A Competency-Based Curriculum for Kenyan Primary Schools: Learning From Theory.

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ABSTRACT

The main focus of this paper is placed on how competent each student is in the subject and not how much knowledge they have acquired in the subject. A competency-based curriculum for Kenyan primary schools. Competency-based curriculum (CBC) is designed with a view to help learners acquire desired knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to enable them cope with life challenges. CBE adopts a learner-centered pedagogy, formative and authentic assessment approaches that emphasize the development of competencies and application of knowledge in real life context. This paper is based on library research and seeks to review literature concerning the CBC in order to come up with various lessons to help in the Kenyan education. A brief analysis of Kenyan adoption of CBC under the system of 2-6-3-3 unveiled in 2017 to replace the current 8-4-4 system which has served Kenya for the last 32 years has been done. The adoption of 2-6-3-3 has received attention because it provides an opportunity to reflect on the end of an Era in Kenyan education system where examination has been the center of the sector. The paper will focus on the potential and prospects of CBC for Kenya based on the experiences of CBC in other countries. Illustrations from some countries will be used to point out why CBC will be useful in the development of the Kenyan education.

Key term: Primary schools, curriculum, competencies, competency-based.

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Introduction

Curriculum change is not a new phenomenon in Africa and around the world. The word curriculum is derived from “currere” a Latin word which means “course or track” to be followed (Hoadley, & Jansen, 2002). When it is used in the educational context, curriculum means a course of study that needs to be completed by a learner within a particular period which can either be primary school lasting for eight years; secondary school (four years) and university education which takes a minimum of four years. In order to meet the needs of a changing society, and to provide relevant knowledge, skills and real-life competencies, the curriculum is always subject to change and revisions.

The process of curriculum change in most African countries started as soon as the nations got independence from the colonizers (Taasisi ya Elimu, 2013; Muneja, 2015). Most African governments became discontented with the content-based curriculum because it produced learners who were only academic. The rate of unemployment was increasing because the formal industry could only absorb a few graduates from colleges and universities. For instance, in South Africa the curriculum moved from knowledge and skills acquisition to knowledge creation and application (Kimaro, 2012). Muneja (2015) remarked that in South Africa, competency-based curriculum preferred as outcome-based education (OBE) was adopted in 1998 following a acute shortage of professionals such as engineers and technicians. OBE was adopted to equip all South Africans with employable skills to cope with the challenging issues in the 21st century (Muneja, 2015). Thus, the rationale for this change in most African countries was to make

the curriculum more effective and responsive to societal needs by providing relevant knowledge, skills and real- life competencies for the learners.

In Kenya, the 8-4-4 system of education was introduced in 1985 to address the concerns that the previous education system (7.4.2.3) lacked the necessary content to promote widespread and sustainable self-employment (The Elephant, 2019). However, it has been argued that the 8.4.4 curriculum does not provide flexible education pathways for identifying and nurturing the talents and interests of learners early enough to prepare them for the world of work, career progression and sustainable development (Republic of Kenya, 2017). It is for this reason that in 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; equipping the learners with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help them fit and compete both nationally and internationally (Sifuna, & Obonyo, 2019). In addition, global trends in education and training are now shifting their focus towards programs that encourage maximum development of human capital. In line with global trends, Kenya needed to align itself with this paradigm shift in education.

Various policy documents had indicated gaps in the former curriculum (8-4-4) as follows; the curricula for some education levels were not appropriate for the age of the learners; the curriculum for basic education was not aligned to the requirements of the Constitution of Kenya and Kenya Vision 2030; the former curriculum did not provide for essential

pathways and thus impeded pursuance of individual interest and development of talents. UNESCO (2017) remarked that Kenya still lack the adequately skilled manpower to spur it towards economic development as envisioned in the Kenya Vision 2030, hence the need to produce graduates who were globally competitive through a reform in education. A research report on the need's assessment for curriculum reform by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) affirmed the necessity for a primary school curriculum that equips individual learner with competencies and skills applicable in real life situations locally and globally (KICD, 2016). This paper focuses on curriculum reforms at primary school level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya

