

Tutors' Interpretations of Competence-Based Curriculum in Tanzania: Implications for Practice in Teacher Education

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Abstract

In the light of new forms of curriculum policy in the world, teachers are increasingly seen as important agents and so it is important to find out how they conceptualize it. This may inform the development of a well-informed teacher education programme at pre-service and in-service levels. This article illuminates what tutors'¹ understanding is of the competence-based curriculum (CBC) in the Tanzanian context. The study draws on Basil Bernstein's concept of 'reconceptualization' to reveal how tutors interpret/understand² the concept of CBC. Informed by the interpretive perspective, data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with tutors from four teacher colleges. Data were analysed thematically. Two main conceptions of CBC among tutors were identified: CBC as an application-oriented curriculum and CBC as an activity-based curriculum. As regards the latter category, tutors are less sensitive to applying what is learnt beyond the classroom and subject context, which seems to be the main focus of CBC in Tanzania. The results generally suggest that tutors interpret CBC in different ways, thus giving it different meanings. Therefore the study recommends the need to carefully design and provide relevant teacher education at pre-service and in-service levels. This strategy would in turn minimize the dilution of the intended curriculum.

Key words: Competence-based curriculum, Tanzania, teacher colleges, tutors, tutors' understanding.

Introduction

In recent decades, drastic changes have occurred in education policy and practice, both in developed and developing countries. Most countries have embarked on curriculum reforms based on the widely shared view that education and the economy are inextricably linked. Today, in education, for example, a global education policy that has been circulating between, and transformed and/or borrowed by countries, has emphasized concepts such as 'competence', and 'standards' (Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012). Consequently, many countries have reformed their curricula to be based on standards, outcomes and competence. As in other Sub-Saharan Africa countries (henceforth SSA), the global educational vocabulary of the 'knowledge economy' has also affected Tanzania and thus necessitated changes in curriculum orientation. In the early 2000s Tanzania reformed her curricula at primary, secondary and teacher education levels in order to provide an education that prepares individuals to fit into the world of work and to cope with the rapidly growing socio-economic, scientific and technological developments taking place at global, regional and national levels (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training [MoEVT], 2007a, 2007b; United Republic of Tanzania [URT], 2014). If the premises underlying this reform are carefully examined, it becomes clear that the reform involved a change from content-based teaching to CBC, underlined by a shift in paradigm from the traditional to a more progressive view of education.

¹In this article the term tutors refers to teacher educators in teacher colleges

² For the purposes of this article the terms understand and interpret are used interchangeably

The traditional view (which underpins content-based curricula) focuses on acquiring knowledge as the main goal of education. It parallels what Young (2008) describes as ‘neo-conservative traditionalism’ an ideology which maintains that the curriculum is a given body of knowledge that schools are responsible for transmitting to students. This view leads to the classical concept of knowledge as school-based or discipline-based, and does not insist on applying school knowledge to real life situations. On the other hand, the progressive view stresses that knowledge should be applied to solving real problems. It stresses knowledge in the context of its application (cf. Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013).

The competence- based curriculum (CBC) can be conceived as the type of curriculum that aims to enable learners to develop, integrate and use the desirable competences, e.g. problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, information technology, teamwork and meta-learning. This type of curriculum emphasizes competences that graduates might use in a range of different employment and life activities in their communities rather than focusing only on acquiring and reproducing knowledge as the content-based curriculum does. CBC aims to put students in realistic situations in which they should demonstrate whether they can solve certain problems or perform a particular activity and how they do it (see also Seezink & Poell, 2010; Tilya & Mafumiko, 2010). It aims, in a general sense, to make people competent (Kouwenhoven, 2003), i.e. having the ability to undertake various tasks, including occupational tasks. For example, this would involve applying the knowledge of terms, facts, principles or procedures to solve problems in new or unfamiliar situations.

