

Exploring the Role of the Assessed Curriculum in Strengthening STEM Competency-Based Learning in Senior Schools in Siaya County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Curriculum translation and implementation go through several stages, from the intended, all the way to the assessed curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of assessed curriculum in strengthening competency-based learning, as implemented in senior secondary schools in Kenya. The perceptions of teachers and education leaders on assessment of competency-based learning, the context-dependent factors that shape assessment of competency-based learning and the use of assessment feedback to shape competency-based learning design were investigated. This study was based on an interpretivist paradigm that is exploratory taking a qualitative approach. The methods of data collection used included semi-structured interviews and document analysis. The data collected was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that there is a general perception that; assessments should enable students to demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge; there is a lack of clarity on competency-based assessment, and learners not being responsible for their learning but only giving priority to passing rather than competencies. The study also reported that the reporting of feedback in most schools still takes the norm-referenced format, where marks are awarded generally with no specific look at the competencies. The reward system was also based on general ranking with no particular look at competencies. The study recommended the use of a range of assessment tools as suggested, reporting feedback based on different competencies, and then concentrating the point of an award on competencies developed.

Keywords: Curriculum translation, curriculum implementation, assessed curriculum, competency-based learning

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, education curricula globally undergo changes from time to time to meet certain demands and changes in the world. The government of Kenya in 2017 rolled out the 2-6-6-3 system of education to address contemporary and developing concerns to achieve increased efficiency in education through the introduction of Competency Based Education. The aim was to provide learners with opportunities to acquire values, skills, and abilities required for the global economy of the twenty first century. The paradigm shift aimed to equip students with both academic knowledge and practical skills and competencies that are essential for thriving in a dynamic interconnected world. The implementation of senior school focuses on nurturing critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving abilities, with the intention to remove focus on only passing exams.

Curriculum, as defined by Glatthorn & Glatthorn (2012) is the planned interaction of pupils with instructional content, materials, resources, and processes for evaluating the attainment of educational objectives. The process of curriculum implementation involves multiple interconnected levels that mediate translation of education policy into classroom practice. Tekir (2021) lists four different levels of curriculum including, Intended curriculum, which reflects the curriculum policy goals; enacted curriculum, which captures the content and practices learners are subjected to; received curriculum, which relates to learner experiences; and the assessed curriculum, which determines how learning is evaluated. Alignment across these levels is widely recognized as instrumental in strengthening competency-based learning. Alignment as defined by Web (2007) as cited by Tekir

(2021) is the degree to which learner expectations and assessments agree and serve in conjunction with another to guide the system towards learning what they are expected to. On the other hand, the demands of the curriculum are the new ideas that arise, and drive the curriculum change, while translation is the process of unpacking and making meaning to these demands

Within the reform leading to competency-based education, assessment was expected to move beyond norm-referenced examinations toward competency-based approaches that capture learners' demonstrated abilities. Therefore assessed curriculum therefore plays a pivotal role in shaping teaching practices and learner engagement, as it signals what knowledge and skills are valued within the system. Despite the policy shift, evidence suggests that assessment practices often remain examination-oriented, with continued emphasis on scores, ranking, and coverage of syllabus content. Such practices risk undermining the goals of competency-based reform by reinforcing traditional pedagogies and limiting opportunities for formative feedback. As a result, alignment between intended competencies and assessed outcomes becomes fragmented, affecting the enactment of CBE in schools. Consequently, strengthening competency-based education in this study means establishing alignment between the intended curriculum and the outcome of the implemented curriculum.

Existing research on competency-based education in Kenya has largely focused on challenges of competency-based education implementation, and factors influencing the use of competency-based assessment. For example, a study by Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) in an East African context on challenges and opportunities in assessing learner achievements under competency-based education also found that large class sizes where 65% of teachers handle more than 50 learners in their classes. The study argues that this hinders personalized assessments. The study further argues that there exists a pedagogical misalignment where outcome-based framework in educational institutions are not supported by robust tools such as portfolios and rubrics. Another study by Warui (2025) on school related factors influencing use of competency based assessment in preprimary schools in Nyeri county, found that factors such as teacher motivation, school type and availability of resources may influence use of competency based assessment. A further study by Kubai (2023) to identify the challenges facing Competency based assessment Nairobi, Kenya found the slow pace of transition of learners in CBE as a challenge, together with lack of clear educational policies for implementation, lack of validity and reliability of learner scores, and the integrity among teachers.

Despite these studies identifying the challenges and giving recommendations on solutions, one aspect seems ignored which is strengthening competency based education by aligning the assessed curriculum with the intended, enacted, received, and assessed curriculum. These studies pay limited attention to the assessed curriculum as a mediating mechanism through which policy intentions are realized in practice. Assessment practices may not fully align with the intended curriculum, thereby not strengthening competency based learning. This is consistent with the argument of Schulte (2018) in a study on envisioned and enacted practices, that there is a widely known discrepancy between educational policy on the one side, and teaching and learning practices on the other. Within the curriculum continuum, assessment can have significant potential to support and reinforce curriculum reform, and on the other hand it can equally have an enormous potential to distort the intended curriculum (Marope et al., 2018). This implies the existence of scanty empirical exploration of how assessment practices influence the strengthening or weakening of competency-based learning at senior school.

