:6)

The disrespect for Elsa’s leadership position (being in charge of examinations at her school) conveyed by her male colleagues made it impossible for her to do her job properly.

They don’t adhere to the date because you are a lady and if I told you, if you push them, they are going to talk and sometimes they
use very bad terms because you are a woman and you don’t have power over them. So sometimes they are very rude to you they can use any word, they insult you. (5:6)

Not having authority over her male colleagues and being insulted as a woman, Elsa felt demoralised in her role as a professional teacher. She interpreted the disrespectful behaviour of male colleagues towards her as embedded in the culture and tradition of her ethnic group, which follows gender constructions that allocate women a dependent and powerless low social position. These constructions remain strong in the school and region where Elsa teaches. She expects there is still a long way to go to reach gender equality because she has identified a general pattern of patriarchal thinking and doing.

The same thing even where I am teaching right now, you find that we have certain posts in the school for example being a deputy, a senior teacher, a discipline master: all those posts are meant for men because they don’t see woman as someone who is capable of having discipline. (5:6)

As someone who feels discrimination based on her being female on a daily basis, Elsa is ready to fight for equal treatment and rights. The practice she follows (and which she regards as important in order to not let the male teachers get away with such discriminatory and disrespectful behaviour towards female teachers) is to challenge their behaviour, speak to the principal and try to get his support.

From Elsa’s experience, much depends on the principal and whether he (in most cases the principal would be male) follows the same pattern of unequal gender constructions. Where a principal is willing to support female teachers in their struggle for equality between the sexes, Elsa sees a chance that gender disparities in schools can be changed – which would not only have an impact on the professionals but also on the learners who observe and learn from gender relations around them.
Other female teachers reported similar experiences of discrimination and unequal treatment in the workplace, based on gender. Beth remembered an instance where she was not treated the same as her male colleague and was deprived of an opportunity she was entitled to. After writing a theatre play and training her students to perform it well, her principal did not allow her to go to the different competitions with her students, but chose a male teacher to go with them. When they succeeded at national level, she did not give in any longer, even though her principal explained:

‘You are not supposed to move with boys. You will not be able to control them.’ Then I told him: ‘If I’ve been controlling them in class, why not outside?’ Then I told him: ‘I must go.’ Then I went. So while I was there, OK, the performance took three days, he kept on calling me. Where are you? Where are the boys? Where are they? Until I was so bitter, very much bitter. (2:70)

Although Beth had done all the work behind the scenes, the principal considered the responsibility beyond her when her chance came.

The lack of recognition and the discriminatory behaviour of Beth’s superior throughout the process caused her frustration and resentfulness because she had led the students to perform so well. Although she initially gave in to the principal’s decision, she later fought for her recognition and place when her class was selected to perform the play at the national level. And she accompanied her students even though the principal was against it. His explanation that she – a female teacher – was not supposed to travel and look after boys while away, and that she would not be able to control them because she is female, reveals patriarchal argument patterns. The fact that he kept on calling to check if everything was all right indicates that he was truly convinced that a female teacher could not measure up to the given task. Although this experience is not about the formal leadership position of a female teacher, Beth, in her capacity as author and director of the play, had taken on the responsibility of leading the students to success in their
performance. She had to fight for her position as director of the play without any solidarity from her male or female colleagues.

In another instance, Beth felt discriminated against by her male colleagues who cheated her of an opportunity she had been anticipating – to become a leader in digital literacy at her school.

When they were introducing the laptops for the children, they say … teachers who had knowledge in computer should apply so that they go and teach the primary school teachers. Now, I know computers, so we collected our certificates, and I was the only female. So I collected it and some other teachers, male teachers, also collected. But only to realise that my certificate didn’t reach the office. Asking why, I think they feared because they knew, I'm a woman, and I'm the only one, automatically, they'd pick on me and then they would be left out. So I was bitter about it. I was so bitter. (2:50)

As the only female teacher in this situation, her male colleagues deliberately left her out and did not forward her application. It was too late for her to do anything about it once she realised what had happened, and she felt betrayed by her male colleagues.

‘I am very sure people would resist’: Gender equality and sexual orientation

Depending on the community and region in which a particular school is situated, discrimination and inequality based on gender, as well as the limits of teaching gender equality, varied substantially in the accounts of the teachers. The first group of experiences demonstrates the strong influence that the community (social life outside the school and where the learners originate from) exerts on schools. This resulted in teachers feeling that certain issues are not negotiable, the parents and churches do not accept them and schools would be in trouble if they taught the issues differently. Gender equality emerged as one such topic that the teachers felt was only possible to teach to a certain degree because, in the homes, the men are the heads. Harald put it like this:
In fact, there it is still Africanised: ‘The woman remains a woman’, that is what they say – and I’m just using their words – that if I marry you, you are my woman and even if you have your job, you still have to do all that I say and work for me. If, for example, you are my wife, as in terms of what I see in the community now, still these women are meant to work under men, yes. So that has never changed, nothing at all, nothing so far as such. (8:58)

Teaching about gender equality in all areas of life would be unacceptable to many community members and parents, according to Harald. He felt they would resist it and that he would be in trouble if he crossed the line of what was perceived as acceptable. As a woman,

you will look after the children, you cook, you do all that, the man is just to sit there; then serve the man and do what the man says. Your opinion as a woman is not the opinion of the family but my opinion as a man is the family opinion, yes. So that one still stands, no change so far. (8:56–58)

Harald ascribed these patriarchal structures to the tradition that says when a man marries a woman, he owns her and she has to obey what the husband says. Harald is sure that it would cause trouble if he as a teacher interfered by instilling values of gender equality in the children. The violence in some homes results, according to Harald, from women demanding equal say in decision-making and equal distribution of labour in the home. He would not give much chance of success in his school to programmes that try to teach the learners gender equality and instil values of equal power sharing between the sexes.