In a major departure from the 8-4-4 system, the CBC was launched in 2017 and is designed to comprise two years of pre-primary education, six years of primary education, three years of junior secondary education, three years of senior secondary education and three years of university (The Elephant, 2019). Competency-based curriculum focuses on development of competences rather than on the acquisition of content knowledge. A competence is the ability to apply appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to successfully perform a function. The CBC is designed to emphasize the significance of developing skills and knowledge and also applying those competencies to real life situations. The CBC also focuses on flexible learning and placing the learner at the centre of the learning process than the teacher or instructor (Menendez, & Morale-Menendez, 2016). This effectively means that the teaching and learning

process has to change its orientation from rote memorization of content to the acquisition of skills and competencies useful for solving real-life problems. Thus, Kenya should envisage the proper implementation of CBC in the classroom to enhance the goals of the curriculum.

Countries that have adopted the Competency-based Curriculum

In this section, examples of countries that have adopted the competency-based curriculum are given and the rationale for adopting the CBC explained.

United States of America (USA)

Competency-based education in United States of America has evolved overtime. According to Burton (1977), the competency-based curriculum was introduced due to concern about low student achievement and poor-quality teacher training. This prompted a need to structure the outcome of learning in a manner that will encourage teachers to express their teaching objectives in terms of observable student behaviors. It was considered that the competency-based approach would improve "effectiveness of schools, teachers and teacher educators; and serve to address society's concern about unsatisfactory performance in the development of programs in teacher education (Burton, 1977). Hence it is evident that lack of necessary skills led to the educational reforms. Though to date, the competency-based education is not thoroughly utilized in the USA primary schools.

United Kingdom (UK)

Many countries in Europe, United Kingdom (UK) included, experienced economic recession in the mid-1970s. This led to the rising inflation and increasing unemployment predominantly for youth. Main criticism was directed at the educational system arguing that standards of attainment in basic skills were too low, making many school graduates unemployable (Wiener, 1981).

Debates dominating policy were on the notion that education was a key engine of economic regeneration and therefore strong functional links between education and the world of work were imperative. The policy favored vocational education. This led to the emergence of a competency-based vocational qualification policy in the UK. Competency-based was favored because of the perception that it would enable learners to mobilize resources including knowledge to master complex situations (Bates, 2002). This has seen commendable progress in the Europe educational system. Hence, competency-based education was introduced in order to minimize unemployment among young people and provide them with appropriate skills. Further, it can be noted that competency-based education was seen as a tool for economic and global development.

Germany

The notion of curriculum-based education (CBE) first appeared in Germany in the 1970s. According to Weigel, et al. (2007), the CBE was characterized by specialization and higher degree of abstract knowledge and skills. The German system of competency-based education in vocational education and training started to follow an action competence

approach by 1996. Competence was expressed as “vocational action competence or the readiness and capacity of the individual to act thoughtfully, individually and in a socially responsible manner (Weigel, et al., 2007).

The vocational action competence includes three categories; subject competence, personal competence and social competence. From the categorization, it can be seen that a competency-based curriculum requires the learner to acquire knowledge, personal competence and social competence. These competences are important for learners to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and social values which are important in society and professional work. The categorization of competences is relevant to understanding the focus of this paper as it provides information on the different types of competences which learners need to acquire in the teaching and learning process.

Rwanda

Rwanda embarked on curriculum reform to improve the quality of education in 2013. The journey lasted for two years involving an in-depth research and study of curricula in neighboring East African countries and leading economies including the United States of America, United Kingdom, and Singapore (Ngendahayo, & Askill-williams, 2016). The study's mission was to identify best practices that could be replicated in Rwanda to produce effective results in the quality of education offered to the Rwandese. It was imperative that the school graduates were equipped with technical and vocational skills (REB, 2015). The new curriculum necessitated for less

academic work and called for more practical, more skill-based and more orientation to a working environment and daily life. There was a need to eliminate any barrier resulting from the old curriculum that would hinder graduates from working or furthering their studies in the region and the rest of the world (REB, 2015).

