

Quality of National Curriculum and Student Learning: The case of thematic curriculum in Uganda.

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This paper is prepared as part of the Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) Africa Continental Symposium on Educational Research and Innovation to contribute to the quality and relevance of education debate, and for the Education Out Loud (EOL) program stakeholders, to make a case for public policy changes to address quality and relevance of education concerns in Africa.

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Abstract: *A curriculum is essential for quality learning and relevance of education to a society's development needs. In 2007, Uganda introduced thematic curriculum at P-1 to P-3 level, with the purpose of improving quality and relevance of learning outcomes. This paper assesses the effect of these reforms on learning among lower grade learners in Uganda and proceeds to make policy recommendations that could improve curriculum implementation in the country. A qualitative research approach was used targeting government practitioners across the education value chain, comprising of curriculum developers, examiners, primary school teacher college tutors, quality assurance officers, education administrators and primary school early grade teachers. Data was collected using 15 key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and analyses of documents on student performance. Results indicate that P-3 literacy improved from 10% in 2013 to 39.5% in 2021 while numeracy improved from 8% to 20.8% over the same period. Use of local language simplified concepts, non-textbook materials promoted incidental learning while CCT support improved teacher preparation and lesson planning. Diagnostic and continuous assessment revealed low performing areas for improved instructional design and planning. Thematic learning areas enabled learning integration with living experiences and class teacher system positively impacted affective learning due to bonding and familiarity between learners and the teacher. Implementation has had challenges of large classroom sizes, teacher capacity, adoption of local language and inelaborate implementation framework. This paper makes policy recommendations relating to teachers' professional development, school-based curriculum implementation, language, content and methods of instruction, teaching and learning materials, performance assessment and an agenda for decolonizing education in Africa.*

Key Words: Curriculum, Relevance, Quality, Learning

Introduction

A curriculum plays an essential role in enabling quality learning and in articulating and fostering an education that is relevant to development needs of a society (Stabback, 2016). Thus, it is important educators concern themselves with what comprises a quality curriculum and how the core elements of Sustainable Development Goal four (SDG4) namely inclusivity and equity, quality of learning, life-long learning and relevance to people's development needs are anchored in a curriculum. Determination of the quality of a curriculum encompasses looking at four broad criteria namely development process, the content, implementation, and evaluation (Altinyelken, 2010). Decision making in policy implementation is a complex process that is laden with political influence as governments prefer to determine what their citizens learn in line with a country's social, economic, and political aspirations (Fullan, 19991). In recent past, many African countries have embarked on curricula reforms (Chisholm and Leyendecker, 2008), but emphasis has been more on policy formulation and less on implementation (Haddad, 1995). This paper examines implementation of Uganda's lower primary school thematic curriculum and the impact it has had on learning.

Background

In 2007, Uganda introduced thematic curriculum at P-1 to P-3 level. The main reform features brought by the new curriculum included familiar language of instruction, class teacher system, non-textbook materials, themes of interest to learners and continuous assessment of learners' achievements. The reforms were in line with commitments made in

the 1997 Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy that all children should access quality relevant education that expose them to quality, inclusive and equitable relevant learning. And thus, these curriculum reforms were meant to enhance the efficacy of primary school curriculum to realize UPE policy aspirations (GoU, 2018). Further, the reforms live up to the aspirations envisaged in Uganda's Vision 2040 development blueprint and National Development Plans I to III, which emphasize the importance of reforming the curriculum as a pre-requisite for quality workforce needed for a country's socioeconomic transformation. The curriculum is not only considered as an input into the education system but also a key determinant of economic growth through its effect on productivity of the human capital (Chisholm & Leyendecker, 2008).

The primary school curriculum in Uganda has been evolving over time to respond to people's development needs. But notable reforms begun in 1988 when the National Resistance Movement (NRM) government's education reform process formed the Education Policy Reform Commission, whose work led to writing of the 1992 Government White Paper on Education. A curriculum reform task force would later be put in place to drive curriculum reform agenda anchored on the recommendations of the 1992 White Paper. Introduction of UPE policy in 1997 called for another curriculum reform process in the hope that a quality and relevant curriculum would attract learners to school and retain and motivate teachers (GoU, 2018). However, a 2006 learning assessment by National Assessment for Primary Education (NAPE) revealed children were still failing to gain numeracy and literacy skills in both local languages and English. Several other studies pointed to perpetual poor learning outcomes attributable to quality of the curriculum and this spiraled into subsequent curriculum reform efforts that led to the 2007 thematic curriculum, which is currently under implementation. This paper therefore attempts to answer the question whether the lower primary school thematic curriculum has led to improvements in learning.

