



LEARNING WHAT MATTERS IN KENYA

EXPLORING THE SHIFT FROM THE 8-4-4 SYSTEM TO COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Kenya Education Management Institute, Dignitas' National Technical Working Group, Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings, our Research and Learning Partners Dr. Eva Nderu and Frank Maimu, Dignitas team, field enumerators, and local stakeholders who facilitated this study. Their invaluable support and dedication were essential in designing the study and gathering the data and insights presented in this report.

In addition, we would like to extend our gratitude to Jennifer L. O'Donoghue, senior fellow and deputy director of the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution, for her editorial guidance, as well as Ghulam Omar Qargha, fellow at CUE, for his thoughtful review.

Brookings gratefully acknowledges the support provided by the LEGO Foundation and recognizes that the value it provides is in its commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.



ACRONYMS

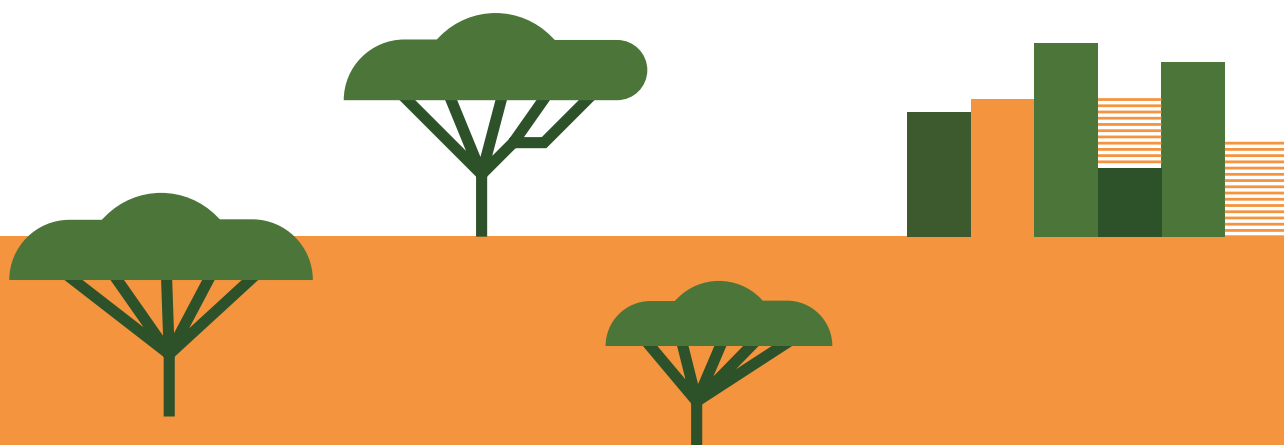
ASAL	Arid and Semi-arid Lands
BECF	Basic Education Curriculum Framework
BOM	School Board of Management
CBA	Competency Based Assessment
CBC	Competency-Based Curriculum
CBE	Competency-Based Education
CBO	Community-Based Organization
ECD	Early Childhood Education
ESRC	Ethical and Scientific Review Committee
FBO	Faith-Based Organization
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
KEMI	Kenya Education Management Institute
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
KNEC	Kenya National Examinations Council
NEST	Networks for Education System Transformation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

ABOUT DIGNITAS

Dignitas (often referred to as Dignitas Project) is a Nairobi-based education development organization in Kenya that works to strengthen schools in underserved and marginalized communities. The organization's mission is to equip and empower educators in underserved communities who will transform opportunities for the next generation. Dignitas leverages five key mechanisms to deliver on

school partnerships: leadership academies, coaching, professional learning communities, professional development workshops, and Dignitas Alumni Community.

Dignitas is a member of the Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST) and partnered with the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution as part of the NEST Kenya study.



ABOUT THIS SERIES

How well are
education
systems creating
opportunities
for children and
young people
to learn what
matters?

Education systems worldwide face mounting pressure to prepare children and young people not just for academic success, but for meaningful participation in an increasingly complex world (UNESCO 2023). Growing evidence suggests that to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century, children and young people need a broad set of skills including but not limited to literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, socioemotional learning, and civic engagement (Dweck, Walton, and Cohen 2014; Martinez 2022; Radó 2020).

The Network for Education Systems Transformation (NEST), a global impact network¹ co-led by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at the Brookings Institution and ten civil society organizations across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia, seeks to understand how education systems can transform

to prioritize a “breadth of skills”—an integrated set of academic, socioemotional, and transversal competencies that enable all children and young people to thrive (Care, Anderson, and Kim 2016; UNESCO n.d.).

Central to our work is a shared exploratory question: How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters? This question acknowledges that while concepts like “education systems,” “opportunities,” and “what matters” may differ across contexts, what binds the network is our collective commitment to understanding how education systems can transform to prioritize the development of a breadth of skills in all children and young people. Rather than prescribing universal definitions, NEST embraces locally grounded interpretations that honor the historical, cultural, political, and socioeconomic realities of each setting.

1. Impact networks are complex living systems, made of interacting people, organizations, and ecosystems. In contrast to traditional organizations with linear processes and standard operating procedures, networks are dynamic, interconnected, and variable. For details about the model of impact networks, see Ehrlichman (2021).

FRAMING OUR INQUIRY: THE FOUR Ps AND THREE Cs AS WORKING FRAMEWORKS

Informed by prior research from CUE at the Brookings Institution, NEST draws on two interconnected frameworks that guide our exploration of education systems transformation towards skills development. The 4P framework identifies four high-level domains of change in systems transformation: purpose, pedagogy, positioning, and power (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022; Winthrop, Morris, and Qargha 2023). The 3C framework proposes three catalytic conditions believed to enable and sustain the transformation process: commitment, capacity, and cohesion (CUE 2022; Olateju et al. forthcoming).

