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Harnessing the competency-based curriculum for a socially just education system: insights from Uganda

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ABSTRACT

Social justice in education in the Global South remains a daunting endeavour. This study examines Uganda's competency-based curriculum (CBC), introduced in 2020, and explores how it might be leveraged to advance socially just curricula. Drawing from interviews and focus group discussions in two elite and two mass lower secondary schools, it examines variations in pedagogy, assessment and implementation, revealing both the potential of the CBC and its limitations in the pursuit of social justice in schools. The findings can therefore serve as a building block in the case for socially just curricula, although they do not in themselves provide a basis for addressing systemic and structural injustices in education.

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Socially just curricula; competency-based curriculum; elite schools; mass schools

Introduction

Uganda has recently implemented a competency-based curriculum (CBC) for lower secondary schools with the aim of providing a more holistic and relevant education system for its students. This curriculum focuses on developing practical skills and knowledge that are aligned with the needs of the twenty-first century (NCDC, 2020). In addition to academic learning, the CBC emphasises the importance of an inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students, regardless of their backgrounds. These are fundamental principles on which social justice can be built. Social justice in education aims to promote equitable educational opportunities by addressing structural inequalities and forms of discrimination faced by marginalised groups. It emphasises the provision of access to education for all, while recognising the need to create inclusive and supportive education systems for learners from diverse backgrounds. Most debates about social justice and education arise from the desire to challenge unjust relationships. Establishing a social justice perspective is needed to ensure inclusive, relevant and participatory education systems (see Nesterova, 2023). Overall, social justice and education are important topics that require ongoing discussion and efforts to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

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In this paper, we explore the ways in which schools can harness the CBC to foster a socially just curriculum. We examine the principles of the CBC and how they align with the goals of a socially just education system. Additionally, attention is given to practical strategies for implementing the CBC in a way that promotes equity and inclusivity in the classroom. We conclude by arguing that, by embracing the principles of the CBC and leveraging its potential, educators can play a pivotal role in shaping a curriculum that not only equips students with essential competencies but also promotes social justice and inclusiveness.

Background to the study

In spite of the government's attempts to enhance educational access and equity through the Universal Secondary Education (USE) policy, a significant number of school-age children have been neglected (Kakuba et al., 2021). With the roll-out of the CBC in 2020, the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) not only anticipated development of learner competencies but also envisaged a shift to a curriculum that recognises the needs of the less privileged majority of learners. This is in alignment with the Education and Sports Sector Strategic Plan (2017/2020) that advocates for the delivery of equitable, relevant and quality education for all. In the midst of these varied reforms geared towards educational equity, access and greater inclusion, educational outcomes of the students from the least privileged backgrounds remain compromised by deeper structural complexities associated with socioeconomic status, location, gender and cultural norms. The Uganda National Household Survey 2019/2020 found that urban areas had a higher secondary school enrolment rate (43%) than rural areas (24%). There was a significant disparity in enrolment between regions, with Karamoja and Acholi at 12% and 7% respectively, while Kampala had 52%. Additionally, there was a large gap in enrolment based on wealth, with secondary school enrolment rates of 13.4% among the poorest and 49.5% among the richest (UBOS, 2021). More concerted stakeholder efforts are required to address this persistent inequality. Therefore, as Tedesco et al. (2014) suggest, there is a need for an ongoing debate and examination of curriculum reforms, including the CBC, to ensure that they address the wider aspects of social justice.

In the recent past, Uganda has registered key milestones in educational and curriculum development. Successive curriculum reforms have been driven by changing political, social and economic dynamics in Uganda. The country has witnessed several curriculum reviews and revisions to align with the changing needs of its population and the global demands of the twenty-first century. One of the most significant reforms was the introduction of USE in 2007, which aimed to increase access to quality education and skills development, especially for vulnerable communities.[1] In the realm of curriculum reform, the CBC for lower secondary schools was operationalised in 2020. It is safe to assert that such curriculum developments have been greatly motivated by Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". Nevertheless, the NCDC maintains that the technical ideas behind the CBC largely derive from the recommendations of the Government White Paper on Education (1992). Among other recommendations, the NCDC embraced the need for key curricula

overhauls, with a shift from a curriculum hitherto designed for a minority elite population to one that enables all learners to develop skills and knowledge according to their individual abilities (NCDC, 2013). Developing a skill set that aligns with the diverse needs and abilities of learners would give students from underprivileged communities a substantive starting point to bargain for agency and space within recognisable educational spaces. However, skill is but one ingredient of competency. According to the OECD, competency is defined as the holistic integration of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to effectively address complex, real-world challenges (OECD, 2018). Unlike skills, which refer to specific tasks or abilities, competencies enable individuals to navigate dynamic, interdisciplinary problems, interact with diverse perspectives and adapt to evolving contexts. This broader understanding of competency aligns with the goals of the CBC framework, which seeks to equip learners not only with academic knowledge and technical skills but also with the personal and social competencies needed to engage in critical thinking, collaboration and social action.

