



Management of Competency-Based Curriculum: Secondary School Student Teachers' Experiences in Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This study synthesized the experiences of student teachers deployed across selected secondary schools in Northern Uganda. Specifically, it examined the administrative support provided to student teachers and the challenges they encountered during the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC). Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, data was collected from 151 Bachelor of Science with Education student teachers through reflective journals and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis revealed variability in school-level support, including limited orientation, inconsistent mentorship, irregular professional development and weak instructional supervision. Findings indicate that insufficient administrative support exacerbates the challenges, limiting student teachers' ability to apply learner-centered pedagogy, conduct continuous assessment and facilitate experiential learning. The study concludes that robust administrative structures, structured mentorship, sustained professional development, adequate resource provision and proactive community engagement are critical for ensuring fidelity in CBC implementation. These insights offer evidence-based guidance for policymakers, school leaders and teacher educators to strengthen school-level support and improve competency-oriented teaching and learning in resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: Competency-Based Curriculum; instructional leadership; curriculum management.

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Introduction

Globally, education systems are shifting to Competency-Based Curricula (CBC) to meet 21st century demands. Countries in Europe, Asia, America and Africa are reforming curricula to prioritize creativity, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy and lifelong learning (Hassan & Shkak, 2020; Mulder et al., 2011). For example, the United States and Canada emphasize mastery learning, personalized learning pathways and performance-based assessment (Patrick & Sturgis, 2013; OECD, 2018). In Singapore, South Korea and Japan, competency-oriented reforms are closely linked to national innovation agendas, with strong focus on inquiry-based learning, interdisciplinary approaches and digital competencies (Ministry of Education Singapore,

2010; OECD, 2019). In Europe, Finland and Scotland exemplify competency-based education through holistic, learner-centered curriculum frameworks that align curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to real-world competencies (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2016; Education Scotland, 2019; OECD, 2018). These systems stress strong teacher preparation, collaboration, continuous professional development and school autonomy as keys to CBC success.

CBC reforms have gained momentum across Africa. Kenya's 2017 CBC marked a major shift, with evaluations highlighting teacher training, parental engagement, funding, resources and participatory leadership (UNESCO, 2017). Rwanda's 2015 curriculum stresses participation, innovation and problem-solving but faces resource and teacher

readiness gaps (Nsengimana, et al., 2025). South Africa's outcomes-based shifts show that reforms need ongoing teacher support, structured assessment and sufficient resources (Bantwini, et al., 2024). Other countries, like Tanzania and Mozambique, have similar lessons: CBC's success depends on strong management, instructional leadership and alignment between policy and classroom.

In this broader global and continental context, Uganda's adoption of the Lower Secondary CBC in 2020 reflects a growing recognition of the need to equip learners with practical competencies that align with national development aspirations and international educational standards (Namatende, et al., 2025). However, as with many African CBC reform efforts, implementation has been uneven, particularly in resource-constrained regions such as Northern Uganda. Uganda rolled out the Lower Secondary CBC in 2020 under the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC), aiming to transform learning from content memorization to skill acquisition, learner participation and real-life application. However, significant disparities continue to shape implementation outcomes, particularly in Northern Uganda, an area grappling with infrastructural limitations, economic constraints and post-conflict recovery (Nakabugo et al., 2011; Kidega et al., 2024).

Schools in Northern Uganda continue to face persistent challenges that hinder effective CBC delivery. These challenges include inadequate instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, insufficiently trained teachers and limited administrative follow-up (Ahabwe, 2024; Kidega et al., 2024). Teachers in Uganda, particularly newly deployed ones, often report low confidence in designing competency-based lessons, facilitating learner-centered activities and implementing continuous assessment due to limited training and support (Nakawuki et al., 2024; Mwebaza et al., 2025; Kachope et al., 2025). A national survey of 377 teachers found widespread gaps in preparedness and alignment with CBC pedagogy, despite about 20,000 teachers having received some initial training. Many had never attended formal CBC workshops and continued to use traditional teaching methods (UNEB, 2023). Student teachers commonly cite weak mentoring during school practice, lack of model lessons and inconsistent supervision as barriers to internalizing competency-based pedagogy (Mulinge, 2024; Arcadio et al.,