We approach these frameworks not as prescriptive models, but as working theories that require interrogation, adaptation, and potential expansion based on observations in diverse local contexts.

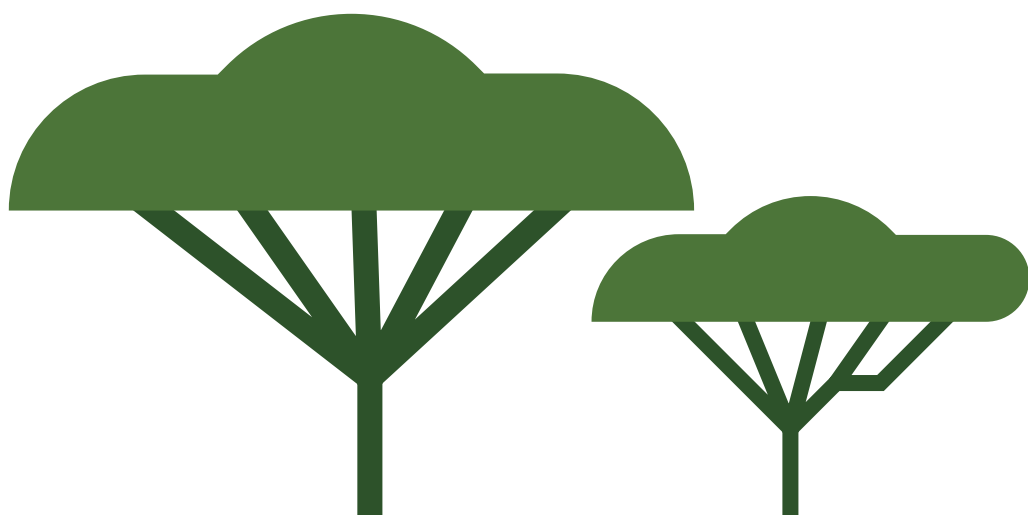
Our methodology is deliberately abductive, that is, moving systematically between observation and theoretical inference while remaining open to alternative explanations and framework modifications. This approach reflects NEST's commitment to collaborative inquiry that is iterative, values local knowledge and expertise, and contributes to broader understanding of education systems transformation. We recognize that meaningful change cannot be externally imposed, but must emerge from genuine engagement with local realities, assets, and constraints.



ABOUT THIS REPORT

The following country-level findings represent an early stage of inquiry in NEST's ongoing exploration of education systems transformation for skills development. Exploratory in nature, the insights emerging from Kenya's unique context are an initial step toward a shared understanding of Kenya's education landscape. While findings of this research may not be directly transferable to other settings, we believe that the patterns, tensions, and possibilities identified in this report can inform broader conversations about how education systems worldwide

might better support all children and young people in developing the skills they need to thrive. As NEST continues its collaborative work across ten countries, subsequent studies aim to deepen these insights and further refine our understanding of what enables sustainable education systems transformation toward a breadth of skills. As such, the following report should not be read as a final statement, but as part of an ongoing, iterative process of learning and discovery that contributes to an emerging field.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the implementation of Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) through a systems lens, examining with a particular focus on teachers how well the education system is creating opportunities for primary school learners to develop a broad range of skills essential for thriving in a complex and rapidly changing world. The CBC is an integral component of a wider shift to a competence-based education (CBE) system in Kenya. The study was conducted across three counties in Kenya, representing Kenya's diverse geographic contexts, including Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASAL), rural and urban informal settlements.

Findings revealed that while teachers as critical ecosystem actors broadly understand the pedagogical intentions of the CBC, the consistent and equitable development of competencies is constrained by gaps in teacher preparation, limited access to learning resources and digital tools (especially in ASAL regions), inadequate infrastructure, and varying levels of parental engagement. These challenges are compounded by weak cohesion and shared understanding across the wider system, including among school leaders, parents, and policymakers, further limiting coordination and effective implementation.

Using the 4P and 3C frameworks, the study surfaces the interconnected conditions that are required for systems transformation. It highlights how teachers' ability to implement

the CBC is influenced by their training and resource availability, how learners' access to meaningful learning is shaped by power and positioning within communities, and how broader transformation requires commitment and collaboration across the education ecosystem—including parents, caregivers, communities, and government actors.

The report concludes with recommendations focused on expanding and decentralizing high-quality, continuous professional development (CPD) tailored to CBC, strengthening coordination across education institutions, raising parents' awareness and voices, rebalancing power to support school-level decisionmaking, and ensuring more equitable access to learning resources. These priorities are identified as critical enablers for translating the CBC from policy intent into meaningful practice, thereby advancing system-wide transformation.

Problem statement

Despite Kenya's ambitious shift to CBC, the education system has not sufficiently adapted to support the ecosystem actors closest to learners: teachers and parents. This reveals critical gaps in capacity, coordination, and engagement that continue to undermine the goal of equipping all learners with the breadth of skills needed to thrive in a changing world.

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CONTEXT AND CONDITIONS

This study is grounded in the ongoing transformation of Kenya's education system via the 4P and 3C frameworks. Transformation via the 4P framework means redefining purpose, reimagining pedagogy, repositioning system elements, and redistributing power (Sengeh and Winthrop 2022), while the 3C framework speaks to systemic conditions believed to catalyze transformation.

The 3C framework was developed by CUE and builds on early-stage inquiry carried out by the Brookings Institution. Its elements (capacity, commitment, and cohesion) are designated as the intermediate expected outcomes of the Knowing-Doing Network, of which NEST is a part. This suggests that they are critical levers in the transformation of any education ecosystem. In this study, "capacity" refers to the level of resources, knowledge, and skills. "Commitment" refers to the level of stakeholder engagement. "Cohesion" refers to the formation of a shared vision and agenda. While this framework was a central analytic tool in our inquiry, it is also being tested for fit and refined through the findings presented in this report.

