

COMPETENCY VS. TALENT: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION AND KENYA'S CBC REFORM

Barrack Okello¹ & Dorcas Jepekemboi Kebenei, PhD²

¹ Lecturer, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya

² Lecturer, Kabarak University, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Competency-Based Education (CBE) has emerged as a prominent approach to curriculum reform worldwide, emphasizing learners' ability to demonstrate knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes in authentic contexts rather than relying solely on content acquisition and examination performance. Kenya's adoption of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2017 marked a significant shift from the traditional 8-4-4 education system, with the objective of producing competent, innovative, and adaptable citizens equipped for the demands of the twenty-first century. This paper critically examines the theoretical foundations of competency-based education, the rationale and implementation of Kenya's CBC, and the emerging debate on the distinction between competence and talent in educational practice. Drawing on contemporary literature, policy documents, and curriculum theory, the paper explores the strengths of CBC, including learner-centered pedagogy, continuous assessment, and the promotion of critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy. It also analyzes key implementation challenges, such as inadequate teacher preparation, resource constraints, assessment complexities, and disparities between curriculum policy and classroom practice. Particular attention is given to the need for balancing universal competency development with systematic identification and nurturing of learners' natural talents. The paper argues that while Kenya's CBC represents a progressive and necessary educational reform, its long-term success depends on strengthened teacher capacity, improved assessment systems, adequate resource allocation, meaningful stakeholder engagement, and the integration of structured talent development pathways. A hybrid approach that combines competency acquisition with knowledge-rich instruction and differentiated talent development is recommended as a more sustainable framework for achieving holistic learner development and national educational goals.

Keywords: Competency-Based Education, Competency-Based Curriculum, Kenya, Curriculum Reform, Competency Assessment, Talent Development, Learner-Centered Education, Educational Policy.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, competency-based education (CBE) has moved from the fringes of educational debate to the center of global curriculum reform. Unlike traditional models that measure student progress by seat time or content volume, CBE shifts the focus to what learners can actually do — the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they can put to use in real situations (Açıkgöz & Babadoğan, 2021). This idea has deep philosophical roots. John Dewey, writing in the early twentieth century, argued passionately that education should be experiential and grounded in lived reality rather than abstract academic exercises. His thinking later merged with behaviorist and social efficiency theories that called for education to produce graduates with clearly observable, practical abilities aligned to societal needs.

The framework that most people now associate with CBE took clearer shape in the 1960s, when Benjamin Bloom introduced the concept of mastery learning. Bloom's core argument was straightforward but radical: virtually all students could reach mastery of defined learning objectives if given the right conditions and enough time. The Cold War context gave this idea practical urgency — policymakers wanted education systems that reliably produced graduates with verifiable, applicable skills rather than impressive-sounding but hollow credentials. Over the decades that followed, CBE evolved and spread, often rebranded under the umbrella of "21st-century skills" — critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and digital fluency (UNESCO-IBE, 2017).

Supporters of CBE point to real advantages. Allowing students to move forward upon demonstrating mastery — rather than simply ageing through a system — opens doors for learners who might otherwise be left behind by rigid, exam-heavy structures. There is also an appealing logic to a model that tries to close the persistent gap between what schools teach and what employers and communities actually need. Yet CBE is not without its critics. Curriculum theorists worry that breaking education into discrete, assessable competencies can fragment knowledge, producing graduates who are technically proficient in narrow tasks but lack the capacity for deep, integrative thinking (Young & Muller, 2016). There is also a recurring problem of language: even among experts, terms like competence, proficiency, and qualification are used inconsistently, creating confusion at the policy level and leading to uneven implementation in classrooms (Açıkgöz & Babadoğan, 2021).

Assessment is perhaps the most contested battleground within CBE. Traditional written examinations are clearly inadequate for capturing applied competencies, but the alternatives — performance-based assessments, portfolios, and observation — are resource-intensive, difficult to standardize, and hard to scale. Research consistently shows that teachers under pressure tend to gravitate toward assessing the most easily observable student behaviors, which are not always the most meaningful ones (Curry & Docherty, 2017). The gap between CBE's lofty aspirations and its classroom realities remains wide in many contexts.

Kenya's Competency-Based Curriculum Reform

Kenya's decision to adopt a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2017 was bold by any measure. The reform replaced the familiar 8-4-4 structure with a 2-6-3-3-3 pathway and represented a deliberate break from a system long criticized for reducing education to exam performance (KICD, 2017). The driving vision was closely tied to Kenya's development agenda: the country needed graduates who could think critically, collaborate effectively, and adapt to a rapidly changing economy rather than students who had merely memorized large volumes of content.

The CBC framework identifies seven core competencies: communication and collaboration; critical thinking and problem solving; creativity and imagination; citizenship; learning to learn; self-efficacy; and digital literacy (KICD, 2017). These competencies are woven across all learning areas alongside values such as responsibility, respect, and integrity. In terms of structure, the reform introduced phased learning pathways, thematic learning areas, and — most significantly — a move away from terminal examinations toward ongoing, formative assessment.

Initial reactions to the CBC were largely positive among policy analysts, who welcomed its holistic and learner-centered ambitions. The on-the-ground reality, however, quickly proved more complicated. Akala (2021) describes the rollout as hurried and poorly coordinated, with teachers receiving inadequate preparation, resources failing to materialize as promised, and parents left uncertain about what the new system actually meant for their children. Subsequent research confirms that Kenya's experience echoes familiar global patterns: underfunding, overcrowded classrooms, and a widening gap between the curriculum as designed and the curriculum as delivered (Muchira et al., 2023). The philosophy behind the CBC is defensible; the capacity to realize it has been far less reliable.