2025; Wanjala, 2021). This mismatch between the expected CBC approach and the realities on the ground significantly undermines learner-centered philosophy, as one of the key principles of competence-based education. While these interventions have contributed to pockets of progress, existing evidence suggests that their implementation has been uneven and often constrained by limited funding, irregular delivery and disparities in school-level support, particularly between urban and rural contexts (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Research in Ugandan secondary schools indicates that teachers' knowledge and application of competency-based curriculum (CBC) formative assessment remain below expected standards, with many continuing to rely on traditional, summative-oriented approaches rather than authentic competency-based strategies, such as performance tasks and continuous assessment, pointing to persistent gaps in assessment literacy and professional development (National Curriculum Development Centre, 2019; Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020; World Bank, 2020). Additionally, although head teachers facilitate internal instructional supervision, they often lack adequate external monitoring support and specialized training in CBC implementation, limiting their capacity to guide consistent classroom practice across schools (UNESCO, 2020). These challenges are compounded by structural constraints, including limited access to textbooks and teaching aids that restrict practical, learner-centered instruction as well as high learner-teacher ratios that make individualized support and continuous assessment difficult to implement (World Bank, 2020; UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, evidence from Uganda and the broader East African context shows that student teachers frequently experience inconsistent mentoring, limited exposure to model lessons and weak supervision during practicum, leaving them insufficiently prepared to translate competency-based pedagogy into real classroom practice (Altinyelken, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2021).

If these challenges remain unaddressed, there is growing concern that CBC may fail to achieve its intended outcomes. Learners may continue to perform poorly in literacy, numeracy and problem-solving competencies, perpetuating educational inequalities between Northern Uganda and more resourced regions. The mismatch between curriculum expectations and school realities risks

leading to teacher frustration, superficial compliance and stagnation in pedagogical reform. The study sought to examine the administrative support provided to student-teachers and challenges encountered by student teachers during CBC implementation.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted to investigate teachers' experiences and implementation of the competency-based curriculum (CBC) in Ugandan secondary schools. It describes the research design, study area, target population, sampling procedures, data collection methods and instruments as well as the data analysis procedures used to generate and interpret findings. In addition, the section highlights the ethical considerations observed throughout the study to safeguard participants' rights and ensure adherence to established research standards.

Design

This study employed a phenomenological design, a qualitative approach suited for exploring and describing individuals' lived experiences in real-world contexts (Sandelowski, 2000; Sandelowski, 2010). The design enabled the researchers to capture student teachers' perceptions and experiences of implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in secondary schools in Northern Uganda, focusing on how they understood and navigated classroom practices, supervision and institutional support. By prioritizing participants' own accounts through reflective journals and focus group discussions, the approach generated clear, practical insights consistent with phenomenological inquiry and thematic analysis of qualitative data (Neergaard et al., 2009; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Population and Sampling

The study population comprised 151 student teachers undertaking school practice from the Bachelor of Science with Education at Muni University. From this population, a purposive sample of student teachers was selected based on their active engagement in school practice to ensure rich, experience-based insights into Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) implementation. The participants were deployed across various secondary schools in Northern Uganda, providing diverse contextual experiences. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate for identifying participants with direct exposure to classroom realities, supervision processes and pedagogical practices

during practicum (Kidega et al., 2024; Darling-Hammond, 2021).

Sources of Data

Data for this study were collected using student teachers' reflective journals and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Reflective journals allowed participants to document daily experiences, classroom activities, challenges and administrative support during CBC implementation, providing rich, real-time insights into their lived experiences (Schön, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2006; Creswell, 2018). Four FGDs, each lasting 45–60 minutes, were conducted to explore shared perspectives on CBC-related challenges, support mechanisms and resource constraints, enabling participants to reflect collectively and generate deeper understanding of school-level dynamics (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Patton, 2015).

Validity and Reliability

In this qualitative study, data quality was ensured through strategies that enhanced credibility, transferability and confirmability. Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement during school practice, triangulation of reflective journals and FGDs, verbatim transcription of discussions and member checking to verify interpretations (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015; Moon, 2006). These measures ensured that the findings accurately represented participants' experiences with CBC implementation.

