



Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya: A critique

Cheptoo Ruth, Dr. Ramdas. V.

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Professor of Education

Department of Education

Regional Institute of Education (NCERT), Mysore, Karnataka, India

Abstract

Competency-based curriculum (CBC) implementation in Kenya comes as a third major reform in the country. Implementation of an 8-4-4 system of education for three decades faced many challenges that its noble philosophy of "education for self-reliance" was never fulfilled. The country's effort to adopt an international fit reform such as a competency-based curriculum is a viable decision to see its citizens move to the attainment of global competence. Nevertheless, CBC is a complex system of education and has flourished in the vocational and training levels as opposed to basic education. The Basic Education Curriculum Framework (2017) gives guidelines on the content of CBC in Kenya. The document has been the reference in the implementation of the CBC in Kenya since 2017. Though it appears to lack major aspects that the CBC approach should emphasize. This narrative paper discusses the general aspects of CBC, the Kenyan CBC, CBC critique from researchers' perspective, and discussion of teachers as CBC implementers'. It is intended to contribute to the effort to improve the strategies in an attempt to achieve the successful implementation of CBC in Kenya.

Index Terms - : Competency-based curriculum, Competency, Critique on the competency-based curriculum

I. INTRODUCTION

Curriculum review in every country is mandatory for the attainment of standard education. Society is advancing towards a more complex entity with a myriad of challenges to be solved. In Kenya, since its independence in 1964, the country had inherited the colonial system of education which was racially segregated which overshadowed the nation's ambitions to propel human power. In 1985 following the presidential declaration the nation experienced overhaul curriculum reform where adoption of the 8-4-4 system of education was effected. The 8.4.4 curriculum was implemented for three decades. It experiences challenges ranging from insufficient infrastructures and resources, inadequately trained teachers, a large number of learners in the classrooms, unskillful graduates, and increased dropouts. The 8-4-4 philosophy was an education for self-reliance but seemingly it never accomplished its mandate. The practical subjects which were the essence of the reform were made optional and non-examinable. This gave loophole to teachers not to teach the subjects. The curriculum ended up being too academic and exam-oriented. Minor changes were effected in 1992, 1996, and 2002 to ease workload within and across the subjects. The effects of 8.4.4 were felt when graduates in the job field had minimal or no capabilities to fit in the market.

National Educational Needs Assessment report In 2009 proposed the adoption of a Competency-based Curriculum (CBC). The major reason was to align the education sector with the Kenya constitution 2010, East Africa community harmonization treaty agreement, and vision 2030 goals. The noble decision brought the adoption of CBC in a phased manner in grades I-VI. CBC was piloted in 2017 and thereafter implemented in lower primary grades. CBC has been implemented in developed countries with commendable successes especially at the vocational education and training level. The implementation in African countries is struggling to make it a reality. CBC has tentatively dominated the developed countries' education system since the early 1950s. The first adoption of Competency-based training education (CBTE) was in 1970 in Vocational teacher training college in the USA. The trainee teacher students were expected to demonstrate the mastery of behavioral objectives to indicate their progress. The knowledge, skills, and techniques were the major emphasis. The CBTE has been adopted in many countries like UK, Australia, and Asian Nations and gradually in Africa.

Competency-based curriculum (CBC)

Woods, (2008); World Bank, (2011). Observed that CBC emphasizes on competence development among learners rather than the acquisition of content knowledge. The curriculum entailed a change in paradigm from content-based approaches to learner-based approaches. KICD (2017) states that it involves the use of learner-centered teaching methods like role plays, discussion, problem-solving, projects, case study, and study visits. In the use of such methods, the teachers' role change to an expert, facilitator, coach, mentor who guides the learning process. The learners should engage and interact with the learning content taking responsibility for their learning through direct exploration of knowledge which will result in desired experiences. CBC proponents advocate that this approach enhances the preparation of students for their future careers.

The Spanish Education act, as cited by Waweru (2017), observed that CBC incorporates core competencies as unique elements in the curriculum. CBC learners are allowed to learn at their own pace and move to more advanced content demonstrating mastery of desired competences.

Redding 2016, cited in Surr and Redding (2017) explains competency as individual capabilities which include skills, attitudes, and knowledge that one has to determine mastery in them. He argues that competency is roles while mastery is a demonstration of proficiency in that role. These require the itemization of measurable/ observable skills and knowledge. He further pointed out that it will need the aspect of experiences for one to be said he/she is competent or has achieved the competency. This aspect appears technical and might not be achieved in the CBC lower levels classrooms like primary schools. Therefore, competence is defined as the 'ability to apply learning outcomes adequately in a defined context like education, work, personal or professional development (Cedefop, 2014a, p. 47).

