



In early 2005, I went to see Geoffrey Griffin, the director of Starehe Boys Centre, just before he died in June of that same year. We discussed many things, among them the 8-4-4 education system. "The fact of the matter is that there is intrinsically nothing wrong with the 8-4-4 system," Griffin told me then. By the time of his death, he had overseen the system at the centre for 20 years. "The 8-4-4 students that Starehe has produced since its inception in 1985 are just as good and as vigorous as the students of the previous (7-4-2-3) system," said Griffin, who explained that the system was based on a Canadian model of education. Even though the 8-4-4 system was supplanted onto a tested system, his students had excelled in it academically and even assumed professional jobs - locally and abroad - in which they had also excelled. "The system had fitted just well," said Griffin.

Griffin, who maintained an annual tradition of taking a select number of Starehe students to study in universities abroad, said he had continued with this tradition. even with the onset of the 8-4-4 system. "In the beginning, I closely monitored their progress because I was interested in finding out how they were fairing compared to their predecessors, who had gone through the previous system and who I had been always confident they would have no problems pursuing further studies in top universities abroad," said Griffin. "I can tell you without a shadow of doubt that my 8-4-4-students coped well and still stood out." Throughout his leadership at Starehe, Griffin sent scores of his students to Ivy League universities in the United States and the Russell Group of universities in the United Kingdom.

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We spoke during an entire afternoon in his office and by the time I was leaving the school I gathered that even though Griffin had embraced the 8-4-4 system wholeheartedly, he was nostalgic about his beloved 7-4-2-3 system. "The 7-4-2-3 system was good because it separated the wheat from the chaff from early on and allowed students to identify their specialisation. It also helped them to gradually mature as students as they developed and gained analytical and comprehensive skills." Had it been his choice, it is unlikely he would have changed the system he had been used to. "In considering the merits and demerits of the 8-4-4 system," said Griffin, as he rounded up our discussion, "you must always remember that the system began because of politics."



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Exactly two years ago, on April 3, 2016, former President Daniel arap Moi was presiding over a thanksgiving day at Sunshine Secondary School in Langata, Nairobi, one of the high schools started by him. The school's prize giving day gave him the platform he needed to tell off the government's impending plans to do away with the 8-4-4 education system. Moi said the system had served Kenyans well and had proved itself as an education system whose students had gone on to doing well in both local and international universities. "The students brought up under the 8-4-4 are excelling...who's that telling us that we got it wrong?" Moi asked the parents rhetorically.

Five years earlier, on August 1, 2011, while presiding over an Anglican Church of Kenya fund-raising event in Voi, Taita-Taveta County, Moi cautioned the government against scrapping the 8-4-4 system. He told the churchgoers that 8-4-4 was the best education system so far that had served Kenyans well, and therefore, there was no "urgent need" to change it. Every time Moi has smelt a whiff of change in the 8-4-4 system, he has always vehemently and vociferously opposed the idea. It has become his personal crusade.

Beneath Moi's vigorous protection of the 8-4-4 system is a political decision that nobody dares to talk about openly. The educationists and education specialists I have spoken to over the years have always, in private, agreed that the 8-4-4 system was more of a reaction to a prevailing political situation and less an answer to a seemingly "faltering" education system that needed to be fixed.

The 8-4-4 education system was ostensibly started with the sole intention of making education in Kenya more amenable to vocational training. Then, as now, the government of the day did not prepare and train the teachers (the core implementers) in the system adequately. Hence, the 8-4-4 system never really achieved its primary objective - that of producing and training more technical-oriented graduates.

In his defence of the 8-4-4 system, Moi no longer speaks of these (noble) intentions. He invariably talks of how the system has (remained) competitive to the extent that 8-4-4 system students are "accepted by even the best universities" worldwide. The technical/vocational training that Moi had said would prepare the students to be self-driven and self-sufficient is no longer talked about - because it has always been non-existent.

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### **Academic versus creative learning**

Fast forward to a dozen years later. It seems to me that both parents and teachers are at a crossroads concerning the 8-4-4 system. In the years since talking to Griffin, 8-4-4 has been beset by massive exam cheating. There is unprecedented corruption in the education sector. Rich parents have been gradually removing and shuffling their children from public and private schools that teach the 8-4-4 system to schools teaching international curricula, convinced that schools offering 8-4-4 are not giving them value for their money. This has been accompanied by a rapid commercialisation of the education sector.

Faith Wambugu's two children used to attend a private primary school that taught 8-4-4 until a year ago when she transferred them to a private school teaching the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) Cambridge syllabus. “For a while I had been agonising about whether my children should continue with the 8-4-4 system,” Wambugu, who is from Nakuru town, said to me recently. “When I found a suitable school with an internationally tried and tested educational system in Nakuru, I did not look back.” I asked Wambugu why she was dissatisfied with 8-4-4 system. “The system does not build confidence and impart skills to children; it is too focused on book learning and that this is not what I wanted for my children,” said the mother of two, who herself went through the 8-4-4 system.

