

## From big ideas to small practice: competency-based curricula in low-resource, centralised education systems

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### Abstract

For some time now, education systems in many countries of the Global South and elsewhere have pursued competency-based curriculum reforms. The appeal of competencies in such contexts seems to lie mainly in a yearning to move away from rote-teaching towards membership of what might be called a ‘21<sup>st</sup> century education club’, in which thinking is prioritised over recall and skills lead to employment. However, the expectations of competency-based curricula are often more ambitious than any system can cope with, let alone systems constrained by limited resources and especially where textbooks – the core of classroom activities in education systems of the Global South – have not been repurposed to support new pedagogical approaches. This paper seeks to identify the elements of what many education systems might describe as important in moving towards a competency-based curriculum and analyses the competency-based curricula of two countries, Kenya and Ghana. It finds that the subject syllabuses, the hinge-point for textbook writers, provide little guidance as to how those writers, and therefore the teachers who use the textbooks, might reflect and support new pedagogical approaches. This lack of syllabus-level signage in a textbook-driven system is therefore likely to impede pedagogical change. The paper recommends that curriculum reformers identify contextually appropriate pedagogical innovations by anticipating the needs of syllabus and textbook developers, and thereby the classroom teachers on whom the reforms depend for success.

**Keywords:** competencies, curriculum, global south education, syllabus design, textbooks

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### Introduction

In an increasingly globalised arena, education planners and curriculum leaders in the Global South, who may be influenced by the voices of global organisations and agencies, often seek to align social and educational systems with their governments’ international educational commitments, even though the starting points for such change may be very different (Verger, 2014). These efforts at alignment may be said to have had limited success in terms of contextualising reforms to national contexts.

The challenges of contextualising and concretising education policy reforms in the Global South are the theme of this paper. In particular, the paper examines competency-based curriculum reforms in centralised, low-resource contexts where national curricula are the norm and where approved textbooks represent the curriculum in schools.<sup>1</sup> How can curricular aims be reflected in subject syllabuses and thereby in the teaching and learning materials that dominate classroom practice?

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<sup>1</sup> An analysis of this kind, which depends only on the English term ‘competency’ or the French *compétence*, is limited by the language of the discourse. Finding an ‘equivalent’ term in other languages recognizing the

A personal learning moment in relation to competency-based curricula occurred when I and other colleagues worked with Bangladesh's National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in 2013–15. A new primary curriculum had been introduced in 2012. It was only the second curriculum revision since the country's independence in 1971 and it had been implemented in haste. The only previous revision had taken place in 1991: it was described as being competency-based and as being a break with the 1971 curriculum. The 1991 revision aimed to frame teaching and learning around level-wise competencies or indicators for each grade and terminal competencies for the final years of primary (grade 5) and secondary school.<sup>2</sup> The haste of the 2012 primary curriculum revision led an education programme steering group, which included development partners, to invite technical assistance to help NCTB 'refine' the primary school textbooks<sup>3</sup> in order to better support the new curriculum aims (Smart, 2019).

A decade later, in 2023, in a vivid example of *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* ('the more things change, the more they stay the same'), a *new* competency-based primary curriculum was introduced in Bangladesh. This was also described by the Minister of Education as being a competency-based 'paradigm shift'.<sup>4</sup>

Bangladesh is not unique. Many education systems in both the Global South and the Global North have visited and revisited competency-based approaches, often encouraged and supported by influential global agencies. In 2017, UNESCO's specialist curriculum institution, the International Bureau of Education (IBE), stated that 'The IBE is *inundated* with country requests for technical support to reorient their curricula toward competence-based approaches' (Marope, Griffin, & Gallagher, 2017; italics added). Under the heading 'Learning resources', the World Bank's 'Realizing the Future of Learning' (2020) opened with the following recommendation for all education systems: 'A flexible, competency-based curriculum that prioritizes foundational skills and nurtures learning to learn must guide learning'.

One might broadly characterise such reforms as, above all, subject-based and pedagogical, operating within subject boundaries and seeking to move on from traditional rote-teaching. Two examples can be offered, among many, in which national statements indicate such ideas.

Egypt's current Education Sector Plan states that:

Education 2.0 [the national education reform strategy] focuses on learning and life skills and tackles critical issues, such as moving from rote-learning to competency-based learning, preventing discrimination against women, addressing the challenges of globalization, citizenship, climate change, and creating stronger alignment with the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goal on education (SDG4) (METE, 2023)

A foreword to Zimbabwe's current national curriculum says:

Historically, the Zimbabwe education system, like others around the world, emphasised the development of strong content knowledge at the expense of critical skills and competencies.

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significance of the English or French terms for non-native speakers who customarily work in a second language is of enormous importance in the actualisation of the concept as part of any curriculum reform.