Considering alignment of curriculum levels of translation, existing research reveal that alignment between assessed curriculum and intended curriculum is weaker compared to alignment of other levels. In a study by Tekir (2021) on alignment of the intended, enacted, received and assessed curriculum in EFL pre-service measurement and evaluation education, a number of findings were reported. First, alignment index between intended and enacted curriculum is 0.67. This means 67% of what teacher education intended to teach in their written curriculum matches what they actually taught. Secondly, the alignment between intended curriculum and assessed curriculum if found to be 0.48. This means that there exists a moderate alignment between what the teacher planned to teach and what is tested through the assessment tools. Next is that alignment between received curriculum and assessed curriculum is 0.78 showing a strong alignment. Finally, an alignment index of 0.44 exists between enacted curriculum and assessed curriculum. This points to a stronger communication between

the learner received curriculum and assessed curriculum. While a moderate communication between intended and assessed, between enacted and assessed. Therefore strengthening competency-based education using the assessed curriculum could be argued to mean that a strong communication is established between the assessed curriculum and all the other levels, that is intended, and enacted too.

Similarly, in a study to investigate the alignment of cognitive demands between science syllabus objectives, textbooks, and classroom instructions, Johnson (2023), reports that alignment between the cognitive demands of enacted curriculum and prescribed curriculum was low due to insufficient comprehension and knowledge utilization tasks in lessons. The study further concludes that classroom practice did not align with the intended cognitive demands of science curriculum. While changes in curriculum may not seal all gaps in the education system, more changes in the curriculum will always come up in the process of translation and implementation in an attempt to meet the demands of the different stages. It is in light of this that this study tends to investigate the potential of the assessed curriculum to strengthen competency-based education.

Tekir (2021) has presented two models used to determine curriculum alignment for purposes of strengthening competency-based education. These are, Webb Alignment Model, and Surveys of Enacted Curriculum Model (SEC). The author elaborates that the Webb Alignment Model presents a framework to measure the alignment between the content standards and assessments, while Surveys of Enacted Curriculum Model (SEC) measures alignment among standards, assessments and instruction through a common matrix. SEC model also allows translating the content of each curriculum into specific content matrix across two dimensions, first representing specific content topics, and second dimension representing the respective expectations for learner performance, that is expected cognitive demands. The five categories of cognitive demands according to this model includes recall, procedural skills, application, analysis, and synthesis.

Strengthening competency-based learning requires that teachers conduct an assessment process that directs learners' attention, encourages thinking, promotes real learning and identifies a learner's abilities and talents. However, teachers still end up with difficulty in practicing assessment processes that may not promote real learning beyond what is provided within the texts, and not bringing out a learner's abilities and talents. Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) reports that teachers struggle to design performance tasks, develop rubrics, provide meaningful feedback, and align classroom assessments with curriculum challenges. However Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (2019) provides guidelines on variation of assessment practices and use of a variety of tools to identify learner talents. Schulte (2018) argues that policy implementation at classroom level entails politics of use where contextual factors come into play. It is therefore not clear the assessment practices which teachers carry out to establish competency-based learning, and what drives the teacher to carry out these practices. This motivated this study that sought to explore the assessed curriculum as key to strengthening competency-based learning. The study will focus on perception of teachers and education leaders on competency-based assessment, context dependent factors that shape competency-based assessment, use of assessment feedback.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of assessed curriculum in strengthening competency-based learning, as implemented in senior secondary schools in Kenya. The following were the specific objectives; to investigate the perceptions of teachers and education leaders on assessment of competency-based learning, to investigate the context dependent factors that shape assessment of competency-based learning, and to examine the use of assessment feedback to shape competency-based learning design and pedagogical actions.

Related Studies

Assessment is acknowledged as a fundamental element in the design of any learning activity and has a great impact on the teaching and learning process. Assessment as defined by Mussawy et al. (2021) is a systematic process of obtaining information about learner progress, understanding, skills, and abilities towards the learning goals. The demand of the assessed curriculum in relation to competency-based curriculum is that teacher assessment should be reinforced, and the teacher assessment capacity should be developed (Marope et al., 2018). However a study by Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) reports that teachers struggle to design performance tasks, develop rubrics, provide meaningful feedback and align classroom assessments with curriculum challenges.

These are further compounded with insufficient teacher preparedness in assessment literacy and continued dominance of high stakes national examination. This study therefore explores the perceptions on teacher capacity to carry out a competency-based assessment as intended in the curriculum, policy document, that is not reported in the previous study.

Stakeholder perceptions of assessed curriculum is considered instrumental in strengthening competency-based education. A stakeholder is an individual, group, or organization that has an interest in the assessment process and can affect or be affected by its operations and performance. According to Leap Consultants (2024), they include parents, teachers, students, administrators, community members, and policymakers. Goldstein (2011) defines perception as the process of interpretation of sensory input based on prior knowledge, expectations, and context. This definition is consistent with the concept of top-down processing, where by what individuals already know and believe influences their perception.