The CBC in Uganda is an educational model that focuses on developing practical skills, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities rather than on traditional academic knowledge alone. Rooted in constructivist pedagogy, it emphasises learner-centredness, in which students actively construct knowledge through experience and inquiry, with teachers acting as facilitators. Ideologically, the CBC aligns with neoliberal values by prioritising skills development for workforce readiness, but it also has the potential to empower students by encouraging critical thinking and social change, as envisioned in Paulo Freire's transformative pedagogy.

However, the CBC's implementation in Uganda faces challenges that could impact its potential for promoting social justice. These include disparities in resources and infrastructure between urban and rural schools, inadequate teacher training and the need for contextual relevance to marginalised groups (Altinyelken, 2015). While the CBC can empower marginalised students and foster social and economic mobility, it risks reinforcing existing inequities if it is not well adapted to local contexts. Ultimately, the CBC's success in promoting social justice will depend on addressing these structural challenges and ensuring inclusive and equitable implementation.

Significance of the study

This research contributes to the existing body of literature (see Lawrence & Maphalala, 2021; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Sinyolo, 2021; Wisker & Masika, 2017) while enriching our understanding of the connection between social justice and curriculum reforms in secondary education. It is important to recognise that earlier educational levels (in this case, lower secondary) play a crucial role in reflecting and perpetuating disparities related to social class, gender, rural/urban location and ethnicity, among others.

This study aims to provide the evidence required by policymakers and educators to address important issues regarding the implementation of the new curriculum, and to point towards possibilities of leveraging the CBC for social justice. By gathering input from various stakeholders about the new curriculum, including teachers, principals and students, this research uncovers gaps in implementation and their potential impact on social justice. Furthermore, the participation of school administrators and teachers is

expected to empower them and provide valuable feedback that can ultimately enhance inclusive teaching and learning.

The findings suggest that some obstacles to socially just education may be addressed through more inclusive approaches to CBC implementation, although broader structural inequalities require attention beyond the classroom and school level.

Overall, understanding the diverse approaches employed in the implementation of the CBC for social justice would open up possibilities for future directions in this field. By examining the experiences of educational institutions in different countries (in this case, Uganda), researchers can gain valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing the CBC framework to advance social justice in education.

Objectives of the study

(1) To examine the inclusiveness of the CBC's pedagogical practices and modes of assessment in lower secondary schools in Uganda.
(2) To examine the challenges in the implementation of the CBC across elite and mass schools[2] and their wider implications for social justice in education.
(3) To identify opportunities for leveraging the CBC for socially just curricula in Uganda.

A curriculum in social change

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in re-evaluating traditional curriculum frameworks in favour of approaches that foster social justice (Dover, 2016). The integration of social justice principles into education is seen as a way to address systemic inequalities and prepare students to critically engage with societal issues (Flores et al., 2014; McKenzie et al., 2008).

The current landscape of competency-based education is multifaceted, with various approaches and models being explored and implemented in different educational settings. For instance, although many countries south of the Sahara have adopted competency-based education (Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi and Rwanda, among others), their approaches vary significantly. The variations are even starker in relation to how curriculum reforms are understood in the Global North and South. In this light, we concur with Tikly and Barrett (2013) in advocating for a "localised" approach to issues of integrating social justice in education. The authors are critical of a rights-based approach to inclusion, which, in their terms, amounts to "global inclusionism". They instead argue for a "grounded inclusionism" – "an approach that builds on the situated expertise of local stakeholders and shares information on existing good practices between contexts" (Tikly & Barrett, 2013, p. 5). We therefore build on the perceptions and experiences of local stakeholders within Uganda's education system to develop a well-informed perspective on the CBC and its affordances for socially just curricula. In the same vein, the results of this investigation can be used only for reference rather than for generalisation or transferability.