Kenya's education system has experienced significant reform aimed at improving learning outcomes and aligning with global standards. One of the most notable changes is the shift from the 8-4-4 system to the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC).²

The 8-4-4 education system was introduced in Kenya in 1985 to replace the previous 7-4-2-3 system. "8-4-4" means eight years of primary education, four years of secondary education, and four years of university education. The 8-4-4 system emphasized practical skills and self-reliance by incorporating vocational subjects like agriculture, business education, and home science—especially at the upper primary and secondary levels. Students took national examinations: the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) at the end of primary, and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) at the end of secondary. While the system aimed to produce well-rounded graduates, it faced criticism due to its examination-oriented structure, limited focus on creativity and critical thinking, and its inability to meet diverse learner needs (Ongesa 2020). Due to these challenges, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) began phasing out the 8-4-4 system in 2017, transitioning to the CBC in 2018.

Kenya's transition CBE represented more than a structural adjustment—it signaled a redefinition of what learning is, how it is assessed, and who is responsible for it. The shift aimed to replace content-heavy, exam-oriented instruction with a more holistic approach emphasizing seven core competencies, values, and practical application of knowledge.



2. Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD). 2017. Basic Education Curriculum Framework. Nairobi: KICD.

This transformation changed expectations for key ecosystem actors. Teachers are now required to adopt formative, learner-centered assessment practices. Parents are recognized as active co-educators, and mid-level education authorities are tasked with fostering capacity rather than focusing

on compliance. While the Ministry of Education and the KICD produced the curriculum framework, the pace and depth of CBE implementation across counties varies significantly. Table 1 below summarizes the major shifts and what they meant for different actors in the system.

TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF CHANGES FROM KENYA'S 8-4-4 SYSTEM TO CBC AND IMPLICATIONS FOR KEY EDUCATION ECOSYSTEM ACTORS

AREA OF CHANGE	CHANGES	WHAT CHANGED FOR TEACHERS	WHAT CHANGED FOR PARENTS	WHAT CHANGED FOR MID-LEVEL AUTHORITIES	SUPPORTS PROVIDED
Curriculum focus	From exam-heavy content to 7 core competencies + values	Shift to learner-centered, activity-based	Support learning at home	Monitor competencies, not just syllabus coverage	Curriculum designs, teacher guides, parent booklets
Assessment	From single end-exam to continuous assessment + final check	Integrate ongoing formative and summative assessments	Understand and use new progress reports classifying learners on the 8-point levels (Below 1 or 2, Approaching 1 or 2, Meeting 1 or 2 or Exceeding 1 or 2)	Moderate school-based assessments	Assessment training, Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC), competency-based assessment tools
Structure	From 8-4-4 to 2-6-3-3-3	Adjust to new grades, move into junior	Manage more transitions	Oversee junior secondary rollout	Infrastructure grants, teacher redeployment
Learning context	More practical, project-based learning	Facilitate community projects	Provide local resources	Link schools to community opportunities	Pathway guidelines, local partnerships
Parental role	Parents as co-educators	Coordinate with parents	Active role in assignments, feedback	Host parent training	Sensitization campaigns, open days

Source: Adapted from Republic of Kenya, Basic Education Curriculum Framework (KICD 2017); Ministry of Education, Competency-Based Curriculum Implementation Guidelines (2017); Kenya National Examinations Council, Competency-Based Assessment Framework (2019).

The transition from 8-4-4 to CBC marked a paradigm shift to enhance the relevance of education by fostering skills that are applicable in real-world contexts (Mwang'ombe 2021), thereby promoting a more holistic approach to learning (KICD 2017). However, the successful implementation of the CBC relies heavily on large-scale system reforms, as well as on the attitudes and preparedness of teachers, who play a pivotal role in translating curriculum objectives into classroom practices (Mutua and Waweru 2023). Research indicates that teachers' positive attitudes towards the CBC significantly influence its effective implementation. A study conducted in Kericho County found that teachers who embraced the CBC were more likely to utilize innovative instructional strategies that align with competency-based principles (Ngeno, Mwoma, and Mweru 2021).

Despite the laudable intentions behind the CBC, many teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to implement the new curriculum effectively. Maiyuria, Mackatiani, and Gakunga (2024) found that significant number of primary school instructors, irrespective of the type of school, lacked the necessary training in CBC approaches for enhancing subject matter competency. While teacher preparedness is a necessary precondition for effective classroom-level translation of CBC principles (Momanyi and Rop 2023), Cheruiyot's (2024) research identified inadequate teacher training and limited resources as formidable obstacles to effective CBC rollout, noting that many teachers feel ill-prepared while schools face significant shortages of essential teaching

materials and technological tools. This pedagogical shift requires more than new lesson plans. It demands a reorientation of teachers' roles from transmitters of content to facilitators of learning. However, the experiential and project-based learning methods most central to the CBC are not yet widely practiced. Chepsiror's (2020) study of emergent reading instruction under CBC found that despite the curriculum's emphasis on experiential learning through concrete experiences and hands-on activities, teachers faced substantial obstacles in implementing these approaches effectively. This pedagogical shift requires teachers to be well-versed in experiential learning strategies, which many report feeling unprepared to implement. These challenges mirror reform experiences across Sub-Saharan Africa, where teachers are expected to deliver on new curricula with limited preparation (Wafubwa 2021).

Parental engagement has also been limited and remains a critical but under-addressed condition for successful reform (Amagove, Limboro, and Itoondo 2024). While research indicates that parental involvement can significantly improve learning outcomes, many Kenyan parents and caregivers report feeling disconnected from the CBC's structure and objectives. Effective communication and collaboration between teachers and caregivers are necessary to foster a supportive learning environment that enhances student performance (Hall and Gao 2023).

