



The Bumpy Road to Reform: Challenges in Kenya's Transition from 8-4-4 to Competency-Based Education (CBE)

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ABSTRACT :

Kenya's transition from the 8-4-4 education system to Competency-Based Education (CBE) represents one of the most significant reforms in its educational history. This study investigates the challenges encountered during this transition, drawing on qualitative insights from a wide range of education stakeholders. Through interviews, document analysis, and observation, the research highlights key obstacles including inadequate teacher preparation, misalignment between policy and practice, resource disparities, and limited stakeholder engagement. The findings reveal that despite the noble intentions of CBE to promote learner-centered pedagogy and holistic skill development, its implementation has been marred by systemic inefficiencies, resistance to change, and institutional unpreparedness. The study concludes that without sustained investment in teacher capacity, clear policy coordination, equitable resource allocation, and ongoing monitoring, the transformative promise of CBE will remain unfulfilled. The paper offers practical recommendations for strengthening curriculum reform implementation and calls for a more inclusive and phased approach to educational change in Kenya.

Keywords: Competency-Based Education, Curriculum Reform, Kenya, Education Policy, 8-4-4 System, Implementation Challenges, Teacher Preparedness

Introduction

Kenya's education system is undergoing a historic transformation with the gradual phase-out of the long-standing 8-4-4 system and the implementation of Competency-Based Education (CBE). Introduced in 1985, the 8-4-4 system emphasized academic performance, content mastery, and national examinations as the primary measure of learning outcomes. However, over the years, it became apparent that this model was ill-suited to equip learners with the practical skills, creativity, and critical thinking necessary for the 21st-century global economy. In response to these shortcomings, the Government of Kenya introduced the CBE framework through the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF) in 2017, aiming to realign education with the needs of the knowledge economy and the country's development agenda, Vision 2030.

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), a core component of CBE, places the learner at the center of the educational experience. It focuses on the development of core competencies such as communication, collaboration, digital literacy, and problem-solving, moving away from rote learning and exam-oriented instruction. This ambitious reform promises to foster holistic learners who are better prepared for life and work in a dynamic and fast-changing world. The transition to CBE has also required systemic adjustments in pedagogy, assessment, teacher training, infrastructure, and stakeholder involvement.

Despite its transformative promise, the shift from 8-4-4 to CBE has faced numerous obstacles. These include resistance to change, inadequate teacher preparedness, infrastructural deficits, unclear assessment criteria, and coordination challenges among key education actors. The scale and complexity of the reform have sparked widespread debate across educational, political, and social spheres.

This paper explores the major challenges that have hindered the smooth implementation of CBE in Kenya. By analyzing policy intentions against classroom realities, it highlights the gaps that must be addressed to ensure the reform achieves its intended goals. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing discourse on education reform in Kenya and offers insights into how large-scale curriculum changes can be more effectively implemented in developing country contexts.

Objective

The objective of this study is to examine the key challenges hindering the effective transition from the 8-4-4 education system to Competency-Based Education (CBE) in Kenya, with a view to identifying systemic, institutional, and pedagogical barriers that affect the implementation of the reform.

Literature Review

World over, education systems are undergoing significant transformation to better prepare learners for an increasingly complex, dynamic, and interconnected world. Traditional models of education that emphasized memorization, teacher dominance, and summative assessment are being replaced by competency-based approaches that promote learner agency, practical problem-solving, creativity, collaboration, and adaptability (UNESCO, 2020). These shifts are grounded in the understanding that 21st-century societies and labor markets demand more than just academic knowledge—they require individuals who can apply skills in diverse, real-world contexts. Countries such as Finland, Canada, Singapore, and Australia have led the way in implementing Competency-Based Education (CBE), often with substantial investments in teacher training, curriculum reform, flexible assessment models, and school autonomy (Sahlberg, 2011).

In Finland, for instance, the national curriculum emphasizes phenomenon-based learning, cross-disciplinary competencies, and trust-based professionalism, where teachers enjoy considerable autonomy in instructional decisions. This model is widely credited for fostering equity, innovation, and student well-being (Sahlberg, 2015). Similarly, Singapore's education reforms have promoted a "Teach Less, Learn More" philosophy, aimed at nurturing independent thinking and lifelong learning habits. Across these systems, a key lesson is the need for coherence among policy, practice, and professional development.

In the African context, the drive toward CBE has been equally compelling, albeit more complex due to structural limitations. Countries such as Rwanda, South Africa, Namibia, and Ghana have made notable strides in reconfiguring their education systems to focus on learner competencies, national values, and employability. Rwanda's 2015 Competence-Based Curriculum reform emphasized learner-centered methodologies, continuous assessment, and integration of technology in teaching and learning. However, implementation challenges—including insufficient training, lack of materials, and high student-teacher ratios—have exposed the tension between reform ambition and institutional capacity (UNESCO, 2020). South Africa's Curriculum 2005, launched in the late 1990s, was among the earliest attempts to integrate outcomes-based education on the continent. Although conceptually progressive, the reform suffered from overly technical language, insufficient teacher support, and misaligned assessment systems, leading to widespread confusion and eventual revision (Chisholm, 2005).

