

From curriculum reform to classroom enactment: A qualitative descriptive study of teachers' experiences in Kenya's Junior Schools

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ABSTRACT

Limited evidence exists on how teachers in the relatively new Junior School level experience and navigate implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya. This qualitative descriptive study examined teachers' experiences of CBC implementation, including what they perceived to be working well, the challenges encountered, and how they navigated them. Fifteen teachers were purposively selected from 15 public and private Junior Schools across Nairobi, Murang'a, and Samburu counties. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically using deductive and inductive coding. The findings revealed an important tension in teachers' experiences of CBC implementation. Teachers generally understood and valued CBC's holistic focus on nurturing learners' talents and competencies and its pedagogical shift towards learner-centered learning. However, their capacity to enact these principles was constrained by inadequate capacity, teacher shortages, limited teaching and learning resources, gaps in learner preparedness, curriculum changes and communication, heavy workload, and limited parental support. Teachers adapted by seeking support from colleagues and online resources and reverting to teacher-centered approaches. While experiences were broadly similar across counties and school ownership, some constraints manifested differently according to local contexts. The study demonstrates an important distinction between teachers' appreciation of curriculum reform and their capacity to enact it under everyday classroom conditions. Viewed through a Diffusion of Innovations lens, CBC implementation emerged as negotiated adaptation rather than simple adoption. Effective CBC implementation therefore requires coordinated attention to teacher preparation, staffing, resources, curriculum communication, learner preparedness, workload, and household-level conditions that enable intended practices to be realized.

Keywords: Competency-based curriculum, curriculum implementation, teacher experiences, junior school, Kenya.

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INTRODUCTION

The competency-based curriculum (CBC) is a learner-centered instructional approach that emphasizes the practical application of knowledge, hands-on learning, and formative assessment to monitor and support learners (Gulled, 2023). This approach has been widely embraced and integrated in many developed economies, such as those in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), for its potential to prepare students for the demands of the 21st-century workforce effectively.

There have also been calls for African countries to

integrate CBC in their education systems (Gulled, 2023; Kim, 2021). This is evident in the Continental Education Strategy for Africa 2016 – 2025 that envisions strong political will to reform and strengthen education and training systems that are holistic, inclusive, equitable, quality, and relevant (African Union, 2015). As a result, several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) have adopted CBC in a bid to equip their learners with relevant knowledge and skills to propel them to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and

consequently achieve socio-economic development (Cheptoo, 2020; Nsengimana et al., 2025; Wawire et al., 2026).

Likewise, Kenya is currently reforming its curriculum from the 8-4-4 system to the CBC. The reforms were motivated by inefficiencies in the 8-4-4 curriculum, such as content overload, inadequate teacher training, misaligned learning areas, and an examination orientation (Akala, 2021). In the Kenyan context, CBC is understood as the application of appropriate knowledge and skills to effectively undertake a task, with a focus on developing the requisite skills and knowledge and their application in the real world (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2019). In addition to nurturing learners' potential, CBC seeks to enhance relevance and ensure a smooth transition to the world of work by integrating Science, Technology, and Innovation and ensuring that the imparted skills match industry requirements. To do this, the curriculum emphasizes seven core competencies, including communication and collaboration, self-efficacy, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, digital literacy, and learning to learn, which are to be imparted to learners through the various learning areas, previously known as subjects (KICD, 2019).

The Basic Education Curriculum Framework prescribes a 2-6-3-3 system with two years in pre-primary school, six years in primary, three years in Junior School (JS), and three years in Senior School (KICD, 2019). The first cohort of students transitioned to JS in 2023. Initially, JS consisted of 14 core and optional learning areas, adding up to 45 lessons weekly. The subjects included English, Mathematics, pre-technical studies, Kiswahili, Integrated Science, Social Studies, Business Studies, Agriculture, Religious Education, Health Education, Sports and Physical Education, Life Skills Education, and two optional subjects. Following recommendations from the Presidential Working Party on Education Reform, the learning areas were rationalized to nine to reduce content overload and overlaps (Republic of Kenya, 2023). Rationalization was done by integrating: Life Skills with Social Studies into Social Studies; Home Science with Agriculture into Agriculture & Nutrition; Computer Studies, Business Studies and Pre-Technical Studies into Pre-Technical Studies; Physical Education & Sports, Visual Arts and Performing Arts into Creative Arts & Sports; and removal of optional learning areas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CBC implementation successes in sub-Saharan Africa

A review of the literature on the implementation of the competency-based curriculum in SSA highlights a growing awareness and positive reception of this curriculum among educators. Evidence from Rwanda indicates that many

teachers and National Trainers agreed that CBC stimulated learners' interests, covered effective learning activities, was easy to teach, was market-oriented, and provided well-illustrated textbooks (Ndihokubwayo and Habiyaemye, 2018; Ndihokubwayo et al., 2019). In Ghana, a majority of teachers expressed high confidence in teaching the new computing curriculum and positive attitudes toward using ICT (Ayebi-Arthur et al., 2020).

Other studies also highlighted that teachers were appreciative and utilized recommended CBC approaches. For instance, physics teachers in Rwanda integrated real-life contexts in their teaching, as they believed these enhanced students' interest and the applicability of physics to real-life situations (Nyirantambineza and Minani, 2022). A study by Musengimana et al. (2021) found that nearly all Chemistry teachers planned activities to evaluate acquired competences, involved students in group discussions, and utilized inquiry-based learning. Further, Addai-Mununkum and Setordzi (2023) observed that teachers in Ghana were implementing cooperative learning, experiential learning, and inquiry-based approaches in their classes. Other reasons teachers appreciated CBC were that it promotes relevant, practical learning and enhances learner engagement and creativity (Kabombwe and Mulenga, 2019).

CBC implementation challenges in sub-Saharan Africa

The implementation of CBC also faces a fair share of challenges. Studies point to the limited application of learner-centered approaches by teachers, with a preference for teacher-centered approaches to teaching and assessment (Nsengimana et al., 2023). A study by Byusa et al. (2020) showed that while 60% of chemistry teachers claimed daily use of active learning, classroom observations revealed dominant teacher-centered practices, with 81% of student activities being passive, that is, listening and note-taking. Further, a study by Musengimana et al. (2021) highlighted teachers' persistent use of passive teaching methods, including verbally explaining concepts, providing notes, and expecting students to recall content. Teachers also noted a mismatch between classroom content and national assessments, with examinations demanding critical thinking, yet they felt underprepared to train students accordingly (Nsengimana et al., 2023).

The lack of or inadequate teaching and learning resources was also identified as a key barrier to the implementation of CBC. The lack of science laboratories and ICT facilities in Rwanda, for instance, hindered effective integration of real-life contexts (Nyirantambineza and Minani, 2022). In Ghana, a study by Arthur and Obeng (2023) found that teachers had limited access to teacher guides, textbooks, and ICT tools. As a result of the inadequate resources, some teachers are forced to rely on materials borrowed from their teacher training sessions to

teach in their classrooms (Mochiah and Adibi, 2023). Studies also highlighted that teachers viewed digital literacy as difficult to implement due to a lack of internet and ICT resources (Appiah and Owusu, 2023). Still on ICT, Baiden (2023) reported minimal use of ICT by teachers in Ghana for student evaluation, to develop teaching aids, and search for lesson resources. This trend was also observed in Zambia, where studies highlighted that a majority of teachers lacked access to modern instructional tools, including up-to-date software and functional labs (Masumba, 2019), and that many schools did not have access to adequate CBC-related facilities and infrastructure, such as classrooms, ICT labs, and teaching materials (Changwe and Mulenga, 2020). Inadequate teaching and learning resources and laboratory space were also identified as key barriers in Tanzania (Mpate, 2025).

Teacher capacity also came out as a key hindrance to the effective implementation of CBC. Amoah et al. (2023) found that less than half of the teachers in Ghana had access to teacher professional development opportunities in biology. Further, despite in-service teachers displaying low levels of creative competencies such as creative abstraction, creative critical thinking, creative curiosity, and creative motivation, they were expected to impart these skills to students (Mahama, 2022).