The competency-based curriculum (CBC) in Rwanda was launched in April, 2015. CBC implementation kicked off with the opening of the school year in 2016. The aim is to develop students' independent lifelong learning habits, appropriate skills and knowledge and applications to real life situations. Teachers were trained and equipped with skills to work with the existing curriculum while applying methodologies and teaching aids in the new curriculum. Hence, the running of the CBC was not to be hampered as the students and teachers received new books outlined in the curriculum. Teachers were required to change their attitudes and demonstrate a change in mindset especially that learners were to look upon teachers as role models in the values to be instilled in the new curriculum. This is evident that for a new curriculum to be successful teachers need to embrace the new innovation.

Tanzania embraced competency-based curriculum reforms in 2005. It involved major pedagogical changes in the curriculum and teaching approaches which incorporated outcome-based education (Muneja, 2015)). It was aimed at strengthening learners' skill acquisition. The curriculum became operational in both primary and secondary schools by the 2006. According to Justin (2013), the ideals were

drawn from the Tanzania Development Vision 2025 and the Education Development Sector Program. Human and financial resources were made available to retain and support teachers, head teachers and other educational professionals to develop the necessary competence to effectively handle the competency-based education (Woods, 2008). Thus, it is clear that the Tanzania education sector introduced the CBC in order to respond to the Tanzanian Tanzania Development Vision 2025 and the Education Development Sector Program.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the method applied is literature review. The process was guided by an extensive literature review and analysis of documents on Competency-based Curriculum (CBC) in Africa and around the world particularly; United Kingdom, United States of America, Germany, Rwanda and Tanzania. An extensive analysis of the literature and research that has been published in relation to CBC was done in order to get more details of how much emphasis was required to address the issues in this research. The analyzed documents provided a basis for understanding the history of CBC, its establishment and the overall performance of CBC. The availability of vital information about CBC on website facilitated the smooth progress of this research

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenyan Primary Schools

The KICD adopted a competency-based approach (CBA) in their curriculum reform based on the findings of needs assessment studies carried out in 2016 (KICD,

2016). Educators in Kenya received a series of training on this approach from the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE-UNESCO, 2017). The curriculum change was guided by the Vision “Engaged, Empowered, and Ethical citizen”. This means that curriculum change aimed at enabling every Kenyan learner to become an engaged, empowered and ethical citizen by equipping them with desirable knowledge and skills needed to thrive in 21st century (Republic of Kenya, 2016). The curriculum mission “Nurturing Every Learner’s Potential” implies that all learners have abilities that can be nurtured for success (KICD, 2016) to produce citizens equipped with relevant and quality knowledge with national values and social competencies (Kenya Constitution, 2010) and to equip them with the 21st century skills and competencies (Vision, 2030). From the needs assessment study, the (KICD, 2016) has stipulated the core competencies to be achieved by every learner in basic education as: communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy, learning to learn and self-efficacy.

The implementation of the new curriculum in Kenyan primary school began with the Early Years Education (EYE) which comprises of two years of Pre-primary and three years of lower primary school education (Grades 1, 2 and 3)(Republic of Kenya, 2016). KICD has developed curriculum designs for EYE as part of the curriculum reform materials. The Learning areas formerly known as subjects for EYE include: Mathematical activities, Language activities, Environmental activities, Psychomotor and Creative activities and Religious Education (CRE, IRE, and HRE)

and Pastoral Program of Instruction (PPI) for Pre-primary education. Lower Primary (Grades 1, 2 and 3) learning areas include; Literacy activities and Indigenous language, Kiswahili activities, English language activities, Mathematical activities, Environmental activities, Hygiene and Nutrition activities, Movement and Creative activities, Religious activities (CRE, IRE, HRE) and Pastoral Program of Instruction (PPI).

The new CBC requires classroom teachings feature by role plays, projects, case study, problem solving among other learner-centered strategies. The teacher is expected to move from the role of an expert to a facilitator who guides the learning process. While learners are expected to take responsibility for their own learning through direct experiences and explorations, the teachers on their side are expected to design effective learning activities geared towards the development of specified competencies.

