

Teacher's Role in Education Reform: The Case of the Competency Based Curriculum in Kenya

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Abstract

The competency based curriculum (CBC) has become a focus of educational reform in Kenya in recent years. Teachers are expected to play an important role in the reform. Drawing from the sociocultural approach to educational reform, this study examined how the teacher's role in the CBC reform process was conceptualized and expressed in extant literature. One overarching question guided the study: How is teacher participation in CBC reform characterized in the reviewed texts? Over half of the reviewed articles indicated the view of teachers solely as implementers of the CBC. They emphasized inadequacies in teacher training, physical infrastructure, and teaching resources, as well as implementing the curriculum as received. Fewer of the reviewed articles centered teachers' agency or involvement in reform beyond the classroom. This paper urges policy makers and researchers to pay attention to ways that teachers could have more agency and serve as substantive partners in CBC reform.

Key words: Competency-based curriculum, educational reform; teacher's role; curriculum implementation, educational change; Kenya

1. Introduction

There has been an increased focus on educational reform in recent years in Kenya. The Competency based curriculum (CBC) became a focus of national conversation following recommendations in the 2012 report by the *Taskforce on the Realignment of the Education Sector to the 2010 Constitution*. The Report recommended a new structure of education and a competencies-focused curriculum. It informed the Kenya government's Sessional Paper No. 2 of 2015 on *Reforming Education and Training in Kenya*, a policy document that articulated Kenya's version of competency based curriculum (RoK, 2017). In 2018, the government supported the CBC pilot program for pre-primary 1 to grade 3 (Kaviti 2018). The CBC was rolled out for these grades in January 2019. The policy to guide the new curriculum was launched in May 2019 amid criticism that the launch should have preceded the rollout, not the other way around. The CBC will be completely phased in when the first CBC grade 3 students complete senior secondary in 2028. CBC reform, especially its implementation, has dominated public discourse in Kenya and is well represented in a growing body of scholarship.

Scholarship on Kenya's CBC acknowledges that teachers play an important role in education reform (Katam, 2020; Koskei & Chepchumba, 2020; Momanyi & Rop, 2019; Muasya & Waweru, 2019; Mwita et al., 2022; Rupia, 2022; Owidi & Lyanda, 2023). This sentiment is echoed in the broader education reform literature, in which teachers are acknowledged as crucial stakeholders in educational change (Datnow, 2020; Dozier, 2009; Giudici, 2021; Levinson et al., 2013; Shen et al., 2010). Datnow stated that "unequivocally, teachers are central to educational

change.” Often in education reforms, however, as Levinson et al. (2013) noted with regard to Mexico’s education reform efforts, “teacher professionalism is placed at the heart of reform but the nature of such professionalism, and how it is exercised, remains ambiguous” (p. 2). Vähäsantanen (2015) specified that teacher professional agency amid change can be understood in three ways: as opportunities to influence their work, including “influencing the contents and design and organization of educational change”; as making choices and decisions about their involvement in reforms; and their perceptions of self as professional actors in participating in reforms (p.2).

In situations where the teacher’s role in educational change is ambiguous, a technicist model of teacher participation becomes the default. In this model, teachers are relegated to “executor of scripted curriculum” (Levinson et al., 2013), implementing reforms in the classroom as received, with limited expectation of any agency beyond this role. The perception of the teacher as receiver and implementer of educational reform is captured well in the “recipient” role, which Levinson and colleagues (2013) contrasted with the more empowered roles of “agent” and “partner.” This characterization of roles, as discussed later in this paper, offers a useful framework for understanding how teachers participate in the CBC reform process.

In the Kenyan context, an increasing number of studies have examined teacher involvement with CBC reform, emphasizing the new skills and resources they need for implementing it in the classroom. However, there is limited discussion on *how* teachers and other stakeholders perceive their role in the CBC reform process. This paper examines how the teacher’s role in the CBC reform process is conceptualized and expressed in the reviewed literature. The paper draws evidence from the literature to address the overarching question: How is teacher participation in CBC implementation characterized in the reviewed texts? The findings from this study inform recommendations for substantive engagement of teachers in the CBC, a reform that has been touted as constituting a paradigm shift in the way Kenya has historically conducted educational reform.

