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Competency-Based Curriculum as a Panacea for Nigeria's Shift Towards Skill-Oriented Education

Ahmad Umar Kalmalo (Ph.D.),

Federal University of Education, Zaria

E-MAIL ADDRESS: ahmadkalmalo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In its bid to employ education as an instrument for total individual and national developments, Nigeria has gradually been shifting away from the traditional or content-based curriculum which emphasizes rote memorization over practical skills with consequent disconnect between education and labour market, to competency-based curriculum which empowers learners with skills, knowledge and values that will enable them cope with global developments. This paper examined the competency-based curriculum, the current state of the country's shift to it, the advantages of so doing and the challenges of implementing the curriculum. The research discovered that the competency-based curriculum adoption by Nigeria considering its enormous advantages of improving the individual and national developments. The paper however discovered that series of challenges confront proper implementation of the curriculum thereby negating the full realization of its advantages, recommending among other things that Nigeria government should ardently train adequate teachers for proper implementation of the competency-based curriculum in the country.

Introduction

Education, when coupled with sound curriculum reforms, implementation and funding that would make learning outcomes align with the needs of society, has globally been recognized as an instrument per excellence for for all kinds of development. Nigeria has therefore sought to to employ improved development and delivery of learner centered curriculum frameworks, the Competency Based Curriculum inclusive (Namubiru, Boakye-Yiadom, Onyango & Nkusi, 2021). The country has gradually been shifting away from the traditional content-based curriculum which highly emphasizes rote memorization over practical skills to competency-based curriculum. The competency-based curriculum has the advantage of empowering citizens with skills, knowledge and values that will enable them cope with global developments and have accordingly shifted towards it. Nigeria has accordingly undertaken reforms in favor of the competency-based education.

Nigeria's shift towards the competency-based curriculum has not however been free of challenges, ranging from lack of human and material resources along with other intervening factors such as quality assurance, and assessment standards, which have negated its smooth and effective implementation (Ukwueze, Nnadi & L. Ekwewuo, 2023). These challenges emanate from policies around education, understanding how CBC is developed, implemented, monitored and evaluated (Namubiru, Boakye-Yiadom, Onyango & Nkusi, 2021). The present paper explores the concept of competency-based education, its implementation in Nigeria, the challenges faced, and recommendations for effective adoption.

The competency-based curriculum or competency-based education/learning is a system in which learners work independently to attain the ability of demonstrating the stated competencies in their area of study. It is usually designed around a set of key competencies with the aim of enabling learners to systematically apply knowledge, attitudes, skills and judgement in performing a task. The CBC is outcome-based, learner-centred and flexible. The model's learning approaches were first implemented in United States of America 1970s and have since then been developed and implemented in a range of professional areas and learning institutions in various countries (Isaboke, Wambiri & Mweru, 2021).

The Competency-Based Curriculum

The word competency, to start with, is a way of doing somethings successfully and efficiently (Odewumi & Dekom, 2020). It may technically refer to successful performance of a task by systematically applying knowledge, skills, attitude and judgment. The term competency-based curriculum has on the other hand been defined by Gruber (2018) in Musaa and Sallehb (2021) as a concept which enables students to learn how to work independently in order to demonstrate command in competencies required for their chosen area of study. Ukwueze, Nnadi & Ekwewuo (2023) define it as that which emphasizes the complex outcome of a learning process (that is knowledge, skills and attitude) to be applied by learners rather than mainly focusing on what learners are expected to learn about in terms of traditionally-defined subject content. It can be submitted that competency-based curriculum is an educational programme designed to equip students with the ability of systematically applying knowledge, attitudes, skills and judgement in performing

tasks. It is usually designed around a set of key competencies that can be cross curricular and/or subject-bound implying that learners should acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes to solve situations they encounter in everyday life and across the globe (Ohadiugha, 2023).

Features of competency-based curriculum according to Ohadiugha (2023) are: (1) it is outcome-based and that the first step in competency-based learning is to define precise learning outcomes. All lessons are hence geared towards the achievement of the set skills/competencies, (2) it is learner-centred because it advocates the necessity of the pupils/students themselves driving the teaching and learning processes. CBC therefore empowers learners to master valuable skills/knowledge at their own pace. (3) it is differentiated in that its learning practices must be adjusted to meet the individual needs of specific learners. All the interventions are determined by the learning requirements of the pupil.

To develop a competency-based curriculum, the following major stages are necessary. The first stage is that of identifying the competencies. The competencies provide a framework based on performance outcomes around which the curriculum is developed and delivered and against which performance can be measured. The second stage is that of linking competencies to school subjects. In this stage, the content needed to support the development of competency in the curriculum are selected and the most effective instructional strategies and methods to be used in developing competency determined. The third stage is that of assessing competencies in the curriculum, taking into consideration whether or not the students have acquired the program competencies by the end of the program and whether or not the acquisition of the competencies results from the program. A variety of methods, potentially integrated in portfolios to assess both formative and summative performances (Kim, 2015 in Ohadiugha, 2023).

