



Analyzing the Rationale Behind Curriculum Changes in Kenya's Education System from 1890 to 2023

Caroline Wambui Wanjugu¹; Dr. Peter Gitonga Kimani²; Dr. Bernard Wasilwa Wanyama³

^{1,2,3}Department of Educational Foundations,

Kenyatta University

Email: wambuiwanjugu@gmail.com¹; kimanipeter@ku.ac.ke²; wanyama.bernard@ku.ac.ke³

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rationale behind curriculum changes in Kenya's education system from 1890 to 2023, exploring the political, economic, and social forces that have shaped educational reforms over more than a century. Grounded in Teacher-Centered Theory and Modern Curriculum Theory, the research employed a qualitative historical approach utilizing document analysis, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Using purposive and snowball sampling, 98 participants were selected from a target population of 130, including policymakers, curriculum developers, experienced educators, and stakeholders with direct experience in Kenya's curriculum evolution. Findings revealed that curriculum changes were driven by distinct contextual factors across different historical periods. During the colonial era (1890-1963), curriculum design served British imperial interests, emphasizing literacy and vocational training to produce African laborers for the colonial economy. Post-independence reforms (1963-1984) were driven by the need to Africanize education, promote national unity, foster self-reliance, and align learning with indigenous cultural values. The introduction of the 8-4-4 system in 1985 reflected efforts to integrate academic and vocational training in the curriculum to address youth unemployment and skills gaps, though it emphasized knowledge acquisition through rote learning. The 2017 Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) emerged from the imperative to align education with Vision 2030, labor market demands, and globalization, shifting focus toward practical skills, critical thinking, and learner-centered pedagogy as outlined in the Task Force on Re-alignment and Sessional Paper No. 2 of 2015. The study concludes that curriculum reforms have consistently responded to evolving national development priorities, economic needs, and socio-political contexts, underscoring the complex interplay of factors shaping educational policy in Kenya.

Key Words: Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), Curriculum Evolution, Curriculum Implementation, Education System, Educational Policies, Educational Reforms

INTRODUCTION

The curriculum is a critical tool in educational system development, serving as both a guide for advancement and a repository of societal values (Pinar, 2012). Prior to Christian missionary arrival, indigenous education in Kenya existed as informal, community-based learning integrated into daily life across ethnic communities. This education emphasized practical skills transmission farming, craftsmanship, and social responsibilities through oral traditions, rituals, and apprenticeships, effectively maintaining intellectual and cultural growth while ensuring cultural identity continuity. The late 19th century arrival of Christian missionaries transformed Kenya's education system. Missionary schooling focused on basic literacy and Christian conversion, with limited scope that often neglected broader educational needs (Sifuna, 1990). The colonial curriculum, influenced by British administration, trained a semi-educated workforce for low-level clerical roles, serving as a social control tool that embedded colonial values, reinforced hierarchies, and remained disconnected from local cultural contexts.

Following independence in 1963, Kenya undertook dismantling the colonial education legacy. The Ominde Report (1964) advocated curriculum Africanization by incorporating local cultural values and indigenous knowledge while addressing socio-economic goals. Together with the Mackay Report (1981), which emphasized self-reliance and vocational training, these reforms led to a curriculum designed to foster national unity, cultural identity, and economic development, significantly reducing illiteracy and increasing educational access. In 1985, Kenya introduced the 8-4-4 education system under the knowledge-based curriculum, emphasizing practical and vocational education alongside academic subjects to address workforce preparation gaps and rising unemployment (Eshiwani, 1993; Kafu, 2011). However, this curriculum faced challenges including increased workload and exam-focused approaches that prioritized rote learning over creativity and critical thinking, creating tension between mass education goals and curriculum quality demands. To address the challenges facing the Knowledge-based curriculum, Kenya introduced the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in 2017, aligning with global learner-centered approaches emphasizing creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration (MoE, 2020). The CBC aims to equip learners with practical skills for a rapidly changing world, moving beyond traditional rote learning. While initial evaluations suggest potential to address knowledge-based curriculum shortcomings, implementation challenges persist regarding teacher training, infrastructure, and resources (Wangeci, 2018). Understanding Kenya's curriculum evolution from 1890 to 2023 reveals education's role in social engineering, its impacts on economic development, cultural identity, and social cohesion, and provides insights for informed policymaking and future educational reforms.