Data Analysis

Data from reflective journals and focus group discussions (FGDs) was analyzed thematically, a widely used method in qualitative research that involves identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is particularly suited for exploratory studies that aim to understand experiences, perceptions and contextual realities. Emerging themes were compared and discussed with findings from prior studies (Ahabwe, 2024; Dadi, 2024; Kachope et al., 2025; Kidega et al., 2024), providing a rich interpretation that situates local experiences. Thematic analysis yielded eight key challenges and five dimensions of administrative support, each supported by direct quotations from student teachers.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical standards set by the Uganda National Council for Science and

Technology. Permission was obtained from District Education Offices and school administrators before data collection. Participation was voluntary and all respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and benefits. Informed consent was secured prior to interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were given the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences and every effort was made to minimize discomfort and avoid disruption to school activities. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained. No participant or school was identified by name in the report; pseudonyms or codes were used instead. All data, including recordings, transcripts and consent forms, were stored securely and accessed only by the

researcher. Sensitive information was handled carefully to prevent reputational harm to individuals or institutions.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings. The findings are thematically organized around key CBC management areas, such as the administrative support provided and challenges encountered by student teachers during CBC implementation.

Demographics of Participants

Demographics of the respondents provide important contextual information for understanding the perspectives presented in this study.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	126	83.3
Female	25	16.7
Total	151	100
Age Bracket		
18 – 25 years	56	36.7
Above 26 years	95	63.3
Total	151	100

Demographic information in Table 1 indicates that the study respondents were predominantly male (83.3%) with female student teachers significantly underrepresented (16.7%). This reflects the composition of the Bachelor of Science with Education cohort available for school practice during the study period and highlights the gender imbalance within the sampled population, which should be considered when interpreting findings related to CBC implementation.

In terms of age, most participants were within the active professional range, with the majority aged above 26 years (63.3%) and 18–25 years (36.7%), implying that many were young and early in their teaching careers. This youthful profile suggests a cohort that is potentially adaptable and receptive to competency-based approaches while also highlighting the importance of targeted mentorship and institutional support during CBC implementation.

Objective 1: Determining the administrative Support for CBC Implementation.

Administrative support for CBC implementation varied considerably across schools, ranging from well-organized induction processes to minimal or no guidance at all, revealing deeper systemic inconsistencies in school-level management and preparedness. In some schools, student teachers received structured orientation, departmental briefings or supportive supervision that helped them navigate CBC expectations. However, in many others, induction was either brief, informal or entirely absent, leaving student teachers to rely on peers or personal initiative to understand CBC requirements. These disparities mirror broader national concerns about uneven school-based management practices and the inconsistent capacity of administrators to provide pedagogical leadership during curriculum reforms (Kidega et al., 2024). Such variability in administrative support not only shapes how effectively student teachers internalize CBC principles but also may influence their confidence, classroom practices and overall professional growth during school practice.

Orientation and Induction

Data from FGDs and school practice journals revealed that some practicum secondary schools in Northern Uganda provided basic CBC orientation and departmental guidance, which helped student teachers familiarize themselves with school routines, available resources, and expectations related to learner-centered pedagogy. These introductory sessions often included brief explanations of CBC principles, departmental roles and classroom management procedures, allowing student teachers to begin their practice with some foundational understanding. However, the depth and quality of these orientations were often limited, with many sessions lasting only a few minutes or focusing on administrative procedures rather than practical CBC pedagogy. As a result, student teachers were left with significant gaps in understanding key aspects of CBC implementation, such as competency-based lesson planning, formative assessment and the facilitation of group activities. The superficial orientation contributed to uncertainty, inconsistent practice and reduced confidence among student teachers as they attempted to deliver CBC-aligned instruction in real classroom settings. A student reported, "We approached the deputy about project-based learning and he said, 'We are still waiting for guidance from the district'" (Student teacher Journal, August 2025). That meant the school leadership was passive rather than proactive. Similarly, student teachers reported inadequate induction on the mode of assessment in CBC: "When I asked for CBC assessment rubrics, the administrator responded, 'We haven't yet received the official templates.' This left us without standardized tools" (FGD, August 2025).

Limited orientation may leave student teachers unprepared for complex demands of the classroom, particularly as they attempt to implement a learner-centered CBC. Without adequate guidance on school routines, pedagogical expectations, assessment procedures and classroom management strategies, many student teachers may default to familiar teacher-centered practices, thereby undermining the transformative intent of CBC (Barasa et al., 2025). This challenge is further compounded when the school administrators exhibit uncertainty about CBC implementation, resulting in inconsistent or superficial induction processes. Consequently, student teachers struggled to translate theoretical knowledge into practice,

lacked confidence in facilitating active learning and faced difficulties adapting to the dynamic nature of CBC activities, such as group work, projects and continuous assessment. These gaps highlight the critical importance of structured, well-planned induction programs that provide clear expectations, hands-on training and sustained mentorship to ensure that student teachers acquire the practical competencies necessary to support effective CBC implementation.

