

When Curriculum Reform Meets School Reality: Learner Perspectives, Implementation and School Retention in Selected Secondary Schools in Bushenyi-Ishaka Municipality, Uganda.

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Abstract

Uganda's competency-based lower secondary curriculum was introduced to shift teaching from content coverage towards practical, learner-centered and transferable competencies. Whether that shift supports continued school participation depends on how learners experience the curriculum and on the capacity of schools and families to sustain its implementation. This convergent, multi-source study examined learner perspectives alongside school records in four purposively selected secondary schools in Bushenyi-Ishaka Municipality. The study involved 252 participants: 240 learners, 8 teachers and 4 head teachers. The quantitative analysis reported item-level means, standard deviations and descriptive 95% confidence intervals for the 240 learner questionnaires. Teacher and head teacher evidence was collected to contextualise implementation, while school and Parent-Teacher Association records for 2021-2024 were organised in a documentary matrix and integrated with learner findings through a joint display. Learners strongly valued CBC's practical orientation ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.917$, 95% CI [4.21, 4.45]) and many attributed part of their continued attendance to CBC ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.095$, 95% CI [3.93, 4.21]). They also identified the cost of projects and materials as a serious concern ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.008$, 95% CI [3.97, 4.23]). Documentary indicators suggested constrained implementation, including limited teacher orientation, inadequate textbooks and restricted project resources. Senior One intake reportedly increased by approximately 20% between 2021 and 2023, while the study's administrative progression indicator declined by approximately 14%; cost concerns appeared in records from all four schools. The findings show that learners may value a curriculum even when implementation conditions are insufficient to sustain progression. CBC may strengthen relevance and engagement, but retention remains shaped by teacher preparation, institutional resources, household affordability and wider post-pandemic pressures. The study calls for equity-sensitive financing, continuous teacher development and cohort-based monitoring. Because raw school-level cohort counts were unavailable in the analytic file, the enrolment and progression figures are interpreted as descriptive administrative trends rather than causal effects.

Keywords: competency-based curriculum; learner engagement; school retention; curriculum implementation; educational equity; mixed methods; Bushenyi; Uganda

1. Introduction

Across Africa, competency-based education has moved to the centre of curriculum reform. The reason is straightforward: schools are expected to prepare young people not only to remember subject content, but also to solve problems, communicate, work with others and apply knowledge outside the classroom. The difficult part is turning that intention into ordinary classroom practice. Recent African studies show that implementation depends heavily on teacher preparation, assessment demands, class size, infrastructure, learning materials and the support available to schools (Christopher & Jones, 2025; Wawire et al., 2026). Uganda introduced the competency-based Lower Secondary Curriculum in 2020, replacing a system widely criticised for being heavily content- and examination-oriented. The reform emphasises learner-centred pedagogy, generic skills, practical application and criterion-referenced assessment (National Curriculum Development Centre [NCDC], 2019). This is a reform of considerable scale. The Education Statistics Abstract 2025 reports 2,044,586 learners in secondary education, with substantial enrolment in both public and private schools (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2026). At that scale, uneven implementation is not a minor administrative issue; it can shape who benefits from the reform and who struggles to participate in it.

Evidence emerging from Uganda already points to that unevenness. Barasa et al. (2025) found that schools serving different socioeconomic communities were not equally prepared to implement the lower secondary reform, creating different learning opportunities for students. Namatende-Sakwa et al. (2025) report genuine gains in active learning, teacher collaboration and generic skills, but they also describe shortages of resources, weak infrastructure and gaps in teacher preparation. Atibuni et al. (2024) show that competency-based assessment is difficult to sustain when classroom practice continues to resemble the older examination-driven system. Atuhura and Nambi (2024) similarly identify shortages of materials, time pressure, large classes and limited stakeholder support. These studies do not suggest that CBC lacks educational value. Rather, they show that its value is mediated by the capacity of schools to enact it.