One perception held on the competency-based assessment is that a range of assessment tools will be administered. Another perception held is that an assessment is associated with marks and ranking based on performance. As outlined by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (2017), some of the assessment tools include, observation schedules, checklists, rubrics, project work, questionnaires, portfolios, written continuous assessment tests, and progress report cards. Alemayehu et al. (2021), argues in favour of using a variety of assessments, without much concentration on traditional written assessments, the time constrained unseen exams, and emphasizing more on tools that measure the students' abilities to use the material they have learned in live situations. However, in a study by Macheso et al. (2024) to investigate the extent of utilization of Competency-Based Assessment tools and types in grade 6 in selected schools in Kenya, reports that there are tools which are used more than the others. For instance, written tests, oral and aural questions, portfolios, and rubrics are extensively used, while questionnaires, journals, anecdotal records, observation schedules and rating scales, are less extensively used. While the different tools have been designed to align with different levels of curriculum translation and implementation, failure to use some may influence the strength of the competency-based education. This therefore calls for more study on alignments of teacher assessments with competency-based learning.

It is also perceived that with the competency-based education curriculum, teachers understand what developmental progression means and an understanding that progression is neither linear nor age related, but iterative, interactive and dependent on making connections to prior learning and to context (ibid). Lee et al. (2023), argues that students must demonstrate their ability to apply knowledge, generate new insights, and develop essential abilities and attitudes. This means that teachers' assessment capacity is developed on how to design and assess tasks that are valid, reliable, and able to specify clear assessment criteria so that learners understand what they need. Teachers' capacity on how to analyze learner feedback and use insights gained and results to improve their practice well so as to engage more effectively with learners and other educators. However, Warui (2025) in a study on school related factors influencing use of competency based assessment in preparing schools in Nyeri County, Kenya, argues that many teachers still rely on outdated norm-referenced assessments. These assessments do not align with competency-based assessment and may hinder learners from acquiring the necessary competencies. While the study used a descriptive correlational research design that established correlations, the current study used qualitative study based on interpretivist paradigm since it seeks to understand how the assessment practices can be used to strengthen competency based learning. This study seeks to examine aspects of this perception in the context of senior secondary schools that was implemented later when these perceptions were already in existence.

A report by Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (2017) highlights that the perceived demands of the different stages of curriculum translation and implementation have been taken into consideration by mandating Kenya National Examinational Council to lead on reforms on assessment, and develop an assessment framework that will allow teachers provide ongoing feedback to learners. Kenya National Examination Council has also been mandated to conduct training for teachers and school managers on the issues of assessment thus providing a collaborative framework for the teachers to consult on matters pertaining to assessment. However Kubai (2023) in critical review of the challenges facing competency-based assessments in Nairobi, found out that there is a

slow pace of transition of learners in competency-based education. The author also reports a lack of clear educational policies for effective implementation, and lack of validity and reliability of learner scores, as challenges facing CBA. This study used a structured questionnaire thus could not give in-depth information on the challenges. This therefore further prompted this study on alignment between the assessed curriculum and the intended curriculum, thus discussing how the assessed curriculum can be used to strengthen competency-based learning and implemented semi structured interviews to enable collection of in-depth information.

In the process of translation of the curriculum, there are contextual factors that could also influence the translation of the curriculum at the assessment stage. NeuroLaunch (2024) defines context as the surrounding information, circumstances, or environment that gives meaning to something, while context dependent factors are the variables or conditions whose meaning, effect or interpretation changes depending on the surrounding context. One that can be argued to influence the curriculum translation is the assessment policy, both within an institution or from the assessment bodies. As defined by Rob et.al (2020), an assessment policy is an organizational structure of assessments within a course programme, which describes the criteria that are utilized to decide on students' academic progress. The study by Chand et al. (2021) presented findings which revealed that the policy directives often bring unanticipated challenges and have negative consequences on the personal and professional well-being of the teachers, impedes their commitment and enthusiasm. Besides, Pedder (2010) reports a feeling of constraint by many teachers about policy contexts that seem to encourage rushed coverage of curriculum and drilling. This influences the considerations in the construction of assessment tools, carrying out of the assessment, reporting the feedback, and the performance award system. This can be argued to influence the tools, nature and administration of assessment and feedback. The mentioned studies were however not based on strengthening competency-based education. Therefore this study sought to relate the aspects of policy and the influence they have on role of assessments on strengthening competency based education.

Another aspect of context in assessment includes school, classroom context and the larger community. There could therefore be context dependent factors that tend to shape assessment practices under the competency-based assessment. Pedder (2010) argues that a school's self-evaluations and organizational learning is core in shaping practices and policies that promote effectiveness of classroom assessment. This study therefore explored the context dependent factors that shape competency-based assessment, in an attempt to contextualize policy recommendations. However Schulte (2018) argues that policies implementation at classroom level entails the politics of use where contextual factors come into play. It can therefore be argued that it is important to ask teachers ways of coping with developing and using diverse assessment tools and practices in different contexts.