Juraschka (2021) in Ohadiugha (2023) stipulates the following six principles for the application of a competency-based curriculum (CBC) to be effective. The first is the principle of equity according to which each student is given what he needs to reach the same end goal. This major principle of competency-based education purposely seeks to understand and remove bias in school leadership. The second principle is emphasis on measurable competencies that help build skills for life. These competencies can be based on: (a) an understanding of key concepts, (b) the ability to apply knowledge to meaningful problems and (c) mastery of relevant skills. The third principle is the principle of transparency according to which the learning objectives are made clear to both learners and parents. The fourth principle is that the pupils/students must get the support they need individually. The fifth principle is that teachers must assess their pupils/students for growth and mastery at the formative, authentic and summative levels. The sixth principle is that the pupils/students must move forward only if they demonstrate mastery.

The competency-based curriculum differs from knowledge-based curriculum in a number of ways. These include: a) Structure: In the case of knowledge centered curriculum, the year is set out in advance for every pupil and at the end of each unit, every pupil must move forward, whether they fully understand the material or have mastered the necessary skills. In the case of competency-based curriculum on the other hand, times for the completion of the individual units and the programme are variable. b) Learning Outcomes: While the content-based curriculum focuses on content by covering knowledge, skills and attitudes and emphasizing memorization and comprehension to pass tests, the competency-based curriculum focuses a deep understanding that is demonstrated through the application. c) Grading: while the traditional or content-based curriculum grades are made up of test scores, assignments, and behaviour, competency-based education scores are based on the performance levels of each pupil, without bias (Ohadiugha, 2023). d) Assessment Methods: The traditional curriculum which focuses on knowledge acquisition uses norm referenced summative evaluation while the CBC model which focuses on knowledge application uses criterion referenced formative assessment (Usoro & Ezekiel, 2017).

The Shift Towards Competency-Based Education in Nigeria

Nigeria's education system has long been characterized by a rigid and exam-oriented structure that often fail to equip students with relevant skills for employment and entrepreneurship. This has been attributed to the predominantly used traditional or content-based curriculum which focusses on memorization and recall and consequently limits students' ability to think critically, solve problems and prepare for the modern workforce (Oko, Oko & Agboje, 2025). The content-based curriculum operates a single curriculum for all students based on age and does not ground learning and teaching in the learning sciences. Moreover, it permits high degrees of variability in how educators and schools determine proficiency thereby holding students to different standards within courses and schools. Furthermore, the traditional curriculum offers opaque learning objectives and performance expectations with limited information for students about the learning cycle. It also uses academic grading practices that can often send mixed messages and misleading signals about what students know (Sturgis & Casey, 2018).

Besides the limitations of the traditional curriculum in delivering the goods as outlined above, Nigeria has been facing increasing youth unemployment and skills gaps with consequent fast-growing emphasis on curriculum reforms to promote skill-oriented education. Nigeria's education system has therefore recently undergone significant reforms aimed at enhancing the quality of education and equipping students for the challenges of the 21st century. A pivotal aspect of these reforms is the transition from a content-based curriculum to a competency-based curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration. Competency-based curriculum is now gaining ground speedily in the training of technologists in the fields of vocational and technical education, engineering, development of professional programmes and workforce training initiatives in the western clime (Oko, Oko & Agboje, 2025).

Apart from the flows associated with the content-based curriculum as outlined above and the problem of unemployment now bedevilling the country, the numerous benefits of the competency-based curriculum also add to the increasing thrust of Nigerians towards it. The competency-based curriculum has several advantages that make educationists see it as a catalyst in solving personal and societal problems of development. It provides learners with opportunity to demonstrate mastery of each competency before advancing to the next level or stage. Moreover, learners exposed to this type of teaching method progress at their own pace and can focus on areas where they need improvement. Furthermore, CBC provides learners with multiple pathways to achieve mastery of competency (Kalu, Kalu, Udeala & Ezeama, 2023).

Key policies and initiatives driving CBC adoption in Nigeria

Nigeria's shift towards competency-based curriculum is grounded in a number of policies, the major ones of which include the National Policy on Education (NPE), the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and The National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF). The NPE is pro-competency curriculum in some of its beliefs, goals, objectives and approaches. It is among others, based on the beliefs that education maximizes the creative potentials and skills of the individual for self-fulfillment and general development of the society and that it is to be qualitative, comprehensive, functional and relevant to the needs of the society. One of the policy's goals is accordingly the development of appropriate skills, mental, physical and social abilities and competencies to empower the individual to live in and contribute positively to the society. The policy wants to specifically promote functional education for skill acquisition, job creation and poverty reduction, among other things. To realize this and other goals and objectives, the policy advocates for learner-centred, practical, activity-based, experiential and IT supported teaching approaches including competency-based learning (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

As for the UBE, it has not explicitly mentioned the Competency-Based curriculum although it has implicitly mentioned it, particularly in its fourth objective thus: "to lay the foundation for lifelong learning through the inculcation of appropriate learning, selfawareness, citizenship and life skills" (Ohadiugha, 2023). This implies that the programme has the aim of integrating practical skills training in primary and secondary education. In line with this, the programme specified its goal of Teacher Professional Development (TPD) as improving teacher effectiveness in subject content knowledge, pedagogy, attitude and professional conduct in the light of current development. One of the objectives of the training was to update the skills, attitudes and approaches of individual teachers in the light of the development of new teaching techniques and objectives, new circumstances and new educational research (Universal Basic Education Commission, n. d).