Mentorship and Supervision

Mentorship was inconsistent across the participating schools, largely because some senior teachers lacked formal training in CBC pedagogy. As a result, student teachers often received fragmented or outdated guidance that did not align with CBC expectations. Several student teachers expressed frustration that their mentors were unable to provide practical demonstrations of learner-centered teaching, CBC assessment and project-based learning. One student teacher noted, "My mentor told me, 'I will guide you where I can, but I have never attended any CBC workshop.' That made me realize I was mostly on my own." (FGD, August 2025). Similarly, another student explained, "When I asked about rubrics, my mentor said, 'We still use the old methods here; CBC takes too much time.'" A third student teacher shared, "The senior teacher supervising me said, 'Just teach the way you were taught; that is easier for now.'" (Student teacher FGD, August 2025).

These experiences illustrate a gap in capacity among mentors, which limits their ability to model CBC-aligned practices, such as collaborative learning, inquiry-based activities and continuous assessment. Consequently, student teachers often improvised without structured guidance, increasing anxiety and uncertainty. The inconsistency in mentorship underscores the need for targeted professional development for supervising teachers to ensure they are equipped to mentor effectively within a CBC framework. This implies that insufficient mentorship reduces opportunities for modeling learner-centered teaching and providing real-time feedback. Kachope et al. (2025) argue that well-prepared mentors are crucial for effective curriculum reform, suggesting that targeted mentor training could improve both teacher and student teacher performance.

Instructional Materials

Student teachers' reflections highlighted that instructional materials were severely limited across practicum schools in Northern Uganda. One participant noted: "We collected soil samples from the community because the lab had no equipment" (Student teacher Journal, August 2025). Another explained: "In my biology lessons, I had to improvise specimens using leaves and bottle tops because there were no lab materials at all" (FGD, August 2025). Several participants reported relying solely on chalk, improvised manila-paper charts and a few outdated textbooks. Others described creating their own visual aids, adapting community resources or using locally sourced materials for classroom demonstrations. One student teacher observed: "I spent most of my preparation time making charts and models because there were no ready teaching aids" (Student teacher Journal, August 2025). During FGDs, participants consistently reported that these improvisations were essential for lessons to proceed: "Without these makeshift materials, we could not conduct practical experiments or engage students in hands-on activities" (FGD, August 2025).

Reportedly, the lack of materials was most acute in science subjects. One participant mentioned that laboratory sessions were often canceled or replaced with theoretical explanations: "The lab had no microscopes or test tubes, so we only discussed the experiments instead of doing them" (Journal, August 2025). Another noted that class sizes exacerbated the problem: "Even when we had some materials, there were too many students to use them effectively" (FGD, August 2025). These accounts indicate a persistent pattern of resource scarcity that constrained the practical and experiential learning central to CBC. This aligns with Dadi (2024), who emphasizes that insufficient instructional materials limit the scaffolding of real-world experiences and reduce opportunities for problem-solving and authentic assessment. Similarly, Altinyelken (2019) and O'Sullivan (2021) noted that resource shortages in Ugandan schools often force teachers and student teachers to improvise, which can compromise the quality of learner-centered pedagogy.

The implications are significant. Without adequate instructional materials, student teachers struggle to operationalize practical activities, learner-centered teaching and continuous assessment. Lessons often remain largely theoretical, limiting students' ability to apply knowledge in real-world contexts and

weakening the overall fidelity of CBC implementation. Addressing these material gaps is therefore critical to ensuring that pre-service teachers can develop and model the competencies required for Uganda's skills-oriented secondary education (Kachope et al., 2025).

Co-Curricular and School Involvement

Student teachers in many of the placement schools reported active involvement in a wide range of school activities, including morning assemblies, sports programs, club engagements and other co-curricular events. One participant reflected, "Participating in sports and clubs allowed me to see how learners develop skills outside textbooks" (Student Teacher Journal, August 2025). Another added, "I noticed that shy students who rarely spoke in class were very confident in drama club activities, while others showed leadership during football practice" (FGD, August 2025). Some student teachers described organizing and leading club meetings: "Leading the debate club taught me classroom management on a larger scale and how to encourage participation" (Student Teacher Journal, August 2025). These experiences provided them with practical insights into how learners acquire competencies that are not always visible in formal lessons, including communication, teamwork, creativity and problem-solving.

