



Will the New Competency-Based Curriculum Lead to Declining Educational Standards in Kenya?

By Special Correspondent



Research findings recently released by the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) show that Kenyan schools are woefully unprepared to implement the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) that is set to replace the so-called 8-4-4 system. The report comes at a time when the country is grappling with issues of curriculum review and the reform process, teacher training and recruitment, the formulation and implementation of a national education policy and the implementation of CBC. The research, conducted by KNUT, looked into issues of teacher preparedness, the availability and adequacy of teaching materials, the level of engagement between teachers and parents, as well as the challenges faced by head teachers and teaching staff in implementing CBC.

KNUT concludes that the implementation of CBC has been hurriedly undertaken while the majority of teachers have not been sufficiently trained in CBC content and teaching methods. It adds that most pre-primary teachers, as well as those for grades one to three have not received any training whatsoever while those that did attend training workshops were inadequately trained by trainers and facilitators who were themselves incompetent in the delivery of the CBC approach.

The research also found that the training sessions were poorly conducted and that their effectiveness fell well below expectations, hindering the ability of teachers to design, assess, and evaluate the delivery of lessons and learners' outcomes. The report also notes that the resources and infrastructure required for learning, assessment and capacity-building in the CBC approach—which are completely different from those in use in the current system—are non-existent or inadequate at best. Parents and other stakeholders have not been involved in the reform process nor have public awareness campaigns been conducted following the roll-out of CBC.

The CBC system and design

Formal education was introduced in Kenya during the British colonial era and between 1964 and 1985 the education cycle comprised seven years of primary school, four years of secondary school, two years of high school, and three years of university education. The 8-4-4 system of education—eight years of primary school, four years of secondary school and four years of university education—was introduced in January 1985 to address concerns that the basic education previously provided lacked the necessary content to promote widespread sustainable self-employment.

The Kenyan primary school curriculum is approved for all public schools and most private schools—with the exception of international schools, which usually offer the British or American curriculum. The subjects studied at the primary level are English, Kiswahili, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Religious Education, Creative Arts, Physical Education and Life Skills. Pupils take a national examination at the end of the primary cycle with the results of the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) determining placement in secondary school.

In a major departure from the 8-4-4 system, the proposed CBC system was launched in 2017 and is designed to comprise two years of pre-primary education, six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, three years of senior secondary education and three years of university.

The Kenyan CBC is designed with the objective that at the end of each learning cycle every learner will be competent in the following seven core competency areas: communication and collaboration; critical thinking and problem-solving; imagination and creativity; citizenship; learning to learn; self-efficacy; and digital literacy.

CBC places emphasis on competence development rather than on the acquisition of content knowledge. This effectively means that the teaching and learning process has to change its orientation from rote memorisation of content to the acquisition of skills and competencies useful for solving real-life problems. Teaching methods include role-play, problem-solving, projects, case studies, and study visits, among other learner-centred strategies, and the teacher is expected to switch from the role of an expert to that of a facilitator who guides the learning process. Learners are expected to take responsibility for their own learning through direct exploration and experience while their teachers are expected to design effective learning activities geared towards the development of specific competencies.

Moreover, the revised curriculum requires teachers to frequently assess their students using assessment methods, such as portfolios, classroom or field observation, projects, oral presentations, self-assessments, interviews and peer assessments. Teachers are also required to change from a norm-referenced to a criterion-referenced judgment of learners' capabilities or competencies to determine their progress. Finally, teachers are supposed to provide continuous, timely and constructive feedback to inform their students about the strengths and weaknesses of their performance since instruction and learning are reviewed and modified based on the feedback.

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It is clear, therefore, that the introduction of CBC in Kenyan schools calls for a comprehensive change in the instructional approach in terms of teaching, learning and assessment, and this requires changes in teacher training programmes in order to equip teachers (both pre-service and in-service) with the competencies that will enable them to effectively handle the challenges associated with CBC implementation in schools.

However, Kenya initiated the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum in 2017 in the absence of any research-based evidence on the effectiveness of the new system. Despite the challenges and shortcomings identified by the internal and external evaluations of the pilot study on CBC implementation, the government went ahead with the national roll-out of CBC in January 2019.

Prior to its adoption and roll-out, no comprehensive survey of international best practices was conducted and nor was there any research to support the argument that the CBC framework is more effective than the current learning outcomes-based curriculum framework. The needs assessment was not properly conducted. The summative evaluation, which was conducted in 2009, cannot be the basis for reforming the curriculum in 2018. The entire process was dominated by foreign consultants with no experience in curriculum reform in Kenya. The involvement of teachers, university lecturers, and prominent local experts was minimal.

Moreover, an illegality was committed at the time of rolling out CBC for pre-primary and Standards One to Three as there was no Sessional Paper to guide the process and, furthermore, no review of the existing education system had been undertaken by an Education Commission prior to the roll-out. Pilot testing of the curriculum was hurriedly done over a few short months and without appropriate syllabus or pupils' books and teachers' guides.

