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## **Competency Based Curriculum in Primary Schools in Kenya: Prospects and Challenges of Implementation**

By

Daniel N Sifuna and Mark M Obonyo  
Department of Educational Foundations  
Kenyatta University  
P. O. Box 43844 00100  
Nairobi, Kenya  
E-Mail: [dnsifuna@gmail.com](mailto:dnsifuna@gmail.com)

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the implementation Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya which adopts a learner-centered pedagogy, formative, authentic assessment approaches and emphasizes on the development of competencies and application of knowledge in real life context. It is generally perceived as an education that seeks to develop in learners the ability to apply appropriate skills and knowledge to successfully perform a function or task. The discussion establishes that it was not systematically planned and implemented; with minimal the training of a majority of teachers on its contents and teaching methods which tends to hinder their application of essential knowledge and skills of the curriculum. There is also a general lack of adequate approved textbooks for teachers and learners as well as instructional materials. Parents and other education stakeholders' involvement and public participation in the curriculum reform process was quite inadequate. With these kinds of challenges, unless urgently addressed, the success of the new curriculum is in serious doubt.. It is therefore recommended that the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders should adequately create a framework for training teachers on the new curriculum, assist in the construction of classrooms in primary schools as well as the provision of adequate resources and facilities and sensitize and involve parents through the school committees and Parents' Teachers' Associations (PTAs).

**Key words:** Kenya, Competency Based Curriculum, Primary Schools, Education Stakeholders

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### **Introduction**

This article focuses on the implementation Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya which adopts a learner-centered pedagogy, formative, authentic assessment approaches and emphasizes on the development of competencies and application of knowledge in real life context. The competency-based curriculum is perceived as an education that seeks to develop in learners the ability to apply appropriate skills and knowledge to successfully perform a function. The following discussion examines briefly the Competency Based Curriculum, some emerging trends in competency based curriculum in East Africa, its key features, procedural strategies in curriculum reform, the launch of the new curriculum in Kenya and perceptions on its implementation.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In January 1919 the Ministry of Education formally launched the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) which envisages a 2-6-3-3 education system to replace the current 8-4-4 system. The new competency based learning refers to systems of instruction, assessment, grading and academic reporting which focus on students demonstrating that they have acquired the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education. It emphasizes the importance of developing knowledge, skills and attitudes and applying them to real life situations. It focuses on seven core competencies, which include; communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy, learning to learn and self-sufficiency. The new curriculum provides a variety of opportunities for identification and nurturing of learners' potentials and talents for preparation for life and the world of work. It is geared to making learning enjoyable. The purpose of this article is to discuss emerging trends in the Competency Based Curriculum in East Africa, its launch in Kenya and prospects and challenges of its implementation for its future.

### **Emerging Trends in Competency Based Curriculum in East Africa**

Many countries around the world are carrying out extensive curriculum reforms to better prepare learners for the higher education demands and job market requirements in the 21st century. According to Sessional Paper No. 14 of 2012, the East African Community (EAC) partner states have adopted a common policy of harmonizing of education systems and training curricula that will shift focus from standard curriculum design to Competency-Based Curriculum and assessment approach (East African Community, 2012). In 2013, partner states in the Community decided to put in place a harmonized curriculum framework which is competency-based and one that matches global trends (East African Community, 2014). This was because a curriculum is perceived as the key means through which a country empowers its people with the essential values, knowledge, attitudes and skills that will enable them to be empowered for individual and

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national development (IBE-UNESCO, 2017). The competency-based curriculum is perceived as an education that seeks to develop in learners the ability to apply appropriate skills and knowledge to successfully perform a function. The curriculum emphasizes on the application of skills and knowledge to real life situations. It is one that has specific outcome statements that outline the competencies to be developed or attained (East African Community, 2014).