These observations are consistent with the literature. Mulder et al. (2011) argue that competencies, such as collaboration, adaptability and interpersonal communication, are best cultivated through varied, real-life learning experiences. Engagement in co-curricular activities offers learners authentic contexts to practice these skills, complementing formal classroom instruction and supporting the CBC's holistic philosophy, which emphasizes multidimensional development rather than purely academic achievement.

These results emphasize the critical role of the schools in formalizing co-curricular programs and assign deliberate roles for both teachers and student teachers to ensure consistent engagement. Structured participation would ensure these activities contribute meaningfully to competency development and are not treated as peripheral. Deliberate integration of co-curricular learning strengthens the link between theory and practice, aligns with CBC objectives and helps produce well-rounded learners equipped with both academic knowledge and essential life skills.

Professional Development

Student teachers reported that several placement schools made deliberate efforts to organize internal Continuous Professional Development (CPD) sessions focused on enhancing teachers' understanding of CBC pedagogy, assessment strategies and classroom implementation techniques. One participant noted, "The CPD on rubric development helped me understand how to score project work" (FGD, August 2025) while another added, "The workshop on group activities clarified many concepts I was unsure about" (Journal, August 2025). Some student teachers observed that CPD sessions provided opportunities for collaborative reflection: "During the sessions, we shared experiences with other teachers, which helped me see practical ways to implement learner-centered methods" (FGD, August 2025).

Despite these positive experiences, student teachers also highlighted challenges with CPD delivery. Many reported that sessions were irregular, short-term and reached only a few staff members: "Only three teachers attended the CPD. Most of us did not get hands-on experience" (FGD, August 2025). Others noted the lack of follow-up or structured mentoring: "After the workshop, nobody came to guide us in applying what we had learned" (Journal, August 2025).

These observations are supported by Ahabwe (2024), who emphasizes that effective CBC implementation requires sustained, coordinated and school-wide professional development initiatives. Ad hoc workshops, without follow-up mentoring or integration into school culture, are insufficient to build lasting teacher competence or confidence in competency-based practices.

Collectively, these findings reveal that schools need to adopt systematic CPD models that incorporate mentoring, collaborative lesson planning, peer observations and continuous assessment training. Such long-term investment ensures that both permanent and student teachers develop the skills, confidence, and reflective habits necessary to implement CBC with fidelity, ultimately strengthening teaching quality and improving learner outcomes.

Objective 2: CBC Implementation Challenges

The study identified eight major challenges that hindered the effective implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in secondary schools in Northern Uganda. These challenges

reflect a combination of contextual factors, such as learner and community attitudes, school culture and local resource limitations as well as systemic barriers, including policy gaps, inadequate teacher training and weak supervision structures. Student teachers' reflections in school practice journals and focus group discussions highlighted how these factors interact to constrain the adoption of learner-centered, experiential and competency-oriented teaching.

Limited training on CBC Implementation

Student teachers reported that many permanent teachers had very limited exposure to formal CBC training, which affected their ability to implement the curriculum effectively. One participant observed, "Some teachers told us to use the old methods because CBC is time-consuming" (FGD, August 2025). Another noted, "My mentor had never attended a CBC workshop, so I had to figure out group work and projects on my own" (Journal, August 2025). Several student teachers highlighted that brief, one-off sensitization sessions offered in some schools did not provide sufficient practical guidance: "The orientation was just a two-hour session; it didn't show us how to plan lessons or assess learners' competencies" (FGD, August 2025). These experiences left teachers uncertain, reluctant and sometimes resistant to adopting learner-centered approaches while student teachers themselves received inconsistent guidance during school practice.

The literature confirms that inadequate professional training undermines CBC implementation. Kachope et al. (2025) argue that successful adoption of competency-based reforms depends on continuous, comprehensive teacher professional development that combines theoretical understanding with hands-on pedagogical skills. When teachers lack sustained training and mentoring, they often revert to teacher-centered practices, such as lecturing or dictation, limiting opportunities for experiential learning and authentic assessment. This aligns with studies across Africa showing that insufficient professional development remains a persistent barrier to competency-based education reforms (Mulder et al., 2011).

This means that schools and education stakeholders must invest in systematic, school-wide training programs that include ongoing mentorship, peer learning communities and practical workshops on lesson planning, group facilitation and continuous assessment. Without sustained professional

development, teachers are likely to continue relying on traditional methods, preventing CBC from achieving its transformative goal of fostering practical competencies, critical thinking and learner-centered instruction. Strengthening training infrastructure is therefore critical to ensuring both teacher readiness and curriculum fidelity.