The curriculum ideology that seems to underlie the CBC reform in Tanzania resonates with what Michael Schiro termed ‘social efficiency ideology’. This ideology views the purpose of schooling as being to efficiently meet the needs of society by training young people to become functional as future contributing members of society (Schiro, 2013). The goal is to provide them with the skills they will need at the workplace and in everyday life at home to be productive and perpetuate the functioning of society. This curriculum ideology is similar to what Young (2008) referred to as ‘technical-instrumentalism’, which believes that the emphasis of the curriculum is not educational in the traditional sense but is directed at what is seen as the needs of the economy. According to Young (2008), unlike neo-conservatives, technical-instrumentalists are more attentive to the changing global economy and its implications. They interpret knowledge and learning needs based on the demands of the market.

However, CBC is not without its critics. The major criticism of this curriculum’s orientation is its over-emphasis on applicable skills and competences while downgrading the fundamental subject knowledge that has stood the test of time (cf. Young, 2008). This means that the best knowledge, values and dispositions that society has accumulated from the distant and recent past are undermined because they are of no immediate use. CBC seems to over-emphasize learners’ and learning needs based on market demand at the expense of the subject matter as a given body of knowledge. As a result, the emphasis in the discussion on curriculum issues has shifted from questions about the content of education to questions about skills and competences (see also Biesta, 2006; 2014). However, a detailed discussion of the criticism of CBC is beyond the scope of this article.

It is evident that, as in most SSA countries, the movement of education policy from content-based curricula to CBC in Tanzania has largely been influenced by external forces as well as by certain internal conditions. External forces include the international education policy discourse, transnational organisations and agreements such as the Organisation for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD), UNESCO, Education for All (EFA) goals and the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Internally, the most critical issue has been that it was centrally initiated and mandated. This means that the ‘what’ and ‘how’ were contested and negotiated within the state arena and distributed via regulations, syllabuses, etc., downward to practitioners for action (see also Nzima, 2016). Evidence shows that there was little or no involvement of important stakeholders, such as teachers and tutors, during the curriculum-making process (cf. MoEVT, 2011). Studies consistently suggest that ever since CBC was officially introduced very little training has been given to school teachers, let alone to those college tutors who are responsible for teacher training (cf. Nzima, 2016; Shemwelekwa, 2008; Tilya & Mafumiko, 2010). In addition, there has been little research on teachers’ and tutors’ understanding of CBC. Therefore, considering this context, finding out how important educational change agents such as tutors understand/interpret CBC is vital.

Theoretical contributions to the study

Comparative curriculum studies suggest that global education ideas are often transformed as they move from the international arena to national and local contexts (Anderson-Levitt, 2008) and that there is no linear way of implementing it from one arena to another (Henshall & Fontanez, 2010). This is in line with Bernstein’s (1996/2000) concept of recontextualization, which this study draws on to examine how tutors interpret CBC. Central to this concept is the idea that when educational knowledge (e.g., a curriculum policy text) is produced it becomes recontextualized. This means that it is re-interpreted, re-fashioned, transformed or given different meanings as it moves between levels. For example, it is re-interpreted as it moves from policy makers, curriculum writers and written curriculum documents to various implementers in colleges and schools (Bertram, 2012).

Following Bernstein (1996/2000), recontextualisation occurs at two levels: official recontextualising and pedagogical recontextualising. The former is done by the government through agents, such as the curriculum designers, who select what knowledge (content), pedagogy and assessment will constitute the official curriculum. The latter is done by local actors, who may include textbook writers, but are mainly tutors and teachers in colleges and schools, who interpret the official curriculum so as to produce the so-called pedagogic recontextualisation. This, however, should not be interpreted as a linear or top-down process, as it may be rather complex. As Lamnias (2002: 35) argues, the process of recontextualisation ‘presupposes intermediations and produces dilemmas’, thereby deserving a thorough investigation. This study focused on ‘pedagogic recontextualisation’, particularly on the interpretation of CBC by tutors in teacher colleges.