The integration of social justice principles into the CBC would involve a critical examination of curriculum content, instructional strategies and assessment methods. Scholars

have emphasised the importance of centring marginalised voices and perspectives in curriculum development, as well as promoting critical consciousness and action-oriented learning (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Rohrer, 2018). By infusing social justice into the fabric of the CBC, educators can empower students to become agents of change in their communities.

Research indicates that the CBC has the potential to foster a more equitable and inclusive learning environment, as it focuses on the acquisition of specific skills and knowledge that are relevant to real-world contexts (Jagers et al., 2019). In this way, students that may not easily cope with "knowledges" that require higher-order thinking could be compensated elsewhere, in skill-based projects. Put differently, the CBC could equip learners with skills that go beyond traditional academic knowledge by also focusing on competencies essential for democratic engagement and social empowerment. Additionally, it allows for personalised learning pathways, accommodating diverse learner needs and backgrounds. However, personalised learning ought to be approached with some care, as Zhang et al. (2020) caution. It requires careful consideration of varying technological landscapes and contextual factors that may affect its implementation.

Moreover, the CBC promotes inclusivity by recognising and valuing diverse learning styles, backgrounds and experiences. It allows for flexibility in pacing and assessment, ensuring that students from various socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural contexts can progress based on their individual strengths and needs. Aronson and Laughter (2016) argue that, although many educators have claimed to have developed culturally responsive education, evidence suggests otherwise. Therefore, there is a need to develop curriculum frameworks that support positive learning outcomes across subject areas. In a similar vein, McKenzie et al. (2008) propose three key goals for educational leaders at the forefront of social justice: (a) ensure high academic achievement of all learners, (b) prepare their students for critical citizenship and (c) accommodate learners in diverse and inclusive classrooms. In this way, all students, irrespective of their individual dis/advantaging backgrounds, would have access to a richly rewarding and engaging curriculum.

A closer analysis of existing research initiatives on the CBC framework for social justice has revealed several best practices and emerging trends in this field. These include the integration of community-based learning experiences (Frederick et al., 2010; Thurston & Yelich Biniecki, 2017), the incorporation of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy (Aronson & Laughter, 2016; Flores et al., 2014) and the development of assessment strategies that authentically measure students' ability to apply their skills and knowledge to address social issues in the real world (Swanson et al., 2019). As noted earlier, the implementation of such developments varies considerably, depending on the pre-existing institutional and national context. While the potential benefits of the CBC for social justice are evident, there are challenges and considerations that must be addressed. These include issues related to assessment practices, teacher capacity and training, and the need for ongoing equity-focused research and evaluation (Byrd, 2016; Cochran-Smith et al., 2009; Khalifa et al., 2016). Understanding and navigating these challenges is crucial in leveraging the CBC for socially just curricula.

Theorising and conceptualising social justice in education in Uganda

Social justice in education is a multidimensional concept that extends beyond access to schooling to encompass equitable learning conditions, meaningful participation and the empowerment of marginalised groups. While a range of theoretical perspectives have been advanced to conceptualise social justice, this study draws primarily on Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy as its central analytical lens. This focus should not be read as an assumption that Freire's work is the sole or definitive account of social justice in education. Rather, it reflects a deliberate theoretical choice, grounded in the relevance of Freire's ideas to contexts such as Uganda that are marked by historical inequalities, colonial legacies and persistent socioeconomic disparities.

To situate Freire's contribution within the broader landscape of social justice theory, Nancy Fraser's (2014) three-dimensional framework of *redistribution*, *recognition* and *representation* is particularly instructive. Fraser conceptualises social justice as requiring attention not only to the equitable distribution of material resources (redistribution) but also to the cultural and symbolic variations across social groups (recognition) and to political voice and participation in decision-making processes (representation). This framework offers a useful baseline for understanding how Freire's pedagogical concerns intersect with wider structural, cultural and political dimensions of injustice in education.

Freire's work, most notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), aligns strongly with Fraser's concern for representation, as it foregrounds dialogue, participation and the co-construction of knowledge. Freire critiques the "banking model" of education, in which learners are positioned as passive recipients of knowledge. He instead advocates for a problem-posing, dialogical pedagogy that enables learners to critically interrogate their social realities. In the Ugandan education system, exam-oriented teaching and rote learning continue to dominate (Kamonges, 2021), limiting students' capacity to question entrenched social, economic and political inequalities. From a social justice perspective, this undermines learners' ability to participate meaningfully in shaping both their educational experiences and the broader society.