Harald also described the impossibility of teaching about the diversity of sexuality and sexual orientation in the context of human rights because this would be a taboo. Not only do the vast majority of politicians, churches and denominations condemn homosexuality and declare it inhuman, schools would also not accept it in any way. In this hostile environment,
homosexuals will always hide themselves unless you use another way to get them. Because the community perceives them extremely wrong and they don’t want to see them, yes. Even, it goes all the way from the grassroots to the government level even to the top there, the government would never wish to hear that … even in institutions, not only in schools but also institutions of higher learning, the issue of lesbians, homosexuals, if there are students participating in that they will always hide themselves, totally hide themselves. (8:66)

The dominant negative sentiments and attitude towards sexualities other than heterosexuality in the Kenyan society are mirrored in the institutional school practices of negating the diversity of sexuality and sexual orientation completely. The extent to which schools do not accept homosexuality is highlighted in the following statement:

I’ve heard of some secondary schools for girls and some are suspected to have involved themselves in lesbians. What the school would do is just to chase them out, yes, just chase them out, ‘You don’t belong here. We don’t do this here. It is not acceptable’, yes. And that is actually what they do, yes. Even to the boys in boys’ schools, if anything is heard that there was something like homosexuality, it is not negotiable, there is no debate about it, you just go. You are just chased out, you don’t belong here. (8:68)

Diversity education that includes comprehensive sexuality education and sexual orientation is scarcely imaginable in this environment, especially since sodomy is a felony under the Kenyan Penal Code. Unsurprisingly, none of the interviewed teachers spoke about approaches to diversity education or practices that embraced gender and sexual orientation issues in an accepting way, or in a human rights context.
‘Girls are not supposed to be involved in anything’:
Gender inequality in the classroom

As the only female teacher in the school at the northern border of Kenya, Beth had to deal with the fact that girls were discriminated against in almost all instances and institutional practices. Girls were not allowed to be in a boarding school nor were they allowed to eat lunch with the boys or participate in any extracurricular activities including sports lessons. As a female teacher, Beth was also not allowed to go to the sports field. In this conservative Muslim area, she only had very few girls in her class.

Because they believe that when a girl goes to school, she gets destroyed, so they cannot get men to marry them. So girls mostly they don’t go to school, they remain at home. When they try so much to learn, after Class 8, when the child completes Class 8, already the man is there, yes: complete and get married. (2:62)

As a teacher, she felt powerless against the overwhelming traditional, cultural and religious rules and values that seemed to govern the community and which she had to understand.

I was against early marriages where you find a child just today, the child is in school, tomorrow, when you go there to class, she is not there. When you ask: ‘Where is she?’ They answer: ‘Madame, you didn’t hear yesterday when we were celebrating her wedding at night?’ (2:68)

After teaching in that school for a while, Beth felt the need to do something about the discrimination against girls and the profound inequality between girls and boys, men and women. She started questioning the patriarchal structures, particularly early marriages, female genital mutilation and polygamy. In a first attempt to empower girls, she began to discuss with the girls and boys about the ways in which things were done.
One day I asked them: ‘Why do you marry when it is still early? Why don’t you go to school?’ One of them told me: ‘Madame, you are going to school, yes, we accept you have read all the books. But we, we leave school and we marry very rich men. We just sit in the house and they bring everything. And you, you are here, struggling with books, you have left your children far away … even if I marry as the fourth wife, or the fifth wife, this man will be bringing everything in the house’. (2:68)

Beth had to defend her lifestyle – she could not take her family to that hostile area, the only place where she got a teacher’s post. She did not give in:

And then another thing that I was fighting against was this female circumcision. Also they do circumcise their girls … And then I asked – I was just trying to argue with them – I asked the boys: ‘Why do you marry so many women?’ … You see now, they used to see me as somebody who has run away from their religion. ‘Even when God created Adam and Eve, I don’t see any other woman around there. Why are you marrying other women?’ Then some of them told me: ‘Mohammed married many women, and that was the culture of Mohammed, and we can still follow that culture’. There is the religion part and there is the cultural part. And also another one told me it was because they want to taste every girl. (2:68)

The longer Beth worked as a teacher in that faraway region, the more she felt the urge to change something and empower the girls.

That’s why I was feeling in my heart that, supposed I’m given an opportunity, I can talk to these people. And I made friendship with them! In fact, they didn’t allow their girls to go in any other … there is a name they used to call us, so they could not allow their children to mix with us [people from outside]. But for me it reached the time they could come in my house! They came so many in my house, I talked to them, I gave them small things …
So when I came this side, I bought for them pants … When I reach there, in my house: ‘What have you brought for us’? I gave them. So they frequently came in my house. I talked to them, we laughed and then they went. (2:78)

Beth’s strategy was to first build trust and a personal relationship between herself and the girls to create a basis for exchange and discussions about different lifestyles, about gender issues and to open their thinking to other ways of doing things. She was successful to a certain degree, as the parents would allow their children to mix with her and visit her at home. Beth felt helpless in that almost-closed community of people with their patriarchal and discriminatory structures, most of whom had not travelled or seen a city or different environment in their lives. Her role became that of a window to the world outside, which allowed a glimpse of the life and diversity out there. Being confronted with vast gender inequality and being the only teacher wishing to empower the girls, she was aware that her influence was very limited and that there was nothing much she could do, for instance, against the exclusion of herself and the girls from the sports lessons.

Beth’s professional experience of discrimination against women and girls in schools and communities is in stark contrast to Harald’s perspective of gender relations in formal education:

The country needs to understand that the boy child has been neglected. A lot and more concern was given to the girls. So educational wise I think it is okay. (8:55)

Noticing that the girls have done better in their final exams in the school where he teaches in the past few years, Harald was convinced that gender equality with regards to education had been achieved. After the international community, government and schools ran many programmes focusing on the education of the girl-child over the past 20 years, he is concerned about the boys and that they are completely out of the focus. To gain further evidence of his impression, Harald started following up to see
where his former students went after finishing secondary school. He found that the majority of the girls were going to college or university after secondary school, but most boys started work and very few went to college or university. ‘I think there is somehow a neglect of the boy as the new trend now for education.’ (8:54) Despite the fact that Harald sees the women in homes and communities occupy a lower social position than the men, he is convinced that the recent educational success of girls shows that they have been sufficiently empowered in terms of education. In his view, this empowerment was at the expense of the boys whose education was neglected in past years. Discrimination against girls in schools was only highlighted by few teachers as one of the diversity issues they had to deal with. This suggests that some success can be seen from the girl-child education programmes of the past – at least in some regions and settings of Kenya as also seen in the statistics. However, these contrasting experiences and perceptions about gender (in)equality in education point at huge disparities between different schools and regions with their own sociocultural characteristics in Kenya.

Another type of differentiation emerging from the interviews relates to health, and the challenge for teachers to consider not only those children who are regarded healthy or ‘normal’, but also those living with a chronic disease, or mental and physical impairments.

‘Talking about HIV and Aids victims openly? No!’:16

Health and stigma

HIV and Aids emerged as a special topic among the health-related issues that the teachers talked about, due to the stigma and myths surrounding the disease in Kenyan society. Particularly in boarding schools, teachers need to take care of the health of children and often find themselves tasked with applying for medication, negotiating with health officials and lobbying for proper medication and treatment for infected learners. Teaching in a boarding school, Florence described the need to be aware of learners who are HIV-positive:
These children, we really need to take good care of them, but there is that fear: ‘This one has HIV’, you see. Both from the teachers and also – they look at you from another angle, and these children never did any mistake to get the disease. In fact, most they were born with the disease, like in my school we have a number of them who are HIV-positive. In most occasions we, that have understood, we have undergone training, we really even give them extra meals because of the drugs they take, the ARVs. But the other children now, we really try to keep it a secret so that the children cannot look at them as those who are sick. (6:42)

The situation of HIV-positive learners in her boarding school is complicated because the teachers try to keep their status secret for fear of stigmatisation. At the same time, affected learners need to be given proper meals and their medication regularly – a special treatment that is sometimes difficult to hide from the other learners.

