



African Population and
Health Research Center

POLICY BRIEF



STRENGTHENING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM (CBC) AT THE JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL LEVEL

INSIGHTS FROM STUDENTS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS

1. Background

Recognized for its ability to prepare students for the 21st-century workforce, competency-based education (CBE) has been widely adopted in developed countries, particularly within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). This global trend has led to calls for African nations to also integrate CBE into their education systems, as envisioned by the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016–2025. As a result, several Countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have embarked on education curriculum reforms from knowledge-based to competence-based education in a bid to equip learners with relevant knowledge and skills that propel them to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and consequently achieve socio-economic development (Nsengimana et al., 2020).

In Kenya, the competency-based curriculum (CBC) was introduced in 2017 to address the limitations of the 8-4-4 system, which was criticized for loaded content, inadequate teacher training, misaligned learning areas, and examination-oriented (Akala, 2021). The new curriculum seeks to identify and nurture every learner's potential by providing relevant learning pathways and tracks at Senior School. In addition to emphasizing the nurturing of learners' potential, CBC also seeks to enhance the relevance and smooth transition to the world of work by in-

tegrating Science, Technology, and Innovation, as well as ensuring that the skills imparted in educational institutions match the requirements of industry (Ministry of Education, 2023). To do this, seven core competencies are part of the revamped curriculum, including communication and collaboration; self-efficacy; critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and imagination; citizenship; digital literacy; and learning to learn (KICD, 2019). CBC follows a 2-6-3-3 path across the basic education levels, that is, 2 years pre-primary, 6 years in primary school (grades 1-6), 3 years junior secondary (grades 7-9), and 3 years in senior school (grades 10-12). The first cohort of students transitioned to the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level in 2023.



2. Study Justification

A few studies in Kenya have highlighted challenges in implementing the CBC. For example, during the initial implementation phases, Akala (2021) pointed out that insufficient teaching and learning materials, limited public participation, and low adoption of the new pedagogical practices by teachers marked the curriculum reform. Additionally, the Presidential Working Party on Education Reform report highlighted CBC implementation challenges such as a large number of learning areas, high costs for parents in purchasing required learning resources, and difficulties in implementing digital literacy due to poor electricity and internet connectivity (Republic of Kenya, 2023).

Given the limited evidence on CBC implementation, especially for the relatively new JSS level, this study sheds light on what is working well, the challenges faced, coping strategies, and recommendations to enhance implementation. Including the voices of students, parents, and teachers was particularly important for highlighting the daily interactions during the curriculum implementation. Their lived experiences were also vital since studies indicate that their voices are often left out of curriculum reforms even though they are greatly impacted (Gooder & Cantwell, 2017).

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research design to understand the lived experiences of students, teachers, and parents with the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level. The strength of the phenomenological approach is its ability to bring out participants' experiences with a phenomenon, in this case, the JSS competency-based curriculum, thereby providing a profound understanding and meaning of the same (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Mapp, 2008).

The study targeted 15 junior secondary schools in Murang'a, Nairobi, and Samburu counties (5 schools per county), representing rural, urban, and arid and semi-arid areas, respectively. The schools were purposefully sampled from a previous study conducted by APHRC focusing on implementing CBC targeting 98 primary schools in the same counties. Three public and two private schools were targeted in Murang'a and Nairobi, while two public and three private schools were targeted in Samburu. In each of the counties, the study targeted 15 institutional questionnaires with school heads from the target schools, 15 in-depth interviews with teachers (5 from each county), 13 focus group discussions with parents, and 13 focus group discussions with students.

Target Population and Sampling	
Location	15 JSSs in three counties: Murang'a (rural), Nairobi (urban), and Samburu (arid and semi-arid).
School Type Distribution	Murang'a and Nairobi: 3 public schools and 2 private schools per county. Samburu: 2 public schools and 3 private schools.

Data Collection Methods and Targets	
Institutional Questionnaires	15 questionnaires with school heads (5 from each county).
In-depth Interviews (IDIs)	15 IDIs with teachers (5 from each county).
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	13 FGDs with parents (5 from each county). 13 FGDs with students (5 from each county).