Low teachers' self-efficacy to implement CBC was also found to be a key challenge, with less than half feeling ready and confident to implement the new curriculum (Arthur and Obeng, 2023). In Zambia, History teachers reported not understanding the CBC framework, therefore limiting effective delivery of the content (Kabombwe and Mulenga, 2019). Further, teachers reported that CBC training lacked follow-up and did not adequately prepare them for classroom practice (Mulenga and Ng'andu, 2022). In Rwanda, Sector-Based Trainers (SBTs) faced issues such as a lack of training materials, including laptops, projectors, and ICT tools, inadequate time and allowances, teacher resistance, poor mobilization, and a lack of post-training follow-up (Ndiokubwayo et al., 2019). In Tanzania, some of the key hurdles facing CBC implementation, especially for science subjects, included insufficient knowledge of CBC and inadequate training (Mpate, 2025).

Additionally, studies show that while teachers might appreciate CBC, heavy workload hampers their ability to complete the curriculum within the allocated time (Ndiokubwayo et al., 2019). This was corroborated by Byukusenge et al. (2023), who highlighted that an overloaded curriculum, coupled with inadequate pedagogical content knowledge and abstract topics, affected teachers' ability to implement CBC. Nsengimana et al. (2023) also reported that CBC was demanding, with a heavy workload, and that textbooks were overloaded, some containing up to 400 pages.

More recent evidence also suggests that the challenge extends beyond whether teachers understand or support

competency-based reforms to whether they can enact their expectations within existing classroom conditions. In Ghana, Armah et al. (2026) found that junior high mathematics teachers used learner-centred approaches such as group work, inquiry, and contextual tasks, but the enactment of core competencies was constrained by curriculum overload, examination pressures, limited resources, and weaknesses in professional learning. Teachers prioritised and adapted aspects of the curriculum according to what they considered feasible in their contexts. These findings draw attention to the interaction between teachers' interpretations of curriculum reform and the conditions that enable or constrain its enactment in practice.

Study purpose and research question

While existing studies have documented several challenges associated with CBC implementation, including inadequate teacher preparation, limited teaching and learning resources, increased workload, assessment challenges, and difficulties in adopting learner-centred pedagogies, less attention has been given to how teachers experience and navigate these interconnected demands in their everyday implementation of the curriculum. In particular, there is limited understanding of how teachers' perceptions and acceptance of the principles underlying CBC translate into classroom practice when implementation occurs within constrained institutional and resource environments. This distinction is important because understanding and embracing the principles of a curriculum reform may not necessarily translate into teachers' capacity to enact them as intended. Further, although CBC has progressively been implemented across different levels of education in Kenya, empirical evidence on teachers' experiences of its implementation at the relatively new Junior School level remains limited.

The study was informed by Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how new ideas and practices are communicated, perceived, adopted, and implemented within a social system (Rogers, 2003). From this perspective, CBC represents an educational innovation whose implementation depends partly on how teachers, as key implementers, understand and perceive the reform. The theory was particularly relevant to this study because CBC requires teachers to adopt new pedagogical roles and practices, including learner-centred teaching, competency development, and new approaches to assessment. However, teachers' capacity to enact an innovation is also shaped by the context within which implementation takes place. The study therefore used the theory as an interpretive lens for examining teachers' experiences of CBC implementation, including their perceptions of the reform and the conditions that facilitated or constrained its enactment.

This study sought to address these knowledge and contextual gaps by examining teachers' experiences of CBC implementation at the Junior School level, including what they perceived to be working well, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they employed to navigate these challenges. The key question of inquiry was: What are teachers' experiences of implementing the competency-based curriculum at the Junior School level in Kenya?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design

The study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore teachers' experiences of implementing the competency-based curriculum at the Junior School level. Qualitative description is appropriate for studies seeking a comprehensive account of an event or experience by remaining close to their accounts and the data (Sandelowski, 2000; Villamin et al., 2025). Such studies can examine participants' concerns and responses to an event or phenomenon, as well as the factors that facilitate or hinder their experiences (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach was therefore appropriate because the study sought to generate a detailed account of teachers' perspectives and experiences of CBC implementation, including what was working well, the challenges they encountered, and the strategies they used to navigate these challenges.

Target population and sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 teachers, with

one teacher drawn from each of 15 Junior Schools across Nairobi, Murang'a, and Samburu counties, representing urban, rural, and arid and semi-arid areas, respectively. These three counties were purposefully selected from a previous study focusing on the implementation of CBC in primary schools (Kiambati et al., 2025). Given the exploratory nature of the study, the sampling strategy sought to capture varied experiences of CBC implementation across different school and teaching contexts rather than achieve statistical representativeness. Variation was deliberately incorporated by county, school ownership, and learning area. Five teachers were selected from each county, with representation from public and private Junior Schools and from teachers handling STEM and Humanities or Languages subjects (Table 1). Selecting one teacher from each school further enabled the study to capture experiences across 15 different institutional contexts rather than clustering participants within a smaller number of schools.

The sample size was not determined prospectively using thematic saturation. Instead, the selection of 15 teachers was guided by the study's exploratory aim and the need to capture variation in experiences across counties, school ownership, learning areas, and school contexts. Sample adequacy was also considered in relation to the specificity of the participants and the relevance of the information generated to the research question. All participants had direct experience implementing CBC at the Junior School level. This approach is consistent with the principle of information power, which recognizes that the adequacy of a qualitative sample depends on factors such as the study aim, sample specificity, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy rather than a predetermined numerical threshold (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Malterud et al., 2016).

Table 1. Qualitative sample distribution.

County	Public		Private		Total
	STEM	Humanities/Languages	STEM	Humanities/Languages	
Nairobi	2	1	1	1	5
Murang'a	1	2	1	1	5
Samburu	2	1	1	1	5
Total	5	4	3	3	15

Instrumentation

The teacher qualitative guide explored teachers' understanding of CBC, capacity and support to implement CBC, challenges affecting teaching and learning at the JS level, gender differences in the learning abilities between male and female students, training and support for learners with special needs and disabilities, workload and mental wellbeing, and recommendations to enhance the

implementation of CBC at the JS level.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all the study participants. The process involved going through all the sections of the physical copy of the consent form, including study purpose, procedures, voluntary participation,

potential risks and benefits, and steps taken to enhance confidentiality. Participants were provided with enough time to ask questions before appending their signatures. The consent forms were in both English and Kiswahili (the two national languages) to enhance the participants' understanding.

Recruitment, training and data collection

A team of nine research assistants was recruited and trained to collect data for the broader study in Murang'a, Samburu, and Nairobi counties. The training was conducted from September 9 to 12, 2024, and covered the study objectives, data collection tools, and research ethics. The training also incorporated role-plays and mock interviews to enable the research assistants to practice and familiarize themselves with the study tools and procedures. The qualitative teacher interviews reported in this paper were conducted by a two-person qualitative team comprising a moderator/interviewer and an assistant moderator/notetaker.

Data collection took place from September 13 to 23, 2024. Prior to data collection, courtesy visits were made to the County Directors of Education in Nairobi, Samburu, and Murang'a to inform them about the study, request approval, and seek their assistance in mobilizing the target schools. During data collection, the research team conducted spot checks and held end-of-day debriefing sessions to review field experiences, provide feedback, address emerging concerns, and clarify issues arising from the interviews.

The teacher interviews were conducted using a semi-structured qualitative interview guide. The guide explored teachers' understanding of CBC; training and support received for implementation; experiences of teaching and learning at the Junior School level; perceived gender differences in students' learning abilities; support for learners with special needs and disabilities; workload and mental wellbeing; implementation challenges; and recommendations for strengthening CBC implementation. The semi-structured format allowed the moderator to use probes and follow-up questions to seek clarification and further explore issues raised by participants. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were conducted mainly in English, with Kiswahili used where clarification was required. The assistant moderator took notes during the interviews, while the discussions were digitally recorded with participants' consent.

Data processing

The qualitative interviews were digitally recorded and supplemented by notes taken by the assistant moderator. The recordings were transcribed verbatim in Microsoft Word. Interviews were conducted mainly in English, with

Kiswahili used where clarification was required. Kiswahili portions of the interviews were translated into English during transcription. To verify transcription accuracy, the lead author reviewed a selection of transcripts from each county against the corresponding audio recordings and checked for consistency and accuracy.