This study is based on the research field of teacher agency in the context of the curriculum. It examines agency from the perspective of the tutors’ role, where tutors are seen as those with the potential to interpret, adapt, alter, substitute, subvert and/or recreate the curriculum in the context in which they work. Based on the ‘ecological’ perspective (Biesta & Tedder’s, cited in Priestley, Edwards, Priestley & Miller, 2012: 196), human agency is seen as people’s capacity to act, combined with the contingencies of the environment in which they work, i.e., environmental conditions as possible constraints. According to this view, tutors’ interpretation of CBC can be seen as having a relational effect, which means that their interpretation can be influenced by or dependent on environmental conditions that act as possible constraints (e.g., the existence or non-existence of training opportunities, resources such as books and tutor guides, and a culture of discussion about the curriculum within the colleges), and tutors’ ability or efforts to read and understand the curriculum policy. This is similar to Priestley’s et al. (2012:

191) conclusion that teacher agency is dependent on “certain environmental conditions of possibility and constraint” and “the beliefs, values and attributes that teachers mobilise” in response to specific conditions, including externally developed curriculum policy.

Inspired by Bernstein’s (1996/2000) concept of ‘recontextualisation’, the paper aims to examine and shed light on tutors’ interpretation of CBC. Based on insights from Biesta and Tedder’s ‘ecological’ view, as outlined by Priestley et al. (2012), the paper considers likely factors explaining their interpretation. This paper addresses the specific question, namely: *In what ways do tutors understand/interpret CBC when it comes to its conceptual meaning and intentions?*

The paper produces empirical evidence from the Tanzanian context, and contributes to providing an understanding of how local actors (in this case tutors as important agents of socialisation and change) interpret/understand the externally and/or centrally initiated curriculum policy – CBC - and the factors that perhaps explain it.

Method

The Design

This study employed the qualitative research approach informed by the interpretive paradigm. This approach was considered ideal for this study, because it offered the possibility of exploring the different perspectives on its objective through interacting with participants in the relevant environment, using interviews. The study used semi-structured interviews as the main data collection method, and these were conducted with each tutor separately at an agreed time in their office. The form of interview was chosen so that the tutors could provide their understanding and experience of the subject of the study. The researcher made every effort in the interviews not to affect their outcome through his own perception. Instead, he stimulated the discussion and allowed the experiences of the interviewees to come to the fore. As Bryman (2012) argues, qualitative interviews are a viable means of learning about people’s views, understanding or conceptions. Additionally, an interpretive perspective (the hermeneutic phenomenology tradition in particular) was deemed appropriate to guide the meaning-making process. The perspective offered the possibility of interpreting and reporting the data (the multiple meanings of CBC) based on participants’ perspectives and the researcher’s frame of reference.

Study Sites, Participants and Selection Procedure

To facilitate a detailed exploration of the study’s objective, data collection was confined to four settings, i.e. four government teacher training colleges (henceforth TTCs) specialising in training secondary school teachers at diploma level, named colleges A, B, C, and D. The four TTCs were selected purposively on the basis that they are well established institutions in Tanzania (e.g., since the 1930s and 1940s). They were assumed to be well resourced and having tutors with diverse educational backgrounds and experience, who could provide relevant information for the study. Further, the colleges were selected because they were accessible that facilitated frequent visits and meetings with respondents to seek clarity or verification of issues when deemed necessary.

The study involved 16 tutors in total. In each college, four methodology tutors from the broader categories (natural and social science subjects) were selected through purposive sampling to participate in the study. Methodology tutors were purposively targeted by virtue of their responsibility for training student teachers in how to implement CBC (e.g., how to plan, select materials and methods, teach and assess). Thus, they were considered ‘information-rich’

respondents who could provide information relevant to the study. Eleven (11) tutors held a Bachelor's degree in education while five (5) held a Master's degree. The number of years the participants had worked as college tutors ranged from three to thirty, which demonstrated a wide range of teaching experience and various stages in the teaching career. The advantages of this range of experience are the richness of the data obtained and the multiple perspectives illuminating the study's objective. Most tutors had not received training related to CBC. Some of them had attended very short internal seminars/workshops, ranging between one day and one week.