The same caution is needed when curriculum reform is linked to enrolment or retention. A relevant curriculum may make school more meaningful, but staying in school is rarely explained by curriculum experience alone. Engagement research distinguishes behavioural participation, emotional connection and cognitive investment, and shows that these dimensions matter for persistence (Fredricks et al., 2004). Longitudinal evidence also links disengagement with later dropout, while demonstrating that family circumstances, social context and learners' own perceptions shape that pathway (Archambault et al., 2009; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry et al., 2012). In Uganda, the cost of secondary education remains an additional pressure. Omoeva and Gale (2016) found that universal secondary education did not remove household schooling costs, and more recent evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa shows that fee-reduction policies do not necessarily remove the wider costs that influence participation (Gruijters et al., 2024).

These concerns raise a practical question. What does it mean when learners speak positively about a curriculum, yet school records show weaker progression? That question was explored in four secondary schools in Bushenyi-Ishaka Municipality. Learner accounts were read alongside records on implementation, enrolment and progression. Perceptions were not treated as proof of impact. The ultimate interest was in the points at which the evidence agreed, added context or appeared to conflict. Those apparent contradictions were especially useful because they drew attention to conditions that one source alone could not reveal.

Uganda's lower secondary CBC promises learning that is more relevant, practical and participatory. Meeting that promise requires more than a revised curriculum document. Teachers need time and support to learn new pedagogies and assessment practices. Learners need materials for practical work, school leaders must organise and monitor implementation, and families often meet costs that are not visible in the framework itself. When these conditions vary widely, a national curriculum may still produce unequal learning opportunities (Barasa et al., 2025; Wawire et al., 2026).

Published work from Bushenyi-Ishaka rarely places learners' accounts beside school records on implementation and participation. That comparison is important because enrolment and retention describe different points in a learner's journey: intake may rise even while fewer learners complete lower secondary school. It is also important to remember that a survey of enrolled learners cannot capture the experiences of those who have already left. I therefore ask how learner perceptions relate to school-level patterns, rather than whether CBC caused changes in enrolment or retention.

The purpose of the study was to examine learner perspectives on Uganda's competency-based lower secondary curriculum and to interpret those perspectives alongside documentary evidence on curriculum implementation, enrolment and retention in selected secondary schools in Bushenyi-Ishaka Municipality. The study addressed three research questions:

1. How do learners perceive the practical relevance, material requirements, affordability, learner-centeredness, inclusiveness and retention-related value of CBC?
2. What patterns of CBC implementation, Senior One intake, Senior One-to-Senior Four retention and household cost concerns are evident in school documentary records?
3. Where do learner-reported perceptions and school-level documentary evidence converge, complement one another or diverge, and what do these relationships imply for equitable CBC implementation and sustained school participation?

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored primarily in Rogan and Grayson's (2003) Theory of Curriculum Implementation, complemented by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris' (2004) School Engagement Theory. Rogan and Grayson's framework is appropriate because the study examines the implementation of Uganda's competency-based lower secondary curriculum within the practical realities of schools. The theory emphasises that curriculum reform is influenced by the capacity of schools and teachers to enact intended innovations and by the support and conditions available for implementation. In this study, teacher preparation, learning materials, project resources, classroom conditions, assessment practices and school leadership are therefore treated as important implementation conditions that shape learners' actual experiences of competency-based education.

Fredricks et al.'s (2004) School Engagement Theory complements the curriculum implementation perspective by explaining how learners' experiences may be reflected in behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement. The study's focus on practical relevance, learner-centered approaches, inclusion, participation and learners' perceptions of the contribution of CBC to remaining in school is consistent with this perspective. The theory helps explain why a curriculum that learners perceive as meaningful and practical may strengthen their connection with schooling, while recognising that engagement does not automatically result in retention.

Taken together, the two perspectives provide an appropriate theoretical lens for understanding the implementation-engagement-persistence pathway examined in this study. The framework proposes that the intended features of CBC are mediated by school implementation capacity, including teacher

preparation, resources, leadership and classroom conditions. These conditions shape learners' experiences of relevance, participation and inclusion, which may influence engagement and continued participation in school. However, the relationship is moderated by contextual constraints, particularly household affordability, family circumstances and wider disruptions. Thus, school retention is conceptualised as a multidimensional outcome rather than an effect attributable to CBC alone.