The data were analyzed thematically using a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke et al., 2015; Proudfoot, 2023). An initial codebook was developed by the lead author, who had also participated in data collection, based on the study objectives and domains covered in the qualitative interview guide. The codebook was subsequently reviewed with the team member responsible for coding the transcripts and refined where necessary. The deductive codes ensured alignment with the study objectives and interview domains, while additional codes were generated inductively to capture issues emerging from participants' accounts. NVivo was used to organize and manage the transcripts and coding process (Dhakal, 2022).

One research team member coded all the transcripts using the agreed codebook, with emerging codes incorporated during the coding process. The lead author and coder reviewed the coded data to assess the application of the codes and discuss necessary refinements. For the present paper, the lead author subsequently reviewed the coded teacher data to identify patterns relevant to the study question and grouped related codes into broader themes and subthemes reflecting teachers' experiences of CBC implementation. The themes and subthemes were reviewed against the coded data to ensure that they adequately represented participants' accounts.

Trustworthiness and reflexivity

Several measures were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Data collection was conducted by a trained qualitative team using a semi-structured interview guide, with interviews digitally recorded and supplemented by notes taken by the assistant moderator. Regular debriefing sessions during data collection provided opportunities to discuss emerging issues and clarify field experiences. To verify transcription accuracy, the lead author reviewed a selection of transcripts from each county against the corresponding audio recordings. During analysis, the initial codebook was reviewed and refined by the lead author and coder, and the coded data were jointly reviewed to assess the application of the codes and discuss necessary refinements. The themes and subthemes developed for this paper were subsequently reviewed against the coded data to ensure that they adequately represented participants' accounts.

The lead author participated in data collection, developed the initial codebook, reviewed the coding with

the coder, and led the development of themes and subthemes for this paper. This involvement provided familiarity with the study context and participants' accounts but also required attention to how the researcher's prior engagement with the study could shape interpretation. To maintain grounding in participants' accounts, theme development and interpretation were based on the coded data, and the resulting themes and subthemes were reviewed against the data to ensure that they reflected participants' experiences.

RESULTS

Understanding of the competency-based curriculum

Teachers demonstrated a clear understanding of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), articulating its key components and differentiating it from the previous 8-4-4 system. Their responses suggested that they understood CBC not only as a change in curriculum content, but also as a shift in the purpose of education, the role of the teacher, how learners participate in learning, and how learning is assessed. Several teachers emphasized that CBC is designed to cater to learners' strengths, abilities, and talents rather than subjecting all students to a uniform academic standard. The curriculum's emphasis on inclusive learning was also noted, with teachers reiterating that it supported the development of talents among learners with diverse abilities, including those with special needs. This reflected a broader understanding of learner success in which different abilities and career pathways were recognized and nurtured.

R: ...each person takes his or her pathway so that at the end of the day we will have a country or world whereby every area is represented, and every area is strong. For instance, if it's a plumber, we have a perfect plumber, not just a plumber who is taking his career as if it's just by the way. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

R: We engage them through projects, through sports, then making some projects like cooking to ensure that the practical content is well done. So, we identify and help students to ensure that their talent is well nurtured, which can help them in the future, and we give them that priority. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Teachers also noted that under CBC, their role as educators had evolved from being content deliverers to facilitators who guide and support students' active participation in the learning process. Unlike the 8-4-4 curriculum, which they described as largely teacher-centered, CBC was perceived as encouraging learner-centered activities that allowed learners to take a more active role in constructing knowledge, with teachers providing guidance and support. Their descriptions

indicated that their understanding extended beyond familiarity with CBC terminology to recognition of the pedagogical changes expected of them.

R: 8-4-4 was mainly based on the lecturing method. In CBC, the teacher facilitates by making real-world connections to enable the learner to familiarize themselves with the real object. For example, when teaching about parts of the human body, you have to use the learner as a teaching guide so that they can touch, feel, and see, but when we talk about 8-4-4, it was picture-centered...For CBC, you have to work as a group where you involve the learner 70 percent, then 20 percent they do it for themselves, and then 10 percent is the facilitator. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

R: It is a learner-centered kind of education. In CBC, we mostly facilitate. We don't teach like we used to in the other system... Here, we are only concerned with facilitating what they are supposed to do. We only guide. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Practical and hands-on learning was another frequently cited characteristic of the new curriculum. Subjects such as Music, Art and Craft, and Home Science were seen as extending learning beyond the classroom and providing learners with opportunities to develop diverse practical skills. Teachers appreciated this orientation because it allowed learners to connect classroom learning with everyday experiences. However, their accounts also revealed an early tension between appreciating CBC's practical orientation and having the resources required to implement it as intended.

R: What I mean is most of the learning that we are doing is also being done at home. For example, you know CBC is a broad kind of learning whereby there are these lessons which have been created, like Music, Art and Craft, Home Science. You can see when we talk of home science these are the things that are being done by the learner at home, but it is very challenging because we don't have most of the teaching materials in school. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Another important characteristic of CBC alluded to by teachers was its emphasis on formative or continuous assessment. Teachers contrasted this with the 8-4-4 system, which they felt placed undue pressure on learners through high-stakes final examinations. Continuous assessment was perceived as beneficial because it enabled learners' progress to be monitored over time and provided a cumulative basis for informing subsequent academic and career pathway placement.

R: The difference is there, because in 8-4-4 they used to do exams in Grade 8, and that single paper is what assessed what the learners had been doing since

Grade 1, as compared to CBC, where the assessments add up to the final results. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: You know, in 8-4-4, we concentrated on summative assessment, and this summative assessment is the one that determines the life of this child. But now, in CBC, when you check, we have what we call monitoring learning from Grade 3 to Grade 9, to enable them to be placed on (specialization) pathways. So, there is at least a connection from the lower grades to the upper grades when it comes to CBC. Unlike 8-4-4, where you learn and there is no connection. You go to Grade 8, then you are put in a national school, and we don't know what happened in between the grades. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Understanding CBC core competencies

Teachers also demonstrated a clear understanding of the CBC core competencies, including communication and collaboration, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving, creativity and imagination, citizenship, learning to learn, and self-efficacy. While some teachers could list all or most of the competencies, others explained how the competencies were developed through everyday teaching and learning activities. A key aspect of their understanding was that competencies were not taught as discrete subjects but were embedded within classroom activities and learning experiences.

For instance, group work was widely associated with communication and collaboration because it enabled students to exchange ideas, work jointly on tasks, and present their outcomes. Digital literacy was associated with exposing students to technologies such as smartphones and tablets, while critical thinking and problem-solving were linked to inquiry-based and real-life tasks. Citizenship was associated with activities that exposed learners to different cultures, while learning to learn was linked to activities in which students independently observed, investigated, and drew conclusions with guidance from the teacher. These examples suggest that teachers understood the competencies not only as curriculum concepts but also in terms of how they could be developed through pedagogical practice.

R: ...they are not taught. They just come out during a lesson. For example, we have communication and collaboration. So, when the learners are in groups, they can communicate and collaborate to do a certain task. Maybe they have to present during the class, so a learner has to develop good communication skills, and also, they collaborate with other students. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

R: Then when you talk of digital literacy, when you expose the learners to these gadgets, they are learning how to operate the gadgets. We have critical thinking and problem solving. You know, CBC prepares these learners to learn to solve life situations when they come across them. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: One of the core competencies that I forgot to mention is learning to learn. Here, learners are able to come up with the learning outcomes as they complete a learning activity... in agriculture, you take them to the field, they see plants without you telling them that this plant is infected, they see the symptoms and determine if the plant is infected or not... You just facilitate and give clarification where they go wrong. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Teachers' perceptions of what was working well in CBC

Teacher professional development

A small proportion of teachers felt that the Ministry of Education was either doing enough or at least making efforts to build their capacity to implement CBC effectively. They referred to teacher professional development initiatives organized by various institutions, including the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), the Centre for Mathematics, Science and Technology Education in Africa (CEMASTEA), and county governments, to equip teachers with CBC knowledge and skills. A majority of the teachers who had attended retooling sessions mentioned that they typically lasted four to five days. The training covered areas such as using curriculum designs to deliver learning areas; changes in curriculum terminology, including strands and sub-strands; CBC core competencies and recommended pedagogical approaches; preparation of professional documents; learner assessment; differentiated instruction for learners with learning difficulties and special needs and disabilities; creativity; digital literacy; and integration of learning within the classroom, outside the classroom, and in the community. These accounts indicate that retooling had provided teachers with some of the knowledge required to navigate the pedagogical and structural changes introduced by CBC.