Freire's emphasis on *conscientization***,** or the development of critical consciousness, also resonates with Fraser's dimension of *recognition***.** Conscientization involves recognising and valuing learners' lived experiences, histories and knowledge systems as legitimate sources of understanding (Freire, 1985). In Uganda, however, curricula are still largely Western-centred, disregarding local knowledge systems and histories that could be powerful tools for critical engagement (Ssentanda, 2014). This epistemic marginalisation constitutes a form of injustice, as it devalues the identities and cultural resources of learners while privileging external knowledge systems. Addressing social justice in education therefore requires not only pedagogical change but also curricular reform that affirms local knowledge and cultural diversity.

While Freire's work is primarily concerned with pedagogy and consciousness, it also implicitly engages with Fraser's dimension of *redistribution* by drawing attention to the structural conditions that constrain educational possibilities. Social justice cannot be reduced to individual empowerment alone; it must also address systemic barriers such as regional disparities in educational provision, gendered inequalities and language policies that disadvantage non-English speakers (Tikly & Barrett, 2011). In Uganda, policy initiatives such as USE have expanded access, yet they often fail to confront the deeper

structural and material inequalities that shape educational quality and outcomes (Altinyelken, 2015; Bajaj, 2011).

Therefore, applying Freire's ideas to Uganda's education system would mean shifting its focus from economic mobility to liberation. This would involve democratising knowledge through participatory learning (Freire, 1974), addressing language inequality by incorporating indigenous languages (Brock-Utne, 2001) and integrating local knowledge and critical thinking to challenge societal injustices (Freire, 1985). Additionally, policy reforms must go beyond expanding access, and improve quality through equitable funding, teacher training and curriculum reform (Altinyelken, 2015).

Methodology

This qualitative study is rooted in Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), in which teaching and learning are expected to examine and challenge existing unfair power relations and structures. Four schools were selected through purposive and convenience sampling, comprising two mass and two elite institutions. This categorisation emerged from the hypothesis that the implementation of the new curriculum varies across school types.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four school principals, four teachers and one NCDC official (Table 1). From each school, 12 students were purposively chosen to participate in focus group discussions (FGDs). Only students from Senior 3 were selected because they were the pioneer cohort of the new curriculum when it was rolled out. The 12 students from each school were selected based on a range of criteria to ensure diversity in perspectives. These included varying levels of academic achievement (from high to low performers, as assessed by their grades, test scores and teacher evaluations); differences in learning behaviours (such as classroom participation, consistency in homework completion and how actively they contributed to group discussions or projects); gender balance; and cultural and socioeconomic diversity (in terms of family dynamics, access to educational resources, and social contexts) that may affect students' academic experiences and perspectives.

The students selected for the interviews were from the classes taught by the participating teachers, ensuring that they had direct exposure to these teachers' practices. Informed consent was obtained from both students and guardians, and, to mitigate power dynamics, interviews and FGDs were conducted in neutral settings, with participants reminded of their voluntary participation and right to withdraw.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Participant ID	Designation	School type	Education level
F1E	FGD 1	Elite	S.3
F2E	FGD 2	Elite	S.3
F1M	FGD 1	Mass	S.3
F2M	FGD 2	Mass	S.3
T1E	Teacher 1	Elite	Bachelor's
T2E	Teacher 2	Elite	Bachelor's
T1M	Teacher 1	Mass	Bachelor's
T2M	Teacher 2	Mass	Bachelor's
P1E	Principal 1	Elite	Master's
P2E	Principal 2	Elite	Bachelor's
P1M	Principal 1	Mass	Bachelor's
P2M	Principal 2	Mass	Bachelor's
NCDC official	NCDC	N/A	Master's

Data were analysed following procedures and guidelines laid down by Braun and Clarke (2006), using NVivo14 software (Release 14.23.1 (38); Lumivero, Denver, CO, USA).

Presentation and discussion of findings

Competency-based pedagogical approaches and inclusion

The NCDC framework underscores the need for meaningful learning experiences rooted in creative problem solving and active engagement of learners in the teaching and learning process (NCDC, 2013). In practice, group and project-based activities appear to be the dominant pedagogical approaches in all schools sampled under the new curriculum. This shift has given learners considerable control over their own learning compared with the old subject-based curriculum. In several FGDs, students embraced the idea that " … the new curriculum helps us to have an input to the learning experience. In other words, we [students] contribute to what we study and how we learn" (F2E).