Purpose and of the study

The overall purpose of the study was to assess the impact of thematic curriculum on student learning in Uganda. Focusing on implementation of the 1997 thematic curriculum in P-1 to P-3, the study sought to explore whether quality of national curriculum has notable influence on student learning. The specific objectives were

1. To examine the effect of thematic curriculum on learners' numeracy and literacy learning outcomes among lower primary school learners in Uganda.
2. To explore how pedagogy and management reforms may have had an impact on learning outcomes among lower primary school learners in Uganda.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to enable in-depth inquiry into reforms impact on student learning. The target population was government practitioners across the education value chain in Uganda, comprising of curriculum developers, examiners, primary school teacher college tutors, quality assurance officers, education administrators and primary school early grade teachers. Convenience and purposive sampling methods were used to select key informants and focus group discussants who were believed to have the most relevant information about the study. Data was collected using key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs) and document analysis. There were 15 KIIs comprising 3 from the National Assessment of Primary Examinations (NAPE), an entity run by Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), 3 at National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC), 2 Center Coordinating Tutors (CCTs) at Busubisi Core Primary Teachers College, 5 public primary school teachers, 1 inspector of schools and 1 education officer from

Makindye division education office. FGDs involved lower primary and early childhood education officers at NCDC and CCTs from Busubisi PTC.

The documents reviewed were student performance assessment reports from the National Assessment of Primary Education (NAPE) and UWEZO learning outcomes research reports from Uganda. Others were the lower primary school thematic curriculum framework and thematic curriculum implementation evaluation reports. Data analysis was done through content analysis, discourse analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis involved analyzing trends that emerged when reviewing documents and making inferences based on trends and comparisons while discourse analysis involved studying conversations and discussions obtained during KIIs and FGDs to come up with common facts that cut across different discussions and interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted through exploration of people's experiences and opinions and generating common themes to form conjecture about effects of thematic curriculum on learning.

Results

Presentation of results is organized in line with the study objectives. Data gathered to find out whether thematic curriculum has had effect on numeracy and literacy is presented and makes comparisons between learning assessment reports over time. The study finds significant improvements in learning among lower primary school learners that are attributable to implementation of thematic curriculum, especially in relation to language of instruction, class teacher system, and non-textbook materials. It also finds learning improvements that can be attributed to pedagogical and curriculum management reforms of the class teacher system, use of thematic learning areas and continuous assessment of learners.

a) Literacy and numeracy learning outcomes

Findings from the study demonstrated a positive trend of literacy and numeracy scores among P-3 learners since introduction of thematic curriculum in Uganda. Data from UWEZO 2013 national learning assessment shows that 9 out of 10 P-3 learners were unable to read and comprehend a P-2 level English story and correctly solve P-2 level numeracy tasks up to division level. This indicates about 10% competency rate. About seven years later, a similar study by UWEZO in 2021 indicated that ability to read and comprehend a P-2 level English story had risen to 39.5% while that of numeracy had risen to 20.8%. The study also found that P-3 local language literacy improved from 10% in 2013 to 45.1% in 2021. Key informant interviews and the FGD were able to corroborate this evidence and determine whether it could be attributed to introduction of thematic curriculum. A curriculum development officer in charge of lower primary school at the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC) felt that allowing use of local language in classrooms enabled teachers to clearly explain concepts in class and that learners could readily associate the concepts with real life situations drawn from their environment. The officer also thought the class teacher system enhanced the learner teacher bond and enabled the teacher to know individual learners in detail, an aspect that led to addressing individual learning strengths and weaknesses.

“When I was in school many years ago, we were taught in mother tongue and had only one teacher from P-1 to P-3. I can relate the situation then and now and I can attest that there are notable improvements in learning due to this arrangement. Our main challenge has been large classroom sizes and inability to use a local language in urban settings. But overall, improvement in literacy and numeracy can be attributed to the class teacher system and use of local language in class. This has positively impacted affective learning due to bonding and familiarity between learners and the teacher.” – NCDC officer.