R: Yes. In some cases, when the schools are closed, you may find that the county or KICD normally plans for seminars. They call several groups of individuals to attend those seminars, then they facilitate. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

However, positive perceptions of retooling did not

necessarily mean that teachers considered their preparation complete. The changing demands of CBC required continued professional development, particularly when teachers were expected to handle learning areas outside their original subject specialization or new grades were introduced.

R: Yes, I am adequately prepared to teach Grades 8, 7, and 9. There is a new class coming. Grade 9. That class comes with different inputs, like subjects, so we need to go to another retooling. Like I am a teacher of Mathematics and Physics, but I have been retooled to teach Pre-technical and Integrated Science, which I did not train in. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Relevant learning areas and connection to student abilities

According to teachers, the additional learning areas in CBC compared to the 8-4-4 curriculum were an advantage because learners were not only exposed to a wider range of knowledge and skills but also had more opportunities to identify and demonstrate their abilities and talents. Teachers felt that, unlike the 8-4-4 curriculum, CBC provided a clearer connection between students' abilities and future career pathways. Continuous monitoring of learners throughout basic education was perceived as providing opportunities to identify their strengths over time and ultimately guide their placement into relevant pathways. Teachers therefore viewed the breadth of learning areas as creating alternative opportunities for success for learners who might not perform well in traditionally academic areas. However, teachers also acknowledged that these benefits depended on how well CBC was implemented and supported.

R: If you look at CBC, if it is implemented well and followed up well, it can have more benefits than 8-4-4 because in CBC, the students have more learning areas. For instance, if they don't perform in one learning area, there are other areas that they are engaged in from their early years, unlike in 8-4-4. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Hands-on learning activities

The skills-based approach in CBC that emphasizes hands-on activities in various learning areas, as compared to what teachers perceived as the more knowledge-based approach of the 8-4-4 curriculum, was lauded for equipping students with practical skills that could potentially be applied beyond school and in future income-generating activities. Teachers linked this orientation to greater learner engagement and to preparing students to use acquired skills in everyday life and the world of work.

Some teachers contrasted this with their perceptions of graduates from the previous system who, despite attaining academic qualifications, did not necessarily possess practical skills that enabled them to engage in self-employment. For example, teachers valued hands-on activities like basketry not simply because they increased classroom participation, but because they perceived a direct connection between learning, acquisition of practical competencies, and learners' future livelihoods.

R: Most of the things we are teaching our learners are hands-on activities. CBC is skill-based, but in 8-4-4, it is knowledge-based. Even right now, when we check the graduates (from the 8-4-4 system), they are getting out of university, but they have nothing to do because you will get someone who gets out of the university, but he cannot come up with an income-generating project...look at the creative arts subject. We have the element of basketry, where the learners are supposed to literally do it and display it in front of the school. If the learner can do it well now and even in the future, they can use that skill to make money. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Use of locally available resources

Teachers reported that CBC encouraged them to use locally available teaching and learning resources rather than depending exclusively on materials provided by the Ministry of Education or schools. This flexibility was perceived as enabling teachers to adapt their teaching to the resources available within their immediate environment. Teachers also highlighted the use of realia or real-life objects as enhancing students' learning experiences because learners could see, interact with, and apply the concepts being taught. The use of locally available materials therefore represented both a pedagogical strategy for making learning more concrete and a practical means of continuing instruction where conventional teaching materials were limited.

R: Because for the 8-4-4, we were not able to come up with those (locally available materials). We mostly depended on what the ministry had provided, and maybe the school. For example, right now, if it is something you want to show or you want the students to do, you can write on the sacks, whereas for the 8-4-4, it was different. We were depending mostly on manila paper. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Enhanced student assessment

The different assessment approaches under CBC were seen as an improvement over the 8-4-4 system because both theoretical knowledge and practical

activities could contribute to assessing learners' progress. Teachers perceived this broader approach to assessment as particularly beneficial for learners who might struggle with conventional academic tasks but demonstrate competencies through practical activities. For instance, mathematics included hands-on activities such as making model shapes, which could be assessed and graded. Teachers felt that recognizing such competencies enabled learners with different abilities to experience success and develop a sense of capability within the learning process. The teachers' accounts suggested that they valued CBC assessment not only because it used different assessment approaches, but because it broadened what could count as evidence of learner competence, allowing abilities that might be less visible through conventional written examinations to be recognized.

R: Like now, you can see in this class, we have some triangular-based models. You find that a very weak student in mathematics is the one making them. So, students feel they are also important. You award marks if they have made a model of a cuboid, so every learner feels I am capable somewhere, unlike the old curriculum. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Link between core competencies and social-emotional skills

Teachers also identified benefits associated with developing CBC core competencies that extended beyond academic learning. For instance, activities promoting communication and collaboration created opportunities for students to interact with peers and express themselves. Teachers perceived these opportunities as particularly valuable for learners who might otherwise be reluctant to participate, suggesting that the development of core competencies could simultaneously support social-emotional skills such as confidence and self-expression. As such, teachers perceived academic, competency, and social-emotional development as interconnected rather than separate outcomes of classroom learning.

R: You know the collaboration and communication competency. You can give students the opportunity to talk, even if it is someone who was not able to express themselves before. You give them the opportunity to express themselves, however long it takes, but you give them the space. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Comprehensive curriculum designs

Teachers applauded the use of curriculum designs in CBC because they clearly and comprehensively highlighted the strands, sub-strands, learning experiences, and key learning outcomes and skills that learners were expected

to gain over a given period in the various learning areas. By referencing the curriculum designs, teachers found it relatively easy to prepare professional documents such as schemes of work, lesson plans, and records of work, as well as track learner progress. This was contrasted with the 8-4-4 curriculum, where teachers reported that lessons could sometimes be delivered primarily from textbooks without comparable reference to professional documents. Beyond providing curriculum content, teachers therefore perceived the designs as providing a structure that connected intended learning outcomes, learning experiences, lesson preparation, and reflection on teaching. In addition, the curriculum designs were perceived as supporting not only planning but also reflection and adjustment of subsequent teaching.

R: In 8-4-4, it was a syllabus, but now you are given a curriculum design, and now from that you are able to see and understand the learning experience. The learning experiences are the things that the learner will do to come up with the learning outcomes. So, from one lesson to another, you understand what needs to be done...after one lesson, you see, I did this; was it effective? I do another. From the curriculum designs, you can come up with your lesson plans, the scheme of work, the records of work, and more, about understanding the 21st-century learner. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Integrated learning areas

Teachers highlighted opportunities to integrate activities across learning areas as another aspect of CBC that was working well. Rather than treating learning areas as entirely stand-alone, teachers described how knowledge, skills, and products developed in one learning area could be applied in another. For example, crops grown in Agriculture and Nutrition could subsequently be used in learning activities like cooking, while mats produced through Art and Craft could be used during gymnastics. Teachers perceived this integration as extending learning beyond the production of an item or completion of a single activity to its practical application across learning areas. These views indicated that teachers understood integration as creating continuity and practical connections across learning areas, reinforcing their broader perception of CBC as less compartmentalized than the previous curriculum.

R: So, they (Ministry of Education) did what we call subject combination. For example, if you are teaching a lesson in art and craft that involves weaving, the mat that you have woven is what you use to perform gymnastics in sports. In music, there is a song that will be sung during the performance of a sport. So, it has become one subject. The other one is agriculture

and nutrition. You find that you go to the farm, you plant crops, then you harvest. You go to the kitchen. "What do you do in the kitchen?" That is Home Science: dieting and cooking. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Teachers' perceptions of CBC challenges

Inadequate teacher capacity

Conversations with teachers revealed that many felt inadequately prepared to teach at the JS level, mainly because they had either been trained to implement the 8-4-4 curriculum or were assigned learning areas outside their areas of specialization. This was particularly challenging where rationalization combined content from previously separate learning areas. Teachers therefore described having to simultaneously familiarize themselves with unfamiliar content and teach it to learners. To navigate these gaps, some relied on internet resources to prepare for lessons. Some sought assistance from colleagues with expertise in the unfamiliar content, illustrating how informal peer support helped them navigate gaps in their own subject preparation.