2.1. Contextualizing CBC Within the History of Education Reform in Kenya

Kenya has seen two significant curricular reforms since independence in 1963, each popularly known by the number of years students spend at each level: 8-4-4 and 2-6-6-3. The 8-4-4 system was implemented in 1985; students spent eight years at primary, four years at secondary, and four years at tertiary level. It replaced the British-style 7-4-2-3 system (seven years of primary, four years of Ordinary Secondary School level, two years of Advanced Secondary School level, and three years of tertiary education) inherited at independence. The 7-4-2-3 system was criticized for being elitist and unresponsive to the lived realities and needs of the majority of Kenyans (Bunyi, 2013; Ogutu, 2017). The 8-4-4 system, which was seen as an antidote to elitism and alienation, emphasized technical and vocational subjects, presumably aimed at cultivating self-sufficiency in students. That curriculum was expected to equip students with skills geared toward self-reliance and alignment with the workplace. The 8-4-4 system was reviewed severally, and in 2003 technical subjects were dropped from the curriculum. Soon the system was also faulted for its politicization, poor implementation, obsession with content coverage and rote memorization of knowledge, and producing graduates unable to fit into the marketplace (Bunyi, 2013; Muricho & Chang’ach, 2013).

The 8-4-4 system was replaced by the 2-6-6-3 system, which was unveiled in 2017 and has a focus on developing “engaged, empowered, and ethical citizens” of the 21st century through exposure to competency-based curriculum (Aradi, 2019; KICD, 2016;). In the new system, students are expected to complete two years of pre-primary and three years of lower primary education (together known as Early Years Education), followed by three years of upper primary, three years of lower secondary, three years of senior school, and three years of tertiary education. At the senior school, students would be sorted into one of three pathways based on their talents and interests:

social sciences; arts and sport science; science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). They may have the opportunity to pursue these interests further at the tertiary level. As mentioned above, the 2-6-6-3 system would adopt the new curriculum.

Several major factors have influenced education policy in the recent past and paved the way for the CBC reform. Vision 2030, a long-term national development blueprint developed in 2007, contains a detailed articulation of Kenya's national goals, including educational goals. In this blueprint, education is seen as vital for the achievement of broader aims such as national unity and patriotism, individual development and self-fulfillment, national development (social, economic, and industrial), social equality and responsibility, respect for Kenya's rich and varied cultures, positive attitudes toward good health and environment protection, and international consciousness (RoK, 2012b). Kenya's Constitution 2010 also influences education policy by articulating the country's aspirations, including integrity, individual rights, and environmental responsibility. International frameworks, such as Education for All, Sustainable Development Goals, and the 21st Century Skills, are another key influence on policy development. *A Policy Framework for Re-aligning Education to the Constitution 2010 and Vision 2030*, released in 2012, brought these influences to bear on curriculum reform (RoK, 2012b, 2018, 2019). Subsequently, Kenya's education policy documents have decidedly emphasized the CBC as a way to organize learning in the specific areas corresponding to national goals, principles articulated in the constitution, and relevant goals of international frameworks.

The CBC is framed in policy documents as a reform that could fulfill all Kenya's aspirations for education. As KICD (2016) noted, "The shift to competency based approach to curriculum and learning is an integrated and holistic understanding of what it is that we want our young people to learn, be able to do and to become" (p. 44). One major aspiration is to "produce citizens equipped with relevant and quality knowledge with national values and social competencies and to equip them with the 21st century skills and competencies in line with Kenya Vision 2030, Kenya Constitution 2010 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" (RoK, 2018, p. v). This is a lot to expect from one curricular reform, and why, as argued in this paper, care must be taken to recognize and appreciate the complexity of the CBC and the important role of teachers in the reform. Some of the complexities of the CBC as an educational reform are related to its global character.

2.2. CBC in a Global Context

CBC is often used interchangeably with other terms such as *competency-based education (CBE)*, *competency-based approach*, *competence-based education*, *outcomes-based education (OBE)*, and *proficiency-based*. Similar to other educational reform initiatives, the CBC traveled to the African continent from the Global North to the African continent. Complexities associated with adoption of ideas from elsewhere are often an area of focus for researchers. South Africa adopted OBE in the 1990s, and curriculum scholarship there is especially notable for its interrogation of the reform's origin and life. Attributing its origins in the Global North (United States, Australia, United Kingdom, New Zealand), South African scholars have examined many of the challenges that resulted in disjunction between OBE policy and practice (Harley & Wedekind, 2004; Molapo & Pillay, 2018; Schmidt, 2017). These challenges include the top-down and politicized nature of the reform; inadequate coordination and management; insufficient resources (personnel and finance); inadequate teacher development; philosophical misalignment with the country's democratic ideals; resistance from a system that is already steeped in a national high-stakes metric assessment; and curriculum and assessment descriptors that are often vague, ambiguous, difficult to measure, and low in academic content. Some South African scholars have gone further to posit that the reform

was merely “policy positioning and symbolism [and] was never meant to be implemented” (Schmidt, 2017).