“I want a system that does not only concentrate on academics, but one that also recognises other talents, such as music and drawing.” She said that the 8-4-4 system is straightjacketed and does not bring out the hidden creative potential that a child might possess.” The introduction of the new Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) system that is to replace 8-4-4 equally does not give her confidence that it is the best system for her children. “I do not have a problem with the CBC system per se, but is the government ready to roll out the system? I was worried my children would be caught up in an experimental project and I was not ready for that.”

As a middle-aged Kenyan Asian woman who has been through the previous GCE public education system told me, “Whereas before one could be sitting in class with your maid's daughter, today students in schools are all from the same



income group, which has created another kind of elitism and racial segregation.”

Although Calisto Ogutu is yet to remove his two children from the 8-4-4 system, he has already identified the school he wants them to attend. “I will be removing my children from the system,” said Ogutu, whose children go to a well-regarded public primary school in a rich suburb in Nairobi. “I have had to wait for my children to be interviewed since last year because the waiting list is long.” The private school in Nairobi County that he wants his children to attend teaches the (General Certificate of Education (GCE) system. “I have done my due diligence and I am persuaded that this is the system that will serve my children’s educational needs.”

Ogutu faults the 8-4-4 system’s teachers for having a limited understanding of how to nurture talent and creative minds. “All what these teachers do is bombard the children with bombastic theoretical knowledge that cannot be of any help in the 21st century.” Ogutu said he wanted a school where his daughter will learn art and craft and be encouraged to learn a musical instrument. According to Ogutu, the 8-4-4 system produces students who are boring and cannot think on their own or on their feet. “The 8-4-4 system presumes that one can only succeed in life if one becomes a doctor, an economist or a lawyer. Yet if the quality of current professionals produced by the system in the last 20 years or so is anything to go, we have a long way to go as a country.”

The issue of an academic curriculum versus creative and exploratory learning was starkly brought home to me by Flora Muthoni, who narrated to me the story of her son who used to attend a well-known and expensive private primary school in Nairobi that teaches the 8-4-4 system. “Some time in 2016, I received a report card from my son’s class teacher that made me ponder over it for a long time,” said Muthoni. The report form said in part: “Your son is always doodling and twiddling under the desk when I am teaching. His concentration is poor. If only he could pay attention in class, his marks would improve.”

“That report card was my wake up call,” said Muthoni. “Ordinarily a rash parent would have set upon the son with tough talk about how it is important to pay attention in class when the teacher is in front teaching. But I decided to approach the matter differently.” Muthoni said she sought to find out from her son what interested him most in his life and what he would like to study in school. She found out that her 12-year-old son enjoyed drawing and painting. “I decided to look for a school that would encourage him to tap into his interest in the creative arts. After shopping around and asking colleagues and friends, I found a school that I thought would tackle my son’s ‘doodling and twiddling’ problem.”



The new Nairobi-based international school that teaches the International Baccalaureate (IB) system that Muthoni found for her son was a dream come true. "My son no longer doodles, he draws and paints without being afraid that he will be chastised," said Muthoni. "I could not believe my eyes when during the school's open day, my son's two paintings were exhibited for all parents, teachers and visitors to see."

Be that as it may, it was the deliberate and systematic neglect of public primary and secondary schools, beginning in the mid-1980s, that led to the rise of the so-called academies and private schools. This "apparent neglect" created a void for "educational private developers" to commercialise education by building "centres of educational excellence and wellsprings of education". In essence, we created a class of educational entrepreneurs, whose primary motive was profit, all in the name of providing "special and quality education".

The cumulative net effect of this privatisation of education was the creation of "class education" that dichotomised and segregated schools - an apartheid-like separation that pitted moneyed parents against less-moneyed parents. This is in sharp contrast to the previous system that was more egalitarian and merit-based, and which offered quality education to all, irrespective of financial capabilities and social status. As a middle-aged Kenyan Asian woman who has been through the previous GCE public education system told me, "Whereas before one could be sitting in class with your maid's daughter, today students in schools are all from the same income group, which has created another kind of elitism and racial segregation."

The teacher, who has taught the 8-4-4 system for 25 years, said that the government decided to introduce CBC without properly acquainting the teachers with the system beforehand. "It looks like the government is in a hurry to implement the system - for whatever reason."

As some parents who have had their children go to school in these private schools told me, some of these private schools are over-rated and over-priced for nothing: They neither offer "private" education in its strictest sense nor quality education. It is about the bottom line - they are businesses that have invested in education to reap profits for shareholders.