R: No, teachers have not been trained well. A teacher like me, I was teaching 8-4-4, then CBC came, and I started to teach up to Grade 8. I have been told to teach, and I am not trained. Yes, and some of the things that are implemented in Grades 7 and 8 require someone who is specialized in some areas. For example, in the performing arts, not everyone can do it. But you find we don't have qualified personnel, but we are told to just go and teach, and you don't have any idea what to teach. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: For me, I teach Pre-tech. We have a Business teacher, so when it comes to Business, I ask her to support me. They are mixed, so when it comes to that part of Business, I ask her to come in. When it is time for computer science, I am there. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Teachers felt that inadequate preparation affected not only their knowledge of the content but also their ability to adopt the pedagogical approaches expected under CBC. Some described struggling to move away from teaching approaches used under the 8-4-4 system, while others reported teaching unfamiliar content directly from available materials without having sufficiently internalized it. This created concerns about the quality of content delivered to learners.

R: Because I've taught in secondary school for many years, trying to unlearn the old methodology of teaching to the CBC is a challenge...this year, when

they combined the subjects, for example, they combined Computer Studies and Business Studies to Pre-Technical. There are some aspects of computers where you are just teaching. You are kind of just teaching what you are reading, not that you have internalized the knowledge, but now you must teach. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Teachers also questioned the adequacy of professional development initiatives such as CBC retooling. Although the previous section showed that teachers appreciated the availability of retooling opportunities, some considered the frequency, depth, and delivery of the training inadequate. In particular, teachers questioned whether some trainers were sufficiently prepared and noted a contradiction between being trained to implement learner-centered CBC pedagogy through sessions that they themselves perceived as largely teacher-centered and focused on providing notes rather than practical engagement.

R: They have tried, but not to the level required. You see, it is a new system, so the trainers, I don't know who trained them. It has not been implemented to the best level. So far, when you check on CBC generally, you find that what is expected of a teacher is still not being done according to CBC. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

R: I can't say it is 100 percent. It's around 50, because they call us for retooling, but there is more to be done, more training, more hands-on. You know, most of the time we go for training, they teach in the 8-4-4 way. You know, we are going for training, then the person facilitating that training is now just giving you notes, telling you to read rather than making it hands-on. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Teacher shortages further compounded these capacity gaps. Teachers reported having to teach multiple grades and learning areas outside their specialization because there were insufficient teachers at the JS level. This increased both the range of content they were expected to master and the number of lessons they taught. However, experiences varied by school leadership, with some heads of institutions responding to staffing gaps by engaging Board of Management (BoM) teachers, while others reportedly provided limited additional support.

R: What I can say is that there is a gap in our government...the teacher preparation is not adequate because when they rolled out CBC, there was no teacher to handle these grades. That is why they are taking the graduates to come and handle the 14 or 9 learning areas, and the graduates are only trained in two areas. There is not enough teacher preparation, and more so in JS. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: So, you realize the teacher just gives notes and does not teach. The teacher comfortably tells you, "I will not teach. What am I teaching? I was not good at that". You realize sometimes there's no goodwill, but in some schools, the heads of institutions are good enough to employ BoM teachers for certain areas that have challenges. You find there are some schools like our school, whereby the head teacher feels that there's no Integrated Science teacher, so he organizes how parents can chip in, then he employs a Biology/Chemistry teacher. Also, the workload. According to TSC, you should teach a maximum of 27 hours per week, but now there are some schools where you teach even 40, so you're not motivated. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Curriculum changes and inadequate communication

Teachers reported that changes to curriculum designs were not always communicated to them in sufficient time to prepare for implementation. Rationalization of the JS curriculum from 14 to 9 learning areas was frequently cited. Teachers explained that they had initially been retooled to deliver the 14 learning areas, but when some learning areas were subsequently combined, they were expected to teach the revised areas without corresponding preparation. Consequently, teachers sometimes encountered unfamiliar content from another subject area within the newly combined learning area.

R: It is now Agriculture and Nutrition. When it is combined, it has Agriculture and some parts of Home Science. So, you find in Home Science there are some parts that you are not completely aware of, and you are supposed to teach them since they are combined. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Teachers also described uncertainty when curriculum changes reached schools without adequate guidance on how revised strands and content should be implemented.

R: You may get that the information is there with the government, but the dispatch! For example, like the curriculum design. You find that this time there is an integration that has been done, and something has been added; this time, something has been omitted, so how to merge these things is a great challenge. You find that the strands that were there previously were no longer there when we opened school. So, we were not guided in the right way. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

The timing of curriculum changes also created misalignment between curriculum designs and available textbooks. Teachers reported that some newly introduced topics were absent from existing textbooks, while changes

in the status of some learning areas created continuity challenges for learners. Creative Arts, for example, had previously been optional but subsequently became compulsory, leaving some Grade 8 learners without the expected prior exposure.

R: They are somehow confusing us because last year it was an optional subject. Now this year, when they are in Grade 8, it has become compulsory. Some schools never took it as a subject because it was optional. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: The curriculum design... There are some topics they have added, but the books don't have those topics. Like in Social Studies, we have trans-Saharan trade, but I think they could have started with local trade because it is within the region. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Teachers further expressed uncertainty about how CBC's emphasis on both academic and non-academic abilities should translate into assessment and learner support. Although teachers valued the curriculum's recognition of diverse learner abilities, some were unclear about how learners demonstrating different strengths should be categorized, assessed, and supported.

R: The student is doing well in co-curricular activities and is very poor in class work, so how can you categorize this learner? Are you now to group him under the co-curricular activities? I tend to think that the ministry or stakeholders who are to guide on how we are to analyze individual learners have not come out clearly. A learner who is doing well in co-curricular activities and a learner who is doing well in academics, how do we categorize this? (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Challenges in implementing group work activities

Teachers reported challenges in implementing group work as envisaged under CBC. While they understood and valued learner-centered approaches, some felt that learners could not always engage effectively with unfamiliar or complex content through group activities without prior teacher explanation. Using group work at the beginning of a topic also meant that teachers could take longer to accomplish their lesson plans, consequently affecting their ability to complete the syllabus. When faced with this challenge, teachers reported reverting to traditional 8-4-4 teaching practices by first introducing and explaining the topics and allocating a larger proportion of lesson time than recommended under CBC to lecturing. This suggests that teachers' continued use of teacher-centered approaches was not necessarily due to rejection or misunderstanding of learner-centered pedagogy, but

was sometimes an adaptation to the practical challenges they encountered in implementing it.

R: So, you realize if you do it the CBC way, whereby they expect you to go to class and the students start group work, it does not work. You must first introduce them to the topic before they do the group work. I have personally tried. You tell them to do an activity in the textbook, and they have no idea what to do. CBC is really against you introducing a strand, but you are forced to introduce it. As you give them the group work, they do not know what they're doing because the content is so deep...You find it's a bit challenging, whereby you're not able to finish what you have planned in time. Other times, you are forced to teach the old curriculum way, just because you have pressure to finish the syllabus... 50% you use the lecture method, which is not allowed in CBC. Not that you cannot use the CBC, but now, there's pressure for you to finish the syllabus. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Inadequate teaching and learning resources

The lack of or inadequate teaching and learning resources at the JS level was identified as another key barrier to effective implementation of CBC. In Integrated Science, for example, inadequate equipment limited opportunities for learners to participate in the hands-on experiments expected under the curriculum. Teachers therefore faced difficulties translating CBC's emphasis on practical learning into classroom practice.

R: The problem there (with Integrated Science), as I earlier mentioned, the apparatus are a big challenge. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Resource challenges were also linked to curriculum rationalization. Teachers explained that after the 14 learning areas were rationalized to 9, textbooks corresponding to the newly combined learning areas were not immediately available. They consequently had to work across older textbooks or source missing content from the internet.