The competency-based curriculum in Kenya.

Implementation of 8.4.4 system of Education in 1985 anchored education on self-reliant philosophy. The graduates at every level were meant to attain skills that would enhance self-reliance. The noble intend faced challenges that prompted reform changes in 1992, 1995, and 2002. Issues on overloads within and across the subjects, unnecessary overlaps within topics and subjects, and emerging issues were changed. Nevertheless, fundamental issues on the curriculum were not resolved.

The government conducted National education needs assessment in 2009 that recommended the adoption of CBC which was implemented in 2017. CBC is systems of instructions, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that are based on students demonstrating acquisition of competence. The focus is on the set of specific competence (knowledge, skills, values, attitudes) associated with successful academic performance. It is a knowledge application-oriented type of education that requires competent teachers. (KICD, 2017).

The competencies to be achieved by learners include communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, imagination and creativity, citizenship, learning to learn, self-efficacy, and digital literacy. These are transferred to learners through learning areas (subjects) which in the early years' education from grade 1-3 will include: Literacy and indigenous languages, Kiswahili language, English, mathematics, environmental, hygiene and nutrition, religious education, movement, and creative and Pastoral program instruction.

Principles that guide CBC encompass opportunity, excellence, diversity and inclusion, differentiated curriculum and learning, parental empowerment and engagement, and communication service learning. These principles are intended to promote access to education for all so that they may reduce the wastage of learners.

CBC incorporates the involvement of community service-learning which aims to create an opportunity for learners to apply knowledge and skills acquired through formal education in daily life situations. The pertinent and contemporary issues have been incorporated into the curriculum. These include broad areas like global citizenship, health education, life skills, and values education, education for sustainable development, learner support program, community service learning, and parental engagement. Theoretical approaches in the CBC give guidance to teachers' practices as they implement the CBC.

CBC requires teachers to be role models, caring, and inspiring each learner for the ability to identify and nurture talents to attain full potential. Teachers need to be competent in making teaching and learning contextual relevant to the learners' holistic intellectual growth and development. KICD, (2016) observed that CBC shifts education focus to achievement of standards as learners need to acquire skills, attitudes, abilities, and competencies. The CBC approaches is an intergraded and holistic understanding of what we want the young people to learn, be able to do and to become. The teachers need to provide opportunities for the learners to actively engage in reflective lessons as they provide regular informative feedback.

Critique of competency-based curriculum

Kafulilo (2017), Kabombwe (2016), have termed CBC as a complex curriculum to implement in African countries. The researchers attributed this to the emphasis of attainment of competence where learners are expected to demonstrate mastery before their progression to the next level. The learner ought to repeat the activity or have frequent exposure until able to do it. This is done regardless of time spent. This fact holds the learning constant

where it becomes more challenging at the primary school level where learners are still developing foundational skills.

Researchers like Osullivan 2016; Schweisfurth, 2011; Tabulawa, 2003; indicate the difficulty encountered in an attempt to implement a learner-centered curriculum in developing countries. CBC is a learner-centered constructivist approach to education that shifts teachers' roles and beliefs in teaching and learning processes. In the context of Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Rwanda, the large numbers of learners in the classroom within other factors make it challenging for the teachers' to adequately facilitate the CBC curriculum implementation. The CBC is a learner-centered curriculum that seemingly will fall prey to the challenge. This may end up supporting the observation made by Young (2009) that CBC may lead to superficial teaching and learning of the content.

CBC requires teachers to assess learners' prior knowledge on what they can do and to what extent is this knowledge. The teaching needs to be founded on existing skills to be improved and new ones are developed. The ability for teachers to do this might be challenging if in case of large students in classrooms and their subject knowledge and pedagogical competencies.

Scholars like Young (2009) revered OBE as a curriculum promoting "hollowing out" of knowledge. To quote:

He further suggests that:

".....an empty and rhetorical notion of knowledge and the increasing tendency to blur distinctions between the production of knowledge and its acquisition and between knowledge and skills – the latter unlike the former being something measurable and targetable – becomes a way of denying a distinct 'voice' for knowledge in education. Furthermore, excluding such a 'voice' from educational policy most disadvantages those learners (and whole societies, in the case of developing countries), who are already disadvantaged by circumstances beyond the school (Young, 2009, p. 195)."