Resource Constraints

Student teachers consistently reported severe shortages of essential teaching and learning materials in their placement schools. One participant noted, “We had only one Biology textbook for 45 students, so I had to improvise worksheets for group work” (Journal, August 2025). Another explained, “The computer lab had three outdated computers for the whole school, which made digital lessons impossible” (FGD, August 2025). Practical science lessons were particularly affected: “The chemistry lab had no chemicals or beakers, so we had to simulate experiments using locally available items” (Journal, August 2025). Physical education classes were also constrained, with one student teacher observing, “We used sticks and bottle caps as equipment because there was nothing else for games” (FGD, August 2025). Across schools, three-quarters of the student teachers reported that the lack of CBC-aligned textbooks limited access to updated content and competency-based activities, making independent inquiry and collaborative learning difficult.

These experiences are supported by the literature. Dadi (2024) emphasizes that meaningful implementation of competency-based education requires deliberate and equitable resource allocation, including textbooks, laboratory materials, ICT equipment and PE tools. Lack of such resources undermines experiential learning, limits problem-solving and practical tasks and reduces opportunities for learners to apply knowledge in real-world contexts. Similarly, Mulder et al. (2011) noted that authentic competency development is heavily dependent on access to adequate teaching materials and hands-on learning tools.

This reinforces the argument that schools must explore strategic partnerships with NGOs, district education offices, private sector actors and community stakeholders to supplement government-provided resources. Ensuring adequate and functional materials is critical for operationalizing the CBC’s hands-on and experiential approaches, enabling teachers to

implement project-based learning, group activities and practical assessments. Strengthening resource provision directly supports both teaching effectiveness and learners’ acquisition of practical competencies, helping schools fulfill the core objectives of the competency-based curriculum.

Large Class Sizes

Student teachers reported that extremely large class sizes posed a major barrier to implementing learner-centered approaches under the CBC. One participant described, “I had 168 learners in one class. Group work was chaotic, and I couldn’t give feedback to everyone” (student teacher Journal, August 2025). Another noted, “With so many learners, it was impossible to organize hands-on activities or monitor progress individually” (FGD, August 2025). Several student teachers highlighted that physical space constraints further compounded the problem: “The classroom was too small for role-plays or experiments. Therefore, we had to rely on lecture-style teaching” (Student teacher Journal, August 2025). The large numbers also made continuous assessment challenging: “Marking projects and giving personalized feedback became overwhelming because of the sheer volume of students” (FGD, August 2025).

These findings align with the literature, which emphasizes that overcrowded classrooms hinder participatory learning, individualized attention and authentic competency-based assessment (Ahabwe, 2024; Mulder et al., 2011). Large classes make it difficult to implement group work, project-based tasks, and experiential activities, forcing teachers to revert to teacher-centered methods and limiting opportunities for learners to develop practical skills. Therefore, policymakers must consider strategies to manage class sizes, such as hiring additional teachers, introducing teaching assistants or organizing rotational learning groups. Team-teaching and flexible classroom arrangements can also help maintain learner-centered practices even in large classes.

Time Pressure and Workload

Student teachers frequently reported overwhelming time pressures while managing multiple responsibilities during their school practice. One participant reflected, “With the number of lessons and administrative duties assigned to me, I rarely had enough time to prepare detailed CBC lesson plans or develop proper learning materials” (FGD, August 2025). Another noted, “CBC requires

constant assessment, but marking projects, giving feedback and designing rubrics became very rushed because of the workload” (Journal, August 2025). Several student teachers highlighted the strain during learner-centered activities: “Group work and projects need close supervision, but I often moved from one class to another without adequately supporting learners” (Journal, August 2025). Others reported limited reflective practice: “At the end of the day, I was too exhausted to reflect on what worked or what needed improvement” (FGD, August 2025). These accounts indicate that extensive administrative and co-curricular duties reduced the time available for essential CBC tasks, such as lesson planning, continuous assessment and reflective evaluation.

The literature confirms that excessive workload and competing responsibilities compromise the quality of learner-centered instruction. Patton (2015) observes that heavy workloads can dilute pedagogical depth, reducing teachers’ capacity to implement active, participatory and competency-based learning. Similarly, Kachope et al. (2025) emphasize that effective CBC delivery requires dedicated time for planning, student assessment and reflection, without which competency development is compromised.