While the CBC aims to foster practical skills, creativity, and learner agency,

A systems approach which simultaneously addresses pedagogy, policy coherence, teacher support, and infrastructure is critical for the CBC to deliver on its promise: equitable development of a broad range of relevant skills.

working it into Kenya's existing education structures is still a challenge. Studies highlight the significant pressure the shift to CBC places on schools, especially with regard to teacher preparedness, infrastructure, and alignment with assessment and teacher education systems (Oduor and Simiyu 2021; Ngware 2022). For example, although the CBC emphasizes formative assessment and learner-centered pedagogy, high-stakes exams and entrenched teaching practices continue to shape classroom realities, creating a mismatch between policy intent and practical execution (Uwezo 2021). Furthermore, the implementation of CBC has exposed long-standing weaknesses in the system. These include uneven resourcing across counties and schools, and limited coherence between curriculum developers, teacher training institutions, and school administrators (UNESCO IBE 2023). These systemic misalignments raise concerns that, without deliberate investment in cross-system coordination and capacity building, CBC may actually perpetuate existing inequities instead of transforming them. The CBC's focus on developing competencies that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) presents both opportunities and challenges. Kahiga and Muasya's 2023 analysis of movement activities within the CBC is an example drawn from the curriculum. It shows how physical education can contribute to holistic development and societal growth. However, integrating such programs requires careful planning, resource allocation, adequate infrastructure, teacher capacity, and policy prioritization to ensure effective implementation in schools. A systems

approach which simultaneously addresses pedagogy, policy coherence, teacher support, and infrastructure is critical for the CBC to deliver on its promise: equitable development of a broad range of relevant skills.

Dignitas, as part of NEST and with the support of the Brookings Institution, embarked on a network-wide study exploring a research question that NEST members co-created: *How well are education systems creating opportunities for children and young people to learn what matters?* As part of our contribution to answering this question, our inquiry in Kenya focused on three sub-questions:

1. What core competencies are prioritized in the CBC, and how are these integrated into teaching and learning?
2. How do various stakeholders understand and engage with CBC core competencies in practice?
3. What strategies or interventions can mitigate the effects of socioeconomic disparities and support the successful implementation of the CBC?

Focusing on these questions, we explore how observable the four Ps and three Cs are in the Kenyan context, how these concepts interplay, and whether this interplay enables or inhibits education system transformation in Kenya. These findings are both descriptive and meant to test and refine the frameworks themselves, offering insights potentially useful for broader systems change efforts in the region.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-methods design, framed by the four Ps and 3Cs framework, to explore enabling conditions and persistent barriers shaping CBC implementation across Kenya. This included quantitative and qualitative methods (surveys, observations, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews providing insight into stakeholders’ perceptions and contextual factors influencing development of core CBC competencies). The study adopted two sampling strategies: stratified random, and purposive sampling

ensuring representative selection of primary schools and education actors from Makueni, Isiolo, and Kisumu counties. Stratified sampling was used to select primary schools from the aforementioned three counties. The stratification considered the varying geographical and socioeconomic contexts of the schools, with Makueni County representing primarily rural settings, Isiolo County classified as an Arid and Semi-Arid Land (ASAL) region, and Kisumu County characterized by predominantly urban settings.

MAKUENI	KISUMU	ISIOLO
Located in the Eastern part of Kenya, Makueni is characterized by a semi-arid climate with a population that is largely rural.	Located in the Western part of Kenya, Kisumu is the third largest city in Kenya after the capital, Nairobi, and the coastal city of Mombasa. It has a more urban population with a mix of ethnicities.	Located in the upper easter region of Kenya, Isiolo is predominantly arid and semi-arid, with significant pastoral communities.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The selection targeted individuals directly involved in the implementation of the CBC

such as parents, Boards of Management, Curriculum Support Officers, Heads of Institutions and Teachers. See Table 2 below for an overview of the sample:

TABLE 2: OVERVIEW OF SAMPLE

METHOD	TYPE OF RESPONDENT	SAMPLE
Survey	Headteachers	30 heads (10 per county)
Observation	Teachers	60 classroom observations of 60 teachers, with each observation lasting a full lesson of 35-40 minutes
Key Informant Interview	Headteachers	30 heads (10 per county)
	County Education Officers	4 Officials (3 Curriculum Support Officers and 1 Sub County Director of Education)
	School Board of Management (BoM)	2 representatives
Focus Group Discussions	Teachers	3 FGDs (15 teachers)
	Parents	2 FGDs (16 parents)

Source: Authors' computation of study sample.

The study population included primary school teachers, heads and deputies of institutions, School Boards of Management, policymakers, parents, and caregivers, capturing a wide range of perspectives around CBC implementation for breadth of skills. Teachers and heads of institutions participated through surveys, focus group discussions, and 60 classroom observations assessing the efficacy of the pedagogical pivot to the CBC curriculum. These methods provided insights into their experiences with the CBC and the skills learners are acquiring. Ninety participants took quantitative surveys, while 67 participated in qualitative interviews and discussions. This mix of engagement ensured a balance between breadth and depth of data.

Parents and caregivers were included in interviews and group discussions to gauge household-level perceptions of CBC and its demands on learners and caregivers. Their feedback illuminated the role of the broader learning environment in shaping

student experiences. Including them was especially important given their emerging responsibilities under CBC, i.e., supporting homework and project-based learning. County Education Officers were also engaged to provide context and understanding of the intentions of the CBC and its design. Their contributions helped bridge policy design with implementation realities. Throughout the data collection process, emphasis was placed on capturing the sociocultural and institutional contexts influencing the interpretation and uptake of CBC. This context-rich approach allowed the study to foreground how CBC implementation interacts with existing educational ecosystems.

Despite limitations such as potential biases in self-reported survey data, and unforeseen restrictions to access schools in one of the counties (Isiolo), the study provided valuable insights into CBC implementation and highlights the need for ongoing research to address challenges within Kenya's education system.

