Andrew Cunningham
Title of thesis: Understanding Local Realities of School Leadership in Kenya: 812 Journeys of School Improvement
Supervisors: Dr. David Johnson and Dr. Ann Childs

Andrew Cunningham is a Marshall and Truman Scholar, pursuing his DPhil in Education at OUDE and St. Antony’s College, Oxford. He is committed to improving the quality of education for the most marginalized children in Kenya through research, innovation and service. His doctoral research works with 812 Kenyan public primary schools, UNICEF-Kenya and the Kenyan Ministry of Education to address contextual, methodological and theoretical gaps in current global school effectiveness and school improvement literature. Contextually, he challenges the definition of quality education in Kenya by asking, ‘Why do we care about what we can measure in quality education, rather than measure what we care about?’.

Methodologically, he employs a new, SMS-based exercise in diagnostic action research to enable parents, pupils, teachers and head teachers to collect, analyse, compare, and act on school-level data about perceived levels of child-friendliness. Theoretically, the study proposes a new set of dimensions of effective school leadership strategies for school improvement in the Kenyan context.

As a result, his research findings have led to local, national and global implications for research, policy and practice. On the local level, the Kenyan Primary School Head Teachers Association (KEPSHA), an association of 26,000 public primary school head teachers, has applied the study’s preliminary findings to a national campaign to mainstream the concept of a child-friendly school into a child-friendly education system (www.kepsha.com). On the national level, the Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology has incorporated the research findings and innovative methodologies to develop the National Meriting Tool as a means to promote and measure a more holistic concept of quality education nationwide. In addition, one of the new dimensions of effective school leadership for school improvement in Kenya was that of democratic leadership, enabling children to elect their student leaders for the first time and participate in school decision-making processes. In July 2014, the researcher co-organized with the MOEST, UNICEF-Kenya and DFATD (Canada) the first-ever National Children’s Government Summit with 470 children delegates where the inaugural set of Children’s priorities for quality education were developed and presented to Kenyan Parliamentarians (http://unicefstories.org/2014/06/16/primary-school-children-in-kenya-becomeforces-for-change/ and http://www.unicef.org/esaro/5440_kenya2014_makingchildren-count.html).

On the international level, the DPhil research findings have informed UNICEF-Kenya’s implementation and monitoring/evaluation strategies for Canada’s ($6.6 million) funded program in Kenya from 2014-2017 entitled, ‘Providing Access to Quality Education for Children (especially girls) in Northern Kenya’ and DFID’s ($5.38 million) funded program in Kenya from 2013-2015 entitled, ‘Modelling of Integrated Nomadic Education, Child-Friendly Schools, and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Programmes in Arid and Semi-Arid Counties’, both of which seek to improve quality education for the most marginalized pupils nationwide. Preliminary findings from the DPhil research have also been presented to practitioners, policy-makers and researchers in plenary workshops sponsored by UNICEF-Eastern and Southern African Region, UNICEF-Innovation, UNICEF-Kenya, UNICEF-Malawi, UNICEF-Somalia, DFID-Kenya (UK), DFATD-Kenya (Canada), the World Bank, the International Education Funders Group (IEFG), Save the Children, ActionAID, and the Kenyan Primary School Head Teachers Association (KEPSHA).