In *My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey states that "the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself" (Dewey, 1897, p. 5). In this case, the social situations refer to the varied dis(enabling) social environments in which students thrive, whether or not these are of their own construction. Students working collaboratively develop communication and presentation skills, confidence and problem-solving techniques, rather than relying on rote learning. For instance, one teacher noted that learners under the CBC are given the chance to interact in groups, including introverts and quiet learners (T1E). This opportunity to be heard resonates strongly with Freire's advocacy of "dialogical voice" as the basis for human agency (Freire, 2005). By giving greater recognition to classroom discourses beyond conventional academic rigour, teachers can create a powerful tool against all forms of social exclusion (Table 2).

At the heart of CBC pedagogy is project-based learning, in which student inquiry, propelled by curiosity, motivates discovery. In contrast to what "Freire calls the banking model" of education, educators invite learners to engage in active exploration of ideas and projects meaningful to their daily experiences. The field findings indicate considerable enthusiasm among learners for project work; learners valued the hands-on nature of the tasks and the opportunity they present for carving out potential early careers. A participant in the FGDs emphasised this viewpoint: "Through hands-on projects, I've learned to connect real-life experiences with classroom learning. For instance, in a biology project about soil and biogas, I gained practical insights from observing how cow dung is used in my village" (F1M). In all FGDs, students responded warmly to project activities – sharing their experiences of a range of projects, including green environment campaigns, shoemaking, baking, information and communication technology (ICT), poultry farming and painting. Effective project-based learning would therefore require the equitable construction of dynamic, culturally responsive classroom settings to close the opportunity gap for historically deprived students (D'Andrea Martínez et al., 2023).

In essence, the CBC would lack substance if it did not revolve around cultivating skills tailored to individual preferences and affordances. The framers of the curriculum maintain that "these projects will be selected according to 'do-ability', local area needs, learner preference and teacher competence to handle" (NCDC, 2013, p. 78). This emphasis on

Table 2. Summary of key themes and their features.

Theme	Description	No. of empirical indicators	Empirical indicator
Competency-based pedagogical approaches and inclusion	This theme explores the influence of teaching methodologies aligned with the CBC and their role in fostering inclusivity among a diverse range of learners.	150	*"The new curriculum is inclusive. This is stated in the curriculum framework as a pillar and in a way that each learner regardless of abilities, background, and needs has access compared to the old curriculum. The new curriculum is a learner centered one. We have included activities for learners to work in groups".* NCDC official
Inclusive nature of the new assessment modes	This theme covers responses concerning assessment in the new curriculum vis-à-vis the old curriculum and how this contributes to accommodation and recognition of individual learner efforts across diverse experiences.	145	*"… Anyways, at least with the new curriculum every student is assured of progressing to the next level, but we are not sure whether our school can follow that".* F2E
Implementation variations and their effect on educational outcomes across elite and mass schools	This theme compares the extent to which the new curriculum has been implemented across elite and mass schools. It looks at the resource gaps in terms of human resources, infrastructure and other benefits that contribute to dis/advantages between the elite and mass schools.	210	*"… Sometimes we cannot do research on a given project because the internet is on and off. So, we are either late on submission of our projects, or we copy from friends who have been able to do the research".* F1M

individual student preference can be construed as highlighting the possibility of learners determining what works for them, rather than the "one-size-fits-all" approach that was the norm under the traditional curriculum. That said, it is essential for educational institutions to have the necessary resources and support to manage specific projects effectively. In reality, there are significant disparities in the resources available to teachers and students across school types, an issue we explore later in this article.

Inclusive nature of the new assessment modes

We have already highlighted the need for a curriculum that is culturally responsive while also being consonant with positive learning outcomes across content areas (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Following McKenzie et al. (2008), educational leaders at the forefront of social justice ought to ensure high academic achievement for all learners to promote greater inclusivity. The CBC adopts continuous assessment, in contrast to summative evaluation, to cater to a wider spectrum of learners, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities or learning styles. In an interview, the NCDC official hailed the formative assessment techniques, emphasising that educators ought to "recognise all achievements however meagre they may be" (NCDC official). Such achievements could not be adequately and comprehensively recognised under the subject-based curriculum, which prioritised knowledge and understanding over other attributes such as attitudes

and values. One student from an FGD expressed her excitement over the continuous assessment approach:

> I no longer fear competition with the bright students, if I work hard, there are chances that we shall all get almost the same grade. The new assessment approach promotes a sense of inclusivity and equality among students. It recognizes effort and participation, fostering a positive learning environment where everyone has the opportunity to succeed (F1M).