<sup>2</sup> The 2011 curriculum (first implemented in 2012) is no longer available online, but several commentaries can be accessed, e.g: <https://www.thedailystar.net/competency-based-general-school-curriculum-9779>

<sup>3</sup> This paper defines a textbook as a subject-specific coursebook intended for use by students. The scope of the paper is limited to formal education sectors in low- and middle-income countries.

<sup>4</sup> Presentation at the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, March 2023. [https://apa.sdg4education2030.org/sites/apa.sdg4education2030.org/files/2023-03/PPT\\_Bangladesh%20HEM\\_10th%20AP-FSD%20Special%20Event\\_Latest.pdf](https://apa.sdg4education2030.org/sites/apa.sdg4education2030.org/files/2023-03/PPT_Bangladesh%20HEM_10th%20AP-FSD%20Special%20Event_Latest.pdf) The new curriculum framework itself can be accessed at [https://shed.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/shed.portal.gov.bd/page/0b8eda3f\\_ce40\\_46c5\\_9e98\\_1ccda2ec348b/English.pdf](https://shed.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/shed.portal.gov.bd/page/0b8eda3f_ce40_46c5_9e98_1ccda2ec348b/English.pdf)

There is, however, increasing recognition that content knowledge mastery is not adequate as an exit attribute. The emphasis is now on developing higher-order thinking skills and competencies. (MPSE, 2015)

A somewhat separate but related current has led to the emergence of the concept of transversal or 21st century competencies that operate *across*, rather than *within*, curricular boundaries. Many observers of competency-based reforms, including Katherine Anderson-Levitt, have drawn attention to the potential tension between the two currents – the subject-specific and the transversal – in both higher- and low-resource contexts: ‘One area of particular disagreement and controversy concerns the relationship between transversal competencies and disciplinary knowledge, which are often seen as in tension with each other.’ (Anderson-Levitt, forthcoming)

## The changing understandings of competencies<sup>5</sup>

The two currents indicated above – namely, the desire to move away from rote-teaching and the desire to develop transversal, 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies – have emerged over the past half century. A description of what some today would understand by a competency-based approach to teaching and learning was provided almost seventy years ago by Benjamin Bloom. Although Bloom did not use the term ‘competency’ himself, his concern was clearly with the *application of learning*, which is echoed in many national policy statements today:

Although information or knowledge is recognized as an important outcome of education, very few teachers would be satisfied to regard this as the primary or the sole outcome of instruction. What is needed is some evidence that the students can do something with their knowledge, that is, that they can apply the information to new situations and problems (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 38).<sup>6</sup>

With the development of frameworks of learning outcomes, often based on Bloom’s work, the distinction between the application of learning and narrow, behaviourist models of learning sometimes became blurred. Over thirty years ago, Noddings (2005, first published in 1992) described the origins of competencies in behaviourist theory in the USA: ‘The use of behavioral objectives – often poorly or vaguely written as “competencies” – became the heart of tests for graduation. To assist students who were struggling to pass the tests, educators often broke major topics into tiny subtopics ... By breaking learning into manageable segments and telling students exactly what they would have to do, educators found they were learning and passing ...’ The grade-wise and terminal competencies of Bangladesh’s competency-based curriculum matrix, developed in the early 1990s and still present to a large extent, echo Noddings’ description of what had by then become a well-established model.

The separate but related current of thinking, in which curriculum reforms attempted to prioritise cross-cutting, rather than subject-bounded, skills may be illustrated by developments in South Africa. Describing the country’s post-apartheid Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) curriculum, introduced in the 000s, Hoadley (2015) observed how “critical outcomes” were derived from the new [South African] constitution and described the kind of citizen that the curriculum aimed to create. They also referred to generic skills underpinning the curriculum, such as problem solving and critical thinking’. For Hoadley, the intentions of the OBE, intended to mark a clear break with the apartheid era, were

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<sup>5</sup> This paper uses the term ‘competencies’ rather than ‘competences’ (without an ‘i’). For the purposes of the paper, the two are seen as being synonymous.

<sup>6</sup> One might of course take issue with use of the term ‘knowledge’ in Bloom’s original taxonomy, but that is another matter.

undermined by a failure to consider how teachers could adapt to the new vision, especially where textbooks had been side-lined, as they had been in the new South African curriculum.

Despite the challenges of introducing generic skills into a curriculum, the emergence of transversal or ‘key’ competencies, as distinct from subject-specific competencies, has become a major feature of some contemporary models, especially in higher-resourced contexts. In an analysis of seven recent Western competency-based curriculum frameworks, McGuinness (2018) notes that ‘Key competency development can be seen as part of a more general thrust in educational systems across the world to pursue broader learning goals beyond traditional school subjects. The aim is to improve student learning in preparation for 21st century living and 21st century work.’

Before concluding this section, it is perhaps worth noting that the shape-shifting nature of competencies may also, paradoxically, be its attraction and its strength. Matland (1995) identified ambiguity in policymaking as having potential benefits: ‘Despite its being blamed often for implementation failure, ambiguity can be useful. Ambiguity can ease agreement both at the legitimization and the formulation stage.’ Matland also observed that ‘Far better an approximate answer to the right question, which is often very vague, than an exact answer to the wrong question, which can always be made precise.’