The combined framework is particularly appropriate for interpreting the study's mixed-methods evidence because it permits learner perceptions and school-level documentary evidence to be examined at different but interconnected levels. It also accommodates the observed situations in which learners report positive experiences while school records indicate resource constraints or weaker progression. Such differences are treated as theoretically meaningful evidence of the interaction between curriculum implementation, learner experience and contextual conditions rather than as contradictory findings.

2. Literature Review

A curriculum may be adopted nationally without being fully realised in classrooms. Century et al. (2010) describe implementation fidelity as multidimensional, while Rogan and Grayson (2003) draw attention to school capacity, classroom practice and external support in developing-country settings. Coburn (2003) adds an important warning: expansion in numbers does not necessarily produce deep or lasting change. In the case of CBC, national rollout alone tells us little about how consistently learners encounter practical work, learner-centred teaching or competency-based assessment.

Teacher learning is central to this transition. CBC changes the tasks teachers design, the part learners' play in lessons, the use of feedback and the way achievement is judged. Desimone (2009) argues that professional development works best when it is sustained, active, coherent and closely tied to subject practice. Brief orientation rarely provides that depth. Schweisfurth's (2011) review showed how material, cultural and institutional pressures can weaken learner-centered reform. Recent African reviews report much the same pattern: assessment difficulties, shortages of resources, weak ICT integration and continued teacher-centred practice persist even where policy strongly supports competency-based learning (Christopher & Jones, 2025; Wawire et al., 2026).

Uganda's Lower Secondary Curriculum Framework describes a learner-centered system intended to promote generic skills, practical application and meaningful assessment (NCDC, 2019). These goals respond to longstanding concerns that examination-driven schooling can reward reproduction of information without adequately supporting application, problem-solving and transferable skills. The reform therefore offers an important opportunity to reposition the learner as an active participant rather than a passive recipient of content.

The prospects of Uganda's reform are therefore tied to the circumstances in which schools implement it. Barasa et al. (2025) show that schools serving communities with different socioeconomic conditions begin with unequal capacity. Namatende-Sakwa et al. (2025) identify opportunities for active learning and collaboration, but also resource and training gaps that are particularly damaging in poorly resourced schools. Atibuni et al. (2024) show that assessment reform cannot be separated from classroom practice. The central concern is not whether CBC is desirable, but whether schools can provide the conditions needed for different learners to benefit from it.

Learner engagement provides a plausible link between curriculum experience and persistence. Fredricks et al. (2004) describe engagement as behavioural, emotional and cognitive. A learner who sees lessons as relevant, participates actively and feels able to use what is learned may be more inclined to remain

connected to school. Yet engagement should not be treated as a guarantee of completion. Archambault et al. (2009), Fall and Roberts (2012), and Henry et al. (2012) all show that disengagement is important in dropout pathways, but they also show that those pathways are shaped by the learner's wider social and educational environment.

The statement, 'CBC has made me stay in school,' must be read with care. It tells us how a learner understands his or her experience; it does not estimate a causal effect. A learner may enjoy practical lessons and still leave because of financial pressure, family responsibilities, illness, mobility, repeated absence or weak support. Perception and persistence are connected, but they are not the same measure.

Practical learning also carries costs. Projects may require materials, transport, equipment or digital access. When schools cannot provide these resources, the burden often shifts to households. Omoeva and Gale (2016) found that Universal Secondary Education did not eliminate family expenditure in Uganda, while Gruijters et al. (2024) show that fee-reduction policies elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa leave many direct and indirect costs in place. UNESCO (2020) treats such barriers as central to inclusion. A practical activity may be educationally worthwhile and still exclude learners whose families cannot afford it.

The implementation-engagement-persistence pathway was used to organise the evidence. The curriculum describes the intended learning experience. Schools interpret that intention through teacher preparation, materials, leadership, project resources and classroom conditions. Learners encounter CBC through those arrangements and may find it relevant, participatory and practical. These experiences can support engagement, but continued enrolment also depends on affordability and pressures outside the classroom. The pathway is not linear; positive learner experiences and weak progression can occur at the same time.