Florence also pointed out that she struggles with the right of the children to be treated the same as everyone else during lessons where she as a teacher may use corporal punishment to discipline the children when they misbehave. In order not to weaken HIV-positive learners, she sometimes spares them from punishment but without any good reason she can give to the class. Similarly, during physical activities in sports lessons, she asks herself if she should spare HIV-positive children from exhausting exercises – and sometimes does so. However, she observed affected learners to be unhappy and feel discriminated against by such preferential treatment. They want to be treated like normal children, like everyone else; they want to receive punishment for misbehaviour and engage in the same physical activities as their classmates. Even though Florence has participated in courses on HIV and Aids and learned that HIV-positive learners should get special attention and treatment, she felt that she was discriminating by treating them differently from everyone else and observed that the learners themselves experience these situations as ‘psychological torture’.
So we discriminate them still on some things in school … We need to see how we are going to tackle them in a way that they feel okay, despite the fact that I have the disease: I am also a normal person, you see, I am also a normal person. (6:44)

As Florence described, where schools feel they need to protect HIV-positive learners by not revealing their status, it becomes a balancing act for the teachers to deal confidentially with the health-related information on one hand, and making sure that the respective learners get the attention and treatment they need on the other.

The workshops and training about HIV and Aids in schools that Florence participated in have made her confident and equipped her with tools to deal with HIV-positive learners. She works closely with the guidance and counselling department of her school to treat learners with HIV-related symptoms in a confidential way. Similar approaches to dealing with HIV in the schools were reported by other teachers as well. All schools tried to keep the HIV status of their learners and staff confidential in order to protect them from stigmatisation and exclusion often based on ignorance and fear. Ana also confirmed that

Most of the cases that have known like students with HIV, actually, the schools have gone through guiding and counselling and most of them keep it very confidential … so that the student is not exposed. (1:144)

The infected children are taught to hide their status, which is sometimes difficult for young learners in primary schools. According to Ana, guidance and counselling is needed not only for the HIV-infected learners but for all learners so they are taught to respect and not discriminate against one another. However, the general approach is to hide the status, suggesting to the infected learners that they have a blemish that no one should know about in order to not be isolated. Some of the teachers perceived no alternative to this approach and confirmed that openness about
an HIV-positive status would be untenable in the contexts they teach and work in.

Aside from the challenge of keeping the HIV-positive status of learners confidential and not treating them differently (even though infected learners need more attention and care), the teachers also described uneasiness when teaching about reproductive health and sexually transmitted diseases. Florence pointed out that teaching about HIV and Aids in the Kenyan context commonly goes along with sexuality education that paints a horrific picture of what can happen through having unprotected sex. This includes the danger of contracting HIV and the opportunistic diseases that go along with infection, eventually causing death.

In our syllabuses, these children still feel discriminated by the way we will, the method that you are going to use to pass the information to them, you see. What is it? You know you will die, if you have Aids, you will die. So the child will look at herself and see now – you know we all fear death – even if I am told today: ‘You are going to die’. Surely, you see? What about a child who is less than 12 years old? So they really feel: ‘Now I am the one with HIV, now I am the one who is to die, I am the one who is not like the rest. So I am only waiting for death’. (6:62)

The uneasiness Florence described when teaching about HIV and Aids – and empathising with HIV-positive learners in her class, and feeling that the content and methods are not adequate, but putting blame and fear on the infected learners – points to the fact that the moral discourse about sexuality and HIV and Aids prevalent in Kenyan society affects school lessons and teachers.

‘Teacher, excuse me, I have not understood!’: Learners with special needs

Other health-related diversities that the teachers mentioned regarded slow learners and learners with intellectual or learning disabilities. While slow learners were difficult to integrate in
lessons because of the large classes of up to 80 learners, children
with severe intellectual and learning disabilities had barely any
chance to participate in the lessons without assistance. The
teachers confirmed that they tried to give everyone a chance and
also taught their classes to be patient with learners who needed
more time to understand what was being taught; but they also
expressed a lack of knowledge about different forms of disabilities
and how to assess or deal with them.

Now, the challenges that we are really face, we have some children,
I don’t know how to call them, that need assistance. I don’t know
how to put this type of children who come to school and what
you expect them to do at a certain level they don’t do. (1:48)

Ana expressed what emerged to be a common experience among
the interviewed teachers who felt ill-equipped to assess or deal with
learners with special needs. Similarly, Florence described a situation
and her lack of expertise to diagnose or handle certain learners:

They are even beyond a slow learner. Because a slow learner will
come to class when you are able to write number 1, number 2,
number 3, maybe up to a certain … but you know, there is a child
who keeps on drawing but cannot – I don’t know how to put it.
Something like mental. Now these children – there is also one
who comes to school and the saliva is just falling down. (6:50)

Gerald pointed at the structural situation of lacking resources:

Many of our schools I can tell you teachers are strained; we need
more teachers on the ground. We need to employ more teachers.
You get to a school and there are classes over 100 students: how
do you get, how do you reach the slow learner? (7:45)

Florence also confirmed that she was not able to include everyone
in a lesson with the limited time and resources she has, and that
some learners are simply left behind. Although learners who are
not capable of grasping what is being taught usually drop out of school sooner or later, some initiatives are trying to prevent school dropouts and to create adequate schooling by setting up special needs schools and going into regular schools to identify learners with impairments. Florence described the new developments:

They have organised special schools, they have trained teachers, they have set up programmes for assessment so that if a child, if a child has a problem undergoes assessment and put in the right school. Even in our neighbouring school we have a special unit, a special unit for special children for those who have done special needs education. Yeah, it is there, the problem is, some teachers still neglect them, still. If a child cannot manage to do something and you have a group of fast learners, I will always work with this one. In fact, three left our schools because I would always work with these ones, I teach, I do the work, I mark the work in the class, these ones were always left. (6:50)

Handling health-related diversities and paying attention to children with special needs, is, according to Florence, not possible under the conditions of a normal school where teachers are overburdened with work. She felt that slow learners or learners with disabilities are let down by teachers like herself who prefer to work with the fast learners. In under-resourced schools, teachers ignore children with disabilities and give up on them. Parents then take their children from school because they are left out of the lessons.