To an extent, ambiguity can bind reformists together. On the other hand, the *enactment* of policy in the form of syllabus documents and approved textbooks, which is how many school systems in the Global South operate, requires a level of detail that cannot remain ambiguous. At some point along the pathway of policy to practice, ambiguity must yield to clarity.

## What do governments in the Global South (and global agencies) seek from competencies?

In *Global Flows of Competence-based Approaches in Primary and Secondary Education* (2017), Anderson-Levitt was curious about the ambiguities of competency-based approaches and asked: ‘In what parts of the world has a competence-based approach been introduced into the curriculum, at least at the level of policy? In each case, how did the policy come to happen?’ She described how her curiosity was piqued by country examples in the Global South:

My interest began with a puzzle. When I read Sarah Fichtner’s fascinating account of the operation of non-governmental organizations in Benin’s educational sector (2012), two details gave me pause. First, she described Benin’s 1998 competence-based reform as nearly synonymous with learner-centered instruction, which surprised me because I associated ‘competences’ with behaviorism and did not know their meanings had stretched to include constructivist perspectives. (Anderson-Levitt, 2017)

Anderson-Levitt wondered how a competency-based approach could be both *narrowing*, in the behaviourist tradition, as well as *broadening*, in the sense of demanding higher-order teaching and learning. Clearly the policymaker, in this case Benin in West Africa, sought to adopt a more learner-centred, ‘broader’ kind of teaching by means of the new curriculum, which would mean embracing the varied experiences and responses that students bring to the classroom. Yet Anderson-Levitt and many others had previously only heard the term ‘competency’ used in either a behaviourist or a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) context.

It is perhaps possible to understand the answer to Anderson-Levitt’s puzzle as being two distinct reactions to traditional, frontal, academic teaching in which knowledge is supposedly conceived in terms of pieces of information to be learned through memorisation: one of these reactions, in the behaviourist mode, views competency as learning outcomes that can be demonstrated and seen in the

student's observable actions rather than in pure recall; the other reaction, in a more constructivist model, sees competence as learning that goes 'beyond' factual learning and routines.

There is a large body of research on Learner-Centred Pedagogy, or Learner-Centred Education, the trajectory of which has much in common with that of competency-based approaches, particularly if we understand such approaches as having to do with pedagogy and the desire to reduce rote-teaching. Schweisfurth (2013) studied a range of Learner-Centred Education (LCE) interventions in sub-Saharan Africa and arrived at a similar conclusion about the appeal and risks inherent in ambiguity:

Part of the problem with LCE ... is its fluid definitions. This creates a number of issues for embedding it in practice. At the policy level, it enables the symbolic gesture of LCE rhetoric without forcing governments to define too clearly exactly what is expected. Then, teachers can be blamed when the policy is not implemented. It allows for a great deal of slippage as well, in terms of how teachers and teacher educators interpret and enact such policy moves.

But these problems can also be virtues, if the elasticity of LCE is put to good effect. The fact that it has no hard and fast, agreed set of rules, and because of the different understanding of its operation and expected outcomes, it means that it has the flexibility to be adapted to different contexts. (Schweisfurth, 2013, p. 143)

Both Competency-Based Curricula and Learner-Centred Education, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, therefore share a need to *define* what is new in their proposition, *describe* how the new priorities can be reflected in subject areas, and *enable* teaching and learning resources – namely textbooks – to support the new priorities.

Several Francophone African countries have attempted to develop competency-based textbooks with very limited success: in 2007–09, a group of international agencies commissioned a report based on five Francophone country case studies into whether their combined investments in competency-based approaches (or *approche par compétences*) and their implementation in national textbooks had had any effect<sup>7</sup>. In a paper published shortly after the initial report, Lenoir and Jean reported that one of the barriers to implementing a competency-based approach (CBA) was 'a strongly cumulative conception of knowledge that reflects a focus on the accumulation of textbook knowledge. This trend hinders or prevents the realization of competencies and translates an encyclopedic conceptualization of knowledge, while the CBA should rest more on a logic of reflected-upon action that draws on the required knowledge.' (Lenoir & Jean, 2012, p. 77) Many articles in the Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan press similarly bemoaned the failure of the *approche par compétences* (e.g. Haouari, 2022).<sup>8</sup>

The subtitle of Lenoir and Jean's paper highlights their stark view of the main reason for the failures: 'The competency-based approach in African textbooks: An Approach Dominated by Economic, Political, and Cultural Interests from the North'. In their analysis, the failure of the approach was not an indication of the failure of the textbooks, but of an approach driven by external forces that ignored the context of the prevailing teaching culture:

a situation of 'discomfort' with the CBA emerges from focus groups led with teachers in the countries studied. Two trends could be identified: a moderate one that, all while recognizing its relevance, is critical among other things of the CBA's limiting nature, its cumbersome conceptual baggage, its evaluation system that is time-consuming and rather ineffective with regard to the quality of learning, an increase in the teacher's workload, etc. The second trend,

<sup>7</sup> The countries were Cameroon, Gabon, Mali, Senegal, and Tunisia.