Talent Versus Competence: Understanding the Difference

One of the more thought-provoking debates to emerge from Kenya's CBC experience concerns a distinction that might seem obvious but is rarely examined carefully: the difference between talent and competence. Competence, broadly understood, is a demonstrated ability to perform specific tasks to a defined standard — something that can be taught, practiced, and assessed. Talent, on the other hand, refers to innate or natural aptitude: a predisposition toward excellence in a particular domain that exists regardless of formal instruction. The two are related but not identical, and conflating them can lead education policy in problematic directions.

Most competency-based frameworks focus on ensuring that all learners reach a common baseline of skills — a universalist orientation that has genuine merits but also real limitations. Kenyan educationist Prof. Humphrey Oborah has made this argument most forcefully, contending that the CBC confuses observable performance with deeper potential. In his framing, competencies are merely the surface expression of underlying talents, and a system that stops at the surface — without mechanisms to identify and nurture what lies beneath — risks producing standardized mediocrity under a progressive-sounding label (Oborah, 2025). Whether or not one agrees with that verdict, the critique raises a legitimate question about the limits of a purely universalist approach.

Oborah's position finds support in established theories of giftedness and talent development. Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, for instance, draws a careful distinction between natural abilities (giftedness) and systematically developed skills (talent), and emphasizes that learners do not begin from equal starting points across domains. In any credible education system, this model implies, both ensuring foundational competencies for all and creating deliberate pathways for exceptional ability to be recognized and developed. Kenya's CBC acknowledges talent development rhetorically through co-curricular provisions and specialized pathways at junior secondary level, but critics argue these elements remain afterthoughts rather than central commitments. Without robust aptitude diagnostics and structured development pathways, the tension between standardization and genuine personalization remains unresolved.

Competency-Based Assessment and Early Childhood Development

The intersection of CBE and early childhood education deserves particular attention, because the developmental realities of young learners create specific tensions with competency-based approaches. Early childhood development is inherently nonlinear, play-driven, and highly individualized — qualities that sit uncomfortably with assessment frameworks built around defined milestones and observable performance. While Kenya's CBC advocates experiential, play-based learning in the early years, the evidence from classrooms suggests that assessment pressure has pushed teachers toward more formal, structured approaches earlier than child development research would recommend (Chepsiror, 2020). Teachers who are themselves uncertain about how to conduct play-based assessment understandably fall back on familiar methods that are easier to document.

Continuous assessment, in principle, is a valuable tool that can provide rich, ongoing feedback on a child's development. In practice, however, it can become another form of high-stakes testing when parents do not understand what competency reporting means or when teachers lack the support to implement it well. Research shows that parents frequently misread assessment scales and sometimes overcompensate —

completing assignments for their children in an effort to ensure good results — which defeats the purpose of authentic, formative assessment (Akala, 2021). Getting early childhood assessment right requires not just good frameworks on paper but sustained investment in teacher training and meaningful parent communication.

Strengths and Criticisms of Kenya's CBC

Kenya's CBC has genuine strengths that should not be lost in the legitimate criticism of its implementation. Its emphasis on skills that are actually useful in contemporary life — rather than the capacity to recall facts under exam conditions — represents a meaningful advance. The inclusion of arts, sports, and technical pathways broadens the definition of educational success in ways that the old 8-4-4 system never did, offering recognition to learners whose abilities do not fit the narrow academic mold. When continuous assessment is done well, it provides teachers and parents with much richer information about a child's development than a single annual exam ever could.

The implementation problems, however, are serious enough to threaten these benefits. Teachers were introduced to a fundamentally different pedagogical model without adequate training or ongoing support. The assessment demands of the CBC are far more complex than those of the system it replaced, yet the infrastructure to support them — in terms of time, materials, and professional development — has not kept pace. In contexts where classrooms are overcrowded and basic resources are scarce, the gap between what the CBC asks of teachers and what they are equipped to deliver is wide. Without closing that gap, the reform risks deepening rather than reducing educational inequality (Muchira et al., 2023; Mpofu & Sefotho, 2024).

Alternatives and Recommendations

The appropriate response to these challenges is not to abandon the CBC but to reform it with clearer eyes. The philosophical direction — toward outcomes, application, and the whole learner — is sound. What is needed is better execution: more rigorous teacher professional development, simplified and better-supported assessment frameworks, and genuine investment in the resources that classroom implementation requires. Critically, the curriculum would benefit from integrating structured approaches to talent identification rather than treating it as a peripheral concern. Hybrid models that combine competency development with knowledge-rich content and differentiated talent pathways have shown promise in other national contexts and offer a credible way forward for Kenya.

CONCLUSION

Kenya's CBC reflects something real and important about where education needs to go: away from rote learning and toward genuine competence, critical thinking, and adaptability. The conceptual foundations are solid, even if the distance between the policy document and the classroom remains large. The distinction between competence and talent is not a semantic nicety but a substantive question about what education is ultimately for — and a curriculum that takes both seriously, rather than treating talent development as an optional add-on, will serve students better. With deliberate investment, honest stakeholder engagement, and a willingness to learn from both successes and failures, Kenya's CBC can still deliver on its transformative promise.

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