Other African countries, such as Tanzania, Nigeria, and Cameroon, have adopted CBC-related reforms, and similar challenges have been identified (Diffang, 2019; Kafyulilo et al., 2012). Countries, such as Rwanda and Kenya, have recently joined the bandwagon. What the literature across national contexts in Africa suggests is that *how* CBC implementation is done can substantially impede its successful adoption and institutionalization. In Kenya, as previously mentioned, the CBC found its way there following the contested recommendations of the 2012 Task Force and subsequent policy statements. The CBC was hailed for its promise of a focus on student learning through learner-centered pedagogy; emphasis on transparency of educational experiences; and measurability of learning outcomes or competencies that departs from the current overreliance on high-stakes testing (RoK, 2012a).

On paper, Kenya’s version of the CBC reflects the basic premises, which are articulated across the countries that have adopted the CBC and associated models. It is also framed around the 21st Century Skills, which include learning and innovation skills (such as critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration); information, media, and technology skills; and life and career skills (such as flexibility, adaptability, initiative, self-direction) (RoK, 2016). Echoing these premises and competencies, the National Curriculum Policy notes that establishing the CBC in Kenya calls for the development of appropriate structures, curriculum frameworks/designs/support materials, standards and indicators of competencies at each level, mechanisms for inclusion, and effective channels to communicate about the reform (RoK, 2018, p. 8).

As defined in Kenya’s policy documents, the CBC so closely reflects the global trend that questions have been raised about its sensitivity to local contexts (Ajuoga & Keta, 2021; Ruth & Ramadas, 2019; Sifuna & Obonyo, 2019). With regard to CBC adoption in Kenya, Sifuna and Obonyo noted that,

Whether this is as a result of the operationalization of the outcomes of competence-based education or not, it seems that there is only very little attention to testing the policy-assumptions that competence-based education is a worthy educational innovation which has taken place in many countries as supported by many researchers. (p. 48)

Similar skepticism about the CBC’s adaptability to local contexts has been raised by scholars elsewhere, including Anderson-Levitt (2017), who argued that:

Constructing a reform as “global” or as very widely adopted by other countries is a mechanism for persuading other countries—or one’s own country—to embrace the reform. To make such an argument persuasively can be an exercise, deliberate or not, of “soft power” when the argument is backed by an aura of expertise. Therefore it is always important for would-be reformers to investigate such claims with an appropriate level of skepticism. (p. 48)

Healthy skepticism notwithstanding, there is no doubt CBC reform enjoys immense political will in Kenya. The reform also suggests a fundamental shift in the way Kenyans have historically understood and organized education. The complexities of such a paradigm shift are reflected in the growing scholarship on this topic, some of which is discussed below.

2.3. Literature on CBC Reform in Kenya

The growing corpus on this topic has focused on the novelty of the reform, as well as on issues and challenges associated with CBC implementation in Kenya. While the bulk of this work is in the form of dissertations or master’s theses, peer-reviewed publications on the topic have also

increased in recent years. This scholarship hails the CBC as an innovative and much needed direction toward achieving equity and quality in Kenya's educational system (Mackatiani et al., 2023a; Mauki et al., 2020). In examining issues and challenges, many studies have focused on implementation challenges, highlighting issues related to inadequate infrastructure, including classrooms, furniture, textbooks, and needed technology (Muasya & Waweru, 2019; Ngeno et al., 2021b; Waruingi et al., 2022). A handful of studies have examined the role of politics, arguing for the need to decouple politics and education reform (Gichuru et al., 2021; Imana, 2020; Inyega et al., 2021).

Other studies have focused on challenges related to the sensitization of stakeholders, including school administrators and parents (Chepkonga, 2023; Mackatiani et al., 2023a;). An impressive number of studies have focused specifically on teachers, examining:

- i) teacher preparedness, competence, and training (Momanyi & Rop, 2019; Muthanje et al., 2020; Mutua, 2023; Mwita et al., 2022; Ngeno, 2023; Okeyo & Mokuu, 2023);
- ii) pedagogy and assessment (Chepsiror, 2020; Ituma, 2022; Momanyi & Rop, 2019; Murithi & Yoo, 2021);
- iii) teacher attitudes (Katam, 2020; Koros & Achieng, 2023; Ngeno et al., 2021a); and
- iv) teachers' relationships with parents (Amunga et al., 2020).