Problem Statement

Despite numerous education reforms in Kenya, significant gaps remain in understanding the historical curriculum evolution and its impact on educational outcomes. Previous studies examined specific curriculum changes without comprehensively analyzing long-term developments and implications from 1890 to 2023. This study addresses the lack of comprehensive research on Kenya's

curriculum development over this period, which is crucial for identifying factors shaping current practices and informing future reforms.

This research addresses critical issues including misalignment between educational outcomes and labor market needs, persistent implementation challenges, and policy-making inefficiencies (KICD, 2020). By documenting and analyzing the historical development of Kenya's education curriculum, the study examines the rationale behind curriculum changes in Kenya's education system from 1890-2023, providing essential insights for guiding future reforms, ensuring effectiveness and alignment with national goals such as Vision 2030.

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by two complementary theories: Teacher-Centered Theory and Modern Curriculum Theory.

Teacher-Centered Theory

Teacher-Centered Theory, developed by B.F. Skinner in the 1950s, is rooted in behaviorist principles emphasizing the teacher as the primary authority in education. The theory posits that effective learning occurs when teachers control the instructional environment, determining content, delivery methods, and learning pace. Students play passive roles, expected to absorb and replicate presented knowledge. Key tenets include teacher authority, structured learning environments, and emphasis on rote memorization and obedience.

This model was particularly prevalent in colonial and early post-colonial education systems, designed to produce compliant, efficient workforces rather than foster critical thinking or creativity. In Kenya, Teacher-Centered Theory was instrumental during the colonial period, where education maintained colonial control (Serin, 2018). The curriculum focused on subjects valuable for economic exploitation and social control. Post-independence Kenya saw decolonization efforts, yet the teacher-centered approach persisted through government influence on curriculum development and continued emphasis on teacher authority (Mascolo, 2009). While providing structured frameworks ensuring content delivery across diverse settings, this approach had significant limitations: stifling student creativity, limiting critical thinking, and reducing engagement to passive information reception.

Modern Curriculum Theory

Modern Curriculum Theory, articulated by Franklin Bobbitt in 1956, contrasts Teacher-Centered Theory by emphasizing learner-centered education. This theory recognizes students' unique needs, interests, and learning styles, arguing curriculum design should engage students in active learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Key tenets include inclusivity, lifelong learning, and teachers as facilitators rather than authoritarian figures.

This theory's significance is underscored by its application to recent Kenyan educational reforms, particularly the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). The theory supports personalized learning experiences, making education more relevant and responsive to diverse student needs in a globalized world (Clark, 2017). The CBC embodies Modern Curriculum Theory, developing 21st-century

competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, and ethical decision-making, contrasting sharply with earlier teacher-centered models (Brown, 2018).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Eshiwani (1990) conducted a historical analysis examining the rationale behind Kenya's colonial education system, focusing on cultural imperialism. Through analysis of missionary records, colonial administrative reports, and historical documents. The study revealed that the primary aim was indoctrinating African students with Western values to ensure subservience to colonial rulers. The system deliberately kept African cultures subordinate by limiting integration of African languages and traditions. However, study lacks in-depth exploration of long-term effects on indigenous education systems.

Furse (1965) examined motivations behind labor extraction through colonial education. Based on interviews with colonial administrators, educators, and African laborers. The study revealed the curriculum was designed to prepare Africans for manual labor, serving British colonial economic interests. This vocational training focus limited higher education access and reinforced socio-economic hierarchies. The current study builds on these findings by analyzing barriers to higher education and intellectual development in colonial Kenya

Sewell (1992) conducted ethnographic research on administrative elite development within colonial education. His research showed the system selectively provided higher education to small groups of Africans, creating an intermediary class supporting colonial government interests. Sewell identified gaps in understanding long-term impacts of this elite class on post-independence socio-political structures. The current research extends these findings by exploring how this educated elite's legacy continues influencing Kenya's political and educational systems.

Mwiria (1990) analyzed colonial assimilation policy rationales, focusing on integrating African students into Western cultural and political structures. His research showed colonial governments sought to reshape African identities by instilling Western values, ensuring political and cultural dominance. However, study left gaps in understanding resistance to assimilation policies, particularly indigenous knowledge's role.