However, some schools do get assistance from outside organisations and interventions, which helps the schools and principals to find a way of dealing with health-related diversities. Florence pointed out that at her school, things are changing as procedures are put in place for learners with special needs:

So with our school we have a new principal. Our principal calls the parents, advices the parents and then they organise in the sub-county and the county for the child to be assessed and then taken to that special school. (6:50)
The emerging school practice of referring children with special needs to outside school actors, however, confirms that the schools and teachers are not equipped to include learners with disabilities. Both Ana and Florence referred to inadequate policies and measures in place to deal with fast and slow learners:

There are those who are exceptional, who have a very high IQ and they perceive things very fast and they’re so fast to understand things. Others are slow learners and they take time to understand. You have the same teacher, you have 40 minutes for all of them, they have an exam it is out of 100 [points], they have to finish it in two hours and the evaluation measures are the same, although they are different, very different. (1:84)

The practice of assessing and evaluating all learners in the same way – even though some would be considered slow learners or learners with intellectual or learning impairments, and others as intellectually gifted – was of great concern to the teachers as being discriminatory and unfair. Another type of experience touches on the requirement of teachers to protect learners with special needs from discrimination in the classroom. Elsa described her role as passive observer of the situation:

I have a student in Form 4 now, he is disabled and you find that that student is isolated, the other students don’t want this student to talk they don’t want to be associated with him. They don’t want him to be part of their anything, yeah, maybe if they are playing in the field or they are forming group discussions in class, they don’t want him to be part of them so that one I have observed among the students. (5:30)

Ana tried to create empathy and respect for different abilities to learn among her students for a girl with a learning impairment:

And every time she kept asking a question: ‘Teacher, I have not understood!’ Sometimes I could teach and teach and when
I reached the end she said: ‘Teacher, excuse me, I have not understood!’ And when I asked: ‘From where my dear?’ Then she says: ‘Everything.’ And you know, the rest of the students were: ‘Mmmh’. They just got bored and with the time, as she was asking such questions, the whole class gets irritated. (1:150)

But from time to time I realised that she was being discriminated because I kept on encouraging the class: ‘Let’s give her a chance to ask her questions and also give you a chance to ask yours and I answer, let us give her a chance.’ So with time I came to realise she was left alone without a friend, she wasn’t working with anybody. She just slept and nobody wanted to talk to her. (1:151)

Ana’s tactic of talking to the class and appealing to them to be considerate and patient, to give everyone a fair chance, worked in the classroom to a certain extent. Outside the classroom, however, Ana observed that the relevant learner was excluded and discriminated against based on her impairment. Similarly, Dora pointed at two challenges she was facing concerning a learner with albinism in her class. The first challenge she reported was when the learner approached her as class teacher:

She began crying and I had to intervene because I was asking her what the problem was. And I called her after the lesson because I told her during the lesson: ‘Maybe we can talk after the lesson’. And after that she was telling me the rest are actually so keen with her skin, she is feeling she is not part of the group. I actually had to talk to her and tell her that actually, it is not all about her sight, it’s about God who created her like that and she should actually accept it and not get depressed. Yes, because she is just like the rest it is only the skin that is different. So I was telling her that actually, she is intelligent and she should take advantage of that and leave the rest aside. Then I had to come and talk to the rest in her absence and tell them that they should not actually be segregating this girl and they should accept her the way she is. And I was also giving them an example that as humans anything
happens and you find yourself handicapped – whom will you blame? So it is actually all a matter of accepting people the way they are. (4:82)

Dora’s practice of counselling the learner and talking separately to her class to create empathy and understanding for human diversity, and appeal to them to accept the learner with albinism, resembles Ana’s strategy to deal with health-related discrimination in her class. The second challenge Dora highlighted about the same learner concerns her uneasiness and insecurity concerning teaching contents in biology that deal with albinism.

It is all about this topic in Form 1 on the variation of genes and all that, what actually causes albinism. So, you know, I actually had to skip the topic because of this girl. It’s still a challenge because we have not actually strategised on how to go about it. But now, well, for a teacher you always have to be very sensitive when handling that class because you know there is a different child from the rest. (4:80)

Based on this experience, Dora identified the need for her school to have a strategy in place for teachers to follow in similar cases. Her way of handling the situation by skipping the particular lessons and, in that way, circumventing the topic completely, can’t be a solution in the long term. Like Florence, who saw the situation in class change when HIV-positive learners were present, Dora felt that the teaching content – in this case, human genetics – and the way the topic is transmitted is not adequate if a learner in the class is affected by it in one way or another. Hence, Dora identified the need for a professional teacher to be sensitive to learners who are ‘different’ and who would be affected by the teaching of specific topics.

Another circumstance regarding learners with special needs relates to the fact that many parents do not want their handicapped children to be seen in public and hence, do not send them to school at all.
I can talk as a teacher. I have seen it happen because you go to a home and to realise there are some children there but they don’t go to school, why? Because they have some disability, they are locked behind in the rooms. (7:31)

To change this situation, parents need a lot of encouragement, as Gerald pointed out:

Where I come from, the schools are embracing that [learners with special needs]. In fact, teachers are coming out and saying: ‘Bring the children to us so that we can be able to assist them’. Yeah, of course, there are other challenges whereby we have some communities whereby our children with disability, they will face some discrimination and all that but then, at school level from where I come from I can say we are really embracing. Like the school where I teach, we have a special school inside our school, we have children with disabilities those with hearing impairments, sight, maybe broken limbs or they are born without limbs. We have many of them, we have many of them and we do encourage our parents to bring those children to school. (7:33)

Gerald was proud to report that his school serves as a role model for embracing disability and trying to create an inclusive learning environment. Going to the homes of the children is, in his perception, part of the professional role and responsibility of a teacher. In talking to parents, he tries to break the stigma around disability that makes parents of handicapped children feel ashamed, so that they can lose the impulse to hide their child and be encouraged by the prospect of getting assistance.

While in some districts, certain support mechanisms for the families and the schools concerning children with special needs have taken effect, in other districts, teachers described frustration due to corruption and the incapacity of officials to act.

You find that somebody who has a problem, will also be put with the rest [in school] because either the special schools would be
expensive or because there’s no information to, maybe somebody could tell them that your child has a special problem, please take him or her to the that school. So you find the child will be wasted along with the others – the others are doing well. But when it comes to being taken care of everybody has a concern for them but the government has done very little to ensure that these people are taken care of. There are people who are appointed even at the district level to be concerned for them but then they don’t care. (3:63)

Chris also pointed out that, due to the stigma related to disability in the society, district officials or leaders would, in some cases, not dare go to families to inform them of ways of getting assistance. In these situations, the schools are left alone with the affected children without the expertise to diagnose or assist them.