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Reforms also strengthens skill-based learning in secondary schools and tertiary institutions. The programme refers to "those aspects of the educational process involving, in addition to general education, the study of technologies and related sciences and the acquisition of practical skills, attitudes, understanding and knowledge relating to occupations in various sectors of economic and social life". The programme has three goals all of which are related to competency-based learning. These are a) provide trained manpower in the applied sciences, technology and business particularly at craft, advance craft and technical levels; b) provide the technical knowledge and vocational skills necessary for agricultural, commercial and economic development; and c) give training and impart the necessary skills to individual for self-reliance economically (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013: 48).

The National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) was established in 2017 establishes competency standards for different vocational and professional skills. It is a replacement of the previous National Skills Qualification Framework (NVQF) which focussed primarily on vocational and technical skills. The NSQF is not restricted to vocational and technical skills but encompasses all skills, whether acquired through formal or informal training. It has the aim of classifying, recognizing and developing skills, knowledge and competencies, regardless of how and where the training was acquired (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013).

Benefits of a Competency-Based Curriculum

According to SpacesEDU Team (2022), competency-based curriculum has the following advantages: 1. students demonstrate complete competency or mastery of the skill they are working on before moving on to the next one. This often affords them with a long-lasting understanding of mastery of the skill and enable them to apply it in multiple contexts, situations, and other problems. 2. Time and resources spent on learning and learning outcomes are more effective and efficient because teachers are tailoring their instruction to respond to exactly where students are at in their learning. 3. There is a more equitable learning environment because students get what they need as learners. 4. It provides more room for authentic learning and assessment rather than conventional "seat work" or paper-and-pencil tests. 5. It gives students autonomy over their learning because it is student-centred, and allows students to take leadership over their own learning. Other advantages of the CBC are that: 6. it welcomes nontraditional learners by posing a challenge to many traditional ways of teaching and learning that hinders some individuals from feeling included in learning environment. 7. It offers time and location flexibility because students can study anywhere, anytime and even via online platforms. 8. It encourages productivity among students by making them save time and money and hence becoming more mindful of their productivity levels. 9. It produces more competent graduates who are proficient in all areas of their field and job-ready.

Another very important benefit of the CBC is that by producing more job-ready and competent graduates, it contributes to economic and social developments of the individual and the society. The CBC empowers vocational and technical education graduates to acquire competencies required in the performance of their jobs (Ayomide, Okwelle and Okeke, 2014). It makes the graduates of entrepreneurial behaviour self-reliant and affords them with competencies and necessary skills for effective teamwork management as well as the ability to successfully establish and run enterprises based on identified opportunities (Zekeri, Issa & Shu'aibu, n. d). the CBC also fosters self-employment of building engineering graduates by equipping them with industrial based competencies such as in-depth knowledge of construction practice, building drawing and interpretation skills, building performance analysis skills and determination of building materials behaviours among others (Kalu, Kalu, Udeala & Ezeama, 2023).

Challenges in Transition and Implementing CBC in Nigeria

There are many several challenges in transition to competency-based education. Such hurdles demand careful planning and targeted action. One of the challenges is to have institution ensure close alignment of the curriculum design with clearly defined competencies and to evolve assessment methods to accurately gauge mastery without relying solely on traditional grading structures. Another challenge is that of giving educators the required specialized training and technological support with which they can effectively implement personalized learning strategies. There is also the challenge of having a proactive change management and ongoing evaluation necessary for mitigating risks during the transition process and for fostering an environment that encourages continuous improvement (Bouchrika, 2025). Other problems challenges include lack of critical mass professional curriculum and textbook authors and developers; acute shortage of educational infrastructure and school facilities such as computers, multimedia projectors, modern classrooms and smart boards; lack of appropriate quality control mechanisms for occasional assessment of the implementation of the curriculum; and, inadequate funding of the curriculum (Ukwuezeh, Nnadi & L. Ekwewuo, 2023).

Recommendations

In view of the paper's findings, it recommends as follows:

1. Nigeria government should ardently train adequate teachers for proper implementation of the competency-based curriculum in the country.
2. Government should formulate clear policies to institutionalize the competency-based learning in the country.
3. The government should partner with the private sector to adequately fund the competency-based learning in the country.
4. Students and parents should entertain positive attitude towards the competency-based learning.

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