Table 1: Analytical framework linking curriculum reform to persistence

Analytical stage	Key constructs	Expected relationship
Curriculum design	Practical learning; learner-centred pedagogy; generic competencies; inclusion	Defines the intended learner experience.
Implementation conditions	Teacher preparation; materials; textbooks; project resources; class conditions; school leadership	Shape fidelity and quality of curriculum enactment.
Learner experience and engagement	Practical relevance; participation; perceived inclusion; value attributed to CBC	May strengthen behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement.
Contextual constraints	Household costs; affordability; post-COVID disruption; other school and family pressures	May weaken continued participation even where engagement is positive.
Persistence outcome	Continued enrolment and progression from Senior One to Senior Four	Should be interpreted as multi-causal and not attributed to CBC alone.

3. Methods

3.1 Design

The study used a convergent, multi-source mixed-methods design because neither learner ratings nor school records could explain the problem on their own. The quantitative strand drew on questionnaires completed by 240 learners. Context was provided by 8 teachers, 4 head teachers and school and Parent-Teacher Association records. Each source was considered separately before comparing them through a joint display. The comparison focused on convergence, complementarity and dissonance (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Fetters et al., 2013; Guetterman et al., 2015). Learner perceptions were treated as accounts of experience.

The research was conducted in four purposively selected secondary schools in Bushenyi-Ishaka Municipality, Uganda. In total, 252 subjects participated: 240 learners, 8 teachers and 4 head teachers. Learners completed the questionnaire. Teachers and head teachers contributed professional and institutional perspectives on implementation and helped clarify how school records were understood. The schools were included because they were implementing the lower secondary CBC and held records relevant to curriculum implementation and learner participation.

Learners completed a structured, self-administered questionnaire with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The eight statements covered practical learning, access to materials, affordability, CBC's perceived contribution to staying in school, learner-centred use of resources, progression of learning experiences, inclusion and extracurricular activity. Statements were analysed separately. They addressed different aspects of experience, and the affordability statement was negatively worded, so combining them into a single perception score would have implied a common construct that had not been demonstrated. The statement that "CBC has made me stay in school" was interpreted as a learner's attribution rather than a direct measure of retention.

Eight teachers and four head teachers took part in semi-structured discussions about teacher preparation, classroom practice, assessment, resources, household costs and learner participation. Their accounts helped place the learner responses and documentary records within the everyday realities of the participating schools. Only themes and quotations traceable to the original interview records should be included in the final submitted paper.

A structured checklist was used to review records on enrolment, progression, dropout, teacher orientation, instructional materials, textbook provision, project resources, classroom conditions and cost-related concerns. The review covered records from 2021 to 2024, including Parent-Teacher Association documents. These documents were created for administrative purposes and were not assumed to be complete or neutral research instruments (Bowen, 2009). They were used to check and contextualise learner accounts while remaining cautious about differences in record keeping across schools.

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative analysis

For each learner statement, the valid sample size is reported, mean and standard deviation. Descriptive 95% confidence intervals were calculated as $M \pm t(0.975, 239) \times SD/\sqrt{240}$. The significance tests were not conducted, as well as regression models or causal-effect analyses. The schools and participants were selected purposively, and the learners were drawn from only four schools. The intervals therefore; describe the precision of the means in this dataset; they should not be generalised statistically to all learners in Bushenyi-Ishaka Municipality. The eight statements were also retained as separate items because a single underlying scale had not been established.

Documentary analysis and trend indicators

The documentary material was organised around teacher preparation, availability of learning and project resources, enrolment, progression and household cost concerns. Retained summaries reported indicators for teacher orientation ($M = 2.75$), material availability ($M = 2.83$), project resources ($M = 2.92$) and overall implementation ($M = 2.95$), together with school-level information on orientation, textbook ratios, Senior One intake and a Senior One-to-Senior Four progression indicator. Similarly, the reported 20% increase in intake and 14% decline in progression are observed vividly in table 4 to clarify the situation being harnessed therein.

Mixed-methods integration

After examining the sources separately, findings were brought together that addressed the same issue. The joint display classified their relationship as convergence, complementarity or dissonance. Dissonance was not regarded as a flaw. Learners, for example, reported having materials, while school records showed weak institutional provision. Learners also felt that CBC had helped them remain in school, although the administrative progression indicator declined. These differences may reflect household purchasing, different meanings of 'materials,' the absence of school leavers from the survey and the many influences on retention.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Victoria University ethics body, together with permission from the district and participating schools. Participation was voluntary. Adult participants provided informed consent, while parental or guardian consent and learner assent procedures appropriate to minors were followed. Confidentiality was protected through coding and anonymisation, and accessible data-collection procedures were used where required. Before submission, the authors must insert the committee's official name, approval number and date; specify consent and assent procedures; explain data security, retention and access; and add funding and conflict-of-interest declarations.