Demographic data overview

The demographic data collected from the participants provides essential context for CBC implementation-related findings. The data revealed that school instructional leadership was predominantly male, while early childhood teaching positions were mostly held by women. This aligns with national trends and traditional gender roles in early education (Cameron 2021). Teachers in public schools (Isiolo and Makueni) mostly held degrees or primary teacher training qualifications. On the other hand, the majority of the teachers in the low-fee private schools

(Kisumu) held ECD certificates and diplomas, with a notable 33% at secondary school level.

The demographic data suggests gendered patterns in educational roles (male-dominated leadership and female-led early childhood teaching). It also revealed disparities in teacher qualifications between public schools (where most have degrees or formal training), and low-fee private schools, where many have only ECD certificates or secondary-level education.

Annex 4 provides a detailed overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents and their relevance to the study.

FINDINGS

System-level constraints affecting classroom implementation of CBC core competencies

Analysis of survey and qualitative data revealed that teachers recognize the pedagogical competencies required to develop CBC core competencies. However, their application of these competencies across the curriculum is said to vary due to systemic factors. These include the relative ease or difficulty of integrating specific competencies, differences

in pedagogical understanding, and availability of supporting resources like digital devices.

Teachers noted that some competencies are easier to cultivate in learners more than others. Communication and Collaboration were most frequently highlighted by teachers as accessible and practical to develop. One teacher noted, “I think communication and collaboration is one of the easiest core competencies to integrate because learners acquire it even when they are playing, when they are participating in co-curricular activities and also group works and projects. So, it is very easy for them to acquire it.”

Teachers also mentioned using question-and-answer sessions and

These resource constraints signal broader issues of power and positioning within the system, where schools have limited autonomy or influence to adapt materials to their context.

group activities to encourage learner interaction: “I start with communication and collaboration. In the class, as we participate in the different learning areas, we engage these learners to talk to one another. This will enhance how they will communicate with themselves or with other learners.”

Some competencies, however, remain poorly understood—conceptually and pedagogically. This may contribute to their inconsistent integration into lessons. One teacher observed, “[T]eachers haven’t fully understood what ‘learning to learn’ really means. Yes, that’s the issue—it’s a challenge.” This points to teachers’ needs for clearer guidance, illustrative examples, and consistent professional development opportunities.

Teachers also reported limited learning resources, which seems to hinder their ability to integrate the core competencies as intended, with implications for students’ learning experiences. A teacher shared, “We often lack basic materials like art supplies or even textbooks. It makes it difficult to engage students in hands-on learning activities.” Teachers also noted that digital literacy is the most impacted by inadequate resources. One teacher said, “The challenge with digital literacy is that I’m handling a class of 40 students, and I only have

my smartphone. Most learners, when asked about laptops or smartphones, tend to say that their parents [and] caregivers do not allow them to touch their phones. So, this becomes a significant barrier to integrating digital literacy in the classroom.”

Infrastructure constraints, such as crowded classrooms, also affect the learning experience. As noted by a teacher, “I think the environment is a significant challenge. In some classes, there isn’t enough space to accommodate learners in groups. Even if you try to group them, it can be difficult to navigate and assist them as they work together. The high enrollment in these classes makes group collaboration a challenge.” Teachers also observed that textbooks and other resources often don’t reference values like citizenship, leading to their exclusion from lessons. One teacher said, “Citizenship is challenging because it cannot be applied in all learning areas, and when it does appear, it’s quite rare. Additionally, the textbooks do not emphasize citizenship much, making it difficult to reference.”

These resource constraints signal broader issues of power and positioning within the system, where schools have limited autonomy or influence to adapt materials to their context.

Collaborative roles of education actors in developing CBC core competencies

Teachers, parents, and caregivers all emphasized the need for stronger school-family partnerships in order for the CBC to succeed.

A teacher noted, “The school administration needs to engage parents/caregivers more actively. When parents/caregivers are involved, students perform better.” This sentiment was echoed by several parents and caregivers who emphasized the importance of communication between home and school. One parent stated, “We want to be informed about what our children are learning so we can support them at home.” This underscores the need to reposition families not just as support systems, but as co-educators within the CBC ecosystem—an important shift in how the pedagogical relationship between schools and families is conceptualized.

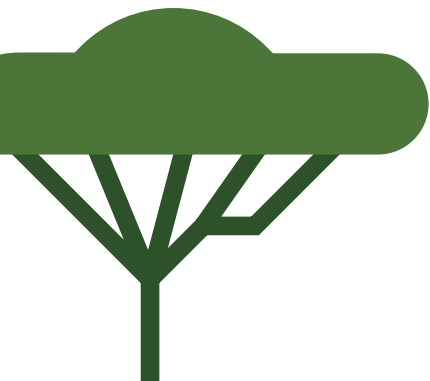
School leadership was seen as central to facilitating engagement among key education actors. A headteacher remarked, “We strive to create an open-door policy where parents [and] caregivers feel welcome to discuss their children’s progress.” This approach could build trust and encourage parents and caregivers to take an active role in their children’s education. However, many teachers noted that such initiatives often require adequate funding and resources. A teacher explained, “Without proper

funding, it’s challenging to organize workshops or community meetings that bring parents/caregivers into the conversation.”

Here, we see the dynamic interaction between commitment and capacity, where stakeholders’ willingness to participate is shaped and constrained by available resources, highlighting how these two conditions can mutually reinforce or undermine each other.

Government support was also considered critical. Several participants called for more robust policies that promote collaboration among actors. A teacher stated, “Policies should promote partnerships between schools and communities. This way, everyone is invested in the students’ education.” A recurring theme was the need for better resource allocation and capacity-building from the government to support curriculum implementation. These are opportunities to strengthen cohesion between the government as a broad ecosystem actor, and teachers and parents as another.

Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of community involvement in education. A parent from Kisumu shared, “Community members should be involved in school activities. When they see the value of education, they will support it more.” These perspectives emphasize the importance of shared responsibility and mutual accountability for CBC success. There is a need to reimagine the community’s role as an active co-creator in the process of education. This means supporting changes in policy, practice, and resource flow that enable this repositioning.



Parents and caregivers' understanding of the core competencies and their participation in school activities

However, while parents and caregivers recognize the value of CBC, many lack the resources to switch to a curriculum that requires greater spending on learning resources than the 8-4-4 system.

Another recurring theme is the necessity for parents and caregivers to engage actively with teachers and school activities. As one participant noted, "We can encourage the parents/caregivers to turn up for meetings in the schools and also educate them on the importance of education to their children." This fosters a supportive environment that enhances student learning. However, while parents and caregivers recognize the value of CBC, many lack the resources to switch to a curriculum that requires greater spending on learning resources than the 8-4-4 system. Financial difficulties emerged as a significant barrier to effective parental engagement.

Many students come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, which often prevents them from attending school regularly. As one parent stated, "Many families do not have the necessary resources to support their children's learning," highlighting the challenges that poverty and unemployment pose to educational success. Limited economic power directly undermines families' capacity to fully participate in system transformation. This raises a critical question for the broader system about the mechanisms in place to ensure that poverty is not a barrier to engagement. A systemic approach to capacity needs to address not only

individual constraints, but also the structural supports needed to enable meaningful participation.

There was also evidence of limited awareness among parents and caregivers about CBC expectations. Many were unaware of how to support their children's learning effectively. One participant remarked, "We need more sensitization about the CBC parent-pupil support." These gaps in awareness and understanding affect parents' and caregivers' ability to support their children's learning effectively.

Literacy challenges among parents and caregivers further complicate the situation. Many struggle to comprehend their children's educational requirements. Of literacy and language skills, one participant said, "Many parents/caregivers struggle to understand what the learners have been instructed to do." This underscores the importance of training programs for parents and caregivers to boost their confidence and ability to assist their children.

Despite these challenges, there is a positive perception of the CBC among parents and caregivers. One shared, "What excites me about CBC is that we are looking for the talent of a child." This appreciation of the curriculum's hands-on approach suggests potential for greater engagement if proper support structures are in place.

Yet, systemic realities appear connected to the low levels of support from educational authorities. This often leads to low levels of parental engagement. One teacher noted, "There were no books on the shelves for the CBC," emphasizing the urgent

need for resources to facilitate cooperation between parents and caregivers and the schools. Some parents and caregivers with economic capacity said they often take personal responsibility. “If anything is required in school, I buy it,” noted one parent.

This data underscores the importance of framing parental involvement not

just as voluntary support, but as a structural condition for CBC success. Parents and caregivers appear interested in the desired outcomes of CBC, but remain constrained in multiple dimensions, highlighting the need for systemic changes that create the conditions necessary for families to engage meaningfully in the transformation process.

LEARNINGS

In Kenya, the CBC aims to promote holistic learning by emphasizing key competencies (e.g., communication, collaboration, digital literacy, and citizenship). However, findings reveal that teachers and parents feel constrained in providing these opportunities due to systemic challenges, like gaps in teacher support, curriculum clarity, parental engagement, and infrastructure. The lack of a coherent implementation strategy bridging policy with practice undermines the CBC’s vision. System-wide alignment remains weak, with many teachers and schools feeling left without the guidance and resources needed to meaningfully integrate these competencies into teaching. Teachers report that while communication and collaboration are more intuitively operationalized, digital literacy, “learning to learn,” and other competencies are poorly understood. These findings highlight the systemic complexity of integrating the CBC core competencies into the classroom. This underscores how structural and policy-level factors shape implementation outcomes that might ordinarily be attributed to individual teachers. Addressing these barriers requires investment in system-wide capacity,

improved access to materials, and more coherent curriculum guidance.

The 4 Ps of systems transformation offer a useful lens to explore the implications of this study.

Purpose

The first P, “Purpose,” highlights a disconnect between the aspirational goals of the CBC and the fragmented understanding of its aims across key actors in Kenya’s education system. The CBC is framed as a shift toward nurturing learners’ full potential, but the study finds that this is not fully understood at the implementation level. Absent adequate training and learning materials, teachers reported confusion about how the CBC should be delivered in everyday classroom practice. Parents, too, expressed uncertainty about what their children are expected to learn and how to support them. Learners often experience the CBC as a continuation of traditional teaching methods, rather than as a new approach prioritizing engaging, active learning. These

findings suggest that while CBC is rooted in a progressive educational purpose, the vision has not yet translated into a shared or actionable understanding across the system. We see weak alignment between the policy as intended and classroom realities. If this transformation is to succeed, there must be clearer articulation and shared ownership of the CBC's purpose.

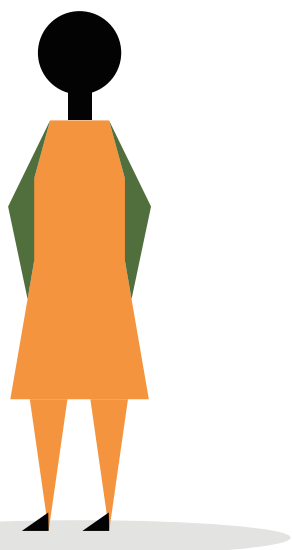
Pedagogy

Reflecting on the second P, “Pedagogy,” it makes sense that supporting teachers through localized and continuous professional development remains important. This must be accompanied by efforts to elevate teachers’ voices, revise curriculum tools, and strengthen alignment between policy and classroom realities. Without adequate training and instructional materials, teachers struggle to translate the CBC into classroom practice. These gaps are particularly evident in schools with lower representations of advanced qualifications, highlighting broader inequities in access to quality teaching. Effective teacher training is critical for the successful implementation of CBC as insufficient professional development constrains teachers’ ability to deliver the curriculum (Ngeno 2023). Addressing this challenge will require technical training, revised curriculum tools, greater teacher involvement in curriculum review, and stronger support systems for teachers. The evidence also suggests the importance of parents and caregivers

in the pedagogical process, and the need to support them in adopting co-educational roles.