It is no wonder that some rich parents, after sending their children to expensive private primary schools, will do anything to wean their children off private education to join national public high schools. A paradox, but one that explains the commodification of the



education system in Kenya. Public high schools, such as Alliance Boys and Girls Schools (aka Bush Boys and Bush Girls), Kenya High (aka Boma), Lenana Boys (aka Changes), Limuru Girls (aka Chox), Mangu Boys, Nairobi School (aka Patch), Maseno School (the only national school on the Equator), Moi Girls Eldoret (former Highlands School), Moi Nairobi Girls and Catholic-sponsored schools, such as Loreto Convent Girls, St. Mary's, Precious Blood, Riruta, Bishop Gatimu Girls School (formerly Ngandu Girls) and Strathmore School remain to date star attractions for parents, who value high schools imbued with a sense of missionary and civic philosophy.

Luis Franceschi, the Dean of the School of Law at Strathmore University in Nairobi, says that over time he has been observing differences in his Bachelors of Law (LLB) students. "I can outright tell which students underwent the 8-4-4 system and those that went through international systems such as IB, IGCSE and GCE," says the Dean. "The students who have gone through international systems are confident, open-minded, better in analytical skills and research methodology. The students who have gone through 8-4-4, even though not lacking in knowledge, tend to be inward-looking and are not adventurous."

Franceschi's sentiments are echoed by a University of Nairobi don who says that today's 8-4-4 system students arrive at the university expecting that their lecturers and professors will provide them with photocopied lecture notes. "They lack the simplest of analytical and conceptual skills. They are not imaginative. It is not them to blame, it is the system that they have been made to go through," said the university don.

Brian Gitonga, a software engineer working for Google in Dublin, Ireland - one of only two African engineers at the firm (the other is a Nigerian) out of a total work force of 4,000 engineers working at the Google's headquarters - told me that the 8-4-4 education system does not bring out creativity and imagination in a student, neither does it encourage the student to think outside the box. Recently in Nairobi, partly on home leave and partly to scout for talented Kenyan engineers, Gitonga told me that it was saddening that the graduate engineers he had a chat with "could not even in the widest margin qualify to work for Google". And it is not because they make for poor engineers (there is a lot to be said about the teaching in the engineering institutions in Kenya, said Gitonga); it is because the graduate engineers have gone through an education system that teaches them to duplicate knowledge and material, instead of encouraging them to be exploratory and innovative.

### **CBC: What is it and why now?**

The nervousness then shown by parents over the pending introduction of the new Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) that is meant to replace the much debated and



doubted 8-4-4-system should therefore be seen in the context of parents being conflicted about what is the best system that will address their children's educational needs in contemporary Kenya's 21st century needs. To this end, I sought the views of teachers who will be central in ensuring that the new system is properly integrated and correctly implemented.

The greatest tragedy in this country is that we have left politicians and non-educational experts to experiment with our children's education. "The only people who seem to know about CBC are ministry bureaucrats," said Ms Achieng. "Who is supposed to be best equipped with CBC knowledge - ministry desk officials or teachers who are out there with pupils?"

"Parents, as well as us teachers, do not understand the new educational system," says Mercy Mbai, a public high school Chemistry and Biology teacher in Kiambu County. "We are yet to be properly inducted and as it is currently many teachers are groping in the dark. We are learning as we go by." The teacher, who has taught the 8-4-4 system for 25 years, said that the government decided to introduce CBC without properly acquainting the teachers with the system beforehand. "It looks like the government is in a hurry to implement the system - for whatever reason. Why wouldn't the government take time to first acquaint the teachers with the new system, since they are the implementers?" Ms Mbai said she was slated to go for training in the CBC system in the coming weeks. "We are being trained on the job, we are learning the ropes as we go along."

The CBC system, as I vaguely understand it, ought to be a practical and workable educational system, one that is able to tap talents and redirect the students to their special areas of interest, be it academics, creative arts, sports or vocational training. However, it is not clear why this new system was introduced at this particular time, and without much prior consultation with the main stakeholders (head teachers, teachers, parents and students).

"As a teacher who has taught the 8-4-4 system for many years, I have pondered over several questions," said Ms Mbai. "Why did the government find it fit to change the system? What is wrong with it? If there is something wrong with 8-4-4, have we first tried to rectify the problem? CBC sounds great on paper, but if, as we are being told, it is supposed to identify gifts and talents among the students, do our we have the necessary resources and infrastructure to facilitate the new system?"



The science teacher told me that the country could be rushing into adopting an educational system that might, in the long run, come a cropper. "As a student myself, I went through the 7-4-2-3 educational system. It was an educational system well-suited to most students of our time. Why? Because it allowed students, once they were in secondary school, to select subjects that they enjoyed and that they would eventually peg their future careers on. The system was a good sieve."