‘In Kenya we have two tribes – the rich and the poor’: Poverty and schooling

An issue cutting across, and relating to, almost all other diversity aspects concerns the difference between learners from poor and those from rich backgrounds:

We have the rich and the poor … There is a lot of disparity … the gap between the rich and the poor is big, is big, literally, big. (7:22)

At a structural level, Beth pointed to the education system that does no justice to this economic inequality and hence, creates structural discrimination:

We have those who have and the don’t have. So you find that the have, they are in their world and the don’t have are in their world. The don’t have are in low schools where there are no resources, there is nothing, they have to struggle for themselves, and those have they are in big schools where there is everything.
And you see, now, what we have been arguing, you find that the students from the local community and those ones from the other schools, they do the same exams. And you know, they are rated equally! You see now there is some discrimination! Because this one is using this kerosene lamp to read and even that kerosene smell is there. And those ones have electricity and everything. How can you rate those people equally? It’s a kind of discrimination. (2:88)

The economic inequality that Beth highlights does not only refer to the background of the learners and their families but also, and more so, to the economic disparity between the schools as institutions. Learners from rich families have better conditions in schools (being in a learning conducive space) and the schools themselves have created a differentiated system with high-cost schools catering for learners from rich families. These extremely different teaching and learning environments exacerbate the unequal conditions for the learners’ achievements.

The extent of difference between the very rich schools and the very poor schools was described as massive by the teachers. While the affluent schools offered every possible support for learning and extra-mural activities, in other schools parents struggled to pay for a school uniform for their children, and teachers tried to maintain an environment for basic learning to take place in overcrowded and under-resourced classrooms. These structurally unequal economic conditions for the schools to operate in and facilitate learning (while, at the same time, learners are all assessed and rated in the the same way in their exams) emerged as a great concern of the interviewed teachers.

Gerald pointed out that the government has tried to relieve poverty-stricken areas with school feeding programmes that provide one meal a day for learners who would otherwise have difficulty concentrating and learning on an empty stomach. However, these programmes have not reached all schools and areas where support is needed:
Even in our – these other areas, there is rampant poverty, there is poverty at the highest level if you can call it that and people are suffering, the truth is, people are suffering a lot. (7:39)

Only some of the areas classified as ‘arid and semi-arid lands’ (ASAL) are eligible for specific support to schools, which Gerald pointed out as not being sufficient.

Chris also confirmed that there are a number of programmes targeting poor families and trying to create conditions where their children can go to school. However, people who should benefit from these programmes often do not get access due to corruption at all levels.

I have seen people in the community who they can pay for their kids but because they are the ones who manage that then they give it to their people. So the person at the bottom is left there. Forms come for filling in and then they hide the forms and give them to their friends. You come there and they say there is only one, so one person is given or two. Then most of the forms they take them – it happens in most areas but I can say most of the things are there but it is only about how it is done. (3:69)

So the biggest problem is with leadership and corruption … when it comes to catering for all the people in the community. (3:80)

The corruption surrounding issues of poverty relief and support programmes was mentioned as a cause of frustration by the teachers who observed funds not reaching the families who were in need. Engaged teachers reported supporting their learners by going with them to local government offices to ensure that the learners got the form to apply for support.

Depending on the location and status of the school, the teachers described different challenges related to economic discrepancies that they as teachers and their schools as institutions faced. Gerald described the devastating poverty of the majority of families in his area and emphasised that this had an impact on all aspects of
his school. Although he did not identify discrimination based on social status among the learners as a problem, he pointed to the tremendous work that he did outside class to support, motivate, help and counsel his learners.

Because as a teacher, we deal with many issues at school level. More than half of my school children are orphaned. There are children who live with their relatives, and they are mistreated and the first confidant is the teacher. So when you are close to your children, definitely they will always open up to you and they will tell you what is happening in their lives and you realise: some of them are going through hell. Some come to school without any food they have not eaten anything. You see them, they cannot even play, concentrating in class is a problem. (7:37)

From Gerald’s narrative, it becomes obvious how learners’ social and economic problems interlink and reinforce each other, and how this affects their learning in school. As an engaged and caring teacher, Gerald has started various initiatives to support learners faced with socio-economic problems.

I’ve been in charge of so many activities in my school, including ‘zamus’, meaning ‘teachers’ turns’, including guiding and counselling and we always fight all this. I have always given my own personal experience when I am sharing … Sometimes I sit with students and you share and when they tell you where they come from you feel pity. You think of your story and well, you had an advantage, you had somebody to put some food on the table for you. But there are children who are literally staying in – I can’t even talk about that … Every Thursday we have a guiding and counselling group, we talk to our students … I always tell them: ‘There is hope’. I have always believed: the past cannot dictate my future … I have literally gone to members of parliament in my area with my own delegation and I can tell you: they [the children in need of support] are in school … When the parents come, I talk to them, I tell them: ‘You have the right. You
need to be served by the members of the parliament, you need to go, go to their offices’. (7:41)

In Gerald’s school, tremendous efforts have to be made by the teachers to create a situation where the basic needs of the children are catered for so that learning can take place. These include group counselling, fundraising among teachers to pay for uniforms of children who cannot afford to buy them, filling in forms to apply for support, initiating feeding programmes, lobbying for support at local governments, informing parents, home visits, giving guidance and motivational talks for the learners.

Besides the struggle to meet learners’ basic needs in terms of food, health and a safe place to stay, Ana, who works in an economically better-off environment, particularly pointed to the psychological aspects of living in economically desperate situations. As a teacher, she tries to identify and mentally lift up affected learners in order to prevent their early dropout from school.

The ones coming from poor families find it a challenge to cope and therefore, as a teacher there’s a lot that you need to do in order to identify those kind of differences amongst the students. Then emphasis can be put in order to lift the spirit and self-esteem of that child that comes from a poor family to the level of that one that comes from the rich family. So that they can have a platform to start. Otherwise, that difference in the background of students affect the self-esteem of the child, which in turn affects the performance. (1:82)

When teaching classes of up to 100 learners, it seems hardly possible for the teachers to know about and respond to individual learners’ worries and backgrounds related to economic poverty.

Institutional responses to the psycho-social aspect of living in socio-economically disadvantaged situations mainly relate to the support provided through the guidance and counselling department.
The major strategy that we use in my school is guidance and counselling, and we have a lot of motivational speakers and also we have bursaries that are meant for poor students. (5:54)

Besides the psychological impact, Ana also described how poverty hinders access to schooling.

So again, the issue of difference in economic background affects their stay in school as well because it affects the school fees. You find that some of them come from families who do not afford to pay the school fees in time and most of the time the child is away and the child is back, away is back. (1:86)

Despite the fact that schooling should be free, schools are dependent on school fees to operate – even on small amounts. Learners whose parents struggle to pay the fees are sent home until they can pay, marking the affected learners as ‘poor’ and making their economic situation visible to everyone. Another inequality arising from socio-economic disparities relates to corruption and cheating at exams. According to Gerald and Ana, rich parents sometimes assist their children to cheat and illegally buy the exam questions in advance to provide their own children with the best opportunity to attain high scores and better chances of admission to a good university.