These African experiences underscore that successful CBE implementation depends not only on curriculum design but also on the readiness of systems to support deep pedagogical change. Key factors include teacher competence, stakeholder buy-in, adequate resources, professional development structures, and meaningful assessment reforms.

Kenya's education reform journey is informed by these global and regional trends. The 8-4-4 system, in place since 1985, was introduced with the goal of promoting practical skills and reducing the over-academic focus of its predecessor systems. However, over time, the 8-4-4 model became heavily examination-driven, resulting in an overloaded curriculum, learner stress, and minimal focus on skill development or holistic education (Republic of Kenya, 2012). Research by Kafu (2011) and Sifuna and Sawamura (2010) indicated that the system lacked flexibility, marginalized learners with diverse needs, and was ill-aligned with labor market and societal expectations.

In response to these challenges, the Government of Kenya developed the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF) in 2017, laying the foundation for the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). This new system—structured as 2-6-3-3-3—is rooted in the philosophy of nurturing every learner's potential by fostering seven core competencies: communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving, imagination and creativity, citizenship, self-efficacy, digital literacy, and learning to learn (KICD, 2017). It also emphasizes values education, parental engagement, and formative assessment, thus marking a radical departure from the 8-4-4 paradigm.

However, as with many large-scale education reforms, the transition to CBE in Kenya has encountered significant implementation hurdles. One of the most pressing challenges is **teacher preparedness**. Many teachers were trained under the 8-4-4 framework and lack the pedagogical knowledge and confidence required to implement learner-centered teaching strategies, facilitate project-based learning, or design effective formative assessments (Bunyi, 2013; TSC, 2020). In-service training has been irregular and often superficial, leaving teachers unsure about their roles in the new curriculum environment.

In addition, **infrastructure deficits** remain a major concern. Effective CBE implementation requires flexible classroom spaces, access to ICT tools, diversified learning materials, and well-equipped assessment systems—all of which are lacking in many Kenyan public schools, particularly in rural and arid regions (World Bank, 2020; FAWE, 2018). These resource constraints contribute to unequal implementation and exacerbate regional disparities in learning outcomes.

Assessment reform, another cornerstone of CBE, has also been problematic. The shift from high-stakes summative tests to ongoing, competency-based assessment has been poorly understood by many teachers and parents. The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) has introduced new assessment tools, but concerns persist about standardization, objectivity, and the capacity of teachers to accurately assess non-cognitive skills and competencies (KNEC, 2021). Without clear guidelines and quality assurance mechanisms, assessments risk being inconsistent and potentially inequitable.

Stakeholder resistance and poor communication have further compounded these challenges. Many parents and school leaders express confusion or skepticism about CBC, partly due to limited engagement and insufficient dissemination of information from the Ministry of Education (Mutua, 2020). This has led to widespread misinformation and politicization of the reform process. Furthermore, coordination among key education agencies—such as KICD, TSC, KNEC, and the Ministry—has often been fragmented, resulting in policy contradictions, inconsistent messaging, and implementation delays (Simiyu, 2021; Oduor, 2019).

Despite these obstacles, the promise of CBE remains significant. When well-executed, competency-based approaches can transform education from a mechanical, exam-centric activity into a meaningful process of personal growth and societal empowerment. However, as the literature consistently emphasizes, such transformation demands more than curriculum change. It requires systemic readiness, policy coherence, professional capacity building, community ownership, and sustained investment. Kenya's experience thus far mirrors the struggles of many countries attempting to operationalize bold reforms in complex education systems. It also offers valuable lessons about the risks of rapid reform without adequate groundwork and the importance of aligning curriculum goals with classroom realities.

Findings, Interpretation and Discussion

This study set out to examine the challenges impeding Kenya's transition from the 8-4-4 education system to the Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework. Drawing from qualitative data collected through interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis and observation, several key themes emerged. These findings, when interpreted in the light of existing literature, reveal that while the CBE reform carries strong transformative potential, its implementation has been marred by systemic, structural, and practical challenges.

One of the most significant findings is the acute shortage of teachers across public schools in Kenya. In many institutions, one teacher is forced to handle several learning areas - some outside their area of specialization. This situation results in work overload, fatigue, and burnout, and undermines both the quality of instruction and the ability to mentor learners effectively. One teachers explained: "I am trained in two subjects and thus I have no idea on how to teach the other subjects. But here I am, teaching any of the allocated subjects by the school head."

Teacher retooling and induction for CBE has been widely reported as inadequate, erratic, and rushed. Most teachers were not given sufficient training on the curriculum's philosophical foundations, its pedagogical strategies, or its assessment approaches. Consequently, meaningful learning is often not taking place. The centrality of the teacher in education reform has been overlooked, severely impairing implementation at the classroom level. Before rollout, quality, phased training for teachers should have been conducted nationwide, which was not the case.