In 2005, Tanzania introduced competency-based curriculums which led to the development of competency- based learning and competency based assessment in secondary education (World Bank, 2011). In 2006, Competency-Based Curriculum was introduced in primary education as well. In respect to the changes, the Ministry of Education and Culture (2001), had called upon education to be treated as a strategic agent for mindset transformation and for the creation of a well-educated nation. The Ministry anticipated developing the education system that enables the Tanzanians to be sufficiently equipped with the knowledge needed to competently and competitively solve the development challenges which face the nation. The competency-based curriculum was also intended to curb the challenges facing, the graduates who were the products of the old curriculum who did not exhibit the competencies and skills that wholly addressed the global job market demands locally, regionally and internationally ( Tanzania Ministry of Education and Culture, 2001). Thus, the competency-based curriculum was intended to raise the quality of education in Tanzania and produce learners who could demonstrate and apply the acquired skills, attitudes and knowledge in problem solving in meeting the changing needs and aspirations of the society. However, five years later after the implementation of the competency based curriculum in Tanzania, studies carried out by Moshia in 2012 and Paulo and Tilya in 2014 on the compatibility between the competence-based curriculum and teaching methods in Tanzania found out that curriculum developers, book writers and teachers lacked clarity on the implementation of the competency based curriculum as they had not fully grasped the meaning of the competency based curriculum. The findings of a study carried out by Makunja (2016) on challenges facing teachers in implementing CBC curriculum in Tanzania confirmed that lack of adequate in-service training for teachers was one of the major challenges affecting sufficient implementation of the curriculum. This was an indication of limited teacher preparedness and readiness in the use and application of pedagogical knowledge during teaching and learning process. The results further found that teachers were willing to implement the CBC but lacked enough knowledge and understanding of the competence-based curriculum. A study by Kyafulilo, Rugambuka and Ikupa (2012) argued that teachers had not fully understood the competency-based curriculum. They pointed out that teachers assumed that they understand the competency-based curriculum, but in reality they did not know how it is practiced. This has been demonstrated more recently in a study by Kya and Huang in 2019.

The findings of the study conducted by Kya and Huang (2019) concur with those of Makunja as well as Komba and Mwandanji in 2015 where they established that the duration of the CBC training sessions in Tanzania was too short and ineffective to equip teachers with knowledge and skills about Competency-Based Curriculum. Head teachers and teachers were generally inducted on learning areas and competency areas. It was noted that for learning to take place it is paramount that teachers are fully prepared to facilitate learning. The respondents were asked whether training covered the following areas; lesson preparation, teaching and assessment.

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Teachers and head teachers noted that both groups received training on head teachers/school administration role/teachers role in learning areas, content, key competencies, learning outcomes, teaching approaches and their application, learning resources to use per strand and sub strand, assessment methods, individual assessment, grading assignment, material development, lesson planning, and preparation of the schemes of work (Makunja, 2015); Komba and Mwandanji, 2015). Such findings were shared by a related and recent study by Kanyonga, Mtana and Wendt in Tanzania in 2019. Interestingly these findings are quite similar to a study by Mulenga and Kabombwe (2019) on competency based curriculum for Zambian primary and secondary schools.

Rwanda shifted to the competency-based curriculum in 2015 in order to deal with scarcity in skills in the Rwandan education system with emphasis on science and technology. This was called for due to Rwanda's desire to build up a knowledgeable society in order to meet its global and local demands in the job market. This was in response to Rwanda's education philosophy of making sure that every child at all levels of learning receives quality education to develop their full potential and relevant skills, knowledge and desired attitudes that will help them fit in the society and job market (Republic of Rwanda, 2015). Rwanda's objective is to transform its state by the year 2030 into a knowledge-based society and middle-income country. It considers ICT a critical instrument in facilitating the transformation. The competency-based approach aimed at stimulating students in order to attain optimum academic performance. The skills, values, attitudes and knowledge are to be applied in day to day activities and learners are expected to reflect them on their endeavours (Rwanda Education Board, 2018).

### **Some Key Features of the Competency Based Curriculum**

In designing the Competency-Based curriculum it 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 a 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 are should be clear specifications that a learner started as a beginner level then moved to competent level and then proficient level and lastly expert level. In practice, a competency is the ability to apply learning resources: skills, knowledge, ethics and attitudes adequately in various defined real - life contexts in educational, work, personal or professional development. Learners are thus expected to be presented with resources which they interact with and construct meaning out of them in the Competency-Based approach (Barman and Konwar, 2011). Competence is the possession and demonstration of knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and behaviour required to perform a given task to a prescribed standard.