4. Results**4.1 Learner-reported experiences of CBC**

Learners responded most positively to the practical orientation of CBC ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 0.917$, 95% CI [4.21, 4.45]). They also reported access to materials needed for CBC activities ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.758$, 95% CI [4.20, 4.40]). At the same time, they agreed that projects and materials were not affordable ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.008$, 95% CI [3.97, 4.23]). These answers are not necessarily contradictory. Learners may have obtained the required materials only because their families paid for them.

Learners also agreed that CBC had contributed to their staying in school ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 1.095$, 95% CI [3.93, 4.21]). This is a retrospective attribution among learners who remained enrolled, not evidence that CBC caused retention. Ratings were generally positive for learner-centred resource use, progression of learning experiences and inclusion. Extracurricular activity received the lowest mean ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.395$, 95% CI [3.27, 3.63]). The larger standard deviations for inclusion and extracurricular activity indicate greater variation in learner experiences.

Table 2: Learner responses to CBC experience items (n = 240)

Item	n	M	SD	95% CI for M
CBC aims at making learning practical	240	4.33	0.917	4.21-4.45
I have all the materials needed for CBC	240	4.30	0.758	4.20-4.40
CBC projects and materials are not affordable	240	4.10	1.008	3.97-4.23
CBC has made me stay in school	240	4.07	1.095	3.93-4.21
CBC allows learner-centred approaches for proper resource use	240	3.97	1.143	3.82-4.12
CBC guides the selection and progression of learning experiences and content	240	3.73	1.086	3.59-3.87
CBC is inclusive in nature	240	3.65	1.312	3.48-3.82
CBC calls for extracurricular activities	240	3.45	1.395	3.27-3.63

Field data, 2026

4.2 School-level implementation and documentary patterns

The retained school records portrayed a more constrained implementation environment. The reported overall implementation indicator was $M = 2.95$, while teacher orientation ($M = 2.75$), material availability ($M = 2.83$) and project resources ($M = 2.92$) were lower. Documentary summaries indicated that one of the four schools recorded teacher orientation and that none had achieved the recommended 1:1 textbook ratio.

Participation indicators reportedly moved in different directions. Senior One intake increased by approximately 20% between 2021 and 2023, whereas the study's Senior One-to-Senior Four administrative progression indicator declined by approximately 14% over the period examined. Parent-Teacher Association records from all four schools referred to cost concerns.

Table 3: Documentary indicators of implementation, access and persistence

Domain	Documentary indicator	Observed pattern	Interpretive caution
Overall implementation	Summary implementation rating	$M = 2.95$; interpretation provisional pending scoring rubric	School-level descriptive indicator; raw scoring matrix and scale not supplied.
Teacher preparation	Teacher orientation	$M = 2.75$; one of four schools recorded orientation	Does not establish intensity or quality of training.
Learning materials	Material availability	$M = 2.83$; no school reached 1:1 textbook ratio	Textbook sufficiency is narrower than learners' broader idea of "materials".

Domain	Documentary indicator	Observed pattern	Interpretive caution
Project resources	Availability of project resources	M = 2.92	Indicates constrained implementation capacity.
Enrolment	Senior One intake	Approximately +20% from 2021 to 2023 (reported trend)	Descriptive change; not attributable to CBC alone.
Retention	Study's S1-to-S4 retention indicator	Approximately -14% over period examined (reported trend)	Raw cohort counts were not supplied; interpret as a record-based trend indicator.
Household costs	PTA records	Cost concerns recorded in 4/4 schools	Documents capture reported concern, not household expenditure amounts.