<sup>8</sup> For a description of how textbooks in Morocco included regular *semaines d'intégration*, which were a feature of CBA textbooks in all competency-based textbooks in Francophone countries, see: <https://www.scribd.com/document/15245880/Guide-Pedagogie-d-integration-final-au-maroc#>.

stronger, goes so far as to question the CBA's usefulness and the applicability of its pedagogical choices in current African educational contexts. But over and beyond these controversies, a consensus can be found: the CBA is seen to be a good, active, effective, and equitable method, insofar as all of the conditions for success are met. (Lenoir and Jean, 2012, p. 78)

The focus groups did not reject the principles underlying the *approach*, they just found the *implementation* unworkable.

## Are there any common elements to understandings of competency-based approaches?

After almost a century of competing currents and cross-fertilisation, can we recognise a common understanding of what a competency-based approach might consist of, especially in the Global South? And, if so, how might it be framed for writers of the teaching and learning materials that are vital in helping teachers to implement change? I will propose three connected, subject-based features that are found in many countries' statements, as well as a feature based on the concept of transversal skills.

### 1. Knowledge, skills and values

Many competency-based curriculum frameworks include a definition of competencies based on knowledge, skills and attitudes (and sometimes values). The elements tend to be listed in the same order, with knowledge placed first and values often placed last. In Kenya, for example, which I will look at in more detail, the Basic Education Curriculum Framework describes the development of 'knowledge, skills, attitudes and values' (KICD, 2019a).

In Ghana, which I will also look at in more detail, the first item in the Aims and Objectives of the pre-tertiary (i.e. basic) education curriculum is to 'Provide learners with broad up-to-date knowledge, skills, values and attitudes in both existing and new subject disciplines and in a range of foundational literacies'. (NaCCA, 2018, p. 20) In the same document, the rationale for the new curriculum states that 'The use of the objectives model of the curriculum led to an over-emphasis on the products of learning; that is, knowing basic facts, principles, skills and procedures at the expense of the processes of learning which involve higher cognitive competences such as applying, thinking critically, creatively and practically' (NaCCA, 2018, p. 16)

### 2. The application of knowledge in new situations

However, when frameworks are turned into syllabuses and classroom practice, the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values often become isolated, thereby losing their potential. How might these dimensions be taught in a way that exploits their combined power? The provision of *opportunities for application* and the *encouragement of autonomy* represent two possibilities.

The notion of students needing to be ready for uncertainty can be seen in both low- and high-resource contexts (Biesta, 2015; Smart et al., 2020), reflecting a view that learning cannot be limited simply to practising what has been learned but should also lead to the *application* of what has been learned, in new situations. Kenya's Basic Education Curriculum Framework (KICD, 2019a) states that 'the curriculum is designed to emphasise the importance of not only developing skills and knowledge but also applying these to real life situations'. In their Francophone study, Lenoir and Jean (2019) describe this as 'the ability to mobilize cognitive resources when facing complex problem situations, to integrate multiple cognitive resources in the treatment of complex situations'. Similarly, the OCED (2018) employ the term 'mobilising' in their own elaboration:

The concept of competency implies more than just the acquisition of knowledge and skills; it involves the mobilisation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to meet complex demands. Future-ready students will need both broad and specialised knowledge. Disciplinary knowledge will continue to be important, as the raw material from which new knowledge is developed, together with the capacity to think across the boundaries of disciplines and “connect the dots”.

However, the notion of ‘new situations’ also reveals an inherent tension between competencies and textbooks: typically, textbooks in the Global South deal with *knowns* rather than *unknowns*, in which students’ responses to the content of the textbook may be narrowly constrained. I will return to this tension below.

### 3. Agency, autonomy and flexibility

Although the terms agency, autonomy and flexibility are not often employed in curriculum frameworks, the clear implication of new, real-life, or complex situations is that a degree of autonomy and flexibility is necessary, in both the teacher and the student. The application of learning to previously unseen, real-life situations, can be described as being able to make appropriate decisions in the face of a new situation. This presents a challenge. By definition, memorisation is easy to observe and easy to measure, whereas allowing for flexibility and choice in students’ responses is less easy to observe and measure.

These interconnected dimensions of application and autonomy explain why policymakers in the Global South see them as important for moving away from rote-learning. They also indicate the difficulty of putting them into practice in highly centralised systems.