4. Key Findings

Parents' Lived Experiences:

- Positive Perceptions of CBC:** Most parents valued CBC's focus on talent development, life skills, and holistic education. They noticed improvements in their children's independence, time management, responsibility, creativity, and communication.
- Active Support for Talent Development:** Parents invested in supporting their children's talents by purchasing materials, encouraging participation in music, sports, and art, and organizing exposure visits.
- Challenges with Cost and Time:** CBC imposed significant financial burdens, especially for project-based activities, digital learning, and printing assignments. Time demands were also high, with some parents feeling that a considerable amount of time was used to support learning activities at home.
- Information Gaps and Uncertainty:** Parents were confused about assessment systems and student progression to Grade 9 and senior school. Many felt inadequately sensitized by schools and the Ministry of Education.
- Parental Trust:** Some students took advantage of the uncertainties and misused parental trust by fabricating school requirements. For instance, some took advantage of spontaneous requests for learning resources from schools by lying to their parents to obtain money or by exaggerating the requests for resources.
- Inadequate Learning Resources:** Parents highlighted insufficient infrastructure, unmotivated or poorly trained JSS teachers, and limited access to learning materials, which negatively impacted their children's education.
- Concerns Over Non-Progressive Learning:** Parents felt that the practical skills were not taught systematically or progressively, making it difficult for children to master skills over time.



Students' Lived Experiences:

- **Educational Technology:** Most students agreed that their teachers used digital devices, such as phones, tablets, laptops, and school computers, while teaching. They appreciated that the digital learning resources enhanced their understanding of various topics.
- **Group Work and Co-Curricular Activities:** These were highlighted as positive aspects of CBC that enhanced their participation and enjoyment in the various learning activities.
- **Gender Differences in Teaching:** There were mixed perceptions among students regarding differences in the way male and female teachers teach, based on the county and gender of the students.
- **Gender Differences in Student Participation:** There were mixed opinions on gender differences in student participation in classroom activities. Some felt girls were more suited to be group leaders since they were more attentive in class and better at explaining concepts. In contrast, others thought they were better suited to be group secretaries because of their good handwriting and grammar skills. Others aimed to find a balance in assigning roles to give both male and female students an equal chance to participate.
- **Curriculum Workload and Mental Health:** A majority of the students agreed that the workload at grade 8 was relatively heavier compared to grade 7 and the primary grade 6, mainly due to the number of subjects covered and the difficulty level of some of the topics, even after rationalization, which merely merged learning areas rather than reducing them.
- **Challenges to Effective Participation:** Students identified several challenges that hindered their effective participation in learning activities. They included inadequate or expensive learning resources, inadequate teachers, limited teaching in some of the learning areas, teacher absenteeism, strict teachers, distance from home to school, school disruption due to lack of school fees, gender-biased teachers, and social-emotional challenges.

Teachers' Experiences:

- **Understanding of CBC Principles:** Teachers showed strong awareness of CBC's key objectives and characteristics, mainly by comparing the new system to the 8-4-4 system. They highlighted CBC's emphasis on:
 - Learner-centered and holistic approach to nurture learners' strengths, abilities, and talents.
 - Inclusive learning that supports talent development for learners with special needs and disability.
 - Hands-on learning opportunities that extend learning beyond the classroom, allowing learners to explore and develop diverse skills.
 - The shifting role of the teacher from a content deliverer to a facilitator of learning.

- Incorporating parental involvement in the learning process by integrating deliberate learning activities for parents to support their children.
- Formative or continuous assessment that objectively provides a basis for placing students into various academic and career paths without exposing them to undue pressure through high-stakes final exams.
- Integration of information, communication, and technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning process.
- **Integration of Core Competencies:** Teachers reported that they made attempts to integrate core competencies through active learning strategies such as group work, rather than through direct instruction.
- **Curriculum Complexity:** Teachers felt that some strands (topics) covered in science and mathematics were too complex for JSS students, with some suggesting that the topics were relevant for the senior school level.
- **Teacher Professional Development:** A majority of teachers felt that they were not well prepared to teach at the JSS level, mainly because they were trained to implement the 8-4-4 curriculum and were currently teaching new learning areas that they had not been trained in. Some of the coping strategies included familiarizing themselves with the latest content before teaching and requesting other teachers who are relatively qualified to teach.
- **Challenges with Rationalization:** Teachers highlighted that after the 14 learning areas at the JSS level were revised (referred to as rationalization) to 9, the teaching and learning resources for the new learning areas were not provided. In such cases, they sourced the missing content from the internet.
- **Resource Limitations:** Teachers felt that the inadequate teaching and learning resources were a hindrance to the effective implementation of CBC. They highlighted inadequate science labs and equipment, ICT resources, textbooks, and project supplies. Inadequate staffing was also highlighted as a key resource challenge.