A small number of studies have highlighted the challenges of CBC implementation by comparing Kenya to other countries (Muchira et al., 2023; Okeyo & Kanake, 2021). Comparative studies have found that challenges related to implementation are pervasive in many countries, especially in the initial stages, underlining the potential of CBC reform in Kenya. Okeyo and Kanake note that "based on related experiences of other countries, the new curriculum has high chances of success" (p. 322). There is no doubt that, judging by representation in the current scholarship, teachers are seen as important stakeholders in CBC reform.

This paper focuses on how the teacher's role in the CBC reform process is conceptualized and expressed in the reviewed literature. Some CBC articles have used metaphorical expressions to convey the centrality of teachers in the reform process. For example, Koskei and Chepchumba (2020) referred to teachers as the "cornerstone" in the CBC reform process, while Akala (2021) referred to them as the "heartbeat of CBC innovation." Other terms used in the literature described teachers as "core implementers" (Owidi et al., 2023), "key agents" (Ajuoga & Keta (2021), and a "linchpin in curriculum implementation" (Kituu et al., 2022). These characterizations are often found in statements in introductory sections; however, they are seldom explained, nor are they used to organize or interpret data. Yet, a review of the extant literature on the CBC in Kenya revealed that there were qualitative differences in the way the teacher's role was expressed. The current study, therefore, examined this scholarship and explored characterizations that emerge from expressions of teacher's role in the reform.

2.4. Teacher's Role in Education Reform

Policy implementation theory and the teacher's role in reform implementation literature inform this study. Gieser (2016) discussed three "waves" of research on policy implementation: the top-down approach, the bottom-up approach, and contemporary sociocultural approaches. He noted that the top-down wave of research prioritizes "authority, hierarchy, and control in the implementation process," while the bottom-up perspective "foreground[s] the role of local actors, immediate contexts, and local conditions." He observed that "the contemporary sociocultural perspective emphasizes that policy-as-mandated and policy-as-implemented may be markedly different things," noting that there are "multiple sociocultural realities that impinge upon the implementation process" (p. 64). The sociocultural perspective, he argued, "makes the assumption

that the implementation process will be powerfully and inevitably shaped by multiple actors who themselves are situated in a diversity of contexts and influenced by myriad concerns” (p. 65).

Sociocultural scholars emphasize that the understandings of the teacher’s role in educational reform must be attentive to teachers as professional individuals—their experiences, emotions, concerns, meaning-making, and decision-making (Datnow, 2020; Fullan, 2015; Hargreaves, 2005; Levinson et al., 2013; Vähäsantanen, 2015). In the sociocultural approach, the teacher’s role is also understood as being “relationally embedded across social circumstances, tools, and people” (Vähäsantanen, 2015, p. 3). That is, the teacher’s role is impacted by social constructs (such as policy), resources (such as physical infrastructure and instructional materials) and other stakeholders (including government, students, parents, and administrators).

Levinson and colleagues (2013), in their excellent examination of the contradictions of teacher participation in Mexican secondary education reform, urge for examinations of the views of the teacher’s role in education reform as expressed by teachers themselves, as well as by other stakeholders. They propose a conceptualization of the teacher’s role as “either agents, recipients, or partners.” They explain:

[We] utilize the term agency to denote “teachers assuming active responsibility for innovation in their own classrooms. Such an emphasis on practical agency conceives of teachers as actively “appropriating” the reform, in effect producing new practices, rather than merely implementing it. . . . By recipients, we mean a situation in which teachers are to receive the reform from the reform planners and proceed to implement it exactly as planned. . . . Finally, our characterization of teachers as partners . . . is the conception of teachers as collaborators in the reform process itself. . . . Partnership views reform as “an ongoing process, which includes substantive participation from both administrative and teaching sectors. (p. 9)

Recipients, agents, and partners are useful descriptions that can deepen our understanding of the teacher’s role in the CBC reform process. The study described below reviewed scholarly articles and distilled views about the teacher’s role in the CBC reform process in Kenya. The characterization of teachers as either agents, recipients, or partners was applied to help organize the reviewed literature with the goal of contributing to the conversation about the need for substantive engagement of teachers in CBC reform.