Data Management and Analysis

The interview proceedings were recorded verbatim by a Digital Voice Recorder (DVR). The recordings were transcribed in their original language to preserve the participant's actual words. The transcripts were labelled using letter codes and stored in a password-locked computer to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. These materials were also kept safely on an external hard disc as back-up copies and remained confidential. Data were analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), whereby themes were identified and illustrated using participants' quotes.

Results

As pointed out earlier, the interviews were analysed thematically to detect the patterns of tutors' understanding of the meaning and intention of CBC. The analysis of the empirical data revealed two basic interpretations emerging from the tutors' answers, which were condensed into two major themes: (i) CBC as an application-oriented curriculum, and (ii) CBC as an activity-based curriculum. The details of each theme supported by representative quotations from the interviews with the tutors are presented as follows.

CBC as an application-oriented curriculum

In this theme, CBC is understood as a curriculum emphasising the building of learners' ability to become practical and creative, and applying the skills they receive to solve real problems in daily life and become functional in society. The tutors described it as a curriculum that emphasizes creativity and the application of what has been learnt to solving day-to-day problems as well as work-related income-generation activities. A few relevant examples from the interview data where this meaning is revealed are presented in the following quotes:

CBC is a curriculum that builds learners' skill to do things rather than knowing only the content without its application. It emphasizes a person being able to relate what he/she learns in class to the real life situation where they live in the community.
(Tutor Mose)

CBC is a curriculum whose intention is to prepare the learner to be practical and creative and to use his brain to solve different problems and not to use it (brain) to cram what he was told, i.e. 1 times 3 equals three...(Tutor Simba).

A similar view was given by Tutor Matata, who explained that:

CBC is the teaching and learning of specific skills which are to be demonstrated later by a learner when executing his work... (Tutor Matata)

The tutors who interpreted CBC as an application-oriented curriculum related its intentions to its underlying meaning, that is, the intention is to prepare learners to be functional in society, applying the skills learnt to create their own income-generation activities (self-employment) as well as becoming competitive in the world of work in general. This view manifests itself in the following utterances:

... my understanding is like what I said... it is to give the learners skills so that when they complete their training...for example secondary students.... they should be able to use those skills in everyday life... (Tutor Zena)

...its aim is to enable the learner to get the skills to do things, unlike in the past when the student was required to know the content from beginning to end without knowing how to apply it in normal life situations. (Tutor Mose)

...the intention is to enable a student to get skills and apply the skills learn to their daily life. This is the whole philosophy of CBC. (Tutor Rose)

The quotation below exemplifies similar views:

...the purpose of CBC is to enable the learners to use the skills they get from the classroom outside the classroom...so it intends to prepare a person to perform the intended work correctly... (Tutor Matata)

The findings revealed further variants of CBC as an application-oriented curriculum. The first variant worth mentioning comes from those who interpreted CBC as a curriculum focusing on providing a learner with the knowledge and skills applicable both to work and general life activities. They seemed to refer to a curriculum focusing on preparing an individual for the encounters he will face in life in general. The second variant relates to those who narrowed it down and seemed to mean a curriculum that emphasised providing an individual with workplace skills, i.e. skills that are likely to make someone employable, that is, to prepare the learner to become competitive in the job market. A typical response was "...to prepare individuals who can compete in the international job market..."

Nevertheless, under the theme 'CBC as an application-oriented curriculum', the analysis generally did not produce any pattern of understanding by teaching experience or by the subject of specialization (e.g., between science and social sciences). Similar interpretations were shared by all categories of tutors.