The study uses the "Politics of Use" approach as the theoretical framework for the study. This entails the contextualization of policy during implementation. Teachers may not be practicing the guidelines on competency-based assessment as put in the curriculum framework, but may customize the same to fit into the local context. This may either strengthen or weaken the competency-based learning. Schulte (2018) argues that policies implementation at classroom level entails the "politics of use", where contextual factors also come into play. Therefore, teachers may not be factoring in various aspects of context at all levels to make the implementation run smoothly. However, Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) reports aspects of systemic barriers where institutional cultures still privilege exam driven evaluations over practical capability building. It is on this basis that this study explored the teachers factoring in the contextual factors in the construction, administration and reporting of assessment feedback.

Curriculum reform to the Competency-based Education requires proper translation at each stage of implementation so that at the last stage of assessment, what is assessed should be aligned to what was intended. The quality with which the translation of the assessed curriculum is done is investigated in this study along three areas of; perceptions of teachers, the context dependent factors, and handling and use of assessment feedback. The previous studies are not in the context of senior secondary schools, and are not specific to assessment. The previous studies mostly focused on challenges of competency based education and assessment, and further do not relate the implementation of competency-based assessment to strengthening the competency-based learning, a gap which this study seeks to fill.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study is based on the interpretivist paradigm, in which the reality of practicing competency-based assessment is to be understood and interpreted. The study is exploratory in nature based on a qualitative study approach. Qualitative approach is commonly used in education and enables for flexibility in the data collection process as highlighted by Creswell (2007) and Merriam (2009). The information collected may be false, and since a small sample is involved, the results may not be representative of the general population. Furthermore, the interpretation of data may be biased and judgmental. However, Owen (2014) claims that an interview aims at finding out the peoples' perceptions about an event, occurrence or object. Therefore, my main aim was to seek the interviewee's understanding of the competency-based assessment practices in grade 7. The advantage is that it investigates an event from the participant's perspective rather than a third party's interpretation of the context, therefore, attempts to ensure trustworthiness have been done.

Sample selection

Purposive sampling method was used for selection of four teachers and six students, in each selected school in Siaya County, and four education leaders, as the study participants. As explained by Tongco (2007), purposive sampling is a deliberate, non-random technique of selecting participants, based on the required qualities of the informants. Purposive sampling was considered suitable in this study as it helped selection of participants directly involved in the implementation of competency-based assessment. As Elo et al. (2014) argues, the informants selected are those considered to have the best knowledge sought. Palinkas et al. (2015) further argues that purposeful sampling involves identification and selection of participants conversant with a phenomenon of interest. In this study, a criterion was involved that identifies, and selects all cases that meet the predetermined criterion. The selected participants therefore possessed experiential knowledge relevant to competency-based assessment. The sample size was deemed sufficient once thematic saturation was achieved as no new themes emerged during subsequent interviews.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were used as the methods of data collection in this study and the qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. The semi-structured interviews were conducted on the students, teachers and education leaders to extract in-depth information on practice of competency-based assessment. Document analysis was carried out on assessment tools, schemes of work and meeting minutes.

Research instruments

The interview guides consisted of instructions to guide the interviewers in capturing background information about the subjects and aspects of classroom questioning. The interviews were conducted face to face, and on phone. Document analysis protocols were also used in the collection of data. The information obtained about the questioning practice includes information on lesson topic, learning outcomes and assessment activities related. The document analysis guide lists the documents required for analysis.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of data was employed in this study. Owen (2014) defines thematic analysis as a process that involves segmentation, categorization, and re-linking of aspects of the data prior to the final write-up, usually employed near the end of the data collection process. As argued by Jugder (2016), thematic analysis facilitates an investigation of the interview data from a data driven perspective and a perspective based on coding in an inductive way, and from research questions perspective to check if the data were consistent with the research questions. Therefore, I used thematic analysis since it can be argued that it will produce an insightful analysis that answers the three research questions in this study.

Rigor and trustworthiness of the study

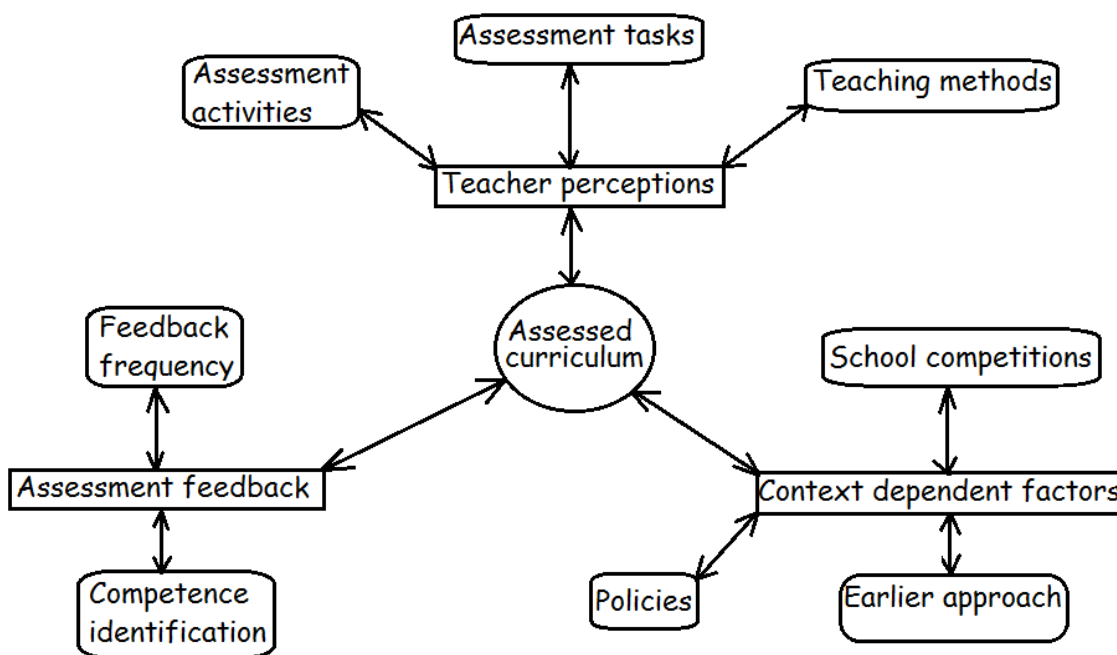
This study being qualitative in nature sought to explore the role of the assessed curriculum in strengthening competency-based learning. The interpretations the researcher accords the responses may therefore be subject to bias, thus it was necessary to establish trustworthiness at all stages of the study. Connelly (2016) defines trustworthiness or rigor of a study as “the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study”. The trustworthiness of this study involves establishing transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability, which is in line with Lincoln and Guba (1985).