In considering this viewpoint, it is important to recognise that the respondent attends a mass school. Her concern about competing with academically strong students may therefore relate not only to peers within her own school but also to students from prestigious elite schools. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that the new assessment modes have the potential to reduce performance margins within and across institutions, while paving the way for the smooth progression of disadvantaged learners.

The CBC evaluation framework adopted the use of "learning outcomes" as opposed to the "objectives" espoused in the old curriculum. The objectives required teachers to rigidly evaluate learners' grasp of specific subject content. Learning outcomes, on the other hand, are more practical, tangible, flexible and measurable in terms of output. As a result, learning outcomes are holistic in developing broader competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration. A more holistic assessment of students' abilities would be a precursor to personal growth, while accommodating the diverse needs of learners and empowering them to navigate the dynamics of power between those who are advantaged and disadvantaged.

However, the effectiveness of the new evaluation and assessment approaches remains questionable. One principal revealed that "the challenge with the new curriculum is that some students tend to relax because there is the 'NO FAIL' policy. The only thing that puts students under pressure is examination, but the activities of integration make them relax" (P1E). Students in several FGDs acknowledged that this diminishes the frequency and intensity of their revision efforts. This issue may pose greater challenges for students in mass schools, given their already compromised learning environment. In addition, much remains to be done to clarify the structure of the final national examinations and remove the uncertainty surrounding it. Meanwhile, some school principals have resorted to contingency approaches, combining the old and new curricula to ensure their students are prepared for any eventual tweaks in the national examinations (P2E).

Implementation variations and their effect on educational outcomes across elite and mass schools

While we consider the possibilities that the new CBC opens for socially just curricula, we are not oblivious to the disparities in levels of school development. Institutions are endowed differently in terms of infrastructure such as classrooms with appropriate furniture, laboratories equipped for both scientific experiments and computer-based learning with internet connectivity, extensive libraries, sports facilities and accessibility features like ramps ensuring inclusivity for students with disabilities. The resources and support available to schools vary significantly across the spectrum from elite to mass institutions, thereby affecting the implementation of the new curriculum. Elite schools have substantial financial support, allowing them to offer excellent facilities, technology, highly

qualified teachers and a wide range of extracurricular activities. In contrast, mass schools, which serve larger populations with fewer resources, struggle with limited infrastructure, outdated technology and difficulty in hiring and retaining qualified educators. This difference in resources can have a major impact on the quality of education and opportunities for students, leading to inequalities in educational outcomes.

Zhang et al. (2020) suggest that it is important to carefully consider the diverse technological environments and situational influences that could affect the implementation of particular pedagogical orientations. However, this may not have been the case with the CBC, as the NCDC official observes:

> Our syllabus relies on computers, yet some schools do not have computers. However, the new curriculum has come to make them equal regardless of the economic muscle. The challenge is in the economic muscle; when the elite schools have a lot of money to support the new curriculum, the traditional mass schools are languishing (NCDC official).

Research conducted in the COVID-19 era revealed a rather vexing state of ICT in the country, with dire internet connectivity issues for schools in the mass category (Ahabwe, 2022; Tumwesige, 2020). The disparity in technological access between mass and elite schools is evident in students' comments, such as this from a student at one mass school, " … sometimes you need like a computer to use to find out these things. But we also don't have much access to computers; the whole of this term we have accessed the computer lab only once" (F2M). In contrast, students from a prestigious school were enthusiastic about the school authorities permitting them to use tablets and smartphones for academic purposes. This would only serve to widen, rather than narrow, the gap between the most and least privileged students, because "technology provides new levers of power and control which can repress as well as emancipate" (UNESCO, 2021, p. 9).

With the shift to a learner-centred approach, new instructional materials tailored to facilitate competency-based learning were needed. However, as all the principals interviewed noted, government provision of these materials remains slow and inadequate. Although this affects all schools, mass schools are hit hardest, as they solely rely on unreliable government provision (P1M, P2M). Conversely, a principal in an elite school noted:

> As a school, we at least have the financial capacity to invest in updated textbooks and supplementary materials aligned with the new curriculum. This ensures that students have access to the latest educational resources. Our numbers are equally manageable and commensurate with the available instructional materials (P1E).