3. The Study

3.1. Methodology

To explore how the teacher’s role in the CBC reform process was characterized in the scholarship, 48 peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2024 were analyzed. The articles were derived from a broad search of online databases: Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ResearchGate. As a first step, Boolean searches were conducted with combinations of these keywords: *competency-based curriculum, CBC, Kenya, education, reform, teachers*. The searches returned numerous sources. For example, a Google Scholar search using *implementation of CBC AND Kenya AND teachers* yielded 1,690 hits for the period 2017–2024. Articles were screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria, selecting for peer-reviewed articles published in scholarly journals. Reference lists of the selected articles, as well as sources citing them, yielded additional articles. Theses, dissertations, reports, conference papers, and other publications that were not peer-reviewed, as well as articles unrelated to teachers, were omitted from the current analysis. Also excluded were peer-reviewed articles that did not include a focus on teachers and their role in CBC reform.

This author read all 48 articles that were considered relevant to the current study, using spreadsheets to map information about each article, including authorship, title, year of publication, research questions, sample size, data collection and analysis strategies, and findings. It was also noted whether each article was based on a desk study or on primary data. Several readings of the articles allowed for identifying segments of each text that illustrated perceptions or views, and possible examples, of the teacher's role in CBC reform efforts. These were coded using Levinson and colleagues' (2013) characterizations of teachers as recipients, agents, or partners.

3.2. Data Analysis

A wide range of methodologies and theoretical frameworks were used in the articles reviewed for this study. However, all of the articles addressed the issue of teachers and CBC reform. The studies employed a combination of questionnaires, observation checklists, and interview schedules to collect data. There was a healthy mix of quantitative and qualitative studies. A few articles were based on desk study. In coding the articles, attention was paid to articulations about teachers in the research questions, study findings, and discussion sections. Some articles were coded for more than one role depending on the particular study's emphases, which explains why the frequency percentages in Table 1 total to more than 100.

Table 1: Roles and Key Emphases

Category (role)	Frequency (percentage)	Key emphases
Recipient	58	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –adequate training, physical infrastructure, and resources –adequacy and compliance as success
Agent	31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –examine teacher motivations, attitudes, and sensemaking –provide strategic support as voiced by teachers –adaptability of the curriculum by teachers –empowerment as autonomy and collaboration
Partner	14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> –inclusion of teachers in all levels of reform process –social constructs (e.g., policy) impact teachers' work –power considerations (between agency and social constructs)

4. Findings

4.1. Teachers as Recipients

As Table 1 indicates, the recipient role was highly represented (58%) in the reviewed articles, compared to the agent (31%) and partner (14%). Although some articles were coded for more than one role, the articles that characterized teachers as recipients involved detailed discussion in two areas. The first emphasized the professional development opportunities offered to teachers—the what, who, where, and how often. Details were provided about training around lesson plans and schemes of work, content, target competencies, learning outcomes, pedagogy, and assessment. These articles also described who was conducting the professional development; this included government agencies (e.g., KICD), other trained teachers, County Education Officers (CSOs), and principals. Noting whether in-service or preservice contexts, the articles also provided details about training workshops and regular supervision procedures, as well as their duration and frequency. The second area of emphasis in the articles coded “recipient” was inadequate physical buildings,

personnel, and instructional materials—emphasizing existing gaps and the ways those inadequacies endanger the success of CBC reform.

Articles coded for this role contained many recommendations that urged commitments from the government, Teachers Service Commission, and related agencies to ensure adequate training and provision of needed physical infrastructure and learning resources. The authors associated the presence of these elements with successful implementation of the CBC. Some studies went to great lengths to establish positive correlations between adequacy of these factors and successful CBC implementation. For example, Isoboke and colleagues (2021) communicated their findings regarding teacher training thusly:

[The] majority of the pre-primary school teachers in public pre-primary schools had not received any training on how to implement the curriculum. The few who had been trained still lacked adequate knowledge and skills in handling various areas meant to be integrated in the curriculum. Therefore, it can be resolved that the teachers were not fully prepared to implement the curriculum, which calls for more training opportunities. (p. 51)

In this and many of the reviewed articles in the recipient characterization, study findings inevitably reported gaps that prevented teachers from implementing CBC as received from government agencies.