The degree of autonomy matters. Context matters. In a background paper for UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative, Smart et al. (2020) advocated for a pedagogy that:

recognizes and responds to the emotional and social dimensions of how students learn and acknowledges how well-designed learning modalities can themselves reinforce positive social and emotional skills and dispositions. Because it is both teacher-centred and student-centred, this kind of teaching provides learning opportunities that allow the teacher to guide students to interpret and discuss textbook content, using a balance of closed and open-ended questions together with guidance for the teacher to support students with prompts, encouragement and constructive feedback. (p. 20)

### 4. Cross-cutting or key competencies

In addition to discipline-based competencies, the place of *cross-cutting*, *transversal*, *core*, or *key* competencies has become influential in education systems in both the Global North and Global South. The OECD (2015) describe key competencies in their framework, the Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo).<sup>9</sup> For the OECD, the importance of key competencies owes much to identifying what employers are believed to need more than proof of academic qualifications.

In other contexts, key competencies may reflect the notions of application and autonomy described above. In a forthcoming volume entitled *Transversal Competencies in ASEAN Countries and their Neighbors*, Care observes that ‘21CS [21st century skills] is essentially a philosophy of education that prioritizes application of core capabilities across multiple areas of learning and doing.’

In East Africa, ‘The education systems across the three countries [Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania] have each reviewed their curricula in the past 5 years, and have included what they variously refer to

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<sup>9</sup> The OECD use the term ‘key competencies’ for the education sector and use the alternative term ‘core competencies’ for the workplace.

as ‘core competencies’ (Kenya), ‘generic skills’ (Uganda), and ‘learning, life, and soft skills’ (Tanzania: Tanzania Institute of Education, 2019). The national perspectives and consultations within each country are reflected by the differences in how each conceptualises these competencies. (Care, 2024). The national context as well as subject-specific needs inevitably shape the identification and implementation of cross-cutting competencies. Kenya’s competency-based curriculum, based on transversal, 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies<sup>10</sup>, clearly has implications for subject-based competencies, since the curriculum remains organised around traditional subject areas.

Turning now to examples of subject syllabuses from Kenya and Ghana, it may be possible to use the above dimensions as lenses through which to view the potential of syllabuses to support a competency-based approach and the degree to which syllabuses support the writers of textbooks.

## Case studies

To understand the challenge of guiding textbook writers in centralised systems of the Global South to reflect a competency-based approach, I will look at snapshots of two sub-Saharan African curricula that I have some knowledge of – Kenya and Ghana. I will look at the subject of mother tongue (MT), which I am most familiar with in terms of curriculum and materials development. In this case-study analysis, the MT syllabuses may represent proxies for subject syllabuses more generally: although each subject has its distinct tradition, the analysis and the observations will also be relevant to other subjects.

Although to some observers from the Global North, the level of detail in the two examples may seem over-prescriptive for a subject syllabus, the two examples are typical of many syllabus documents in countries of the Global South.

### Kenya

In 2019, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) adopted a competency-based curriculum (CBC), which states that it reflects the East African Community’s own Curriculum Harmonisation Structures and Framework (KICD, 2019a). The Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF) describes the approach of the curriculum as follows:

In the context of the Kenyan Competency Based Curriculum, a competency is understood as ‘the ability to apply appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to successfully perform a function’. Within this context, the curriculum is designed to emphasise the importance of not only developing skills and knowledge but also applying these to real life situations. The integration of pertinent and contemporary issues and service learning into the framework provides the opportunity for learners to develop and apply their skills and knowledge, or in other words, their competencies (KICD, 2019a).

In addition to subjects being defined in terms of specific learning outcomes, the curriculum also includes seven transversal, core competencies to be achieved by every student in basic education (see above). As a framework, the BECF says little about the application of a competency-based approach in terms of curriculum subjects. For this, we must turn to the subject syllabuses.

Taking grade 4 of the indigenous languages (mother tongue) syllabus (KICD, 2019b) as an example, the document begins with an Essence statement, followed by general learning outcomes for the subject. The intended outcomes express what students should be expected to know and be able to do by the end of the grade. This in itself is clear. However, the format of the syllabus, organised around

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<sup>10</sup> The core competencies are Communication and Collaboration, Self-efficacy, Critical Thinking and Problem Solving, Creativity and Imagination, Citizenship, Digital Literacy, and Learning to Learn.



topics, is less so (see Table 1). The strands or language skills – namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing – are separated rather than integrated within the topic, with the result that the pupils spend a few lessons on listening, followed by a few lessons on speaking, etc. Likewise, the competencies – consisting of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values – are fragmented and separate rather than integrated.