According to Polit and Beck (2017) credibility refers to “confidence in the truth of the data and interpretations of them”. Credibility was established by prolonged engagement with the interviewees, use of three data sources, carrying out member checking and keeping a research journal. Transferability is the potential for extrapolations, that is, the level to which findings can be transferred to other settings or groups. To ensure this, semi-structured interviews together with comprehensive description of findings have been done, such that data saturation was achieved when no new was being obtained from the participants. Dependability of the study refers to stability of data over time. This was done by allowing inquiry audit which implies the ability of another researcher to pursue the methods and conclusions made by the main researcher. This was done by having more than one coder, being able to access tape records and data registry and notes taken during interview. Confirmability, concerns establishing that the data represent the information participants, and not the researchers’ biases. This was done by peer reviewing of the transcripts and their interpretations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study were presented into a thematic framework, which is a web-like illustration summarizing the main themes that constitute a given text. In this study, basic themes were identified, put into organizing themes, summing up to a global theme according to the framework below. The author further defines basic themes as “low order premises evident in the text”, organizing themes as “categories of basic themes grouped together to summarize more abstract principles”, and global themes as “super-ordinate themes encapsulating the principal representations in the whole text”.

THEMATIC FRAMEWORK



In this study, the global theme was identified as the assessed curriculum, the organizing themes include teacher perceptions, context dependent factors, and assessment feedback.

Teacher perceptions of Assessed curriculum

The teacher perceptions on the assessed curriculum are seen to be on selection of assessment activities and implementation of the assessment processes. Based on the responses given from the interviews, the respondents seem to pay more attention to grading other than enabling learners to be competent through careful engagement of practical assessment tools. When asked about their view on the paradigm shift in the competency-based assessment, one participant responded as follows

“..CBC is highly involving, such that it requires a lot of assessment and paper work.... but we have a large population and few teachers so our assessments may not consider the individual targeted competencies...” [Liam, personal communication, September 11, 2023]

From the responses, it was also evident that the teachers perceive that there is paradigm shift in the competency-based assessment. Another respondent said as follows,

“...for us to be able to develop real competencies, we need to align our assessment to the competencies. The design of the assessment tasks should be such that we engage our learners with the application of real knowledge, that is to say, application of the knowledge in the very way they would apply it in handling real world issues outside school...”.[Liz, personal communication, September 11, 2023]

Another participant when responding to the same responded as follows.

“...assessment of the learners need to enable them display what they know, or the competency by using the real tools that reflect the actual work area and activities that they carry out outside the school environment...” [John, personal communication, September 11, 2023]

The respondents however did not specify how the construction of the assessment tools changed from how they were administered differently from the previous system, such that the key competencies are factored in the assessment tool.

Context dependent factors

Competency-based assessment is mostly influenced by a number of contextual factors and policies. As evident from the responses, these contextual factors that influence competency-based assessment include, achievement reward process, school and national policies. There is influence of earlier approach to teaching and use of assessment tools from the previous 8-4-4 system on the development of assessment tasks. Asked about this factor, a learner responded as follows.

“...those questions can make us understand more than we were to understand before and also how questions can be set differently and how they can be twisted and varied in an examination situation...”[Jackson, personal communication, September 11, 2023]

From this response it is evident that learners look at assessment in the context of examinations. This can be interpreted to be a culture in the previous system where learning and preparation for assessment is based on revision of past papers. Similarly, the teachers also adapt assessment practices to examinations, in line with the response given below,

“...they get sample papers for agriculture concerning the question he asked in class in order to make us understand more on what he said during the explanation....”

[Victoria, personal communication, September 11, 2023].

“So maybe the questions he is asking are those that mostly are set in the examinations” [William, personal communication, September 16, 2023].

This still means there is the influence of the methods of doing studies as in the previous system, that were evident in the competency-based system.