It must also be pointed out that the introduction of technical and vocational courses in the school curriculum is a serious mistake as the purpose of basic education is not to train students but to make them trainable. Empirical studies show that competency-based models are mainly applicable to vocational education and training due to the emphasis placed on standards of competence in occupational sectors. Competence is the possession and demonstration of knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and behaviour required to perform a given task to a described standard. The concept is therefore more useful in vocational education since the emphasis is on the ability of the student to perform a set of related tasks with a high degree of skills, and a particular competency can be broken down into its component parts through task analysis.

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The adoption of CBC in Kenya—as in some other African countries, such as Botswana, Senegal and South Africa—may be explained in part by the current tendency of some international agencies to favour such pedagogies. In most of the countries concerned, however, attempts to institutionalise child-centred pedagogy in schools and teacher-training institutions have been inconclusive and, indeed, no country in the world has successfully implemented CBC. It is therefore a disturbing

development that the member countries of the East African Community have—according to Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012—adopted a common policy of harmonising education systems and training curricula that will shift focus from the standard curriculum design to the CBC and assessment approach.

Tanzania introduced CBC in secondary schools in 2005 and in primary education in 2006. Back in 2001 the Ministry of Education and Culture had asked for education to be treated as a strategic agent in the creation of a well-educated nation. The ministry anticipated developing an education system that would enable Tanzanians to be sufficiently equipped with the knowledge needed to competently and competitively solve the development challenges facing the nation.

However, a 2012 study on the implementation of the competency-based teaching in schools in Tanzania established that CBC had not been well implemented and more efforts needed to be devoted to the development of tutors' and principals' understanding of the CBC approach. Other studies conducted to assess CBC implementation in Tanzania have confirmed that there is very minimal use of the CBC teaching approach in schools and that more than 80 per cent of the teachers lack a proper understanding of the approach and continue to use traditional knowledge-based teaching and learning methods, with assessment methods remaining the same as those used in assessing knowledge-based teaching and learning, while the teaching approach continues to be teacher-centred.

Hidden agendas

The role of education in the development process cannot be over-emphasised. There is substantial empirical evidence of the crucial role of education in poverty reduction, human development, job prospects for individuals and the broader social-economic development of nations. In other words, education plays a key role in the transformation of societies. Unfortunately, the impact of education in sub-Saharan African countries has been minimised because African countries have often been put under pressure to adopt unrealistic reforms by a small number of nameless and faceless experts working in international organisations, such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, who have a hidden agenda and normally exert their influence indirectly from behind the scenes.

Curriculum reform is necessary if we want to improve the quality of education in Kenya. However, curriculum reform should be based on the needs of learners and society and on best international practices and standards. It is an orderly, planned sequence in which curriculum specialists, teachers, university lecturers who have undertaken advanced academic studies in curriculum development and other local education experts—including the Ministry of Education professional staff who have extensive experience in curriculum development, implementation and evaluation—assist in conducting a needs assessment identifying a problem, finding a solution, conceptualising the required curriculum, planning and designing a reformed curriculum, pilot-testing the revised curriculum on a small scale, then implementing it nationally.

Unfortunately, the views of the Ministry of Education and the team of local consultants and foreign experts have tended to dominate decisions about the ongoing curriculum reform process. The prominent role of UNICEF—and not UNESCO—in the reform process raises fundamental questions about the agenda of the donor.

Curriculum reform is an improvement or change of the curriculum for the better. It involves the development and utilisation of the curriculum in new and unique ways that will enhance the

attainment of higher levels of achievement for students. Curriculum reform is mainly concerned with changes in the content and organisation of what is taught. Many people and organisations, including teachers' unions, professional bodies, religious organisations, students, teachers, curriculum specialists, quality assurance and standards officers, educational administrators and community leaders concerned with matters of education often seek to bring reforms to the school curriculum.

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In most African countries—and Kenya is no exception—curriculum developers are the gatekeepers who critically assess the different proposals for curriculum reform and make recommendations for the changes to be made to subject panels and academic boards. The authority for the decision to change the curriculum rests with the Academic Boards of Curriculum Development. Many educators, including those from Kenya, are now rejecting the externally-driven approach to education reform. They propose instead an interactive and participatory approach which involves—and begins with—an evaluation by classroom teachers and district education personnel. This ensures that the views of the people closest to the process of teaching and learning are taken into account.

Based on the findings of the research conducted by KNUT, it is fair to conclude that the implementation of CBC has not lived up to the aim of transforming education in Kenya. Collective efforts are, therefore, needed to save Kenya's education system not only from vested business interests and local cartels, but also from international agencies and non-governmental organisations with hidden agendas. The Ministry of Education should commission highly educated and experienced curriculum developers and evaluators to produce a high-quality curriculum which is relevant to the Kenyan child and to the needs of the country.

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