- **Student Transition Challenges:** Teachers highlighted the lack of preparedness among students transitioning from primary to JSS, noting that many students lacked essential foundational competencies, particularly in literacy and numeracy, making it challenging to meet the academic and competency demands of CBC.
- **Curriculum Overload and Mental Health:** The heavy workload for JSS teachers was reported to affect their mental health as well as their capacity to teach effectively. They mentioned often getting stressed, tired, and depressed.
- **Gender and Inclusion Awareness:** A majority of the teachers agreed that there were gender differences between male and female students at the JSS level, attributed to subject interests, socio-cultural factors, student-level factors, and parental support. They felt that:
 - Boys tended to perform better in technical subjects, such as pre-technical studies, due to higher curiosity and engagement in practical tasks and digital gadgets, while girls were often perceived to excel in languages and humanities.
 - Societal expectations that boys would naturally perform well in the sciences, while girls would perform well in the humanities, could also explain the differences.
 - Female students were perceived to be more attentive and committed to the learning tasks that required attention for long periods.
 - Female students tended to receive more support from their parents, especially in completing their homework assignments, and in turn, that positively influenced their academic performance.

5. Policy Recommendations

Based on the lived experiences shared by parents, learners, and teachers, as well as the thematic findings from this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen the implementation of CBC at the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level in Kenya:

- **Provide Continuous Teacher Professional Development and Support**
 - Strengthen pre-service and in-service teacher training on CBC pedagogy, learner assessment, and psychosocial support.
 - Include specific modules on differentiated instruction, talent development facilitation, and workload management.
 - Hire more teachers in under-resourced schools and improve their tenure to reduce their workload and enhance their motivation.
 - Promote peer mentorship and learning communities among teachers to share strategies and support each other.
- **Enhance Parental Empowerment**
 - Develop user-friendly CBC parental involvement guidelines for parents (relevant for all parents, including those with limited literacy or digital skills).
 - The Ministry of Education and schools should enhance the frequency and clarity of communication with parents regarding curriculum requirements, their roles, assessment systems, and transitions.
 - Deploy parental sensitization campaigns to build confidence and shared understanding of their expected roles in CBC.
- **Improve Resource Provision and Equity**
 - Prioritize the equitable distribution of learning resources, especially for practical and technical subjects such as science, art, home science, and ICT.
 - Review the parental engagement activities to ensure they have minimal financial requirements to reduce the financial burden.
- **Align Curriculum Progression Across Levels**
 - Address transition challenges by aligning primary-level exit expectations with JSS entry-level demands to enhance student readiness as they transition to the JSS level.
 - Revise assessment practices at the primary level to prepare learners for more open-ended, critical thinking-based approaches at JSS.
- **Integrate Psychosocial Support and Well-Being Measures for Students and Teachers**
 - Strengthen school counseling programs to address learner and teacher stress and mental health.
 - Encourage flexible academic timetables, co-curricular involvement, and rest periods to prevent academic fatigue.
- **Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning**
 - Institutionalize and strengthen monitoring, evaluation, and learning frameworks to assess the implementation of CBC.
 - Establish county-level CBC implementation committees to monitor progress, capture feedback, and identify local solutions.
 - Involve students and parents in periodic curriculum reviews and school decision-making forums.



6. Conclusion

The study emphasizes that while CBC reforms at the JSS level are generally accepted, successful implementation depends on addressing various structural and systematic gaps. Effective implementation requires strengthening teacher training and professional development, improving resource provision, providing more explicit guidance on learner assessment and progression, reducing the workload for learners and teachers, addressing mental health issues for both teachers and learners, and improving communication and awareness among parents regarding their involvement.

7. References

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