The other contextual factor manifested in the assessment is policy. There are national and school level policies that tend to influence or are influenced by the assessment practices. The competency-based assessment framework outlines a number of guidelines that would influence the nature of assessment for competency-based learning. The competency-based curriculum framework outlines as follows,

“...outlines the principle of assessment that may guide the development of assessment tasks in addition to the types of assessment and core competencies expected to have been acquired....”[Kenya National Examination Council, 2021].

One respondent however say that the learners should be made aware of the competencies to be assessed prior, as follows

“..students should be aware of how and when competency will be evaluated,.....students should be assessed against a predetermine competency standards expected....”

School assessment practices can also be used to influence both school and national policies that could have an impact in the CBC policy process. It is evident from the staff meeting minutes that the teachers assessment practices tend to influence school policy interventions, in a way that they expect the given assessment practices to be favored. This is in terms of preference to learning materials, and allocation of more time. These are captured in minutes as follows:

“...It was recommended that administration to buy exams....there is need for more revision materials....” [Personal communication, September 11, 2023]

“... it was agreed that the candidates will be taken through as many revision practices as possible ... requested for more time to be allocated for mathematics activities so as to increase contact time” [Personal communication, September 11, 2023]

Therefore, the assessments can be used to influence policy at school level. It is consequently possible to strengthen the policy at the implementation level, using assessment requirements and feedback.

Assessment feedback

It can be argued that assessment feedback can be used to improve the competency-based learning, and to identify learner competencies. When asked how they would use assessment feedback as evidence for accountability, one participant responded as follows;

“...during the teaching and learning process, it is important that we record the learners’ competencies during the process of learning, and this is where some of the assessment tools come in handy....” [Liam, personal communication, September 11, 2020]

In addition to this, another responded indicated the need to continuously record student scores and use the progress records to plan during the learning process. The respondent said,

“..The score of students need to be continuously recorded and the progress records kept. The progress records should then be used during the learning process....”

The format of reporting feedback was also a factor that that came out to be that which influences competency-based learning. When asked about how assessment feedback is reported a respondent said

“.....once an examination is administered we record marks, work out the totals and rank our students, then award the best performing in the different learning areas....”

[Liam, personal communication, September 11, 2020]

This points to the fact that feedback is still been given in the same way as was done before. Below is an extract from the reporting of feedback under the Senior Secondary School which is under the competency-based curriculum.

| Performance Level Meeting Expectations | | Mean Marks 72% | 5.8 ↑ | Total Marks 936/1300 | 75 ↑ | Total Points 44/52 | 5 ↑ |
|----------------------------------------|-------|----------------|------------------------|----------------------|------|--------------------|-----|
| LEARNING AREAS | MARKS | DEV. | PERFORMANCE LEVEL | TEACHER | | | |
| Mathematics | 50% | +33 ↑ | Meeting Expectations | Mr. C | | | |
| English | 78% | +6 ↑ | Exceeding Expectations | Ms. J | | | |
| Kiswahili | 68% | -9 ↓ | Meeting Expectations | Ms. I | | | |
| Integrated Science | 54% | -13 ↓ | Meeting Expectations | Mr. C | | | |
| Health Education | 66% | +14 ↑ | Meeting Expectations | Mrs. | | | |
| Social Studies | 74% | -6 ↓ | Meeting Expectations | Mr. J | | | |
| Christian Religious Education | 90% | +20 ↑ | Exceeding Expectations | Mr. J | | | |
| Business Studies | 70% | +7 ↑ | Meeting Expectations | Md. J | | | |
| Agriculture | 64% | -6 ↓ | Meeting Expectations | Mr. | | | |
| Pre-Technical Studies | 56% | -11 ↓ | Meeting Expectations | Ms. | | | |
| Life Skills Education | 92% | +5 ↑ | Exceeding Expectations | Mr. | | | |
| Sports and Physical Education | 78% | +11 ↑ | Exceeding Expectations | Ms. J | | | |
| Home Science | 96% | +24 ↑ | Exceeding Expectations | Mr. | | | |

[DOC 001, 2023]

When the above extract is now compared to the extract from the outgoing norm referenced, there seem to be no much difference..

| Mean C 52% | | -2.5 | Total Marks 570/1100 | -28 ↓ | Total Points 66/132 | -6 ↓ | Overall Position 206/522 | -38 ↓ | Stream Position 25/67 | -3 ↓ |
|------------------------|-------|-------|----------------------|-------|------------------------------|---------|--------------------------|-------|-----------------------|------|
| SUBJECTS | MARKS | DEV. | GRADE | RANK | COMMENT | TEACHER | | | | |
| English | 70% | +23 ↑ | B+ | 1/67 | Good work but aim higher | Jos | | | | |
| Kiswahili | 66% | +33 ↑ | B | 11/66 | Zaidi ya wastani | Jan | | | | |
| Mathematics | 45% | -12 ↓ | C- | 34/66 | Below average, can do better | Eva | | | | |
| Biology | 38% | -17 ↓ | D | 14/66 | Put more effort | Ste | | | | |
| Physics | 31% | -13 ↓ | D- | 36/66 | Weak but has potential | Jec | | | | |
| Chemistry | 54% | -5 ↓ | C | 18/66 | Average, aim higher | Chc | | | | |
| History and Government | 41% | -36 ↓ | D+ | 61/66 | Put more effort | Odi | | | | |
| Geography | 54% | -21 ↓ | C | 55/66 | Average, aim higher | Dickson | | | | |
| C.R.E. | 56% | -4 ↓ | C+ | 29/66 | Can do better, aim higher | Sha | | | | |
| Computer Studies | 64% | +12 ↑ | B- | 4/27 | Satisfactory, aim higher | Milc | | | | |
| Business Studies | 52% | +12 ↑ | C | 40/66 | Average, aim higher | Edw | | | | |