CBC as an activity-based curriculum

The findings revealed further that some of the tutors had a different understanding of the concept of CBC. They understood CBC as a form of curriculum that emphasises activity-based pedagogy only, and that it is a curriculum that insists on the active involvement of learners in the lesson by giving them the opportunity to engage in hands-on activities during teaching and learning. In other words, they viewed it as a curriculum that emphasizes learning by doing in the classroom. This is the key difference in understanding from that of the tutors who conceived CBC as an application-oriented curriculum. In other words, the tutors in the category 'activity-based curriculum' viewed CBC more as a participatory curriculum. This view is depicted in the following extracts from the interviews:

CBC is the method of teaching whereby the learner is the one to participate more than you who teach. It emphasizes that the learners should be more like the actor in what they are learning and you (teacher) should be the listener.... (Tutor Chewa)

CBC is the kind of curriculum that draws out the knowledge of the learner. The teacher and the learners work cooperatively so that everybody has a chance to say something but the one who should dominate the class should be the learner. (Tutor Godi)

This is a curriculum that insists on letting students practise what they are learning during the teaching-learning situation...learn the subject practically. (Tutor Flora)

When it comes to its intentions, these tutors thought that CBC intends to make students active during the teaching-learning process, to learn practically and to boost students' academic performance. Their views were typically expressed in phrases such as: "...the intention is to enable students to achieve better (academic achievement)..." "...to enable a pupil to get all that he/she has learnt practically...through activities..." "...the purpose is to make the learner active and to make him a member of the learning process..." The analysis showed that all the tutors who interpreted CBC as an activity-based curriculum came from the social sciences.

Discussion

The results of this study revealed that in certain respects tutors understand CBC in different ways and thus interpret it differently. Two main ways of interpreting CBC's meaning and intentions are CBC is an application-oriented curriculum and CBC is an activity-based curriculum. In the former, CBC is understood as a curriculum that emphasises providing learners with the ability to become practical and creative, and to apply the skills they receive to solving real problems in daily life and become functional in society. In the latter, CBC is understood as a curriculum that emphasizes learning through engaging in activities in the classroom. The key difference between the two categories of understanding is that, in the latter category, tutors are less sensitive to applying what is learnt beyond the classroom and subject contexts. A further distinction worth mentioning is that CBC as an activity-based curriculum is more subject-focused, whereas the application-oriented curriculum is more student-focused. That is to say, those who interpreted CBC as an activity-based curriculum seem to place more emphasis on the subject matter. They viewed CBC as a curriculum that focuses on the active involvement of the learners during the learning process to enable them to experience the subject matter practically. This category of understanding does not seem to be concerned with what the learners will do with the subject matter after school.

On the other hand, the understanding of CBC as an application-oriented curriculum is more sophisticated because it is more complex, incorporating but going beyond the understanding of CBC as an activity-based curriculum. That is, CBC as an application-oriented curriculum focuses both on the active involvement of the learners during the learning process, and on the application of the knowledge learnt and skills acquired beyond the subject contexts, i.e., what will happen with this knowledge/subject after school. For example, questions concerning what the student will do with this knowledge and what will happen to a student as a person are answered by CBC being regarded as an application-oriented curriculum.

The consequences of the difference in the understanding of the meaning and intentions of CBC are that, in their daily teaching activities, those conceiving CBC as an activity-based curriculum might only concentrate on teaching, e.g., 'geography methods', 'biology methods', or 'history methods' instead of teaching/training student-teachers to become professional teachers who may selectively apply 'geography methods', 'biology methods', 'history methods', etc., when teaching in secondary schools. When understanding CBC as an activity-based curriculum the focus on application is taken for granted. The literature suggests that teachers who are student-focused are likely to concentrate on or emphasize what the student is becoming as a person rather than on where he or she is going in terms of mastery of the subject, as subject-focused thinking does (cf. Fox, 1983). The findings suggest that the tutors who interpreted CBC as an activity-based curriculum still embody and maintain a content-based curriculum orientation, even though they recognise the importance of students' active involvement in the teaching-learning process. Further, it could be interpreted that these tutors are concerned about the importance of knowledge itself rather than focusing on the usefulness of knowledge. This

echoes the on-going debate about the need to bring knowledge back into curriculum discussions (cf. Young, 2008).