Strand	Sub-strand	Specific learning outcomes (KSA, core competence, values)	Suggested learning experiences (address the learning outcomes)	Key inquiry question(s) (key questions that guide achievement of the learning outcomes)
3.0 READING	3.4 Reading sentences in a variety of structures to acquire information	By the end of the sub-strand, the learner should be able to:  a) Read sentences in present continuous tense in varied texts b) Answer comprehension questions from texts on modern means of transport c) Enjoy reading a variety of texts to acquire information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners to read pictures and identify modern means of transport</li> <li>• In pairs, learners to practice reading poems on modern means of transport with correct pause and pace</li> <li>• Learners to read short passages on modern means of transport identifying sentences in present continuous tense</li> <li>• Learners to engage in digital language games to read words and sentences about modern means of transport</li> <li>• Learners to participate in peer reading and peer assessment activities</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do we read to acquire information?</li> <li>2. Why is it important to read fluently?</li> <li>3. Why is safety important when using modern transport?</li> </ol>
<b>Core Competencies to be developed:</b> Communication and collaboration as learners read sentences in present continuous tense with comprehension, critical thinking for problem solving, and digital literacy as learners use digital devices to identify passages on modern means of transport and read them, creative thinking and imagination as learners read poems on modern means of transport with correct pause and creatively play digital language games.				
<b>PCIs:</b> Effective communication as learners read sentences with comprehension, safety education as they read passages on safety in modern means of transport, critical thinking for problem solving as learners choose to practice safety on modern means of transport, creative thinking and imagination as learners creatively play digital language games.			<b>Values:</b> Unity as learners work harmoniously in pairs and groups, responsibility as learners practice safety on modern means of transport.	
<b>Links to other subjects:</b> All languages teach reading with fluency, present continuous tense and comprehension; social studies teaches transport			<b>Suggested Community Service Learning activities:</b> Learners to observe safety when using modern transport	

KSA = knowledge, skills, and attitudes

PCI = Pertinent and Contemporary Issue

**Table 1: Extract (retyped from the original) from the syllabus for indigenous languages (mother tongue), grade 4 (KICD, 2019b, p. 72)**

Overall, there are too many dimensions, including intended learning outcomes, ‘suggested learning experiences’, core (i.e. cross-cutting) competencies, and PCIs (pertinent and contemporary issues). It

would be difficult if not impossible for a teacher (or a textbook writer) to juggle all of these at the same time. The complexity and overload mean a likely recourse to rote-teaching rather than allowing the teacher to use her/his autonomy to – in turn – allow the student a degree of application and autonomy.<sup>11</sup>

The suggested learning experiences, which are an important reference for the textbook writers, are constrained by the topic of transport, a topic that recurs in each of the four strands (or skills) and may be a relic inherited from the previous curriculum. It does not immediately suggest opportunities for the development of higher-level competencies.

From an analysis of this syllabus sample, major potential contradictions arise:

- It would be natural for the textbook writers to assume that the suggested learning experiences map to activities or sequences of activities in the textbook. However, the learning experiences do not reflect the desired knowledge, skills, attitudes and values. (Furthermore, similar learning experiences related to transport are also found in the listening, speaking, and writing strands.)
- The inclusion of specific content within the learning experience, such as ‘reading poems on modern means of transport’, could easily default to rote teaching specific texts. There is no indication of how studying and working with poetry might support the development of competencies.
- The nature of competencies does not map well to learning outcomes such as ‘read sentences in present continuous tense’. One might expect a well-designed textbook activity that supported a competency-based approach to be more holistic, to develop and apply integrated knowledge and skills and attitudes.
- In terms of the *core competencies* to be developed, the syllabus format gives no indication of how the learning experience might support critical thinking, problem solving, creative thinking, etc.

In the syllabus sample, the ‘core competencies’ and PCIs (pertinent and contemporary issues) are supplementary to the main specification. Arguably, in a competency-based approach, the core competencies might form the *basis* of the syllabus design, rather than being ancillary, as they are in this format.

The CBC implementation process has not been without its critics (Akala, 2021). Much of the criticism has been focused on the implementation, including the lack of piloting at the outset. However, despite its flaws and challenges, some commentators have noted favourably the reduction of stress to students, the reduced pressure from exams, and an increased focus on skills development especially critical thinking, problem solving, and digital literacy. According to a Kenyan publisher with long experience of publishing educational materials, ‘There is a world of difference in the levels of confidence levels between the children who have gone through CBC compared to the previous system.’ (personal communication)

## Ghana

In contrast with Kenya’s explicitly competency-based curriculum, Ghana’s pre-tertiary education curriculum describes itself as standards-based, with an explicit focus on Knowledge, Understanding and

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<sup>11</sup> For school year 2024, the CBC has been slimmed down in the number of subjects and their content and the above issues may have been at least partly addressed.

Application; Process Skills; and Attitudes and Values. It uses the term ‘competencies’ more to describe transversal or core competencies, similar to the core competencies of the Kenyan basic education curriculum.

In Ghana, the core competencies ...

describe a body of skills that teachers at all levels should seek to develop in their learners. They are ways in which teachers and learners engage with the subject matter as they learn the subject. The competencies presented here describe a connected body of core skills that are acquired throughout the processes of teaching and learning.<sup>12</sup>

The following extract from the syllabus for Ghanaian languages (NaCCA, 2019) provides a brief introduction to guide materials developers and teachers as to how the subject of MT might be taught and assessed. It also describes, in contrast with the Kenya example, how the skills and values should be integrated.