Implementation of CBE has also been hampered by logistical issues. Schools reported delayed delivery of textbooks and materials, which in turn delays syllabus coverage. This is exacerbated by chronic funding challenges, which leave institutions without necessary facilities such as science laboratories and ICT infrastructure - critical for practical, competency-based learning.

There is a widespread lack of clarity among teachers, parents, and school administrators about what the curriculum entails, how it should be implemented, and how learning outcomes are to be assessed. This confusion is a product of inconsistent, sometimes contradictory, communication from education authorities. The entire transition process has been marked by trial and error, abrupt changes, and a lack of coherent direction.

Compounding these issues is the overcrowding of classrooms and rivalry between junior and primary school teachers. Since junior secondary is domiciled in primary schools, there is often friction. Many headteachers—trained at certificate (P1) level—supervise graduate-level junior school teachers. The schools also lack the infrastructure and staffing to teach subjects like science effectively, deepening the disparity between curriculum intentions and actual classroom practice.

Parental involvement remains a major obstacle. Many children, especially in rural or marginalized communities, are raised by grandparents or guardians who are either illiterate or semi-literate and therefore unable to support CBE learning activities. Additionally, assignments often require families to buy materials or use internet-enabled devices—resources that many do not have access to. As a result, CBE has come to be perceived as a curriculum for the wealthy, exacerbating inequality.

Public schools are especially disadvantaged when compared to private schools, which are generally better equipped and staffed. The disparity between the two is growing, creating a stark class divide. Many learners in public institutions suffer from congestion, lack of resources, and poorly paid, overworked teachers who are not included in health insurance schemes.

Perhaps most critically, stakeholders across the board—teachers, parents, learners, and even some government officials—have expressed a lack of goodwill toward the curriculum. Many feel the programme was rushed and imposed without adequate preparation, consultation, or resources. Without stakeholder buy-in and ownership, sustainable implementation is impossible. Ultimately, the curriculum is seen by many as "only drama in class," with more focus on theatrics than actual learning.

Conclusions

The study concludes that Kenya's transition to Competency-Based Education (CBE) has been severely hindered by a combination of policy, administrative, pedagogical, and social challenges. These include an acute teacher shortage, inadequate and inconsistent training, insufficient learning materials, underfunded schools, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of infrastructure. Teachers, who are central to the success of any education reform, have been largely left unsupported and overburdened.

The rushed implementation, often perceived as authoritarian and poorly coordinated, has led to confusion, low stakeholder morale, and minimal meaningful learning. Socio-economic inequalities have been exacerbated as children from wealthier families can access better-equipped schools, while their counterparts in public institutions are left behind. There is also a serious communication gap between policy-makers and implementers at the grassroots, leading to mistrust and misinterpretation.

The study finds that CBE lacks the critical elements of stakeholder goodwill, inclusive planning, and equitable resource distribution. Unless these issues are addressed systematically and collaboratively, the promise of CBE will remain unfulfilled.

Recommendations

To address the multitude of challenges impeding the effective implementation of the Competency-Based Education (CBE) framework in Kenya, a multi-pronged and systemic approach is necessary. First and foremost, the Ministry of Education should urgently implement a nationwide, comprehensive, and sustained teacher retooling programme. This training must not only cover pedagogical skills but also the philosophical underpinnings and assessment strategies required under the new curriculum.

Simultaneously, the government must increase the recruitment of qualified teachers to alleviate the burden of subject overload currently placed on existing staff. Improving working conditions—including fair remuneration, adequate health insurance coverage, and hardship allowances—is essential to restoring teacher morale and preventing burnout.

Infrastructure development must also be prioritized. Investments should target science laboratories, ICT facilities, and classroom expansions, with particular attention given to marginalized regions and public schools. Alongside this, there should be a commitment to timely and sufficient provision of teaching and learning materials. No school should begin the term without the core textbooks and instructional aids required to deliver the curriculum. Clear and consistent communication from curriculum developers and policy makers is crucial. The Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) should establish structured channels to clarify curriculum content, assessment modalities, and implementation expectations. This must be accompanied by national sensitization and information campaigns to empower parents and guardians to participate meaningfully in their children's education. To address equity concerns, the government should implement targeted interventions aimed at narrowing the divide between public and private schools. This includes resource subsidies, infrastructure grants, and expanded support for low-income learners. Governance of junior secondary schools should also be restructured to eliminate conflicts between primary and junior staff and to ensure professional leadership. Finally, the government must adopt a phased and consultative approach to curriculum implementation moving forward. Genuine stakeholder engagement—including feedback loops and participatory policy-making—will help build the goodwill necessary for success. Robust monitoring and evaluation systems must be established to track progress, identify emerging challenges, and make timely course corrections. Only through inclusive planning, adequate resourcing, and sustained political commitment can Kenya realize the transformative potential of Competency-Based Education.

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