Here conclusion can be that the education denies the fundamental transmission of powerful knowledge. Those students from the disadvantaged background may be less beneficial in CBC approaches. Altinyelken (2010) pointed out that CBC favors students from educated families where parents are steering learning with adequate materials to support their exposure. Here the scholars recommend that the curriculum needs to balance knowledge and competence.

Scholars like Bates cited in Nzima (2016), Arguellos, and Gonzi (2000) have criticized CBC in that it leads to "vocalization" of general education hence cause impoverishment of learning. They observed that it was meant to bring education and vocation closer and to narrow the gap on the application of knowledge. CBC learners need to apply knowledge to solve problems in real-life situations. This is supported by Kowenhoven (2003) that CBC fits vocation training, not other levels of learning as its essence is practice preparation of learners for job market tasks. But in Australia CBC was criticized as not able to develop the skilled workers as required. The criticism was on competency standards as had little attainment of narrow and short term objectives other than long term skill development or educational achievement. Arguelles and Gonzi further argue that CBC has been considered fragmented and ignored the interrelationship between tasks performed. It ignores how students go about their learning. CBC emphasis performs the task in expenses of root causes of problems and strategies on solutions. Corford cited in Arguellos and Gonzi also observed that mere competencies statement is not adequate as a basis for teaching and learning. The cognitive knowledge and relation of theory and practice are also important. Competence is the expert expected value, therefore most scholars question if curriculum need be based on how expertise acts

Cantwell (2014) added inappropriateness of CBC to cater for high achiever learners. These learners would demand more complex competence to content them in the classroom. CBC more of lean-to determining ends before the means which adds the complexity has the education also evolves due to technological prowess.

Biesta cited in Nzima 2016 observed that CBC emphasizes learners and the learning process. He referred to this as 'learnification' of education. Where curriculum issues have shifted emphasis from content to the process. This aspect of implementation makes the CBC complex among teachers to translate the theory into practice.

Critique of Kenyan Competency-Based Curriculum

The values have been incorporated in the CBC following values education study 2003 that recognize that in all school context promotes, foster, and transmit values to the built character in students. The values stated in the constitution of Kenya 2010 are responsibility, excellence, respect, trustworthiness and honesty, care and compassion, understanding and tolerance, trust, and being ethical. Though all these values envisioned in the curriculum, much need is done in implementation to see such issues as corruption, terrorism, tribalism, hard work, and peaceful inter-coexistence be inculcated appropriately as a response to the societal needs and interests.

According to KICD (2017), the Kenyan Competency-Based curriculum is envisioned that at the end of the learning period every learner should have competence 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. However, Khan and Ramchandran, S. (2012) noted that the need for criteria or guidelines on how competencies are evaluated and attained during each phase or level of development, for instance; it is expected that after completion of each level, there should be clear specifications that a learner started as a beginner level then moved to a competent level and then proficient level and lastly expert level. In practice, competency is the ability to apply learning resources which includes: skills, knowledge, ethics, and attitudes adequately in various defined real-life contexts in educational, work, personal or professional development.

Sifuna and Obonyo (2019) noted that implementation of CBC education reform was based on the summative evaluation done in 2009, sessional paper 2015, EAC treaty agreements. But apparently, there was no research to support the argument that the Competence-Based Curriculum framework is more effective than the current teacher-centered learning curriculum framework.

IBE-UNESCO (2017) found out that pilot monitoring evaluation study exposed loopholes in the understanding of teachers on the CBC and their inability to interpret and practice the reform. The teachers missed major resources, strained in trying to accommodate large classes in the use of the new learner-centered CBC approaches. CBC flourish well in the small classroom therefore the question of large numbers of students in Kenyan classrooms will mediocrity the implementation process.

This type of curriculum generally requires small classes for teachers to give personal attention to each learner. However, with increased enrolment to meet the 100 percent transition, the classrooms are overflowing with large numbers of pupils. Also, there has been an acute shortage of teachers, with some schools, having only a few teachers which posed a major challenge in the successful implementation of the new curriculum (Sossion, 2017; Ondimu, 2018).

Teachers found it difficult to assess learning progress. Teachers also lacked specialized training for different learning areas. The assessments Rubrics had unclear guidelines which make giving learners assignment difficult.