Taken together, findings suggest that schools must adopt strategies to protect instructional time, streamline administrative tasks and distribute co-curricular responsibilities more equitably among staff. Providing targeted support to student teachers, such as mentorship, teaching assistants and rotational duties, can reduce workload pressures. Ensuring that teachers and student teachers have sufficient time and focus is essential for maintaining the fidelity of CBC implementation, allowing them to plan, assess, and reflect adequately on learners’ progress.

Weak Assessment Practices

Student teachers consistently reported that assessment practices in many placement schools did not reflect the requirements of the Competency-Based Curriculum. One participant explained, “I was told to give a test at the end of the topic because that’s what the school is used to” (FGD, August 2025). Another observed, “Rubrics existed, but no one actually used them” (Journal, August 2025). Several student teachers noted that projects, though assigned, were rarely marked thoroughly: “We gave project work, but teachers barely checked

them because the classes were too large and there was no time” (FGD, August 2025). Others reported that even when rubrics were available, they were often used only to comply with administrative requirements, not as tools to guide competency assessment. These accounts demonstrate that while some schools possessed CBC-aligned assessment tools, their integration into teaching and learning was inconsistent and superficial. Literature supports these findings, noting that ineffective assessment practices undermine the fundamental goal of competency-based education, which is to measure learners’ ability to apply knowledge, demonstrate skills and develop attitudes (Ahabwe, 2024; Mulder et al., 2011). When schools rely heavily on traditional summative tests and neglect continuous, authentic assessment, learners lose opportunities to engage in problem-solving, practical tasks, project work, and reflective learning. According to Kachope et al. (2025), authentic assessment requires both teacher training and school-wide policies that promote systematic use of portfolios, rubrics and project-based evaluation.

The findings imply that schools must establish coherent, school-wide assessment policies, aligned with CBC principles. Teachers require ongoing training in designing and implementing authentic assessment tools, including rubrics, portfolios and project evaluation methods. Failure to address these gaps risks perpetuating rote learning and prevents learners from developing the practical, reflective and problem-solving competencies central to CBC. Effective assessment practices are therefore critical for ensuring that curriculum reforms translate into measurable improvements in learners’ skills, knowledge and overall competence.

Weak Instructional Supervision

Student teachers repeatedly reported that instructional supervision from Heads of Department (HODs) and school administrators was minimal and irregular and it focused narrowly on exam performance. One participant noted, “I taught the whole term without my HOD ever observing a single lesson” (Journal, 2025). During FGDs, another explained, “Feedback only came when a class performed poorly in exams; otherwise, no one followed up” (FGD, August 2025). Several student teachers also shared that departmental heads rarely offered guidance on lesson planning, assessment and learner-centered instructional strategies. Some reported, “Our HODs only came around when there was trouble; we never received advice on how to

implement group work or practical activities” (Journal, August 2025). These experiences indicate that supervision was largely reactive, inconsistent and insufficient to support the pedagogical shifts required by CBC.

Existing literature suggest that effective CBC implementation requires strong and proactive instructional leadership at the school level (Kidega et al., 2024; Ahabwe, 2024). School-based supervision should involve regular classroom observations, mentoring, constructive feedback and facilitation of reflective practice. When supervision is absent or limited to exam outcomes, teachers lack guidance on implementing competency-based strategies, leading to uneven instructional quality and inconsistent application of learner-centered methods (Mulder et al., 2011).

Such patterns underscore the need for schools to institutionalize structured and supportive supervision frameworks. This includes scheduled lesson observations, timely feedback, collaborative professional dialogue, and ongoing mentoring of teachers and student teachers. Strengthening instructional leadership ensures fidelity to CBC principles, promotes professional growth and provides the support necessary for teachers to implement learner-centered, practical and competency-based approaches effectively. Without these measures, CBC risks remaining a theoretical framework rather than a transformative approach to learning.

Infrastructural Gaps

Student teachers reported that inadequate infrastructure in placement schools significantly hindered their ability to implement CBC effectively. One participant described, “Learners sat on bricks because the classroom had no chairs” (Journal, August 2025). Another participant noted during FGD, “The school lab was locked the whole term because the equipment was broken” (FGD, August 2025). Several student teachers also reported the absence of functional ICT rooms, poorly stocked libraries and inadequate laboratory apparatus, which made it difficult to facilitate practical, learner-centered lessons. One participant explained, “Even for simple experiments, we had to improvise because the labs had no basic chemicals or apparatus” (Journal, August 2025). These accounts reflect the extent to which infrastructural deficiencies limited hands-on and experiential learning, a cornerstone of the CBC model.