For those who did not go beyond GCE "O" level studies or who did not qualify to go to university, there were tertiary and vocational institutions that could absorb them, said the teacher. These institutions included teacher training colleges for primary and secondary school teachers that awarded certificates and diplomas and technical-oriented institutions, such as the polytechnics and vocational training institutes.

Some of the better known primary teacher training institutions included Thogoto and Shanzu teachers colleges in Kiambu and Mombasa counties. The best science teachers' colleges were Kagumo and Kenya Science Teachers College (KSTC) in Nyeri and Nairobi counties. Kenya Polytechnic, Mombasa Polytechnic, Eldoret Polytechnic, Rift Valley Institute of Science and Technology and Kenya Technical Teachers College trained some of the best middle cadre technical personnel that this country has ever produced. So what happened to these great institutions? "They were all converted to universities," lamented Ms Mbai.

Victoria Achieng, a primary school teacher of many years, posed the same questions that Ms Mbai is grappling with: Why does the government seem to be in a rush to implement this new system? Have they (the state bureaucrats) told us (parents, teachers and all the people involved in education matters) what precisely is wrong with 8-4-4? Is the infrastructure ready and in place to roll out CBC? Have teachers been properly trained to teach the new curriculum? Do the current crop of teachers have the necessary skills to identify and scout for talent?

Ms Achieng told me that teachers have been "trained" for only three weeks and with that they are expected to fully comprehend the details of what they are supposed to teach. "I will tell you for free that many teachers - and head teachers - do not know, much less understand, what CBC is."

### **Can the new system work in Kenya?**

The greatest tragedy in this country is that we have left politicians and non-educational experts to experiment with our children's education. "The only people who seem to know about CBC are ministry bureaucrats," said Ms Achieng. "Who is supposed to be best





equipped with CBC knowledge - ministry desk officials or teachers who are out there with the pupils?"

Ms Achieng said that ministry officials keep on assuring the teachers that they will acquaint them with all the necessary information and skills. "It is as if they are on a trial-and-error policy. Is the government piloting the students?" The teacher was categorical about what she thought about CBC: "It is a system that had been tried elsewhere and worked, no doubt, but it is not the panacea to our current educational crises."

CBC's advocates believe that the system will see increased success in many companies' performance. This is pegged on the fact that CBC is not exam-oriented and, therefore, "students will no longer only be interested in passing exams, but also in nurturing the required skills in their field of specialisation".

The Competence Based Curriculum (CBC), is an educational model used in countries such as Australia and the Scandinavian countries like Finland. It is supposed to be implemented right from pre-primary level - PP1 to PP2, then progresses to Grade I, II, III, which signals the end of lower primary schooling. Grades IV, V and VI end primary schooling. Primary schooling is followed by three years of senior school that comprise grade VII to Form 1. This is followed by another three years of learning from Form 2 to Form 4, and finally three years of tertiary and higher learning.

According to CBC proponents, the 2-3-3-3-3-3, or for some 2-6-3-3-3 system, is transformational and is supposed to evolve a new educational methodology that taps into the students' creative juices. The system, its architects opine, will be skills-oriented rather than exam-oriented. Students will be able to acquire all-round skills, ranging from sports to academics. The students will be judged on how they display their skills, not on whether they pass exams. They further argue that the system will allow specialisation for students. While at senior secondary, students will go for the subjects they are best suited for. It will allow students to excel because they will only select their areas of interest.

Ministry officials seem convinced that CBC will curtail cheating in national examinations. They argue that since national exams will be scrapped, schools will not be tempted to engage in exam cheating as they will no longer be competing against each other. Proponents of the new system are also convinced that students will now have room to express their talents and abilities. They point to the fact that the current system had totally neglected non-academic subjects, with teachers spending all their valuable time pushing



students to cram for exams.

CBC's advocates believe that the system will see increased success in many companies' performance. This is pegged on the fact that CBC is not exam-oriented and, therefore, "students will no longer only be interested in passing exams, but also in nurturing the required skills in their field of specialisation". Here is a summary of what the benefits of CBC are supposed to yield: focus on competencies, flexibility that creates room for specialisation, balanced and fair assessment of excellence, emphasis on education and learning.

We will just have to wait and see if the system will create a new breed of creatives and entrepreneurs who will propel Kenya into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let us hope that like the much-maligned 8-4-4 system, CBC will not be replaced with yet another system because it did not produce the desired results. Kenya, after all, is not Finland, where the government backs its policies with the needed infrastructure, training and budgetary allocations, and where the teacher-student ratio is one where teachers are able to not just spot talent, but nurture it as well.