Poorly printed books owing to hurried implementation of the curriculum which overstretched the writers and publishing houses resulted in unedited books, or poorly printed books. Syllabus for learners with special needs has not been distributed to schools while there was no syllabus for mentally challenged learners. Besides diversity of learners with special needs was not catered for (Kenya national union of teachers, KNUT, (2017); Ondimu, (2018). There was also a major challenge with the preparation of teachers for the CBC. KICD (2017) about BECF document vision of the curriculum reform in Kenya to enable every citizen to become engaged, empowered and ethical this would be attained through the provision of excellent teaching and school environment. It postulates that teachers will be supported to have knowledge and confidence in the modern pedagogical tools to enable them to adapt to the curriculum to meet the needs, interests, and talents of the learners. On the contrary, KNUT 2019 findings indicate a lack of adequate and proper teacher preparation. This will jeopardize the realization of the intended reform. Furthermore, the BECF (2017) stipulated the clearly stated learners' competence be attained but teachers' competencies were overshadowed. The implementers' are equally relevant in the competence attainment and development.

KICD (2017) envisioned the theoretical approaches framework and guiding principles as the pillars of the CBC. These theories are proponents of constructivism which include Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky among others. The visible theory of Hattie illustrates how teachers need to make learning visible to learners. Teachers were trained in 2017, 2018, and 2019. About the training materials the training didn't consider the practical applicability of the theories into practice and this is what is making the implementation quite challenging. The training should be designed to incorporate how teachers can translate the curriculum into viable CBC classroom practices.

The specification and specialization of subjects are very important in the curriculum. In Korea and Malaysia for instance subjects are distinct unlike Kenya subjects' creative arts encompass craft, arts, and music. This also contributes to overcrowded, congested, and overloaded curriculum, KICD (2016). Lower primary level subjects that are used to facilitate the attainment of competencies include literacy, English, Kiswahili, indigenous language, mathematics, environmental, religious, movement and creativity, hygiene and nutrition, and pastoral program. These subjects appear to be overloaded as compared to other countries' syllabuses. The overlap of three different languages also poses difficulty in the realization of successful implementation. The literacy ought to be taught in the catchment area language but the inclusion of indigenous language may bring overlap. How should the teacher accommodate these diverse languages in a single classroom pose as questionable?

CBC is a westernized curriculum that fundamentally fits the developed countries. As Altinyelken observed that reform failure in developing countries are mainly due to fundamental contradictions of the adopted educational curriculum where problems and content and settings are different. The application of reform in a different context might produce different practices and learning outcomes.

Teachers as implementers' of Competency-based Curriculum

Kabobwe (2019) acknowledges the complexity involved in the principles and understanding of CBC. The stakeholders in school, administration, parents, and government at large need apt knowledge in the meaning of CBC for it to be effectively implemented. In South Africa, the CBC terminologies were difficult for teachers to identify with. In many countries, the CBC competencies have either been misinterpreted, misunderstood as checklists,

learning targets, or mastery outcomes. This evident that teachers find it challenging to translate the CBC aspects to the intended practices.

Perez and Clem (2017) argue that knowledge and content in CBC change to the emphasis on the attainment of competencies. It calls for a broader definition of what it means to learn and demonstrate competencies. This implies that learning can no longer be achieved through traditional teacher-centered approaches but requires the adoption of more synergetic pedagogies. CBC brings a change in the preconceived roles of the teacher and the students. Teachers ought to play the role of the facilitator while learners drive the learning progress. The learners participate in the construction of knowledge. As further supported by Zainan (2019) the study gives the need of a teacher to adopt the role of coach though it was clear though teachers were not able to perform this role. Biemans et al said that implementation of CBC in western countries need more proper operationalization of teachers role in their classrooms.

Carla and Vander (2018) observed that for CBC to be effectively implemented the teachers need professional development and capacity building. The CBC approaches give teachers the different role of guide and shift instructions where learners are to be given adequate practices to enhance the attainment of competence. Teachers' reality and experiences have to streamline to fit the CBC mode of teaching.

Conclusion

CBC adoption in Kenya since 2017 needs the involvement and consultation of concern stakeholders to enable the teachers to achieve the intended learner-centered curriculum. The discussion pointed out the difficulty in the implementation of CBC and its aspects. The shortcomings pointed out in the Kenyan Basic Education Curriculum Framework 2017 need be corrected to give clarity in the practices as per CBC. Proper teacher training and continuous professional development would play a role of improvement in the implementation of CBC in Kenya.

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