Further examples of how economic disparities become visible in schools and how this becomes a challenge to the teachers were reported. Elsa observed incidents of exclusion and discrimination among the learners based on their economic situation and social status:

Amongst our learners you find that there are those who come from rich families, others are very poor. Then you find that there are those social classes so you find that they form groups, so there is that group for the rich and those who come from poor backgrounds are isolated. (5:30)
Similar group dynamics were also described by other teachers, especially those working in more affluent schools. Chris observed an intersection of social status with the urban/rural divide in affluent schools:

The school in Arjana town, there was some kind of discrimination. Children who come from the town, as much as they were from almost the same social status, but then the ones who are in town would go to a club but these ones in the villages could not go so they were ‘These are the children of the club’. I noticed it and I even raised it in the in our [teachers’] meetings and said okay, there is this issue we need to address, but then you find that some teachers – because maybe they have alienated themselves from others – they will say: ‘No problem there! We’ll try and address it’. And then it was taken down under the carpet and stayed there. But it only happens in high-cost schools but normal schools everybody is everybody, nobody cares. (3:74)

According to Chris, discrimination based on social status is an issue mainly in urban middle-class and high-cost schools. His attempt to alert his colleagues that action should be taken against discrimination among learners based on their socio-economic (and, in part, intersecting with their rural) background, did not lead to any action. He explained this as lack of interest and empathy on the part of his colleagues. In contrast, Elsa reported her practice after observing discrimination against learners from poor backgrounds, which follows her school’s policy for dealing with problems in class.

Every class has a class teacher and a class teacher will hold a class meeting with his/her students to discuss issues that are affecting them in their class. Sometimes they are not free to tell you because they don’t want the others to hear them speaking out. So you tell them to write something: you don’t write your name but write all the problems that you are experiencing in class … When we realised that that [discrimination based on social class] was a
major problem, whereby there are those girls, for example in my class, there is that group of girls that used to call themselves the ‘Five Stars’. So when we realised that, we called them for guidance and counselling. Not just the five girls but all of them, so we tried guiding them on the side effects of having those social classes or seeing other students as lesser things. And I think after that guidance, the teacher in charge of guidance and counselling she had a chance to call those five students and they admitted that they had formed a group for those five girls who come from rich communities … So after the guidance and counselling session, I think, yeah, I can see, I think after two terms there were not those social classes so that gap had reduced. (5:32)

The guidance and counselling intervention (including whole-class discussions, anonymous written submissions, individual counselling and more general inputs focusing on discrimination and its consequences) led to a positive outcome, according to Elsa. The individual counselling of learners also included showing the five girls, who had discriminated against the others, ways of friendship and close relationships that are not based on excluding, discriminating and exerting power over others.

According to Dora, status differentiations are on the increase in Kenyan society and the schools reflect this development. On a more general note, she stated:

People are socialising based on their status. Maybe on Fridays, after work, you realise that people just meet, have fun. So if you are not working or if you don’t have money, of course you won’t suit in that class. So we have such divisions. (4:46)

Similarly, Florence pointed at the intersection of the socio-economic status and ethnic group affiliation, explaining:

You find this kind of discrimination even with our own people when they know that you are living like that, you are in a low social class. (6:14)
According to Florence, social class formations create new demarcations between members of the same ethnic group and thereby interrupt lines of difference that were constructed as a more relevant group identity (‘even with our own people’). Hence, it can be concluded on the other hand that social class potentially dilutes or even replaces ethnic group demarcations and constructs them as irrelevant. The demarcations of haves and have-nots in school also manifest as tangible differences, a challenge that Chris experienced regularly in his job as a teacher.

It will always be easy if you find like the same social status but when you have two, one of high and one of low status – then it becomes difficult because they need textbooks and the one can’t get. The others have textbooks – then what do you do? Especially in private schools: these ones have all the textbooks, you have to give homework and then there [for the others] is nothing you can do at home – that becomes some of a challenge. (3:72)

The problem that Chris described arises when textbooks needed in school are not provided by the schools or government so that access depends on whether the parents or guardians can provide the books for their children. As a teacher, he felt he had no means of mitigating the disadvantage of learners who did not have the textbooks. However, the actions some teachers took to assist learners from poor economic and social backgrounds are impressive. One school collected donations to open a children’s home for their learners who lived on the streets.

The teachers also reported assisting learners from poor backgrounds who had potential and were hardworking by providing scholarships, helping them to find a safe place to stay and thus enabling them to successfully complete their school education and apply for government bursaries. As Chris said:

Thank God of my experience when I was poor, at least I try … Many teachers do that in fact, the young generation of teachers are really helping a lot in terms of making the child learn. (3:71)
Other teachers also mentioned that their own situation (coming from poor economic backgrounds) helped them to empathise with the affected learners and to find ways of assisting them.

**Conclusion**

What is striking when looking at the diversity phenomena experienced by teachers is the variety of situations they referred to – curriculum, teaching strategies and contents, the marginalisation and stigmatisation of specific learners and the need to adjust their professional role and practice as a teacher – depending on the specific context of the school.

Tribalism as politically motivated hostility and violence (that does not arise from specific cultural or religious differences but relies on large group constructions of political and economic power and opportunities in Kenyan society at large) also impacts on the schools. Installing guidance and counselling departments, especially for traumatised learners, was the main approach of the government after the 2007/2008 post-election violence. In particular, teachers who work at schools with a history of tribalism and violence between ethnic groups, or whose ethnic set-up is insecure due to national politics, are highly sensitised and aware that conflict can break out again at any time. Hence, awareness and record keeping of learners’ backgrounds was identified as a necessary precondition in these schools in order for the teachers to be able to properly understand conflict situations and the problems of certain learners.

However, this practice also raises the question whether this ethnicised way of interpreting conflicts reinforces tribalism to some extent given that it views the students primarily as members of a certain ethnic group (with its specific position in that school and in society). Teachers’ interventions to respond to and prevent tribalism (which usually manifests as stigmatisation, offending speech and fighting along tribal lines in schools) mainly include sensitising sessions about non-offensive speech and reconciliation in the classrooms and whole-school assemblies – as well as
counselling sessions with individuals affected by tribalism. Some of the teachers reported that they have opportunities to take part in seminars and training workshops on topics identified by teachers and school principals as problem areas to be addressed in the schools. Tribalism as described by the teachers does not necessarily include violence and conflict. High levels of awareness about ethnic group affiliation reportedly leads to parents entrusting ‘their own’ teachers with their children and teachers assisting learners from their own group more – particularly if they are in the minority. However, not all teachers experienced tribalism or high levels of awareness concerning ethnic group affiliation in the schools where they teach. The region, the mix of different ethnic groups and their construction as essential and pure, general and specific power relations and other factors seem to influence bonding along ethnic lines and politically motivated ethnic hostilities.