[DOC 002, 2023]

This can be interpreted to mean that teachers still report feedback in the same way as what was done previously

As revealed in the findings teachers acknowledge a conceptual shift towards competency-based assessment. On the contrary, what they practice largely remain influenced by examination-oriented traditions. While participants articulated the importance of aligning assessments with real-world application, they concurrently expressed constraints related to workload, large class sizes, and policy expectations. From the perspective of Politics of Use, these findings suggest that teachers reinterpret assessment policy through contextual realities, prioritizing manageable practices over prescribed competency-focused approaches. This selective adoption indicates that policy enactment is shaped not only by policy intent but also by institutional pressures and resource constraints. Consequently, the assessed curriculum, rather than reinforcing competency-based learning, risks reproducing norm-referenced practices.

DISCUSSION

The following section gives a discussion on the findings based on the study literature. Based on the findings, it is becoming clear that assessment practices may not fully align with the intended curriculum. Based on this, this study therefore seeks to investigate the possibility of strengthening competency-based learning using assessment.

From these responses, it is evident that there is a paradigm shift in the assessment, from one that requires transfer of learning in form of knowledge only to one that requires display of competencies, skills and attitudes. This is consistent with the highlight from Ministry of Education (2019), that through competency-based assessment, an enabling environment will be created for performance-based learning, and transformation of assessment to check knowledge, and other competencies required for performance of certain tasks. This is further supported by the arguments of Chu et al, (2018) that teachers are required to change from norm referenced to criterion referenced judgment of learners' capabilities or competencies. However, Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) report that teachers struggle to design performance tasks, develop rubrics, provide meaningful feedback and align classroom assessments with curriculum challenges. These point to a paradigm shift with the implementation of the competency-based assessment. The difficulties as reported mean there is an increase in assessment tasks that teachers may be expected to adapt to.

There can be seen some lack of clarity on what competency base assessment actually entails. Some respondents perceive that from the paradigm shift in competency-based assessment, there is increased paper work. This can however be interpreted to point to more assessment tools being developed, and a lot of assessment activities being used. This is also consistent with Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (2017), that competency-based curriculum requires the use of a range of assessment tools, some of which include, observation, checklists, rubrics, project work, questionnaires, portfolios, written continuous assessment tests, and progress report cards. It can therefore be argued that there is a paradigm shift in terms of assessment of competencies and use of a range of assessment tools that were not engaged previously.

It is also evident that a contextual factor that influences assessment is the previous culture of considering past revision papers and not interest on learner competencies. This can be argued to be an influence of the previous approach to methods of teaching and assessment. This is however not consistent with Chu et al. (2018) who argues that the revision process should involve a shift in paradigm from content-based to competency-based. On the other hand, Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) report a challenge that institutions still experience institutional cultures which privileged exam driven evaluation over practical capability building. Besides, robust assessment tools such as portfolios and rubrics are not supporting outcome based frameworks still in use. It can therefore be argued that other than have learners revise past papers for learning, teachers should design assessment tasks based on the desired competencies and relevant to the learning context as a result of this, the classroom practice did not align with the intended cognitive demands of STEM curricula. Therefore it can be argued that competency based learning can be strengthened through use of assessment.

This points to the fact that there should be a well-developed assessment policy to guide the competency-based assessment. This argument is consistent with Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (2017) which guides through steps that teachers need, to make competency-based assessments such as articulating competencies, developing evidence of competencies, building student-friendly rubrics, and creating the learning experience. In addition, Kubai (2023) argues that among the challenges facing competency based assessment is the lack of clear educational policies for effective implementation of assessment practices. It can however be argued that teachers tend to develop assessment tools and activities based on the format of the national assessment tools, as outlined in the Basic Education Curriculum Framework.

Assessment practices also tend to influence school and even National Policies. The suggestions to obtain more revision materials, having as many questions as possible, and allocating more time, are all aspects which touch on school policy issues and that through intended assessment practices, the policy could be influenced. This is consistent with the argument by Ministry of Education (2019), that competency-based assessment promotes flexibility in assessment towards enhancing participation and appropriateness for learners and trainees with special learning needs by adjusting timing for learners with special needs, and adapting assessment materials appropriately. The assessment practices will therefore be able to influence policy at school level, towards strengthening the competency-based learning.