Positioning

With regard to the third P, or “Positioning,” effective implementation of the CBC also requires the collaborative, system-wide participation of all actors—teachers, school leaders, parents, caregivers, and government. However, the study reveals limited coordination and uneven recognition of these actors’ roles. Teachers, though central to CBC delivery, frequently operate with insufficient training, unclear guidance, and inconsistent support from education officers, constraining their ability to act as empowered facilitators of learner-centered education. School leaders face similar ambiguities in interpreting their leadership role within the CBC. Families, particularly those in lower-income or rural contexts, come across as passive recipients of reforms rather than co-educators or informed partners. Many parents reported feeling ill-equipped to support CBC activities, often due to a lack of accessible information and engagement strategies. This misalignment in positioning undermines the system’s ability to distribute responsibility, voice, and agency across actors—a core requirement for the participatory learning that CBC aspires to promote. Strengthening the roles and visibility of all actors, particularly caregivers and local communities, is therefore critical for deeper system transformation.



Power

The CBC reform assumes a redistribution of responsibilities and decisionmaking power across the education system. In practice, the fourth P, “Power,” remains concentrated in formal structures, leaving frontline implementers without the tools or influence to drive meaningful change. The CBC aspires to shift classroom practice and foster broader skill development, but the power to do so remains centralized. Teachers reported limited involvement in curriculum design and inadequate consultation during CBC rollout, positioning them as implementers rather than co-creators of reform. Education officers responsible for supporting implementation, often lack clarity in their mandates. Headteachers navigate top-down expectations with minimal autonomy or resourcing. Parents, especially in low-income and rural communities, are largely excluded from CBC decisionmaking but are expected to support it without being equipped or engaged meaningfully. Furthermore, inconsistencies in national and subnational coordination reflect fragmented governance and limited alignment between policy intent and local realities. These disconnects reflect a persistent power asymmetry that sidelines those closest to learners.

The 3Cs

Exploring the findings through the lens of the three catalytic conditions (capacity, commitment, and cohesion) shows that the CBC’s success depends on sustained investment in system-wide capacity to establish the

environments required for learners to engage meaningfully with the core competencies. Strengthening capacity entails equipping all teachers, school leaders, parents, and local officials with relevant training, accessible resources, and consistent institutional support.

The study also finds differing levels of commitment across the education ecosystem. While teachers and school leaders often express a strong willingness to support CBC, their ability to act on this commitment is constrained by a lack of funding, institutional incentives, and strong communication channels. Strengthening commitment thus requires not only clearer policy mandates, but also tangible, everyday supports that empower all actors to align with the policy’s goals. This includes addressing socioeconomic barriers hindering parental involvement and raising community awareness of CBC objectives.

Finally, cohesion across the system remains weak. The study highlights gaps between the intentions of national policy and the realities of local implementation. Coordination between families, schools, and education authorities is inconsistent due to a lack of shared understanding of roles and feedback loops for course correction. Building cohesion will require mechanisms for structured communication, stakeholder sensitization tailored to different literacy levels, and the development of inclusive, locally grounded strategies that ensure all learners—not just those in well-resourced environments—can access and benefit from the competencies envisioned by the CBC.

Parents, especially in low-income and rural communities, are largely excluded from CBC decisionmaking but are expected to support it without being equipped or engaged meaningfully.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study offers an analysis of the implementation of Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), revealing a deep gap between policy aspirations and lived realities in classrooms, communities, and system governance. While the CBC is a bold reform aimed at cultivating 21st-century skills among learners, its success is contingent on resolving key systemic challenges—particularly those related to capacity, cohesion, and power imbalances within the education ecosystem. This study holds that CBC implementation must move beyond policy design toward inclusive, adaptive, and locally grounded sustained action.

While the shift to the CBC aspires to decentralize decisionmaking and recognize teachers and school leaders as change agents, teachers and parents lack the power and agency to adapt the CBC in ways responsive to local contents.

The findings demonstrate that teachers, though broadly supportive of the CBC, are navigating its demands with systemic challenges: insufficient training, overloaded syllabi, and weak institutional guidance. The Ministry of Education and Teachers Service Commission must expand and decentralize high-quality, continuous professional development (CPD) tailored to CBC. Training should transcend orientation workshops to include coaching, in-class demonstrations, and peer learning

platforms. School infrastructure, teaching aids, and digital resources should also be made more equitably accessible, particularly in marginalized counties. Equitable allocation of materials and infrastructure should be a clear policy priority, particularly for schools in underserved rural and urban informal settlements. Community and NGO partnerships can play an important supporting role, but they must be structured for sustainability and aligned with national education priorities. Flexibility in resource use should also be encouraged, enabling teachers to innovate with locally available materials.

Parental and community engagement emerged as a key lever for system transformation in the study. While parents and caregivers are eager to support their children, limited awareness of the CBC framework and a lack of guidance on home-based learning practices persist. Schools can bridge this gap through targeted parent sensitization sessions pitched at varying levels of literacy, regular communication channels, and inclusive events that clarify curriculum goals. Establishing peer learning groups can also facilitate collective problem-solving and shared responsibility for children's learning.