From the teachers’ accounts, different mother tongues (as an indicator of ethnic diversity in the schools and the classrooms) can be viewed as a problem because it has potential for stigmatisation and exclusion as well as being a barrier to teaching and learning. In schools with one dominant mother tongue, teachers and learners (particularly in primary school) use their mother tongue and the teachers practise code-switching to explain learning contents in the language of the students. This practice, however, excludes the speakers of other mother tongues and is therefore questionable in the experience of the teachers. That the languages of instruction are English and Kiswahili puts some groups of learners at a disadvantage. The particular region where a school is situated, and the rural-urban divide, emerged as relevant lines of difference related to the language of instruction policy. This policy leaves rural, marginalised and remote areas of the country at a structural disadvantage because students from these areas have little to no exposure to these languages in their daily lives. The practice of exam-paper theft promoted by some teachers and principals in remote areas as a response to this disadvantage can be interpreted as a strategy to reach a certain level of inclusion,
and to counteract the structural disadvantage. However, it also indicates that some communities at the margins of the society might perceive the benefits of formal school education as reduced to the school-leaving certificate.

The need for teachers and schools to respond to religious or cultural diversities and sociocultural backgrounds (e.g. to rethink their teaching practices in order to become responsive to the background of the learners, to overcome barriers to learning and teaching or to solve arising conflicts) emerged as a central theme. Evidence for this can be found, for example, in refugee learners feeling excluded and ignored if treated the same as the other learners. Examples of teachers’ and schools’ responses included the collection and confidential handling of student data concerning cultural, religious and other background information in order to be better able to classify and understand behaviours or conflicts. This also included awareness of religious requirements so that schools can arrange for boarding students to participate in the religious activities of their particular religious organisation.

However, it again raises the question of whether these classifications (relating to culture, religion, ethnic (sub-)group etc.) promote stigmatisation and prejudice and, possibly, reinforce certain stigmatising patterns in the teaching and learning process.

Ethnic and other large group constructions can lose importance and even become insignificant – as exemplified by Christian denominations that create strong identification with their church and a sense of belonging and membership. This inclusive effect on the one hand provokes exclusive effects on the other hand by drawing a sharp line between members and non-members and thus, replacing other lines of difference. Denominational schools therefore annul some of the diversity phenomena found in public schools in Kenya – but at the expense of being exclusive for their own members. The reports about students and teachers of different religious backgrounds, particularly in boarding schools, suggest that religious diversity could be accommodated in many schools (e.g. allowing the students and staff to participate in
church services during the required times). However, the extent to which religious diversity is accommodated in schools differs, and cannot be taken for granted.

The need for teachers to be responsive to specific cultural, religious and socio-economic settings within Kenya also became apparent with respect to knowledge, learning and formal education. Connecting the teaching content of the curriculum with the specific lived experiences and concepts of knowledge found in the, often culturally diverse, classrooms was highlighted as a challenge. In a more radical community where formal education in general is rejected (including the languages of instruction), and which regards knowledge as a common community good (that cannot be owned and produced by an individual), teachers’ professionalism is questioned fundamentally. Bridging the gap between the requests of national government and the requests of the local community seemed barely possible in some instances.

To a less extreme extent, teachers in other regions identified the need to include a variety of teaching strategies, subject fields and skills and, at the same time, to de-emphasise the focus on examinations and drumming abstract knowledge into learners in order to not marginalise and exclude particular learners. Some teachers developed their own inclusive approaches by applying arts-based, creative and performative teaching strategies that advantaged learners who had difficulty taking in and reproducing abstract knowledge as emphasised in the curriculum. The teachers also identified the need to include more subject fields like music, arts, crafts, drama, technical skills and sports education in the curriculum in order to be responsive to the various sociocultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the learners, and to not advantage specific groups at the expense of others.

The perceptions of knowledge and learning expressed by some teachers, based on their experience, are rooted in the assumption that learning not only takes place in and through the head but also through engagement in creative and physical activities. Diverse forms of teaching and learning would help learners with different
sociocultural and socio-economic backgrounds to succeed in the formal education system and not put a small group of learners at an advantage.

The examples of how the teachers experienced gender inequality and the discrimination against girls and female teachers in their schools reveal the strong influence of the immediate sociocultural and economic context (with its traditions and values) in which the school is situated. While some teachers did not experience gender as a relevant diversity category and basis for discrimination of any kind in their schools, it surfaced as the most challenging category for other teachers. The discrepancy between the teachers’ experiences of a school where girls are excluded and discriminated against on various levels and of another school where the teacher felt the boys were being neglected, is tremendous.

The teachers’ strategies to change towards gender equality included the attempt to make a male principal aware of the discriminatory behaviour of male teachers and convince him to support the female staff members in their leadership positions. One difficulty encountered with the strategy of using the principal’s authority was that he would first have to be convinced of the value of gender equality and of how this equality was being undermined in his school. The limitations that strong local influence had on the teachers’ practices (in terms of teaching diversity and change towards gender equality in the school) became obvious in some instances. The values and norms shared by the community limited the teachers’ abilities to teach gender education (empowerment of women at home, in families and communities and improvement of their social position) because it was not accepted. The values that impacted on what the teachers perceived as teachable or taboo were not always widely accepted social norms, but sometimes rooted in regional sociocultural, religious and traditional values. The situation in one remote area with girls and female teachers being discriminated against and excluded on various levels exemplifies the disparities between the regions – and the extent to which local sociocultural values and traditions can govern schools.
While in this case the values and norms shared by the local community were different from the majority of people living in Kenya (and as stated in the constitution), the case of sexuality and sexual orientation is an example of a widely shared social norm that is also anchored in state criminal law that forbids homosexual practices. As part of the strong heteronormative discourse and the criminalisation of diverse sexual orientations and practices, speaking, for example, about homosexuality is a taboo. Teaching comprehensively about sexuality and sexual orientation with a diversity focus therefore appears to be a no-go area.

HIV and Aids was singled out by a number of teachers as a health-related diversity issue that is not always easy to deal with. Due to the stigma attached to HIV and Aids, it is common that schools and teachers try to keep an HIV-positive status secret and not disclose it to other learners. While HIV infection is common among learners and teachers, teachers feel the need to protect infected learners by hiding their status. In that context, teachers spoke about the difficulty of meeting the health-related needs of these learners and, at the same time, avoiding different treatment and discrimination of learners who would suffer from any treatment that indicated that they were or are not part of the ‘normal’ group of learners. Handling HIV-infected learners in an inclusive way in the context of concealment was brought up as a challenge by the teachers. Another aspect of dealing with HIV, mental or physical health including ableism in school, concerned the challenge of teaching subjects that touch on sensitive topics, including reproductive health or genetics. In order not to make affected learners feel bad, discriminated against or stigmatised, teachers reflected on the contents, methods and ways of transmitting the subjects in class.