<p><b>NOTE TO THE TEACHER</b></p> <p><b>Integration of Skills</b> A fundamental component of this syllabus is its integrated approach to the teaching of language skills and cultural values. In the sense that Listening, Speaking (cultural values), Reading and Writing are integral in building the grammatical and communicative competence of the learner. Grammar simply sets the rules for speaking, reading and writing correctly. This is not to shift the focus of language lessons to preaching these values. Small doses of these values are fused into literature and composition as well as reading and oral work. It is, therefore, advantageous at this level to adopt an integrated approach in the teaching of language skills and cultural values.</p> <p>This means, for example, that as you teach a writing/composition lesson, relevant grammatical and cultural issues must be raised and explained in relation to the writing task. Similarly, such a lesson must have significant aural and oral components.</p> <p><b>Approach to Grammar</b> It is important to point out that at the primary school, grammar is basically internalised. It must be seen as an integral part of listening and speaking and treated as such. The main task is to assist learners to learn to use the listed language/grammatical items correctly and fluently. These should be introduced in meaningful situations in the context of everyday activities, modelled adequately and practised orally by every child. As much as is possible, the children must not be bothered with grammatical terminologies, definitions and lengthy explanation of abstract grammatical concepts.</p> <p><b>Oral Language (Listening and Speaking)</b> The section on Oral Work referred to as “Listening and Speaking” in this syllabus has the following segments: songs, rhymes, poems, talking about (oneself, family people and places), storytelling, dramatisation, conversation, listening comprehension, asking and answering questions, giving and following commands/instructions and presentation. The purpose of each of these segments is to encourage learners to listen carefully, recite, sing and carry out instructions in the Ghanaian language. In KGI to B3, the Grammar has been integrated into the Listening and Speaking as well as Writing aspects of the lessons. The teacher must give the segments their due weight, balance and influence in the teaching process.</p> <p><b>Reading Material</b> To help the teacher to achieve the indicators of the strand “Reading”, a list of topics for reading has been provided below. The topics have been carefully selected to help learners acquire vital information on health issues, as well as information on issues of current interest. The teacher is further encouraged to use his/her initiative in improvising and planning new reading materials. It is a requirement that each learner should read three books on different topics each term, that is, nine books per year. Apart from the prescribed books, the teacher should also encourage learners to read any Ghanaian Language book they find interesting.</p> <p><b>Supplementary Material</b> The teacher is further encouraged to constantly look for other supplementary material which will enhance the teaching/learning especially of the sections on “Listening and Speaking” and “Reading”; Materials that focus on comprehensive sexuality education, moral, ethical and social values such as honesty, diligence, integrity, are particularly recommended.</p>
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Figure 1: Extract from the syllabus for Ghanaian languages (NaCCA, 2019, p. xvii)

In terms of the skills for MT at grade 3 (NaCCA, 2019), the following extract from the reading strand of the Ghana mother tongue syllabus may be compared with the previous extract from Kenya, with which it shares similar problems for textbook developers and teachers:

<sup>12</sup> <https://nacca.gov.gh/cross-curriculum-issues-core-competences/> The core competencies, which are almost identical to those in Kenya’s CBC, are: Critical thinking and problem solving, Creativity and innovation, Communication and collaboration, Cultural identity and global citizenship, Personal development and leadership, and Digital literacy.

Sub-Strand 6: Comprehension		
CONTENT STANDARD	INDICATORS AND EXEMPLARS	SUBJECT SPECIFIC PRACTICES AND CORE COMPETENCIES
B3.2.6.1 Exhibit knowledge of answering questions based on texts presented.	<p><b>B3.2.6.1.1 Answer questions based on passage read to them.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let learners say the letters of the alphabet as a group and then individually.</li> <li>With correct pronunciation and tone read texts aloud.</li> <li>Let learners read the text in turns.</li> <li>Ask questions based on the text read for learners to answer.</li> </ul> <p><b>B3.2.6.1.2 Answer questions based on passage read by learners.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Let learners say the letters of the alphabet as a group and then individually.</li> <li>Give textbooks to learners.</li> <li>Lead learners to read the text on a given page as a group and individually.</li> <li>Ask questions based on the text they have read for them to answer.</li> </ul>	<p>Communication and collaboration</p> <p>Critical thinking and Problem solving</p>

**Table 2: Extract from grade 3 syllabus for Ghanaian languages (NaCCA, 2019, p. 101), reading strand**

While the core competencies that are listed here could provide fruitful opportunities for new approaches to teaching literacy or reading, there is no indication as to *how* they might do this. Indeed, they do not seem to be reflected in the indicators and exemplars at all.

It is the indicators and exemplars that writers might focus on when developing new textbooks. However, although they provide clear examples of standards, they do not guide the writers to develop textbooks with an ‘integrated approach to the teaching of language skills and cultural values’ (Note to the Teacher, NaCCA, 2019, p. xvii). As in the Kenya example, the core competencies appear as a kind of supplement to the core elements of the specification – the standards, indicators and exemplars – rather than being integrated into the syllabus.