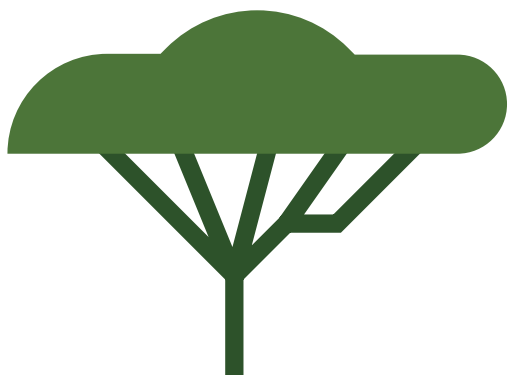
We also find inconsistencies in how the CBC's goals are interpreted and enacted. National policy emphasizes holistic learning, but classroom practice focuses on curriculum coverage, often

due to exam-oriented pressures and legacy systems. This warrants a clear national communication strategy to articulate the purpose of the CBC in practical terms, and curriculum reviews that reduce content overload and align the assessment of learning outcomes more explicitly with a broad range of skills.

The fragmentation of the system was clearly observed in disconnects across national policy, teacher training, curriculum design, and school-level implementation. The siloed nature of agencies such as KICD, TSC, and KNEC limits the coherence of reform efforts and frustrates schools attempting to implement CBC meaningfully. As noted in the Government's 2019 CBC Taskforce Report and supported by Tao (2019), the lack of institutional coordination across curriculum design,

teacher deployment, and assessment continues to hinder effective system-wide transformation. Coordination across key education institutions requires institutionalization. A joint CBC Implementation Taskforce could foster collaboration among KICD (curriculum), KNEC (assessment), TSC (teacher management), and MoE (policy). At the county level, structured platforms should support sub-national actors (i.e., quality assurance officers, headteachers, and education officials), to share lessons and coordinate CBC rollout.

In conclusion, strengthening commitment, building capacity, and fostering cohesion among system actors are necessary conditions to achieve the curriculum's vision of developing a holistic set of skills for all learners.



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ANNEX 1: DEFINITIONS OF CORE COMPETENCIES PRIORITIZED IN THE COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULUM (BECF)

CRITICAL THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

This enables students to analyze information, evaluate evidence, and make informed decisions. It is crucial in a world where learners are bombarded with information and need to discern credible sources from unreliable ones.

CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

Encouraging innovative thinking and expression allows students to explore new ideas and solutions. Integrating it into various subjects fosters an environment where experimentation and creative expression are valued.

COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION

Effective communication is vital for teamwork in academic and professional settings. The CBC promotes activities that enhance verbal and written communication skills, preparing students to engage constructively with others.

DIGITAL LITERACY

In today's technology-driven world, digital literacy encompasses the skills needed to navigate, evaluate, and communicate information using digital tools. The CBC aims to integrate these skills across subjects, ensuring students are proficient in using technology responsibly and effectively.

LEARNING TO LEARN

This encourages students to take ownership of their learning processes, fostering autonomy and responsibility. By developing metacognitive skills, students learn to assess their understanding, set learning goals, and employ effective strategies to achieve them.

SELF-EFFICACY

The belief in one's ability to succeed is fundamental for academic achievement. The CBC fosters self-efficacy by giving students opportunities for success through achievable tasks and constructive feedback, building their confidence and motivation to learn.

CITIZENSHIP

Understanding civic rights, responsibilities, and engaging in community service to foster responsible and active membership in society. The CBC encourages students to appreciate cultural diversity and contribute positively to their communities.

ANNEX 2: DEFINITION OF THE THREE Cs

COMMITMENT

Increase the interest, engagement, and action of all stakeholders to effectively reorient and resource education systems to support a breadth of skills.

CAPACITY

Improve knowledge, skills, and resources required of all stakeholders to eliminate systemic barriers toward a breadth of skills.

COHESION

Develop a shared vision and agenda for transforming systems by implementing policies and practices that support a breadth of skills.

ANNEX 3: OVERVIEW OF DATA GENERATED FROM STUDY

Gender distribution of teachers and instructional leaders

School instructional leadership was predominantly male, while early childhood teaching positions were mostly held by women. This aligns with national trends and traditional gender roles in early education.³

TABLE 3: GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF TEACHERS AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

GENDER	PERCENT (%) (N=60) - TEACHERS	PERCENT (%) (N=30) - INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS
Female	83%	40%
Male	17%	60%
Total	100%	100%

Source: Author’s analysis of data

3. Cameron, Claire. "Promise or problem? A review of the literature on men working in early childhood services." *Gender, Work & Organization* 8, no. 4 (2001): 430-453.

TABLE 4: QUALIFICATIONS OF TEACHERS

QUALIFICATION	ISIOLO (N=22)	KISUMU (N=18)	MAKUENI (N=20)	OVERALL (N=60)
Bachelor of Education	18%	6%	10%	12%
Degree in primary education	14%	0%	5%	7%
Diploma in special needs	5%	0%	5%	3%
ECD certificate	0%	22%	0%	7%
ECD Diploma	14%	22%	10%	15%
Other (please specify)	9%	11%	0%	7%
Primary teacher training	27%	0%	55%	28%
Teacher education diploma	9%	0%	15%	8%
Certificate in Primary Education	0%	6%	0%	2%
Certificate in Secondary Education	5%	33%	0%	12%

Source: Author's analysis of data

TABLE 5: QUALIFICATIONS OF INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

QUALIFICATION	ISIOLO (N=22)	KISUMU (N=18)	MAKUENI (N=20)	OVERALL (N=60)
Bachelor of Education	20%	0%	30%	17%
Degree in Primary Education	50%	0%	10%	20%
Diploma in special needs	0%	10%	10%	7%
ECD certificate	0%	10%	0%	3%
ECD Diploma	20%	0%	10%	10%
Masters	0%	0%	20%	7%
Other	10%	10%	0%	7%
Primary teacher training	0%	0%	20%	7%
Teacher education diploma	0%	20%	0%	7%
Certificate in Secondary Education	0%	50%	0%	17%

Source: Author's analysis of data

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