The Competency-Based Curriculum in some other African countries such as Botswana, Senegal and South Africa adopts a learner-centered pedagogy, formative, authentic assessment approaches and emphasizes on the development of competencies and application of knowledge in real life context. The key features of the CBC are discussed as follows: The curriculum

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emphasizes on competence development rather than acquisition of content knowledge. The curriculum entailed among other things change in paradigm from content-based to Competency-Based curriculum. This means that the teaching and learning process has to change its orientation from rote memorization of content knowledge to acquisition of skills and competencies useful for solving real life problems (Woods, 2008; World Bank, 2011). In the instructional process in Competency-Based programs certain dynamics facilitate development and evaluation of specified competencies thus, for achievement of each learning area, competencies should be specified and the use of learner-centered activity-based pedagogy during teaching and learning is paramount.

Classroom teachings feature by role plays, problem solving, projects, case study, and study visits among other learner-centered strategies and the teacher is expected to switch from the role of an expert to a facilitator who guides the learning process. While learners are supposed to take responsibility for their own learning through direct exploration and experience, teachers are supposed to design effective learning activities geared towards the development of specified competencies. Moreover, the revised curriculum stresses on the use of formative assessment focused on the prescribed competences. It emphasizes teachers to assess students frequently using authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, classroom or field observation, projects, oral presentations, self-assessment; interviews and peer-assessment (Sturgis and Casey 2018). Teachers are required to change from norm-referenced to 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 students about the strength and weakness of their performance. This is because instructions and learning are reviewed and modified based on the feedback data.

### **Key procedural strategies in curriculum reform**

In most African countries, curriculum developers are the gatekeepers who critically assess different proposals for curriculum reform and recommend to subject panels and academic boards changes to administer. The authority of the decision to change the curriculum rests with the academic boards of curriculum development centers which initiate strategies to educational reform. They normally propose an interactive and participatory approach which involves and begins with an evaluation by classroom teachers and district educational personnel. This ensures that the views of the people closest to the process of teaching and learning are taken into account. In such a bottom-up evaluation model, students, teachers, parents, curriculum specialists, quality assurance and standards officers and other experts are involved in the planning and implementation of education reforms. Successful curriculum reform would involve among the following key stages:

There is need for research and appointment of an education committee or commission which will establish the need for reform by carrying out research to identify the problem or deficiencies in the existing system of education. The committee or commission once appointed will set up technical teams to conduct in-depth studies of relevant sectors of education in order to provide up-to-date and reliable data to the commission. They would also receive presentations from different stakeholders such as head teachers, principals, teachers, quality assurance and

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standards officers, students, parents/guardians and others. In order to sensitise the public about the issues involved; awareness creation seminars, workshops and meetings would be held in different parts of the country. In addition, the commission would collect and collate public views on the education reform and come up with a draft report. Such a draft report would be disseminated to a representative sample of teachers, parents, students and other key shareholders. This would be followed by the preparation and submission of the final report to the relevant education authorities (K. I. C. D, 2016)

The next step would be the formulation of a national education policy. On the basis of the education commission, policymakers would formulate a Sessional paper which would guide and legalise the entire education reform process. This would normally be followed with the implementation of the education policy during which the new curriculum is developed and implemented. It would include; identification of problems, situation analysis, needs assessment, selection appropriate innovations and their implementation. The innovations are piloted with samples of the target audience to validate the curriculum components and expected learning outcomes. Pilot schools would be provided with syllabuses, teachers' guides, pupils' books and necessary teaching/learning resources. The duration of piloting in selected classes ought to be long enough to ensure adequate familiarization with the curriculum materials (K. I. C. D, 2016)

Once the results of the pilot evaluation indicate that the innovations are effective in solving the identified problems, it would then be implemented on a national scale. However, a summative evaluation of the pilot phase of the curriculum innovations should be conducted by disinterested external evaluators. Following the decision to implement the curriculum nationally has been arrived at, adequate funds have to be provided for the orientation of teachers, quality assurance and standards officers, curriculum support officers and other curriculum implementers. It is critical that adequate teaching and learning resources and equipment are provided as well as thoroughly training teachers on the new curriculum and how they would implement it (K. I. C. D, 2016)