Literature underscores the critical role of infrastructure in competency-based education. Mulder et al. (2011) and Dadi (2024) emphasize that well-equipped classrooms, laboratories, libraries and ICT facilities are essential in fostering practical skills, problem-solving and collaborative learning. Without these resources, learners’ engagement is restricted and teaching tends to revert to theoretical, lecture-based approaches, undermining the goals of CBC. Similarly, Barasa et al. (2025) noted that learning environments lacking functional infrastructure impede the acquisition of applied competencies and limit opportunities for active participation. These findings imply that schools and policymakers must prioritize investments in learning infrastructure to create environments conducive to CBC. Functional laboratories, ICT rooms, libraries and adequate classroom furniture are not optional but foundational for implementing experiential, competency-oriented pedagogy. Addressing these gaps is critical to ensuring that learners can engage in practical tasks, projects and interactive activities that align with CBC’s holistic education, ultimately enhancing skill development and preparing learners for real-world challenges.

Learner and Community Attitudes

Student teachers reported that learners and community members often held expectations rooted in traditional, exam-oriented education, creating resistance to the learner-centered approaches promoted by the Competency-Based Curriculum. One participant noted in a journal, “One learner asked, ‘Sir, why can’t you just dictate notes like other teachers?’” (Student Teacher Journal, August 2025). During focus group discussions, another student teacher reflected, “Parents still believe that the best teacher is the one who gives notes” (FGD, August 2025). Several student teachers also reported that learners were hesitant to engage in group work, projects or hands-on activities, often preferring familiar lecture-based instruction. These accounts illustrate how both learner habits and parental expectations can influence classroom dynamics, sometimes limiting opportunities for participatory, skills-oriented learning.

The literature highlights that entrenched cultural norms and educational traditions can impede curriculum reform. Barasa et al. (2025) emphasized that successful implementation of competency-based education requires deliberate community sensitization to align learners’ and parents’ expectations with the goals of the curriculum. When

communities prioritize rote memorization and examination outcomes, teachers' attempts to implement project-based learning, collaborative activities and experiential methods may face skepticism or resistance. Mulder et al. (2011) further note that stakeholder attitudes significantly affect learner engagement, participation and the overall effectiveness of competency-based reforms. These imply that effective CBC implementation in Northern Uganda and similar contexts, requires proactive engagement with learners, parents and the broader community. Therefore, schools should organize workshops, parent-teacher meetings and awareness campaigns to promote understanding of learner-centered approaches and the value of practical competencies. Aligning community expectations with CBC principles can enhance student engagement, facilitate adoption of participatory methods and ensure that the curriculum achieves its transformative goal of fostering critical thinking, problem-solving and applied skills. Without such measures, there is a risk that CBC reforms will remain superficial, limiting their potential to cultivate well-rounded 21st-century learners.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This study concludes that the experiences of student teachers in implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum were strongly shaped by the level of administrative support provided by placement schools. Where schools offered orientation, departmental guidance, co-curricular involvement and mentorship, student teachers were better able to navigate classroom routines, apply learner-centered pedagogy and engage in reflective practice. However, inconsistent supervision, irregular feedback from Heads of Departments and sporadic professional development compounded the multiple challenges they faced, including limited teacher training, inadequate instructional resources, overcrowded classrooms, heavy workloads, weak assessment practices and infrastructural deficits. These interrelated factors hindered effective lesson planning, continuous assessment and practical engagement, underscoring that robust administrative support, structured mentorship and adequate resource provision are essential in mitigating the challenges and ensuring a successful implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum in Northern Ugandan secondary schools.

Recommendations

The study recommends that schools institutionalize structured orientation programs, mentorship and continuous classroom supervision to support student teachers in effectively implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum. Additionally, schools should prioritize the provision of adequate instructional resources, including textbooks, laboratory facilities and ICT infrastructure while adopting strategies to manage large class sizes in order to enhance experiential learning and authentic assessment practices. Integrating administrative support with targeted capacity building and resource allocation is essential in addressing the identified challenges and facilitating effective CBC implementation, thereby fostering learners' practical competencies and lifelong skills.

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