While there was an acknowledgement in the articles that a combination of factors—including training, physical facilities, instructional and assessment materials, and school leadership—impact the implementation of the CBC, the assumption was that the CBC should be faithfully implemented as handed down. For example, some studies saw constant monitoring and supervision of teachers by principals, quality assurance officers, and others to determine how well they were adhering to the script as evidence of successful implementation of the CBC. The emphasis in these articles was on this adherence rather than on ways that the teachers make sense of and appropriate (Levinson et al., 2013) the CBC as agents.

4.2. Teachers as Agents

The studies coded for agent went beyond acknowledging the need for support to alleviate the challenges highlighted in the recipient role and focus on teacher agency. Those studies prioritized examinations of teachers' motivations, attitudes, sensemaking, adaptability, and autonomy. They presented teachers as professionals who made conscious decisions to interact with the CBC. Teachers' motivation in these articles was associated with their commitment to student learning. Koros and Achieng (2023), for example, found that teachers were “motivated to implement the CBC because it gives the learners opportunities to develop independence and freedom of expression due to the friendly learning environment that it creates” (p. 12).

A number of examined teachers' attitudes, revealing a mix of positive and negative attitudes toward the CBC—although the majority were negative. For instance, Ngeno and colleagues (2021a) explored how teachers' attitudes affected the implementation of the CBC in one county and confirmed that their attitudes mattered and differed based on age, but not on gender. Other studies in the agent characterization focused on the teacher's adaptation of the CBC in the classroom. Adaptation requires teachers taking responsibility for and ownership of the curriculum and creatively acting upon it to suit the learning goals of their students. For example, Owino et al. (2022) reported that teachers who were successful at implementing CBC also had a high mean score on adapting instructional methods.

Another focus of the studies coded for teacher as agent was on empowering strategies for enhancing autonomy and collaboration. For example, Njiru and colleagues (2024a) reported that “conferences, specialized seminars, and collaborative learning communities were the most critical

in building instructors' pedagogical skills and subject knowledge needed for the successful implementation of CBC." Mogere and Mbataru (2023) noted the importance and benefits of collaborative environments and leadership styles in supporting teachers. Commenting on contexts they described as supportive to teachers, they observed that "the school leadership encourages teamwork, there is delegation of duties by the school leadership, and the school leadership encourages teachers to be autonomous in decision-making" (p. 49). Benson and Njuguna (2023) highlighted the positive effects on teacher expertise and attitude when teachers and their supervisors worked collaboratively to enhance student learning. The autonomy and collective efficacy in professional learning communities, such as the ones described in these articles, can help enhance teachers' agency by developing teacher leadership, increasing knowledge-sharing practices, regulating workload, bolstering a sense of self as professional actors, and mitigating negative attitudes toward the reform.

The articles coded for the agent characterization were more likely to transcend the ubiquitous "more training and more resources" recommendations common in the articles coded for the recipient characterization. They instead emphasized the need to listen to teacher concerns while understanding the nexus between teachers and the broader contexts for the CBC reform. Katam (2020), for instance, emphasized the need to understand teachers' hidden concerns and cautioned that "the vitality of curriculum efforts depends on the teacher's acceptance of the reform and how their concerns are addressed, because teachers are expected to put reform ideas into practice" (p. 52). Gichurur (2024) called for "restructuring administrative policies to provide robust support systems for teachers" (p. 1690). This proactive way of viewing teachers' hidden concerns, related resistance, and connections to policy structures is an important characteristic of the teacher as agent characterization, as explained in the Discussion section.

4.3. Teachers as Partners

The notion of teachers as partners is premised on the acknowledgement that teachers should not be mere technicians who implement a curriculum handed down to them; rather, they must exercise their agency as well as have substantive involvement in all aspects of reform, including reform formulation, planning, and evaluation. Vähäsantanen (2015) noted that teachers should influence the content, design, and organization of educational change—and they should be treated as "active participants . . . whose actions and opinions matter" (p. 2). Participation here speaks to inclusivity. Articles coded for this characterization tended to emphasize noninclusion of teachers, as well as the understanding of the teacher's role relationally and paying attention to how power is exercised in CBC educational change.

Some articles highlighted that the lack of substantive inclusion of teachers in the reform process was a significant misstep in CBC reform. Ngeno and colleagues (2021a) concluded that "there is need for teachers to be involved at all levels of curriculum development" (p. 126). Similarly, Owidi and Lyanda (2023), in their meta-analysis of the transition from 8-4-4 to CBC, noted that,

The teacher's role was not clearly defined in the development of Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya. This has resulted in various challenges in its implementation right from the onset. This is because the teachers were only involved during the implementation stage, which is the last step of the curriculum development process (p. 1088).