R: Like we have the subjects that were rationalized, but the textbooks are not there. We are ready to teach, but it was a challenge for us. So, it means if the government had prepared on time, produced the books on time, and communicated on time, it could be effective for the teachers. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

R: You know, in some of the learning areas we are still using the separated learning areas that we were using in Grade 7. The textbooks for the rationalized

learning areas are not in place. When you go to the market to get Pre-technical, which has combined Business and whatever, the books are not there. So, we are trying to source the information from the internet, we add to what we know, and then we give our learners. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Although inadequate resources were reported across the three counties, teachers' accounts showed that the specific resources available or difficult to access could vary by context. For example, a teacher in Nairobi reported that access to electricity made the use of digital resources relatively easier, while some natural materials required for practical activities, such as particular plants or insects, were difficult to obtain in an urban setting. In contrast, a teacher in Samburu described lack of electricity and digital devices as constraints to integrating ICT into teaching and argued that resource provision should take regional circumstances into account.

R: ...you can find a learner is being told to go and bring a grasshopper from home, bring a banana leaf and you are in town and in town you cannot get a banana leaf. A grasshopper you cannot get in Nairobi....like computer studies, some places don't have electricity, but in the town it's okay. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

R: At the same time, they should consider the region itself. For instance, in Samburu they should put much emphasis on arid areas, like providing more resources. You cannot compare a school in Samburu or a school in Maralal with a school in Nairobi.... I think there should be consideration when providing resources. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Some differences were also evident by school ownership, particularly in the source of material support. While resource constraints were reported in both public and private schools, some private-school teachers indicated less access to government-provided resources and relied more on school management and parents for material support. A private-school teacher in Murang'a, for example, reported that although government officers provided professional advice and organized workshops, material support came primarily from parents. Similarly, a private-school teacher in Samburu called for private schools to receive books and other materials provided to public schools.

R: They just give us oral support because we are in a private school they are mostly concerned with the public school. The support we get, we get from the parents not from the ministry. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a, Private School)

Teachers therefore linked resource inadequacy not only

to shortages within schools but also to the timing and coordination of curriculum changes, teacher preparation, communication, and provision of corresponding instructional materials, and the contexts in which schools operated.

Inadequate parental involvement

Teachers expressed varied views regarding parental involvement in CBC. Some felt that parents were not sufficiently taking up their expected role in supporting children's learning, which made it difficult to achieve some learning objectives. However, teachers also attributed limited parental involvement to factors beyond parents' willingness to participate, particularly inadequate sensitization about CBC and household resource constraints such as access to digital resources. For instance, without adequate sensitization on the financial requirements to procure resources for hands-on activities like cooking, parents were often suspicious that teachers were extorting them.

R: From the region where we are right now, I don't think the parents are engaging with their students because teachers are saying, "Go and search for this on your parents' phones or laptops", and here it is very difficult to find parents with a smartphone. When they come back, a quarter of the class has done it, so we just use what the quarter of the class has done as an example. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

R: They are not participating fully. They are leaving the work to the teachers and learners. CBC is for everyone; the parents, learners, and teachers, but when you say the learner is left to the teacher, then it is difficult to achieve what you want, the goal or the objective. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: The major challenge here is sensitization of parents. These parents are not fully aware of CBC. You know, we have resources that parents have to provide for learners for learning to take place. They may think that we are just sourcing money from them...I had this challenge last term. We had a practical from KNEC (Kenya National Examination Council), which was requesting that we prepare stewed meat. So, where will I get meat? I had to group these learners so that they contribute KES 20 to 30, so that we could facilitate that lesson. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

These accounts illustrate that the barriers to parental involvement could manifest differently depending on context. The Murang'a accounts, for example, highlighted inadequate sensitization and the financial contributions required for some practical activities, while the Samburu

account additionally showed how limited household access to digital devices could restrict learners' ability to complete home-based activities. Teachers' accounts therefore suggest that parental involvement depended not only on parents' understanding and willingness to participate, but also on whether households had the financial and material capacity to meet the expectations placed on them by CBC.

Misalignment between primary preparedness and JS expectations

Some teachers expressed concern that students transitioning from primary school lacked foundational competencies in literacy and numeracy needed to cope with the academic demands at JS. Teachers reported having to manage the demands of the JS curriculum while simultaneously addressing gaps in foundational learning. In some cases, this created friction with school administrators, who teachers felt attributed poor learner performance to their teaching without sufficiently considering learners' prior preparedness.

R: ...the friction (with the administration) has been there, and it has been so bad, and also pressure which is unrealistic.... whereby somebody doesn't want to know why maybe you have not been able to achieve the target. But you realize the learners you have been given are so weak, and some may not even be having the basics that they should have from primary. We don't know where the gap came from, and remember in primary, they still do the multiple choices. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

Teachers therefore perceived a mismatch between the competencies assumed by the JS curriculum and those possessed by some learners entering JS, increasing the difficulty of delivering grade-level content and meeting expected performance targets.

Heavy curriculum workload

Teachers expressed varied opinions about workload, with experiences depending on the learning area, number of learners, teacher capacity, and staffing levels. Agriculture and Nutrition was cited as particularly demanding following curriculum rationalization because teachers had to consult separate Agriculture and Home Science textbooks in the absence of a textbook covering the combined learning area. Integrated Science was also described as demanding because of its broad content, practical requirements, and teachers' need to research unfamiliar topics before teaching them.

R: The workload for Agriculture and Nutrition is high.

The reason being that after it became Agriculture and Nutrition, we don't have a textbook that has combined them...I will be forced to use an agriculture textbook, then I go to a home science textbook, while using the curriculum design to guide me...it is hard. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: ...the content is very broad, and it also requires a lot of experiments... You have to do a lot of research on them in order to understand. (IDI, Teacher, Samburu)

Workload was therefore not experienced simply in terms of the number of lessons taught. It also reflected the preparation required to teach unfamiliar or combined learning areas, search for appropriate teaching materials, and facilitate practical activities.

Teacher shortages further intensified the workload, with available teachers having to take additional lessons and teach learning areas outside their specialization.

R: We don't have enough manpower in some subjects like Agriculture and Nutrition... teachers are being assigned more subjects to teach, even the subjects that you are not specialized in. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

Teachers reported that heavy workloads affected both their wellbeing and their capacity to teach effectively. They described stress, fatigue, loss of sleep and, in some accounts, depression. Importantly, teachers linked these experiences not only to their personal wellbeing but also to the quality of support they could provide to learners.

R: You become stressed when you remember that you are going to handle that thing ... you become stressed, and fatigued. Even when you sleep, you get more tired because you can't get enough sleep thinking about what is waiting for you. (IDI, Teacher, Murang'a)

R: It is draining even health-wise... teachers are really stressed... Some teachers have even battled depression. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

R: When you have to over-stretch the brain combined with personal issues, then you will not be able to deliver adequately... You will only work with the demand of the curriculum, but not to assist the learner. (IDI, Teacher, Nairobi)

DISCUSSION

This study sought to generate evidence on teachers' experiences in supporting the implementation of the

competency-based curriculum at the JS level by highlighting what was working well, the challenges faced, and the coping strategies employed. The findings revealed an important tension in teachers' experiences of CBC implementation. While teachers generally understood and valued CBC's holistic focus on nurturing learners' talents and competencies and its pedagogical shift towards learner-centered and practical learning, their ability to translate these principles into classroom practice was constrained by inadequate teacher professional development, teacher shortages, limited teaching and learning resources, gaps in learner preparedness, and heavy workload. Teachers consequently adapted their practice in different ways, including relying on peers and online resources and, in some instances, reverting to more teacher-centered approaches. These findings suggest that teachers' understanding and appreciation of curriculum reform do not necessarily translate into effective classroom enactment when the conditions required to support implementation are inadequate.

Holistic learning and pedagogical shift

Teachers' appreciation of CBC's focus on nurturing learners' strengths, talents, and competencies signified an important pedagogical and cultural shift from the exam-oriented 8-4-4 system. Their accounts indicated a positive orientation towards a more holistic and learner-centered curriculum, where education was perceived as preparing learners for life rather than examinations alone. This aligns with the mission of Kenya's basic education curriculum of "nurturing every learner's potential" (KICD, 2019) and with findings from other competency-based reforms in the region, where CBC has been associated with enhanced learner engagement, real-life application of skills, and greater relevance of learning to contemporary life and work (Ayebi-Arthur et al., 2020; Kabombwe and Mulenga, 2019). Importantly, however, teachers' appreciation of these principles did not necessarily mean that they were consistently able to realize them in practice.