The use of non-textbook materials enabled learners to participate in co-creating thus eliciting incidental learning and discovery.

“Non-textbook materials promote incidental learning and student-centered approaches. Although not all teachers are trained in the human centered design of developing teaching and learning materials, there are instances where learners and teachers are involved in preparing non-textbook teaching and learning materials and this promotes authentic and incidental learning”. – NCDC Officer

The study also encountered some negative effects of Covid-19 on learning among early grade learners. Uganda closed schools for almost two years with no elaborate method of continued learning during closures. This led to unprecedented learning losses among other socioeconomic effects on communities and learners. For instance, P-3 local language literacy dropped from 59.1% in 2018 to 45.5% in 2021. This decline was also reported in numeracy rates dropping from 22.8% in 2018 to 20.8% in 2021, a situation attributable to prolonged school closure due to Covid-19 pandemic (UWEZO, 2021; NAPE, 2021).

b) Pedagogy and curriculum management

The study observed pedagogical and curriculum management reforms and practices courtesy of thematic curriculum that have had a positive impact on quality of learning. The introduction of Center Coordinating Tutors (CCTs) within Primary Teacher Colleges (PTCs) and establishment of Core Centers in every zone provided a strategic method of continuous professional development for teachers. CCTs are assigned zones to provide field support to teachers while on the job, a practice that is believed to improve teacher preparation and lesson planning. A discussion with two CCTs from Busibisi Core Primary Teachers College in Mityana, Central Uganda, painted a picture of how teachers facing difficulties in implementing the thematic curriculum were supported by this fieldwork function while on the job. Teachers can hold briefs with visiting CCTs on pedagogical challenges they face at school. The arrangement also provides teachers with opportunities to make authentic proposals drawn from their practical pedagogical experiences.

“I am mainly at the college on Mondays. The rest of the days throughout the week I use this motorbike (pointing at his Yamaha DT 175 Motorcycle provided by government) to visit various schools to provide support to teachers on the job. Most of my job is in the field and I find this very practical as opposed to purely in-service courses as a method for continuous professional development. A blend of the two has led to improving teachers’ capacities and motivation” – A CCT from Busubisi Core PTC.

When schools reopened after Covid-19 pandemic, diagnostic assessment was largely used to determine level of learning and helped teachers to identify appropriate methods of placing learners and subsequent structuring of schemes of work and lesson plans. This coupled with continuous assessment revealed low performing areas for improved instructional design and planning. The practice is hoped to help recover lost learning among learners since not all learners had equal opportunities for learning continuity during school closure. This was an excellent fit since Uganda’s thematic curriculum has already factored in diagnostic and continuous assessment methods of evaluating learning. During the study, it was also observed that shifting from subjects to thematic learning areas enabled learning integration with living experiences. Organizing learning into emerging themes as opposed to subjects enable schools and teachers to determine relevant learning content drawn from

catchment communities. This practice can enhance relevance of education and has a bearing on quality of learning.

“It doesn’t make sense to have a national curriculum that dictates uniform content across the country. Rather, the government should provide a national curriculum guideline with defined standards of expected competencies and allow adaptation of learning content to catchment communities. For instance, why would we be struggling to teach agricultural production concepts using coffee or tea farming content to children in Karamoja region where the main agricultural practice is livestock rearing? Thematic learning areas allow this adaptation and has had positive effects on the quality of learning” – Makindye division education officer.

The practice of continuous assessment provided for in thematic curriculum allowed teachers to identify areas that learners were not doing well and adapt learning to address them as opposed to working with summative assessment methods only. The practice of adaptive management of teaching and learning based on continuous assessment results leads to improved learning in an action research type of curriculum planning and management. However, a challenge arises where the old examination-oriented philosophy of determining student performance is largely maintained, even as continuous assessment is emphasized in the thematic curriculum.

“We have continuous assessment in the thematic curriculum, but many teachers still teach to the exam since the system and society holds on to the old fashion that examination grades are the sole determinants of student performance. This has to do with the style and foundational philosophy of our education system that is heavily dependent on the colonial education adopted at independence. It would be useful if results from continuous assessment can significantly contribute to final performance, especially in transition grades. Nonetheless, continuous assessments provide teachers with opportunities to identify poor learning outcomes at an early stage and can take corrective measures in good time”. NAPE officer.