They urged construction of a "pedagogic discourse in which the teachers as the core implementors [*sic*] of the curriculum [have] a clear understanding of the whole process of development, implementation, evaluation, and challenges expected of the new curriculum." (p. 1094).

Many articles coded for the partner role considered the lack of substantive involvement of teachers in the reform process as a serious threat to sustainability of the CBC reform. For instance, Muchira and colleagues (2023) reported evidence from their comparative study revealing that:

Inadequate involvement of teachers in the curriculum development process impedes effective implementation of a CBC. Thus, it is important to engage teachers throughout the implementation stages, including their participation in technical working groups that examine the gaps in the curriculum to foster improved pedagogical skills and techniques. Teachers also can be involved through government funded action-research to better identify challenges in the implementation process and as sources of recommendations on how to solve the challenges. (p. 70)

Sifuna and Obonyo (2019) presented the “bottom-up” model as an ideal, where teachers among other stakeholders are collaboratively involved in the planning and implementation of education reforms (p. 43).

The limited participation of teachers was attributed to existing policies and related attitudes of the policy makers toward teachers (Ajuoga & Keta, 2021; Kubai, 2023; Mackatiani et al., 2023a; Sifuna & Obonyo, 2019). Regarding policy makers’ attitudes, for example, Ajuoga, & Keta (2021) criticized as unethical utterances by a deputy director of the curriculum development agency in Kenya who seemed to suggest teachers should borrow teaching materials from neighboring schools as a way of silencing teachers’ demands for resources. They summarized the poor perceptions that state agencies have of teachers as “fail[ing] to be creative” and too “lazy to think out of the box” (p. 46). Examinations of the intertwining of teachers’ work and the social structures in which they work are critical for understanding the partnership role of teachers in CBC reform. More studies are needed that examine this nexus.

5. Discussion

The CBC in Kenya, for all intents and purposes, can be described as a top-down education reform. There is ample literature opining that top-down education reform strategies can be useful for the implementation and sustainability of centralized education reforms (Bjork, 2003; Tikkanen et al., 2019). However, as Tikkanen and colleagues note, “top-down reforms tend to have a weak impact on the everyday life of schools because they often fail to enhance ownership over the reform and build aligned understanding of the reform across different levels of the educational system” (p. 547). This paper indicates one such weakness when it comes to the conceptions of the role of teachers in CBC reform in Kenya. In most of the reviewed articles coded recipient, perceptions of the teacher’s role employed what is referred to in this paper as the “unpack and implement” lens. In this conceptualization, the focus is on the received curriculum, and teachers view themselves (and are viewed by others) solely as implementers of the curriculum in the classroom—not as individuals engaging in a moral, intellectual, and transformative practice. Studies emphasizing this role see teachers from deficit and technicist perspectives, emphasizing their lack of training or preparedness, instructional and other resources, and the physical infrastructure needed to do their work—while underplaying their agency.

The “unpack and implement” understanding of the teacher’s role in the CBC reform process can be contrasted to the view of teachers as agents. A focus on agency must start with recognizing teachers as individuals with desires, motivations, beliefs, concerns, attitudes, sense-making, voice, and power to interact creatively with (or thwart) reform. Agency is premised on the belief that, in the words of Katam (2020), “all change origin[ate]s with the individual.” An emphasis on teacher agency can enhance ownership—and hence sustainability of the reform (Tikkanen et al., 2019). Articles coded for “agent” in the current study explored various aspects of teacher agency, including

motivation, attitudes, adaptability, and autonomy, as well as the effect of these aspects on CBC implementation.