CBC introduces a significant pedagogical shift towards student-centered learning, facilitation rather than lecturing, and the nurturing of competencies (Cheptoo, 2020). Teachers' accounts showed that they understood this shift and valued approaches such as group work, inquiry-based learning, practical activities, and the use of digital resources. They also perceived competencies such as communication and collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking as emerging through activities such as group work and projects. However, the findings also showed that teachers sometimes modified these approaches or reverted to more teacher-centered practices when confronted with unfamiliar or complex content, gaps in learner preparedness, limited resources, and pressure to complete the curriculum. This suggests that the persistence of teacher-centered practices should not

necessarily be interpreted as teachers rejecting or failing to understand CBC pedagogy. Rather, in some instances, these practices represented adaptations to the practical constraints they encountered in implementing it. Such adaptation is consistent with curriculum implementation research showing that teachers do not necessarily enact prescribed curricula exactly as written but may extend, revise, replace, or omit aspects of the curriculum as they translate it into classroom practice (Bümen and Holmqvist, 2022).

Teacher professional development

One important condition shaping teachers' capacity to enact these pedagogical expectations was their professional preparation. Many teachers felt inadequately prepared to teach unfamiliar or newly combined learning areas because their initial professional training had been aligned with the 8-4-4 curriculum. In response, they adopted various coping strategies, including using online resources to familiarize themselves with unfamiliar content, seeking support from colleagues, and learning new content while teaching it. While peer support provided an important source of professional assistance, its value may depend on the focus of the collaboration. Lowell et al. (2024) found that teacher collaboration could support or inhibit learning during curriculum implementation depending on what teachers focused on in their collaborative work, with collaboration centred on understanding the new instructional approach being more supportive of reform-oriented practice than collaboration grounded primarily in established practices. In some instances, teachers reported covering unfamiliar content superficially or reverting to more teacher-centered approaches. Importantly, these practices did not necessarily reflect a rejection of CBC's learner-centered pedagogy. Rather, teachers' accounts suggest that they sometimes adapted their teaching practices when their existing preparation, knowledge of unfamiliar content, learner preparedness, and pressure to cover the curriculum made the recommended approaches difficult to implement. Similar tensions between teachers' support for competency-based approaches and their capacity to enact them have been reported elsewhere, with inadequate teacher preparation and difficulties implementing new pedagogical expectations constraining classroom practice (Byusa et al., 2020; Kim, 2021; Mulenga and Ng'andu, 2022).

The frequency and quality of retooling further shaped teachers' preparedness. Although some teachers valued the retooling they had received, they considered it insufficient to prepare them for the changing content and pedagogical demands of CBC. Of particular concern was the reported inconsistency between how teachers were expected to teach and how some TPD was delivered. Trainers sometimes relied on note-giving and other

approaches associated with the 8-4-4 system rather than modelling the hands-on and learner-centered methods expected under CBC. This suggests that TPD needs to provide teachers not only with knowledge about CBC but also opportunities to experience, practice, and receive feedback on the pedagogical approaches they are expected to use. Kelley et al. (2020), for example, emphasize the value of sufficient time for micro-teaching, engagement with training materials, adaptation, and feedback on teaching performance. Such opportunities may also strengthen teachers' confidence in applying unfamiliar pedagogical approaches. Similarly, teacher in considered one-off professional learning insufficient and called for sustained, subject-specific support for integrating competencies into teaching (Armah et al., 2026).

Teachers' capacity to implement CBC was also shaped by conditions beyond TPD itself. Teacher shortages resulted in some teachers handling multiple grades or learning areas outside their specialization, increasing both the knowledge they needed to acquire and the preparation required to teach effectively. Curriculum rationalization further introduced newly combined learning areas for which some teachers had not been adequately prepared, while delayed communication and the mismatch between revised curriculum designs and available textbooks compounded these difficulties. Teacher capacity should therefore not be understood solely as an individual teacher attribute or a problem that can be addressed through one-off retooling. Rather, the findings indicate that it was shaped by the interaction between professional preparation and wider implementation conditions, including staffing, curriculum communication, instructional materials, and institutional support. This reinforces calls for sustained TPD alongside adequate staffing, timely communication of curriculum changes, and school-level support for teachers implementing curriculum reforms (Chepkonga, 2023; Muchira et al., 2023).

Transition and preparedness challenges

Another challenge concerned the preparedness of learners transitioning from primary to JS. Teachers reported that some learners entered JS without the foundational literacy and numeracy competencies they expected them to have acquired at the primary level. This created a mismatch between the competencies assumed at JS and those demonstrated by some incoming learners, requiring teachers to address foundational learning gaps while simultaneously delivering the JS curriculum. The challenge therefore extended beyond learners' preparedness, as it affected teachers' ability to implement the curriculum at the expected level and pace. Similar concerns about alignment and progression across levels have been identified as important to the implementation of competency-based curricula (Nsengimana et al., 2023).

The finding also resonates with the broader challenge of learning poverty, whereby learners progress through education without acquiring foundational literacy and numeracy skills needed for subsequent learning (Azevedo, 2020; Usawa Agenda, 2026).

These findings highlight the importance of viewing CBC implementation as a progression across levels of education rather than focusing on JS in isolation. Competency-based learning assumes that learners progressively develop and build upon competencies acquired at earlier levels. Where foundational competencies remain weak, JS teachers face the dual task of addressing earlier learning gaps while supporting learners to acquire the competencies expected at their current level. This may increase instructional demands on teachers and reduce the time available to cover the JS curriculum. Strengthening alignment across education levels therefore requires mechanisms for identifying foundational learning gaps during transition and providing appropriate support to learners who have not yet acquired the expected competencies. Assessments that identify learners' mastery of foundational competencies and areas requiring additional support could help teachers respond to these differences as they transition between levels (Gulled, 2023).

Inadequate teaching and learning resources

Inadequate teaching and learning resources constrained teachers' ability to translate CBC's emphasis on practical and learner-centered learning into classroom practice. In Integrated Science, for example, insufficient equipment limited opportunities for learners to engage in the hands-on experiments expected under the curriculum. Resource constraints were also linked to curriculum rationalization: textbooks corresponding to the newly combined learning areas were not immediately available, requiring teachers to work across older textbooks or source missing content from the internet. Thus, resource inadequacy affected not only the availability of materials but also teachers' capacity to enact the intended pedagogy and deliver newly rationalized content. These findings are consistent with regional evidence showing that inadequate infrastructure and learning materials, particularly for practical and digital subjects, constrain the implementation of competency-based curricula (Arthur and Obeng, 2023; Changwe and Mulenga, 2020).

Although resource constraints were reported across the three counties, the cross-case findings showed that the specific resources available or difficult to access could vary according to context. Teachers' accounts from Nairobi illustrated that urban settings could facilitate access to electricity and digital resources while making some natural materials required for practical activities difficult to obtain. In Samburu, teachers highlighted limited access to electricity and digital devices and questioned the

appropriateness of applying similar resource expectations across geographically different settings. These findings suggest that effective implementation requires attention not only to the quantity of resources provided but also to their relevance and accessibility within different school contexts. A uniform approach to resource provision may therefore be insufficient where the practical requirements of the curriculum interact differently with local infrastructure and resource availability.

School ownership introduced another dimension to resource provision. While resource constraints were not exclusive to either public or private schools, some private-school teachers reported less access to government-provided materials and greater reliance on school management and parents for material support. This suggests that the institutional arrangements through which resources reach schools may shape teachers' capacity to implement CBC, even where teachers across school types face similar pedagogical expectations. The finding therefore draws attention to whether the resources required to implement a national curriculum are accessible to learners across different school contexts, including private schools.

The timing of resource provision was also important. Teachers' experiences following curriculum rationalization showed that changes in curriculum content were not always synchronized with the availability of corresponding textbooks and other instructional materials. This meant that teachers were expected to implement revised learning areas while simultaneously identifying or assembling the resources required to teach them. Resource inadequacy should therefore not be understood solely as a school-level shortage; it may also reflect gaps in the coordination and sequencing of curriculum reform. Teachers also emphasized the need for strengthened communication channels to ensure that they are promptly informed of curriculum changes and adequately prepared to implement them. This is consistent with evidence that effective communication can promote openness and positive attitudes towards curriculum reforms (Gouédard et al., 2020). Aligning curriculum revisions with teacher preparation, timely communication, and the production and distribution of corresponding instructional materials is therefore important for translating policy changes into classroom practice.