In Kenya, the paradigm shift in the education curriculum called for a new mode of assessment, which is competency-based assessment. The Competency-based Assessment (CBA) focuses on formative assessment, assessment of higher order skills, self and peer assessment of values (KICD, 2016). Amutabi (2019) remarked that curriculum and assessment in Kenya have been fundamentally summative in nature. These include; school-based continuous assessments (quizzes, homework), end of term or year examinations, national examinations. School based examinations have been competitive to an extent where teachers are held accountable for their pupils’ performances in the national

examinations. This implied that teaching and learning was largely oriented towards increasing pupils' scores. However, CBA is based on the principles of assessing learners as they use acquired knowledge and skills in a given situation. It emphasizes more on what the learner is able to do than on what the learner knows (KICD, 2016).

Ngendahayo and Askill-williams (2016) assert that formative assessment requires teachers to assess pupils frequently using authentic assessment methods such as portfolios, projects, oral presentations and peer assessment. This is in agreement with KICD (2016) that the new competency-based assessment methods should promote higher order learning such as projects, portfolios, problem solving and performances to collect timely information on pupils learning. Teachers are supposed to provide continuous, timely and constructive feedback to inform pupils about their strengths and weaknesses of their performance. This is because learning is reviewed and modified based on the feedback data. Lastly, teachers are required to change from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced judgment of learner's competencies to determine their progress. This implies that the Kenyan approaches to assessment will need to undergo fundamental changes if the assessment practices are to respond to the new goals and demands of the new curriculum. In addition, it implies that for teachers to effectively implement CBC they must have sufficient content knowledge for them to transfer the experiences and make learning more meaningful.

Kenyan competency-based curriculum was introduced in primary schools in order to help learners not only on the acquisition of knowledge but also skills, values and attitudes which will most likely help bridge the gap between labor market and the school system. Kenya is not the first country in the world to have done the same before. However, though this approach may have worked well for other countries where it has been implemented. Kenya has a different economic, social and political environment from all of the mentioned countries. This is likely to negatively influence the effective implementation of the competency-based education.

The implementation of the CBC is more expensive than the content-based since it demands for specialized teaching and learning resources, equipment and infrastructure especially in the vocational and science-based learning areas. It has been explained that teachers use learner centered approaches to implementing the CBC. This means that all serving teachers require in-service so that they are updated in the appropriate teaching and learning of the competency-based education.

Sifuna and Obonyo (2019) in their study observed that preliminary studies on the implementation of the CBC in Kenyan primary schools generally seem to indicate that there is inadequate infrastructure due to extremely high enrolment which is straining the existing facilities. In addition, teachers noted that the government distribution and delivery of textbooks had been delayed with some schools starting the year without the necessary textbooks. Ondimu (2018) also noted that print and digital materials had not been

delivered and distributed to schools. To the best knowledge of the authors of this paper, in –service of Kenyan teacher educators has not been done. This implies that teachers generally have limited knowledge and skills for successful implementation of CBC.

Since changes in the curriculum usually call for changes in instructional approaches, teachers need ample time for in-service teaching for them to have considerable knowledge and skills to be able to effectively and confidently implement the competency-based curriculum. For inadequate in-service training is likely to compromise the quality of the teacher and the education. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Kenya depends on the support from NGOs and stakeholders such as USAID, World Bank and others. If these stakeholders have no agenda related to teacher education and provision of teaching and learning resources, equipment and infrastructure for the CBC, then the implementation of the 2016 revised curriculum in Kenya is likely to remain a vision and nothing more.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: In this paper, it is affirmed that the implementation of CBC in Kenyan primary schools emphasizes the development of competencies and application of knowledge in real life context. Based on related experiences of other countries, the new curriculum has high chances of success.

Recommendation: Based on the extensive literature review and analysis on Competency-based curriculum (CBC) in Africa and around the world, CBC is outcome-based instruction that is adaptive to the changing needs of learners, teachers and the society. Drawing of recommendations is based on the barriers to implementation of curriculum and curriculum change. The following are recommendations to help policy makers and educational planners to effectively implement CBC:

- i. In-service training of teachers should have specific focus on the CBC
- ii. KICD should develop comprehensive manuals for teachers and the Curriculum Support Officers
- iii. Teachers' pedagogical skills in the implementation of CBC should be enhanced.

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