Another contextual factor that comes into play in using assessment to strengthen competency-based learning, is the point of reward. Respondents reported that school competitions are geared towards rewarding mean scores as opposed to learner competencies. This finding is consistent with arguments of Kyamugambi & Barigye (2026) that there is a lingering influence of colonial era of credentialism where the institutional cultures still privilege exam-driven evaluation and rewards. These cultures similarly are reluctant to implement some assessment tools, as they argue that the tools such as portfolios and rubrics do not support their outcome-based frameworks. The shift from norm reference to criterion reference system needs to be reflected in the assessment process in a bid to strengthen competency-based learning.

From this response, the participants feel that the assessment feedback is an important document for accountability as once available, will be used to plan for instructional activities, and monitor learning progress in terms of competency development. This is consistent with Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (2017) which suggests that teachers' capacity on how to analyze learner feedback and use insights gained and results to improve their practice well so as to engage more effectively with learners and other educators, should be enhanced. Lang et al. (2022) on the other hand argues that student performance should also be visualized in relation to that of the local peers, other than just the normative standards. It can therefore be argued that the feedback records can be used to continuously monitor the progress of learners in terms of competency development.

There is an aspect of feedback frequency which most teachers reported the importance of considering frequency of feedback to the learners. The responses based on frequency of feedback is that it should be continuous. Some respondents also indicated that the assessment should be continuous and not just at the end or at regular time. This is consistent with Chu et al, (2018), who argues that assessment practices need to emphasize on the provision of feedback which continuously, timely and constructively inform learners about the strength and weakness of their performance, and is normally descriptive, directly linked to learning goals and pin point what is well done, what needs improvement and how to improve. This is also consistent with the arguments of Lang et al. (2022), that feedback should be available on demand so that learners have flexibility and control of when they consult the feedback information.

The other finding from two different documents also showed the reporting of feedback done in the same way, despite competency being a key element in the assessment. The two extracts showed that the only element that changed is the description of the score, from "very good" to "exceeding expectation", "good" to "meeting expectation", and "fair" to "approaching expectation", and "poor" to "below expectation". However key competencies are not reflected in the assessment report. To strengthen assessment, there should therefore be the transcript model that scores the key competencies in each learning area.

CONCLUSION

Strengthening competency-based learning, requires that teachers conduct an assessment process that directs learners' attention, encourages thinking, promotes real learning and identifies a learner's abilities and talents. The politics of use approach was used as the theoretical framework for this study. It was based on interpretivist paradigm that is exploratory in nature taking a qualitative approach. The methods used include classroom observation, semi-structured interviews for Senior Secondary School teachers and learners, and document analysis. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data from the findings.

From the findings it can be noted that there is lack of clarity on the competency-based assessment practices of the learners and teachers. Therefore strengthening competency-based learning through assessment requires that teachers' capacity on competency-based learning be increased. It has also been found out that assessment practices may influence policy decisions even at school level. It can therefore concluded that competency-based assessment can be used to strengthen policies that support competency-based learning. It was also found that teachers still grade the whole learning area as has been happening with subjects in the norm referenced feedback. Strengthening competency-based learning needs to bring the grading to the level of competency acquired, thus feedback to take format of transcript for the final results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the assessment report should go beyond just giving performance in a general learning area, but should be based on the format of a transcript where different competencies in a given learning area are reported and in comparison to the learner's peers. Next, is to intensify the use of assessment feedback as accountability tool for development of competencies. This to be done by enhancing teacher capacities to analyze learner feedback and use insights gained and results to improve their practice as well as engage more effectively with learners and other educators. Therefore, feedback to be such that it combines performance feedback with information on student learning processes, such as planning and tracking. The study further recommends provision of a framework for continuous assessment with policy interventions that strengthen school-based assessment, that makes use of a wide range of suggested assessment tools, so that teachers recognize challenges and interventions in learner's experiences early. This should be supported by use of an analytic process to help monitor some of the learners' latent competencies from the records. The findings call for targeted capacity building based on assessment reform, assessment literacy, including interpretations and use of competency descriptors, performance standards and formative assessment data. Finally, the school's award criteria needs to be redesigned such that it enables reward of the acquired competencies, but not the general performance of learners in the whole learning area.

Implications of the Study

Educational Practice

The findings of this study suggest that institutional cultures and professional beliefs shape competency-based assessment as much as technical competence. The continued reliance on examination-oriented practices indicates that assessment reforms are often mediated by entrenched accountability norms. This implies that meaningful pedagogical change requires shared understandings of assessment purposes and sustained professional dialogue, rather than procedural compliance alone.

Policy Implementation

At the system level, the results underscore the importance of coherence between intended curriculum, assessment frameworks. Where summative assessment and examination outcomes dominate policy signals, competency-based approaches are likely to be marginalized in practice. This implies that policy environments function as powerful mediators of assessment reform, shaping how assessment innovations are interpreted and enacted by teachers.

Educational Leadership

The study highlights instructional leadership as a critical contextual influence on assessment practices in schools. Leadership priorities appear to affect whether competency-based assessment is integrated into everyday teaching or subordinated to examination performance, suggesting that school-level mediation is central to policy enactment.

Theoretical Implications

The findings extend the “Politics of Use” perspective by illustrating how assessment reforms are recontextualized through competing institutional values and incentive structures. This reinforces the view that assessment policy implementation is a socially negotiated process rather than a linear technical exercise.

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