This difference in the understanding of the meaning and intention(s) of CBC could be explained by several factors, including the insufficiency of education on CBC that the tutors have received. As noted in the methodology section, apart from the fact that no tutors had received proper training in CBC, some did not receive any orientation at all. This observation is consistent with the findings of previous studies conducted in Tanzania (Nnko, 2013; Paul, 2012) that observed that most tutors in the teacher colleges had little or no knowledge about CBC. Further, given the style in which the CBC reform was introduced in Tanzania (top down), the study found that the tutors had mixed feelings. For instance, some tutors received CBC positively and were proactive, while others were not. This factor might be contributing to the difference in understanding, as some tutors seemed uninterested and thus may not have taken the time to read, understand and reflect on the meaning of CBC. The above observations echo the literature, which suggests that in implementing curriculum reforms, local actors, especially in contexts where reforms are introduced using the top-down approach, may be ambivalent or even resist them (Anderson-Levitt, 2008; Henshall & Fontanez, 2010).

Further, the differences could be explained by the fact that the official curriculum documents themselves do not define CBC explicitly, leading to the risk of various interpretations. In line with Bernstein (1996/2000), the official recontextualisation (e.g., the official curriculum documents) often dominates and controls the interpretation in schools or colleges. This is especially common in contexts that follow a centralized curriculum, where schools adhere to one national curriculum. This suggests that to achieve a correct and consistent interpretation of the curriculum by its users, the official curriculum documents have to be very explicit on important matters, such as the meaning of CBC, its intentions and underlying assumptions.

The above explanations of factors contributing to the differences in understanding reflect Priestley's et al. (2012: 191) conclusion, which is influenced by the 'ecological' view, that teacher agency is dependent on "environmental conditions of possibility and constraint" as well as personal acts in response to a particular policy and conditions. Moreover, the findings in general revealed that the pattern of understanding does not follow teaching experience, academic status or age. As pointed out earlier, the likely reason for this could be the scarcity of orientation in terms of the education that all the tutors had received. This could also be explained by the fact that the study involved only a few participants (sixteen tutors), which may be considered a limitation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study are remarkable and tell us that CBC is recontextualised by the tutors in different ways, thus giving it different meanings. As revealed by the findings, the study has basically established two main ways of understanding CBC's meaning and intentions, i.e. CBC as an application-oriented curriculum and CBC as an activity-based curriculum. Although the two interpretations may be seen as closely related, in essence they represent different understandings whose implications may involve changing the meaning originally intended by the curriculum. Further, the differences have implications for teaching practice (e.g., subject-focused versus student-focused) and the resulting learning outcomes. As seen in the discussion, the differences in understanding could be explained by several factors, including the insufficiency of education about CBC the tutors had received, as well as the lack of a culture of discussion about the curriculum within the colleges' environment. This could be contributed to

by the ambivalence of some tutors. Lastly, the official curriculum documents themselves do not define CBC explicitly.

In this regard, teacher education programmes (both at higher learning institutions and teacher education colleges) may consider integrating CBC as a learning area in curriculum courses. In addition, the government through its relevant education agents such as the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, and the Tanzania Institute of Education in particular, in collaboration with other partners in education, should continue to prepare and conduct intensive in-service teacher education relating to CBC in order to clear up misunderstandings. Further, in future when it is deemed necessary to reform the curriculum, the government should not only focus on the goal (e.g., preparing, issuing and distributing new syllabuses for implementation), but also on other important aspects relating to the change such as teacher education. This should also be made clear in education policy documents that whenever a curriculum change is introduced, teacher education should be a priority.

An overall effect of the difference in understanding the national curriculum (especially the interpretation of CBC as an activity-based curriculum) is that the primary CBC meaning may be transformed from focusing on what the student is becoming as a person and a functioning member of society into one that emphasizes 'learning the subject matter through activities in the classroom'. It should be emphasized that the underlying ideology of the CBC reform in Tanzania is that the essence of learning lies in the capacity of learners to competently perform activities in their daily lives. Arguably, in terms of tutors' understanding of CBC, this study brought new interesting knowledge, which is an important contribution in the context of Tanzania. The findings could also be useful in other countries and systems as lessons from Tanzania, especially for researchers interested in comparing curricula.

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