Somerset (2009) analyzed political symbolism behind post-independence curriculum changes, revealing governments framed academic-focused curricula as equality and progress symbols, contrasting with racially segregated colonial education. Somerset identified gaps in understanding real-world implications of symbolic changes, particularly in rural and marginalized regions where quality education access remained limited. The current research critically evaluates symbolic reform effectiveness by analyzing tangible impacts on educational equity across Kenya's diverse regions.

Eshiwani (1983) investigated post-colonial quality education perceptions, finding academic education was viewed as superior to vocational training. This perception led to prioritizing academic subjects over practical skills, neglecting vocational education importance. The current study extends this work by exploring long-term impacts of this imbalance on Kenya's education system, particularly contributions to vocational training underdevelopment and education-labor market

mismatches, investigating how recent reforms like the Competency-Based Curriculum address this through integrating academic and practical skills.

Wanjohi (2011) conducted qualitative research on nationalism and curriculum indigenization in post-independence Kenya, finding governments promoted national unity and cultural pride by incorporating local history, geography, and languages. However, gaps existed in policy implementation, particularly regarding regional access disparities. The current study explores indigenization policy effectiveness, especially in rural and marginalized areas, examining regional challenges hindering full realization of curricula promoting national unity and cultural pride.

Bedi (2006) studied international donor influence on education policies, finding donor-driven reforms emphasized basic literacy and numeracy but insufficiently addressed local needs. The current study examines long-term donor impacts and tensions between global development priorities and local contexts. Njeng'ere (2014) evaluated CBC implementation rationale, identifying gaps in teacher preparedness and resource availability. The current research extends this by evaluating teacher training program effectiveness and resource distribution impacts on CBC implementation in rural and urban schools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

The study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically a historical research approach. Historical research design is a method used to systematically collect, evaluate, and interpret data from the past to understand and analyze events, trends, and issues within a historical context.

Target Population

The target population consisted of approximately 130 individuals who have played integral roles in shaping Kenya's education system. This included educational policymakers and curriculum developers from the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), who have been instrumental from colonial commissions such as Phelps-Stokes (1924) through independence reforms like the Ominde Report (1964) to the 2017 Competency-Based Curriculum. University historians and researchers were included for their specialized knowledge of Kenya's educational history, providing critical insights into how political, social, and economic factors influenced educational reforms. Experienced educators, teachers and administrators with hands-on implementation experience offered first-hand accounts of curriculum impacts on teaching and student outcomes. Representatives from educational organizations such as the Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT) provided perspectives on how reforms were received by educators. Community members, including parents, learners, and local leaders, contributed insights into cultural and societal impacts, particularly regarding indigenous knowledge preservation.

Sampling Techniques and Sample Size

The study employed purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling intentionally selected participants based on their specific roles and expertise in curriculum development, including policymakers, curriculum developers, historians, and experienced educators identified through

official records and professional networks. Snowball sampling identified additional participants not initially captured, particularly community elders with cultural knowledge of indigenous education and retired educators with experience in earlier reforms. Using the Taro Yamane formula for finite populations with a precision level of 0.05, the sample size was calculated as 98 participants from the target population of 130. The distribution included: 8 educational policymakers, 11 curriculum developers, 34 experienced teachers, 4 representatives from educational organizations, 30 community members and elders, and 11 university historians and researchers.

Research Instruments

Three primary instruments were employed. A document analysis guide systematically analyzed historical documents, government reports, policy materials, and archival records. Both external criticism (verifying document authenticity by examining authors' qualifications, institutional affiliations, and contextual factors) and internal criticism (establishing accuracy through cross-referencing, assessing author competence, and evaluating content consistency) were employed. A semi-structured interview guide gathered detailed insights from key informants, combining predetermined core questions with flexible follow-up probes. This approach ensured comprehensive coverage of research themes while allowing participants to elaborate on unique experiences across the 133-year timeframe. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) guides facilitated collaborative exchanges among stakeholder groups. Currently practicing teachers participated in FGDs to discuss contemporary CBC implementation challenges, while experienced educators spanning multiple curriculum systems like the knowledge-based and competence based curriculum participated in individual interviews for deeper historical reflection. Additional FGD participants included parents and educational organization representatives.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within qualitative data. The process involved: (1) familiarization through repeated reading of transcripts and documents; (2) identifying preliminary themes by grouping significant statements around topics like curriculum content, policy shifts, and implementation challenges; (3) refining themes by assessing coherence, relevance, and distinctiveness; and (4) reporting findings with direct participant quotes to ensure authenticity. Themes were interpreted in relation to study objective, providing comprehensive understanding of curriculum evolution, challenges, and societal impacts.