Centering agency allowed these articles to present teachers as volitional actors who interact with CBC as professionals. In this role teachers worked creatively with the CBC even when training, physical infrastructure, and resources were inadequate. They adapted the curriculum in response to the needs of their students and worked in learning communities to mitigate some of the negative effects related to the less-than-ideal development, implementation, and evaluation of the CBC. The articles depicted teachers as likely to embrace the CBC when it served their professional needs and well-being, and when their concerns were seen as opportunities to problem-solve. The articles also presented teachers' negative attitudes and resistance as a symptom of the lack of recognition of teacher agency by the government. Giudici (2021) noted that teachers "resist policy change, alter it, or forge new policy on the ground" by exerting influence through strategies such as "voicing experience, subversive enactment, and open resistance" (p. 801). Katam (2020) was among those echoing this view of teacher resistance. She cautioned that policy makers in Kenya should view "teachers' resistance as a positive force" (p. 60). More studies are needed that examine proactive ways of treating teachers' hidden concerns and resistance as important characteristics of their agency. Such studies would highlight proactive strategies—or the lack thereof—to enhance teacher agency and mitigate resistance that could undermine the sustainability of the reform. They would also pay attention to proactive strategies (Tikkanen et al., 2019) for ensuring the well-being of teachers.

Teachers as agents in the reform process should be complemented by regarding teachers as partners. As noted in the Findings section above, teachers as partners characterization was least represented in the reviewed articles. The articles in this category decried the non inclusion of teachers beyond the classroom and began to examine social structures and issues of power that hinder robust participation of teachers in the CBC reform process. An important step in the fight for inclusion that was mentioned in some of the reviewed articles is an acknowledgement that substantive teacher inclusion is political and must be fought for. Some articles noted the struggle for inclusivity through the efforts of teacher unions, especially the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT), but they offered little else in terms of exploring or theorizing teacher inclusion in a context with a long history of disempowering teachers. Other articles mentioned a sociocultural context in which government officials harbor disempowering attitudes toward teachers. There is a need for researchers to move beyond reporting on deficit views of teachers. They could further examine how embedded power in the sociocultural and political structures impedes robust teacher partnership in the CBC reform process. Such a focus is likely to reveal ways to help elevate teachers to become partners in CBC reform. The goal, as Levinson and colleagues (2013) note, is to achieve a robust and substantive—rather than merely symbolic—participation.

The oft-cited case study of Ontario, Canada, can be useful. According to Boyd (2021), past education changes were "disempowering for teachers and ultimately detrimental for students" (p. 40). The government then adopted a "collaborative and problem-solving approach at all three levels of government" (p. 41)—national, provincial, and school; enhanced teacher leadership at all levels; and "took action to rebuild a trusting relationship with [teachers]" (p. 45). Teacher leadership emphasized collaboration with and among teachers. Teacher collaboration, as Hargreaves (2021) noted, "depended as much on how well leaders helped teachers develop collective ownership..., as on where the changes technically come from" (p. 608). He and others have cautioned that empowering teachers in these ways demands a culture shift.

Empowering teachers in Kenya would require, as a first step, improving the working conditions of teachers. As pointed out in many of the articles reviewed for this study, teachers in

Kenya currently face numerous challenges, including heavy workload, low pay, and lack of adequate infrastructure, training, and teaching materials. As urgent as the support needed to address these challenges is, however, a collaborative model would couple this support with cultivating an empowered teacher role in and beyond the classroom. Empowered teachers are likely to function as agents and partners; owning the reform and collaborating on solutions to the current challenges facing the CBC curriculum reform process. Both teachers and policy makers at the ministry level must value this view of collaborative partnership for the needed culture change to take effect. Researchers in Kenya could focus more on examining and theorizing the forms of collaboration experienced by teachers in the CBC reform process in Kenya, while being attentive to broader social structures and power relations. They could ask, for instance, about the dynamics that influence how teachers interact collaboratively with the policy structure.

6. Conclusion

The CBC has been touted as constituting a paradigm shift in the way Kenya has historically conducted its educational reform process. In a rapidly growing Kenyan CBC literature dominated by the “teacher preparedness” and “infrastructural challenges” emphases, discussions about competing perceptions of the role of the teacher in the CBC reform process are underrepresented. This paper has argued that the ways in which teachers and other stakeholders perceive the teacher’s role is critical in educational change. In Kenya, while teachers are acknowledged as critical to the CBC reform process, their role beyond implementing a scripted curriculum remains unclear. The ubiquity of the characterization of recipients and underrepresentation of agents and partners in the conceptualization of the teacher’s role is not unique to Kenya. However, researchers need to expand and deepen examinations of teachers as agents and partners in the CBC reform process in Kenya. Such studies would require a commitment by researchers to integrate a consideration of the dynamics among social structure, culture, and teachers’ experiences in their exploration of the teacher’s role in the CBC reform process. In addition, there is no doubt that while research is important, the reconceptualization of the teacher’s role in CBC reform will require a cultural shift in the way educational reform is approached in Kenya.

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