4.3 Mixed-methods integration: convergence, complementarity and dissonance

The value of combining the two data sources becomes clearest where they do not tell exactly the same story. On affordability, the evidence converged: learners described projects and materials as costly, and PTA records documented parental cost concerns in every school. On material access, the evidence diverged: learners said they had what they needed, whereas school records pointed to weak institutional provision and inadequate textbook ratios. Retention produced another important divergence. Current learners often felt CBC had helped them remain in school, while school records showed a declining retention indicator. Rather than treating one source as more credible, these differences suggest that personal experience, household effort and institutional capacity operate at different levels.

Table 4: Joint display integrating learner and documentary evidence

Construct	Learner evidence	Documentary evidence	Relationship	Integrated interpretation
Practical relevance	CBC makes learning practical: M = 4.33	No directly equivalent documentary item	Complementarity	Learners recognise CBC's intended practical orientation, but documents do not measure instructional quality directly.
Material access	Has materials needed: M = 4.30	Material availability M = 2.83; no 1:1 textbook ratio	Dissonance	Learners may define "materials" more broadly or obtain items despite school-level scarcity.
Affordability	Projects/materials not affordable: M =	PTA cost concerns in 4/4 schools	Convergence	Financial burden is visible to both learners

Construct	Learner evidence	Documentary evidence	Relationship	Integrated interpretation
	4.10			and school-community records and is an equity concern.
Staying in school	CBC has made me stay: M = 4.07	S1-to-S4 retention indicator declined ~14%	Dissonance	CBC may support engagement among retained learners, but positive perceptions do not neutralise structural causes of attrition.
Teacher preparation	No direct learner item reported	Orientation M = 2.75; 25% of schools recorded orientation	Complementarity	Weak professional support may limit the quality and consistency of learner-centred CBC enactment.
Access versus persistence	Positive CBC experience among current learners	S1 intake +20%; retention indicator -14%	Dissonance	Attracting or enrolling learners is not equivalent to sustaining progression through lower secondary education.

5. Discussion

The strongest learner response concerned CBC's practical value. This matters because relevance is one way a curriculum becomes meaningful to students. The finding is consistent with Uganda's curriculum framework (NCDC, 2019) and with research showing that teachers recognise opportunities for active learning and the development of generic skills (Namatende-Sakwa et al., 2025). Studies of engagement also suggest that relevance and participation can strengthen a learner's connection to school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Archambault et al., 2009).

School records, however, caution against treating appreciation of CBC as evidence of strong implementation. Teacher orientation was limited, and schools reported shortages of materials and project resources. Similar gaps appear across the African literature (Christopher & Jones, 2025; Wawire et al., 2026). The Bushenyi-Ishaka findings point to a distinction that is easy to overlook: learners may value the direction of reform even when their schools cannot provide everything required to implement it consistently.

The difference between learner reports of material access and school reports of scarcity is worth examining. Learners may use 'materials' to mean whatever enabled them to finish a particular task, including items bought at home or found locally. Schools may have been referring to textbooks, equipment and institutional stocks. Affordability offers a second explanation. Materials may have been available because families paid for them. If so, access was achieved partly through household effort rath-

er than adequate school provision.

This distinction has practical consequences for future research and monitoring. Asking whether 'materials are available' is too broad. Studies should separate textbooks, teacher guides, laboratory equipment, digital access, consumables, locally sourced resources and items purchased by families. Such detail would show whether CBC is genuinely resourced at school level or whether the costs of implementation are being shifted, quietly, to households.

The learner and school-record findings do not cancel each other out. Many enrolled learners believed that CBC had helped them stay in school, while the school-level progression indicator declined. A more engaging curriculum can make schooling feel worthwhile, but it cannot by itself remove financial pressure, family obligations, mobility, illness or weak institutional support (Archambault et al., 2009; Fall & Roberts, 2012; Henry et al., 2012).

The survey necessarily reflects the views of learners who were still enrolled and present during data collection. Those who had already left school were not available to answer it. The mean of 4.07 for the statement that CBC had helped learners stay in school therefore represents current learners, not everyone who entered Senior One. This is a serious limitation when a cross-sectional survey is used to discuss retention. Future studies should follow cohorts over time and include young people who transfer or leave.