Greater disparities are evident across school types in terms of physical infrastructure such as classroom blocks, library and land. These are strong enablers for project activities and practical subjects such as physical education and agriculture. Despite identifying these subjects as potentially "liberating" for their practical and skill-based nature, most students dropped them at Senior 3 (F2M, F1M). This trend can be largely attributed to limited resources. By contrast, elite schools continue to boast a rich array of games and sporting activities, including badminton, hockey, swimming, volleyball, rugby, cricket and tennis, whereas their mass school counterparts are restricted to traditional games such as football and netball. In addition, a principal at a mass school castigated the government's failure to acquire enough land to facilitate physical education programmes. He

emphasised that many of his students come from underprivileged areas and possess diverse talents. However, because of the school's limited resources, it struggles to develop and support these talents effectively (P2M). Schools that are well equipped to support a variety of sports contribute to an inclusive and well-rounded educational experience, with the potential to demystify preconceived social norms of disadvantage (Guadalupe & Curtner-Smith, 2020). Indeed, if physical education is given the appropriate emphasis as an academic discipline, it has the potential to act as a vital equaliser in communities where students have historically faced marginalisation.

Teachers, for their part, are regarded as agents of change, whose choices and actions affect the extent of implementation and adaptation to curriculum change (Campbell, 2012). However, evidence from the field suggests that these key stakeholders were consulted only superficially. This is detrimental to a socially just curriculum grounded in the tenets of active participation and engagement of those contributing to the social change in question.

Whereas the summary of findings in Table 3 reveals the NCDC's efforts to train and orient teachers in the new curriculum, variations remain apparent across mass and elite schools. Despite gaps in teacher training, elite schools are confident that they can afford the resources needed to provide training and retooling programmes for their teaching staff. Schools often seek both internal and external training. Internal training involves peers and master trainers within the school, while external training is provided by the NCDC team or master trainers from other schools. It has been observed that elite schools, particularly traditional government schools, are more capable of producing master trainers. Many mass schools therefore depend on these privileged schools to provide master trainers for their staff training, which affects the pace at which schools pick up the new curriculum.

Among other salient human resource considerations is the preparation of in-service teachers for a pedagogical shift from the "knowledge-transmission" mode to the more "active-learning" approach envisioned under the CBC framework. Similarly, teacher training colleges urgently need to align their training modules with the demands of the CBC, while embracing a paradigm shift from a teacher dictated instruction to a more *laissez-faire* learner-centred training approach. If teacher training colleges are committed to producing graduates who will promote social change, they need to consider how best to prepare them (Yob, 2018). Without this shift, the preconditions for a socially just curriculum remain a myth.

Implication for social justice

A socially just education would require a conscious effort to define both its process and its goal in terms of the equal participation of all those involved. This encompasses recognition, empowerment and the eradication of unfair power dynamics within the educational setting (Hytten & Bettez, 2011). When the CBC is leveraged for a socially just curriculum, its pedagogical orientations (such as projects and group activities), inclusive assessment modes and implementation gaps all require careful scrutiny. This is because learner-centred approaches to education such as projects and group work allow an interplay of negotiated ideas, while recognising individually dis/advantaging epistemological constructions. Such approaches also build a sense of belonging and confidence for the

Table 3. Teacher preparedness across school types.

Interviewee	Evidence
Principal interview transcript – P2E	*… Our educators are not only well-versed in the theoretical aspects but also adept at practical implementation. We have the capacity to invest in specialised training programs tailored to the new curriculum. This includes workshops, seminars, and ongoing professional development opportunities. While I cannot speak for all schools, it's possible that they may face resource constraints which could potentially limit the depth and frequency of such training.*
Teacher interview transcript – T2E	*We have embraced the new curriculum. I was among the first people to be trained for the new curriculum. Trainings are inadequate and a few teachers attend them.*
Principal interview transcript – P2E	*… While there have been training sessions provided for our teachers, we acknowledge that there is room for improvement. We believe that more frequent training sessions, especially at the start, middle, and end of each term, would greatly enhance our teachers' proficiency in implementing the CBC.*
Principal interview transcript – P2M	*Being a new policy, there was fear among teachers but there has been more retooling of teachers. We have had both internal and external training. Government has organised workshops for different schools in our school. But I think the training should be more frequent, for instance at least at the beginning of every new school term.*
Principal interview transcript – P1M	*Government has taken steps to train teachers. The government called in master trainers who train other teachers. We have had both internal and external training. Retooling is needed since a lot keeps on changing …*
Teacher interview transcript – T1E	*… Every day we get familiar with the new curriculum and more to learn on the job. However, a lot of things keep changing and we are uncertain. Every opening of the term, there is training for teachers about the new curriculum …*
Teacher interview transcript – T2E	*Government invited many teachers to train as master trainers, and I was privileged to be among the master trainers. We have had refresher courses about the new curriculum*
Teacher interview transcript – T2M	*We have had a number of training workshops. However, the problem is that even the trainers seem not to be sure of what the curriculum is all about. There are both internal and external trainings …*
Teacher interview transcript – T1M	*… Not so adequate training. They train us [teachers] once in a while. The trainers come from some schools. We need training more often. We normally get internal training in terms of workshops, but the external training is not many.*
NCDC official – Interview transcript	*… Also, when it comes to the employment of quality teachers, the poor schools are challenged. The capacity of training teachers for the elite schools is high while the mass schools are finding it difficult to do so.*