Parental involvement

Teachers' accounts further showed that effective CBC implementation depended partly on support and resources beyond the school. While some teachers attributed limited parental involvement to inadequate understanding of their expected role in CBC, others highlighted material and financial constraints that limited parents' ability to support learning activities. For example, limited household access to smartphones and other digital devices constrained

some learners' ability to undertake home-based searches, while practical activities sometimes required parents to contribute financially towards materials. These findings suggest that parental involvement in CBC cannot be understood solely in terms of parents' willingness to participate; it is also shaped by their understanding of the curriculum and their capacity to provide the resources expected for some learning activities.

This has implications for the implementation of a curriculum that emphasizes practical, inquiry-based, and digitally supported learning. Where learning activities depend on resources provided by households, differences in families' financial and material circumstances may result in unequal opportunities for learners to participate in the intended learning experiences. Strengthening parental sensitization is therefore important for clarifying parents' roles and the rationale for their involvement, but sensitization alone may be insufficient where participation depends on resources that some households cannot readily provide. Implementation strategies should consequently consider how schools can support resource-dependent learning activities without placing unrealistic demands on learners and their families.

Heavy workload and mental health

Teachers' experiences showed that workload under CBC was shaped by more than the number of lessons they taught. Teacher shortages resulted in some teachers handling multiple grades and learning areas, including subjects outside their areas of specialization, while unfamiliar and newly combined learning areas required additional preparation and content familiarization. Practical learning activities also required teachers to identify and prepare materials, while gaps in available textbooks led some to search for additional content from other sources. Workload was therefore interconnected with other implementation challenges, particularly teacher shortages, inadequate preparation, curriculum changes, and limited teaching and learning resources. These interacting demands reduced the time and capacity teachers had to provide the individualized learner support expected under CBC.

The cumulative demands of implementing CBC also had implications for teachers' well-being. Teachers described fatigue, stress, loss of sleep and, in some accounts, declining motivation and mental health concerns as they attempted to manage increased preparation and instructional demands. These experiences support Gewirtz and Cribb's (2020) argument that reforms requiring substantial emotional and cognitive labour from teachers need to be accompanied by corresponding institutional and psychosocial support. Teacher well-being should therefore be considered an important condition for sustaining curriculum reform rather than an issue separate from implementation. Where teachers are continually

required to compensate for staffing shortages, unfamiliar content, inadequate resources, and other implementation gaps through additional effort, the sustainability of classroom implementation may be compromised. Addressing workload consequently requires attention not only to individual teacher well-being but also to the staffing, preparation, resource, and institutional conditions that generate excessive demands on teachers.

Understanding CBC enactment through a diffusion of innovations lens

The findings can be further understood through Diffusion of Innovations Theory, which conceptualizes diffusion as a process through which an innovation is communicated over time among members of a social system (Rogers, 2003; Rogers et al., 2014). Importantly, diffusion extends beyond becoming aware of or developing favourable attitudes towards an innovation to decisions about its adoption and its subsequent implementation. This distinction is evident in the present study. Teachers generally understood and valued CBC's emphasis on holistic development, learner-centred pedagogy, practical learning, and competency development. However, their positive orientation towards the reform did not necessarily translate into the capacity to enact these principles consistently in classroom practice. The findings therefore suggest that understanding or accepting a curriculum innovation should not be equated with its successful implementation.

CBC implementation also required teachers to change established professional practices. Rogers et al. (2014) illustrate that adopting an innovation may involve relinquishing some previously established practices. This was evident in teachers' accounts of having to move away from pedagogical approaches associated with the 8-4-4 curriculum and assume more facilitative roles under CBC. Yet this transition was not straightforward. When teachers encountered unfamiliar content, insufficient preparation, gaps in learner preparedness, limited resources, or pressure to complete the curriculum, some modified recommended approaches or reverted to more teacher-centred practices. Viewed through DOI, such practices need not necessarily signify rejection of CBC. Rather, they illustrate how enactment of an innovation may be negotiated as adopters attempt to reconcile new expectations with established practices and the conditions in which they work.

The findings also reinforce the social character of diffusion. Rogers et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of interpersonal networks in shaping how innovations are understood and acted upon, with peers playing an important role in influencing adoption and implementation. Teachers in this study similarly drew on colleagues for assistance with unfamiliar content and supplemented formal professional development through informal

professional and online sources. Such practices suggest that CBC implementation occurred not only through formal dissemination and retooling but also through interactions within teachers' professional networks. Strengthening implementation may therefore require greater attention to sustained peer learning and school-based communities of practice alongside formal teacher professional development.

At the same time, the findings illustrate an important limitation of viewing curriculum implementation primarily through the characteristics or decisions of individual adopters. Rogers et al. (2014) caution that traditional diffusion research has tended to emphasize individual adoption while giving insufficient attention to organizational and community-level processes. In this study, teachers' capacity to enact CBC was shaped by conditions extending beyond individual knowledge or willingness, including staffing levels, subject specialization, availability of instructional materials, curriculum communication, school leadership, learner preparedness, and household resources. The variation observed across school and county contexts further demonstrates how common curriculum expectations interacted with different local implementation conditions. This contextual dimension is consistent with Christopher and Jones (2025) comparative review of CBC in Rwanda and Zimbabwe, which identified differences in implementation contexts and drew attention to the alignment between intended curriculum expectations and their actual enactment. Their analysis underscores that competency-based reforms are implemented within educational and social contexts that can shape how intended practices are realized. In the present study, the predominance of similarities suggests that many of the challenges identified were not confined to a particular county or school ownership category, while the more limited contextual variations show that common curriculum expectations can interact differently with local implementation conditions.

This interpretation also helps guard against what diffusion scholarship describes as a pro-innovation bias, where there is an assumption that an innovation is inherently desirable and therefore ought to be adopted readily (Rogers et al., 2014). Applied uncritically, such a perspective could frame departures from prescribed CBC practices primarily as teacher resistance or inadequate commitment. The present findings provide a more nuanced explanation, showing that teachers often supported the reform while adapting its implementation in response to practical constraints. The study therefore contributes to understanding CBC implementation by distinguishing teachers' acceptance of the curriculum innovation from their capacity to enact it and by showing that enactment emerges through the interaction of teacher agency, professional networks, and wider institutional, material, learner, and household conditions. Strengthening CBC implementation consequently requires attention not

only to teachers' understanding of and support for the reform but also to the conditions that enable its intended practices to become workable in everyday classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of distinguishing teachers' understanding and appreciation of curriculum reform from their capacity to enact its principles under everyday classroom conditions. Teachers generally valued CBC's emphasis on holistic development, practical and learner-centered learning, and the nurturing of diverse competencies and talents. However, their ability to translate these principles into practice was shaped by interconnected implementation conditions, including teacher preparation and staffing, availability of teaching and learning resources, learner preparedness, communication of curriculum changes, workload, and parental support. Teachers consequently adapted implementation as they negotiated the expectations of the reform alongside existing professional, institutional, material, learner, and household conditions.

Strengthening CBC implementation at the JS level therefore requires more than building teachers' understanding of and support for the reform. It requires sustained professional development, adequate staffing and context-responsive resource provision, timely communication and coordination of curriculum changes, support for learners entering JS with foundational learning gaps, manageable teacher workloads, and approaches to parental involvement that recognize differences in household resources. Addressing these interconnected conditions is important for enabling teachers to translate the principles of CBC into classroom practices through which the intended benefits of the reform can be realized.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The findings should be interpreted in light of the study's scope and limitations. The study draws on the experiences of 15 teachers purposively selected from Junior Schools in three counties and is therefore not intended to be statistically representative of teachers implementing CBC across Kenya. However, including teachers across different counties, school ownership categories, and subject areas provided variation in implementation contexts and enabled examination of both shared and context-specific experiences. As the study focused on teachers' experiences, the findings are based on their self-reported accounts. They should not be interpreted as an independent assessment of classroom practice or fidelity of CBC implementation. Finally, this paper focuses specifically on teachers' perspectives and therefore does not capture how the implementation experiences identified may be understood by other actors involved in CBC

implementation. Further research across a wider range of contexts and using complementary sources of evidence could build on these findings.

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