Teaching inclusive classes (with slow learners and learners with mental disorders together with everyone else) poses a challenge in overcrowded classes with only one teacher. While special attention and efforts are necessary to assist the relevant learners, the teachers should also speak to the class, develop empathy in
the other learners and prevent discriminatory and stigmatising behaviour. The problem of discrimination and stigmatisation was described as a problem of the society as a whole, such that parents would try to hide children with disabilities and not send them to school, and such that many people and officials try to avoid contact with people with disabilities. Schools’ and teachers’ responses to this situation differed widely. While some schools have created space for children with special needs, and teachers go to the homes of such children to encourage parents to send their children to school, other schools try to teach the children with special needs in the regular classes without specific arrangements for these learners. Teachers expressed feelings of excessive pressure in fulfilling of catering for learners with special needs in their large classes, together with their lack of expertise to diagnose specific (dis)abilities and cater for particular needs. They also felt the need to be sensitive towards learners with various health problems. Since not all schools had a strategy to deal with health-related diversities and (dis)abilities, the approaches to dealing with such challenges included getting help from an outside NGO, leaving out topics in subjects that could disturb affected learners, counselling individual learners, sensitising classes about discriminatory language and trying to develop empathy through talking to the whole class.

The disparity between learners from rich and poor backgrounds (with unequal conditions for learning and succeeding in the education system) emerged as a great concern to the teachers. They referred to the structural level which sees schools in marginalised areas working under extremely difficult situations compared to the middle-class urban schools and, on the institutional level, working with learners from very poor backgrounds – or with a mix of learners from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The day-to-day challenges arising from working with learners who live in economically desperate situations or who have to fend for themselves at a very young age are manifold. The teacher’s job resembles that of a social worker who tries to create conditions
for the learners to sit in school and participate in the lessons. Hence, schools in disadvantaged areas are confronted with many obstacles before formal learning can take place. The basic needs of the children (including food, shelter and psychosocial support) have to be met before formal learning can take place – which in many cases cannot be ensured by the school or the teachers alone. Apart from financial support to individuals, school social work (or other resources to support the schools and the teachers who work in poverty-stricken areas) was not mentioned in the teachers’ accounts. Instead, the teachers expressed their anger about corruption and nepotism channelling funds provided by the government to support families living in economic poverty to other places. Engaged teachers described the great need for listening, counselling, comforting and lifting up the spirit of learners from socio-economically unstable and marginalised positions. Practices meeting these needs included regular group counselling sessions with affected learners, fundraising activities, the initiation of feeding programmes, lobbying for the learners and supporting them outside school (e.g. by finding a shelter or a children’s home) if they had no place to stay.

When looking at the category of socio-economic background in the context of diversity, it became obvious that the type of school and its location had a major impact on how this category plays itself out for the teachers. While in the common local schools, the set-up of learners was described as rather homogenous with regard to their families’ economic situation (many families having problems providing the necessary school books, uniforms, etc. to the children), more affluent urban schools that cater for a variety of learners are confronted with challenges arising from their learners’ different socio-economic backgrounds. The formation of groups among the learners according to social classes, mobbing, discriminatory language and exclusion based on affluence were reported as causing rifts in these schools and leading to demoralised individual or groups of learners. The teachers’ responses to this kind of discrimination among learners
ranged from complete disregard to sensitising learners about the language they used, trying to develop empathy and prohibiting the use of certain terms. If the challenge of discrimination based on economic status was approached by a school, it was mainly done through group or individual counselling and motivational talks. In boarding schools, prefects are also used to report on any discrimination or conflict among the learners.

In summary, the experience of diversity in the context of education in Kenya emerging from the interviews were evident on the structural, institutional and individual levels. In the context of one national Kenyan education system with national exams and English and Kiswahili as languages of instruction, tremendous differences in the base conditions for educational success have become visible through the accounts of the teachers. Urban middle-class children are exposed to English in their daily lives, before it becomes the medium of instruction in school but children in rural areas have to learn in a language of which neither they nor their community have adequate command. Similarly, schools and teachers in middle-class settings can provide a conducive learning environment but schools in marginalised and poverty-stricken areas struggle to meet the children’s basic needs in order to create the primary conditions for them to learn at all. Yet, all compete in the same system for educational success and career paths.

On an institutional level, the ethnic, health-related, cultural or socio-economic diversities that schools experience and are expected to address differ widely. The schools’ task to fight discrimination and to foster national unity and cohesion is mostly approached through guidance and counselling and through external or internal motivational speakers who appeal to the learners to act morally and embrace one another. While some schools have worked out a strategy on how to deal with certain categories of diversity, most issues and challenges seem to be resolved ad hoc or be ignored. A comprehensive approach to diversity could not be found in any of the schools the research participants worked at. A register of voluntary revelations regarding any specifics about
the learners’ identities in order to better understand potential instances of discrimination, exclusion or other challenges, was the only approach at the institutional level attempting to incorporate different diversity categories in one strategy.

On the level of individual teachers, approaches and practices to deal with social diversity and discrimination in the classroom were mainly influenced by the specific conditions in which their particular school operates. In very few instances did the teachers refer to a policy or strategy that the school provided to deal with the diversities (health-related, cultural, ethnic, religious, etc.) or discriminatory behaviour of learners (offending speech, exclusionary practices etc.). Hence, teachers are asked to find a way of dealing with diversity when it emerges as an issue that requires a response.

Teachers reported they had been prepared in workshops or during their studies to deal with some specific challenges, like HIV-positive learners, but that they lacked competence in other fields completely – like diagnosing the special needs of children, for instance.

The teachers’ practices can hardly be considered as pro-actively sensitising about diversity or general pedagogical concepts to embrace diversity in the school yet they all faced challenges with regard to various diversity-related issues and reacted to the specific cases in their capacity as teachers. What stands out as remarkable on the individual level in all the teachers’ reports is first, that the research participants – despite some extremely difficult and desperate school contexts and learners’ situations – maintain a very high work ethic and take on tasks and responsibilities that reach far beyond the role of a conventional teacher in order to meet the needs of their diverse learners as best as possible.

Second, in face of these challenges, it is noteworthy that the research participants demonstrated a reflexive, partly critical, attitude and consciousness with regard to various aspects of diversity. They all went through the Kenyan education system themselves and experienced discrimination and violence as consequences of socially constructed differentiations. Regardless
of these experiences, they uphold an unflinching belief in humanity, in the common ground humans share despite their differences and in the possibility of change – which struck me as extraordinary. This not only reveals their strong (teacher) personalities, but also reveals perspectives that do not buy into (or, at least doubt) the logic of globalised and exploitative capitalistic notions of competition and progress.