Neither of the examples from Kenya or Ghana clearly feature the application of knowledge or provide opportunities for teacher or student autonomy. Nor do they support a combination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values.

### The place of competencies in centralised, textbook-centred systems

The two syllabus extracts should be seen from the perspective of textbook writers: how the syllabuses specify the kinds of activities that the textbooks should include and how textbook evaluation criteria might be written and applied. These will be the main influences on the writers of the textbooks. (The other major influence will be the textbooks of the previous curriculum, especially if the writer is the same as the writer under the previous curriculum.)

Due to the relatively high profiles of their education systems and online availability of their documentation, the curricula of both Kenya and Ghana have been among the most influential among other countries in Anglophone sub-Saharan Africa. In both countries also, commercial publishers have the role of publishing the textbooks for government schools according to curriculum documents and following textbook evaluation criteria.

Textbooks can be powerful levers of change. However, the above syllabus snapshots from Kenya and Ghana show the scale of the challenge for textbook writers, who have the task of turning big curriculum ideas into small-scale practice.

Ironically, it is the dominance of textbooks that may prevent policymakers giving them due consideration when attempting to move away from the rote-teaching methodology that the textbooks themselves often, wittingly or unwittingly, reinforce. In an effort to distance the methodology from rote teaching, the textbooks themselves are distanced.

However, echoing the findings of Guthrie (2021a, 2021b) and Schweisfurth (2013), it is not the textbooks themselves that constrain a competency-based approach. In Schweisfurth’s continua, the choice is not between *rote-learning from textbooks* or *competency-based teaching without textbooks*. The sweet spot lies at a point or points on a continuum, where textbooks can provide a frame for an appropriately contextualised, competency-based approach. Textbooks can support a different kind of

teaching by reducing the tendency to default to ‘rote teaching’ and by including content and pedagogy that integrates knowledge, skills, attitudes and values, by creating opportunities for student and teacher agency, and by allowing for and encouraging ‘new’ situations in which students are given space to apply their learning. However, in order to be able to produce such textbooks differently from how they have previously worked, textbook writers need to be provided with syllabuses that steer them towards a new approach rather than reinforcing a traditional approach.

## Conclusion

If the feature most common to curricular reforms in low- and middle-income countries is a desire to move away from rote teaching, how can countries identify and isolate the factors behind rote teaching? How can they deploy existing resources to shift the thinking and practice of the teaching workforce? For Anderson-Levitt and Gardinier (2021), who ask ‘What problems do competency-based reforms solve?’, it is apparent for many countries that the problem is primarily one of pedagogy.

Taylor et al. (2020) find that ‘In any major education reform, where there is a shift or refocusing of learning goals, alignment across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is critical for implementation to occur’. It seems clear that – at least for countries in the Global South – curriculum and pedagogy should be framed for textbook writers. Where Taylor et al. ask, ‘Does the jurisdiction systematically include teaching strategies designed to teach students the competencies?’ the framing for textbook writers is critical for framing the pedagogies.

Rather than being a barrier to implementing competency-based content and pedagogy, textbooks can provide a practical way of thinking about supporting change in teachers’ practices. Competency-based curricula, even when they are defined in terms of transversal or key competencies, have subject-specific applications. As we have seen in the case of mother tongue syllabuses, breaking the subject into strands and sub-strands and then suggesting activities within each strand, may not only be misread by textbook developers, but it also contradicts the intentions of the competency-based approach, which, in the case of mother tongue, should *integrate* the development of skills. The syllabus needs to make clear to the materials writers *and* the teachers how the competencies – whether subject-specific or cross-cutting – can be taught and assessed in the subject and at the level or grade of the textbook.

Curriculum and pedagogy have both generic and particular, subject-specific characteristics. Therefore, when considering how a competency-based approach might be reflected in textbooks, we must consider subject and level as well as other contextual factors such as the teachers’ own experiences and dispositions. While taking care to be appropriate to context, a competency-based approach that seeks to reduce rote teaching should acknowledge that a degree of teacher autonomy – while not a competency in itself – is an essential factor in developing student competencies and sense of autonomy. Without an increase in autonomy, both for students and for teachers, competencies cannot be enabled.

In the education systems of the Global South, the syllabus is the hinge-point for the expression of a competency-based approach. At the national level, in both low- and middle-income countries, a curriculum is expressed by means of frameworks and syllabuses. However, while the curriculum framework looks *outwards*, addressing national stakeholders and embracing the priorities of society, the syllabus looks *inwards*, into the classroom, addressing the teachers and the schools but also the writers of the textbooks. In order to give a competency-based curricular reforms a chance of success, the subject syllabuses should provide a clear foundation for teachers and textbook writers alike.

## Biographical notes

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