### **Launch of the Competency-Based Curriculum for Primary Schools in Kenya**

In January 2011, the government of Kenya set off a review of the national curriculum in order to develop a curriculum that will sufficiently address and meet the needs and aspirations of the Kenyans and equip the children with knowledge, appropriate attitudes and skills that will help them fit and compete internationally. A research report on the need's assessment for curriculum reform by KICD affirmed the necessity for a primary school curriculum that integrates and equips individuals with competences and skills applicable in real life situations locally and globally. It added that curriculum needed to prioritize vocational education and practical subjects. Consequently, it recommended that for effective curriculum delivery and provision of quality education, teacher capacity building, provision of learning resources and teacher training in all areas either through pre-service and in-service is fundamental. The new curriculum was aimed at creating pathways to domicile talents. Based on the needs assessment study carried out by KICD, there are seven competencies to be developed and they include self-efficacy, citizenship, creativity and imagination, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, learning to learn and digital literacy. The task force set in 2012 therefore came

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up with the competency-based curriculum which emphasizes more on practical subjects that had earlier been neglected (Republic of Kenya, 2012).

In January 2017, the CBC framework on values and vision was launched and the Ministry of Education in conjunction with the Teachers Service Commission (TSC) trained some teachers and also developed curriculum support materials which were basically books and prototypes. Amid the gaps and challenges identified by the internal and external evaluations of the pilot study on the CBC implementation, the government continued with the national roll-out of the CBC in January 2019. The newly introduced Competency Based Curriculum in Kenya under 2-6-3-3 System of Education puts emphasis on seven core competences, namely: Communication and collaboration, Critical thinking and problem solving, Creativity and imagination, Citizenship, Digital literacy, learning to learn and Self-efficacy. The new curriculum provides a variety of opportunities for identification and nurturing of learner's potentials and talents in preparation for life and the world of work. It is geared towards making learning enjoyable. The Curriculum Designs for Lower Primary for grades one; two and three are in four areas and include the following subjects; Kiswahili, Literacy, Mathematics Activities, Hygiene and Nutrition Activities, Christian Religious Education, Hindu Religious Education, Islamic Religious Education, Movement and Creative Activities (K. I. C. D, 2016).

### **Some Perceptions on the Implementation of the Competency Based Curriculum in Primary Schools in Kenya**

At the time of rolling-out Competence Based Curriculum for Pre-primary, Standards One to Three; there was no Sessional Paper to guide the process, hence the roll out tended to be unprocedural. The needs assessment was not properly conducted. The summative evaluation which was conducted in 2009 could not be the basis for reforming the curriculum in 2018. Apparently, there was no research to support the argument that Competence Based Curriculum framework is more effective than the current learning outcomes based curriculum framework. Pilot testing of the curriculum seemed to be hurriedly done without an appropriate syllabus, pupils' books and teachers' guides. What appeared to be piloted was unrealistic for a syllabus. Piloting was done for a couple of months and there was limited involvement of teachers, university and other local expertise. The whole process seemed to be dominated by foreign consultants who limited experience in curriculum reform in the country (Sossion, 2017).

The Competence Based Curriculum generally entails extensive and effective training of teachers, but at time of the roll out very few teachers had been trained, and many who had undergone the training, seemed to claim that they still did not know how to implement the Competence Based Curriculum. 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 were overflowing with large numbers of pupils. In addition, there was 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).

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Preliminary studies on the implementation of of the competency based curriculum in primary schools generally seem to indicate some major flaws in its roll out. Inadequate infrastructure due to extremely high enrolment and such learner over enrollment is straining existing facilities. In addition, there is a serious problem with the provision of the teaching and learning resources. Teachers noted that the Government distribution and delivery of textbooks had been delayed with schools starting the year without the necessary textbooks. Buying of texts books was difficult since they were not available in the market or bookshops. This included; teachers handbook on the CBC implementation; approved pupils course books for such areas such as literary activities books, Kenya sign language books, approved hygiene and nutrition activities books, play materials and permanent classrooms for lower classes and movement and creative activities books. Learning in these levels is done under the tree/shade in some schools. Other resources not available were; inadequate learning and teaching materials (Sossion, 2017; Ondimu, 2018).

Learning print and digital materials had not been distributed to schools. In addition to poor quality learner's books in the bookshops, most schools lacked teacher guides and handbooks. The study further established that although some instructional materials were available in schools most of them inadequate both for the teachers and the learners. In addition, learner and teachers' desks and chairs were not adequate. For special needs learners: there were inadequate Braille materials. Teachers found it difficult to assess the learning progress. Teachers also lacked specialized training for different leaning areas. The assessments Rubrics had unclear guidelines which makes 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 have not been distributed to schools while there was no syllabus for mentally challenged learners. In addition diversity of learners with special needs was not catered for (Sossion, 2017; Ondimu, 2018).