Affordability was the point at which learner and documentary evidence agreed most clearly. Learners described projects and materials as costly, and PTA records from all four schools recorded parental concern. This places CBC within the wider economics of secondary schooling in Uganda. Omoeva and Gale (2016) showed that household expenditure remains important even under Universal Secondary Education. If practical activities depend on families buying materials that schools cannot provide, the reform can unintentionally widen differences between learners. A task may be identical on paper but much harder to complete for a learner whose household cannot meet the additional cost.

Barasa et al. (2025) reach a related conclusion at school level, showing that socioeconomic context shapes preparedness for Uganda's lower secondary reform. The policy response should therefore not be to abandon practical work. The more useful question is how to finance and design practical learning so that competence development is not conditional on household income. Locally available materials can reduce some costs, but they cannot substitute for system responsibility for textbooks, specialist equipment, teacher support and inclusive adaptations.

The teacher-orientation findings also deserve attention. Only 25% of the sampled schools recorded orientation, and the orientation indicator itself was low. CBC changes the everyday work of teaching: planning, classroom interaction, feedback, assessment and practical tasks all need new routines. A short introductory workshop is unlikely to carry that change on its own. Desimone (2009) argues that professional learning is more effective when it is sustained, coherent, active and connected to teachers' subject practice. African reviews likewise identify teacher capacity as one of the most persistent constraints on CBC implementation (Christopher & Jones, 2025; Wawire et al., 2026).

For that reason, monitoring should ask more than how many teachers have been 'trained.' It should examine what support teachers receive after initial orientation, whether they have opportunities to plan and moderate assessment together, whether they can obtain the resources needed for practical work, and whether classroom assessment actually reflects competency-based expectations. Atibuni et al. (2024) make this point particularly clearly: assessment reform is difficult to sustain when classroom practice remains anchored in older examination-oriented routines.

The period covered by the school records also requires caution. Uganda's education system was still dealing with the consequences of COVID-19 school closures, disrupted progression and household income shocks during 2021-2024. It would therefore be misleading to attribute changes in enrolment or retention to CBC alone. The more defensible reading is that, during a difficult period of curriculum reform and post-pandemic recovery, the four schools recorded rising Senior One intake but weaker progression to Senior Four, alongside resource and affordability constraints. That pattern is important enough to investigate further, but it is not a causal estimate of the curriculum's effect.

6. Conclusion

Learners generally appreciated Competence Based Curriculum practical orientation and many believed that it supported their continued participation. School records, meanwhile, pointed to limited teacher preparation, constrained resources, continuing cost concerns and weaker progression despite increased Senior One intake. A curriculum may be attractive to learners without being sufficiently supported to sustain their participation.

CBC can give learners a stronger sense of purpose, but that benefit is fragile when teachers are under-prepared, schools lack resources and families must finance practical activities. The tensions in the findings are therefore informative. They show why curriculum experience, school capacity and household circumstances must be considered together. Policy should prioritise continuous teacher development, adequate resources, affordable practical learning and cohort-based monitoring. Future research should follow learners over time and separate the contribution of curriculum experience from the financial, household and institutional pressures that shape persistence.

7. Implications for Policy and Practice

1. CBC should be approached as a whole-system reform, not as a curriculum document that schools are expected to implement through effort alone. Learners appear to value its practical orientation, but continued participation depends on teacher support, school resources and household affordability. The evidence points to five priorities:
 1. Government and education authorities should protect practical learning from becoming a household-financed mandate by providing core textbooks, project resources and essential instructional materials, with additional support for lower-resourced schools.
 2. Replace one-off orientation with continuous professional learning. Teacher development should include subject-specific modelling, competency-based assessment, project design, learner-centered classroom management and collaborative moderation of assessment tasks.
 3. Monitor implementation fidelity and learner progression together. Inspection and municipal monitoring should include teacher support, material sufficiency, assessment practice, learner participation, attendance and cohort progression rather than treating curriculum coverage as the principal indicator of success.
 4. Design low-cost practical tasks without lowering standards. Schools can use locally available materials where pedagogically appropriate, but affordability should be assessed explicitly so that learners are not excluded from tasks because of household income.
 5. Build early-warning and re-engagement systems. Attendance, repeated absence, incomplete project participation and financial distress can be used to identify learners at risk of leaving school, while

parent-school dialogue should connect families to feasible support before disengagement becomes permanent.

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