RESULTS

The rationale behind Kenya's education curriculum evolution is deeply intertwined with the country's shifting political, economic, and social landscape. The curriculum has evolved responding to internal and external forces, reflecting changing priorities and the need to align education with national development goals.

In the pre-colonial period, education curriculum though informal centered on community and practical survival skills including farming, hunting, and craftsmanship, embedded in daily life and transmitted through oral traditions and hands-on training. As one community elder noted, "Pre-colonial education was focused on practical skills, survival, and preparing the young for their roles in society."

The colonial period marked a significant shift, with curriculum shaped by colonial administration needs. Education was designed to produce a compliant workforce serving colonial interests, emphasizing literacy, Christian doctrine, and basic vocational skills for low-level labor (Sifuna, 1990; Eshiwani, 1990). This system suppressed indigenous cultures and marginalized African languages and cultural practices. One historian stated, “The colonial curriculum was designed to subjugate, providing only enough education to keep the local population subservient.” This aligned with findings by Onubogu and Davis (2020) and Karanja (2010), who emphasized how colonial education served British economic needs while failing to provide academic opportunities or support broader African population development.

Following independence in 1963, Kenya’s education system required urgent transformation. The Ominde Report (1964) became a landmark document stressing education Africanization to reflect national identity, promote self-reliance, and build national unity. One policymaker noted, “Political factors like independence in 1963 and the need for Africanization of content drove major reforms.” The report recommended teaching local languages, including vocational and technical training, and integrating national history. New subjects; agriculture, home science, business studies, music, and art and craft were introduced to foster self-reliance and support industrialization. However, over time these vocational subjects became marginalized as emphasis shifted toward academic achievement and exam passing.

Economic challenges became dominant curriculum change drivers, particularly during the 1980s economic downturn. The Koech Report (1999) responded to increasing mismatches between education outputs and labor market demands, recommending more flexible, skills-oriented curriculum to equip youth for practical work and self-employment. One curriculum developer stated, “Economic needs pushed for technical and vocational education, especially during the 1980s economic downturn.” The Mackay Report (1981) contributed to the 8-4-4 system (1985), aiming to integrate academic and vocational education, though the Koech Report critiqued its overemphasis on exams and rote learning at practical skills’ expense. Recent reforms have been influenced by globalization, technological advancement, and alignment with global standards. The Basic Education Curriculum Framework (2017) outlines shifts toward competency-based learning prioritizing critical thinking, creativity, and practical skills over rote memorization, reflecting Kenya’s Vision 2030 goals for a knowledge-based economy. The CBC introduced three pathways allowing over 576 combinations, dual certification, community service, and local languages emphasis to develop well-rounded individuals. Focus group participants called CBC a “game-changer,” with one educator noting, “The curriculum is no longer exam-centered; CBC now cares about what a child can actually do.”

However, CBC implementation faces challenges including resource limitations and teacher preparedness requirements. The rationale behind Kenya’s curriculum changes has been shaped by complex political, economic, and global forces interplay, though challenges remain in aligning educational outcomes with labor market needs and ensuring adequate teacher preparation.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The rationale behind curriculum changes has been predominantly driven by political independence, socio-economic challenges, and globalization. The study confirms that major reforms were responses to political liberation, socio-economic challenges such as unemployment, and the need to prepare learners for a competitive global economy. These drivers have influenced the emphasis on vocational training, skills development, and competency-based learning over time. Reforms, therefore, were shaped by the demands of a rapidly evolving political, economic, and global landscape, aiming to better equip students with the necessary skills for contemporary challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the study's conclusions regarding gaps in teacher preparedness, it is recommended that comprehensive teacher training programs be developed and implemented to focus on competency-based pedagogy, continuous professional development, and practical skills teaching.

The study recommends the periodic review and adjustment of the curriculum to ensure that it remains responsive to Kenya's socio-economic landscape and global educational trends. A clear, structured process for curriculum evaluation and revision should be established to ensure that changes are based on evidence rather than being reactive or driven by political cycles.

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