There was also a major challenge with the preparation of teachers for the CBC curriculum. For instance in the preparation of teachers it was pointed out that the training sessions were largely ineffective due to a number of factors which included; an overload of the training content in the two-three day training sessions which were on the whole quite inadequate. There were also incompetent trainers/facilitators who had not properly conceptualized and understood the CBC, hence were unable to adequately facilitate the envisioned training. Head teachers in particular were not trained on how to assess learning, teachers and the teaching process of the learning areas as well as the core competencies. Lesson plans and schemes of work for instance were too lengthy which entailed too much preparation and paper work and took more time at the expense of the teaching time. The teachers noted a lack of adequate training materials and inadequate information on the new curriculum. In addition, there was the issue of the TSC transfer of the only CBC trained teachers in a school to other schools leaving the school with none or less trained teachers. The ineffectiveness of the training sessions and the training duration meant that teachers were not equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills about Competency-Based curriculum. This implies that teachers generally have limited or lack knowledge and skills for the successful implementation of CBC and since changes in the

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curriculum call for changes in instructional approaches therefore teachers need ample time for in-service training for them to have considerable knowledge and skills to understand Competency-Based curriculum and be able to implement it confidently, effectively and successfully (Sossion, 2017; Ondimu, 2018).

There was also a general lack of parental involvement in the CBC implementation leading to uncooperative parents due partly to the fact that a majority of the schools have not inducted parents. It was clear from the beginning that advocacy and awareness raising programmes for parents and community in all schools were to be conducted to strengthen participation and support for CBC on parental empowerment and engagement. There was a general lack of shareholders involvement in CBC roll out. For example, the lack of sensitization of parents and public participation limited effective implementation. Most parents generally do not understand what CBC is all about, their expectations, learners' assessment, grading, and others. Parents and other education stakeholders are key actors in the process of teaching and learning. For example, parental and community involvement in the learning process can improve students' behaviour and participation in classrooms. Schools need to organize regular meetings at the school level to discuss matters related to the process of teaching and learning and ensure the school is held accountable by parents and they know their roles in supporting school activities. In addition to meetings between teachers and parents to discuss matters related to students' outcomes, teaching and learning processes, changes in the curriculum, requires schools to have materials such as books and other teaching and learning resources. By the time of the survey, a majority of the schools have not inducted parents/ guardians on the CBC implementation, its expectations and their responsibilities (Sossion, 2017; Ondimu, 2018).

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

In this article it is noted that the implementation Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya which adopts a learner-centered pedagogy, formative, authentic assessment approaches and emphasizes on the development of competencies and application of knowledge in real life context was not systematically planned and implemented; with training of a majority of teachers on its contents and teaching methods which tends to hinder their application of essential knowledge and skills of the curriculum. There is a general lack of adequate approved textbooks for teachers and learners as well as instructional materials. Parents and other education stakeholders' involvement and public participation in the curriculum reform process were inadequate. There is also poor knowledge by decision makers about the quality of resources needed for the successful implementation of competency-based educational curriculum which includes infrastructure for learning, assessment and capacity-building of teachers. The Ministry of Education and other stakeholders should adequately create a framework of training program on preparing the teacher on the new curriculum. MOE should assist in the construction of classrooms in primary schools to cater for lower and preprimary grades as well as the provision of adequate resources and facilities. In addition, there is need for sensitization and involvement of parents through the school committees and Parents' Teachers' Associations (PTAs). Otherwise, on the basis of modalities and strategies of its implementation as discussed in this article and related experiences of other African countries, the new curriculum has slim chances of success. Besides the

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staggering conclusion of this exercise is that there is hardly any evidence for the effectiveness of competence-based education despite the long period since the 1970s when the approach came up in the United States of America. Whether this is as a result of the operationalization of the outcomes of competence-based education or not, it seems that there is only very little attention to testing the policy-assumptions that competence-based education is a worthy educational innovation which has taken place in many countries as supported by many researches (Lassnigg, 2015). It hoped that the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders in the education sector will seriously consider our humble suggestions for future improvement of the new curriculum.

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