subaltern to "speak". In this way, historically marginalised students develop the agency to assert their presence and unique contributions to societal dialogue. With the more inclusive assessment practices espoused by the CBC, students are relieved of tension and the unnecessary competition that arises from striving for excellent academic grades. This cut-throat competition for grades is evident both within schools and across school types. To eliminate this problem, especially across school types, key stakeholders such as the NCDC and the Ministry of Education and Sports ought to address implementation gaps by directing their efforts to the least advantaged schools.

While the preceding analysis already addresses power relations through a Freirean perspective, it can be further strengthened by explicitly framing these issues within broader political economy debates. A political economy analysis would add depth to Freire's critique of power and oppression in Uganda's education system, highlighting how global and national political forces shape educational provision. Notably, Uganda's education policies are heavily influenced by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), whose structural adjustment programme in the 1990s led to the privatisation and underfunding of public education (Jones, 2006). While USE has increased access, it has often prioritised numbers over

quality, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and inadequate infrastructure (Altinyelken, 2015). According to Tikly and Barrett (2011), this market-driven approach, in which education is treated as a commodity, worsens inequalities, especially for rural students.

Additionally, Uganda's education system is influenced by politicking, in which education is used as a populist tool. Politicians, including President Museveni, have used USE as an electoral promise without addressing systemic issues such as teacher training and infrastructure (Nishimura & Yamano, 2013). The decentralisation of education governance has led to inefficiencies, with political loyalty often driving resource allocation (Kjær & Muwanga, 2016). Teacher remuneration and working conditions also reflect broader political decisions, as underfunding and low salaries contribute to poor morale and strike action (Businge, 2015).

Overall, Uganda's education system remains structurally unjust because of the influence of global financial institutions, political manipulation and inadequate funding. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from treating education as a political tool or commodity to recognising it as a public good. Combining Freirean pedagogy with a political economy analysis offers a more comprehensive framework to confront the power dynamics shaping educational inequality in Uganda.

Limitations of the study

The data were collected from a relatively small sample drawn from two elite schools and two mass schools. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised to all schools implementing the CBC in Uganda, as they reflect the experiences and perceptions of stakeholders within these specific school contexts. Instead, the strength of the study lies in its ability to provide rich, contextualised insights into how the CBC is experienced across contrasting school settings. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of implementation realities, providing a foundation for future studies involving larger and more diverse samples.

Conclusion

This study underscores the potential of the CBC to contribute to socially just curricula in Uganda. However, it also highlights the complexities and challenges associated with its implementation, which are detrimental to the realisation of social justice in education. The study examined the learner-centred pedagogies and continuous assessment within the CBC framework and found pervasive elements of social justice that can be nurtured to develop socially just curricula. The findings also reveal that barriers to social justice, such as social class, gender, location, persist and vary significantly across school categories, that is, between elite and mass schools. However, although this study recognises that the CBC incorporates elements of social justice and inclusivity, the CBC may not inherently address broader social issues or cultural perspectives. We therefore call for the affordances of the CBC to be illuminated and for its adoption as a building block for socially just curricula in Uganda.

Notes

1. A Comprehensive Report on Universal Post Primary Education & Training (UPPET/USE) & Universal Post O' Level Education & Training (UPOLET) National Headcount Exercise 2013.

2. Elite schools are high-cost private institutions or public schools outside the USE programme, typically attended by students from affluent backgrounds, while mass schools include low-cost private schools and public USE schools serving students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics declaration

This study was conducted as part of the first author's doctoral research at Beijing Normal University. Prior to data collection, the first author obtained an official introduction letter from the university and secured permission from the relevant educational authorities and participating schools to conduct the research. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through pseudonymisation and the removal of identifying information. No separate ethics approval number is available for this study.

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