Discussion of results and conclusions

This study provided evidence that a national curriculum has significant effect on quality of learning. It finds that reforms brought by introduction of thematic curriculum in Uganda have had notable effects on student learning. Data gathered during the study show significant improvements in literacy and numeracy learning outcomes among P-3 learners. There are plausible connections that can be made between observed learning outcomes and reforms advanced by thematic curriculum. The use of familiar language of instruction simplified concepts by making them available in a language familiar to the learner’s environment. Teachers were able to explain concepts better in local languages as opposed to English. This is in line with observations that learning in the native language, especially during the first years of formal schooling, help children improve their cognitive skills in numeracy and problem-solving. Likewise, teachers may also teach more effectively in their native language (Soh, Carpio and Wang 2022). For this reason, it can be argued that local language of instruction policy introduced in the thematic curriculum significantly contributed to improved literacy and numeracy learning outcomes.

There are some challenges, however, that were noted. These may not be generalized and could be specific to systemic shortfalls of the management of education system in Uganda, but they present useful lessons that other countries can learn from to avoid similar pitfalls. There was the problem of language of instructing student teachers in Primary

Training Colleges (PTCs). From discussions at Busibisi Core PTC, it emerged that although student teachers were expected to teach in local languages, their instruction was done in English. And the question that arise is whether one can use one language to teach another. For instance, can one teach Luganda in English or English in Luganda? This presented a notable challenge for teachers once they are deployed.

Use of local language as a medium of instruction faced a challenge in cosmopolitan areas like urban areas. Although a policy was adopted to use local language in early grades, schools in cosmopolitan areas continued to use English for instruction. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that the people in Uganda do not have one official local language that is spoken by everyone. Such a language would be the language of instruction in cosmopolitan areas. Although Luganda is widely spoken, it is not intelligible to everyone and thus cannot be used as a language of instruction where communities of different ethnic backgrounds reside, like urban areas. It is however noted that the Cabinet of the Government of Uganda adopted a resolution in July 2022 making Kiswahili the official national language which should be a mandatory taught subject at all levels of basic education (GoU Cabinet Resolutions, 2022). In addition, localizing the language of instruction without localizing content and methods emerged as an area needing attention. A lot of emphasis has been put on using local language for instruction and not much has been focused on using local content from indigenous knowledge systems and methods of teaching and learning. To complete the localization and familiarity agenda in learning, it is crucial that indigenous knowledge and methods are adopted as well. The befitting scenario that will achieve intended learning by use of local language is where both language, content and pedagogy are drawn from the indigenous knowledge and learning systems of the catchment community.

The class teacher system provided an opportunity for learners and teachers to bond and develop friendship, thus enhancing the affective domain of learning as observed in Anderson and Krathwol, (2001). It also provided an opportunity for teachers to understand individual learners in detail and attend to their unique learning needs. It can be argued that this situation could be responsible for improved learning among P-3 learners observed in the study. As argued by Nawatti (2019), the class teacher system promotes reinforced learner centered approach where the teacher can understand the weaknesses and strengths of individual students and respond to them accordingly. The approach promotes responsibility and discipline among teachers since a single teacher assumes credits for all that happens of a particular classroom. Some challenges in the case of Uganda were identified during the study, which could advance a negative effect of class teacher system on quality of learning. The high teacher pupil ratio in the country due to government's failure to supply adequate qualified teachers conferred a heavy workload on teachers and thus individual attention aspired in the approach wasn't properly implemented. In addition, there were concerns that a single teacher may not be an expert in all taught thematic areas.

The use on non-textbook materials for teaching and learning intended in the thematic curriculum was observed to have contributed to improved quality of learning. When teachers and learners collaboratively co-create materials, there is an opportunity for incidental learning and discovery. This concept is referred to as the Human-Centered Design (HCD) in teaching and learning, an iterative process that involves learners (users) in all phases of the process. It enables participants to experience the process and philosophy behind the materials while putting their own real-life experiences in the development process (Carles, Mor and Tesconi, 2020). This factor was evident in cases where non-textbook materials were developed and used for teaching and learning. However, teachers who participated in the study observed that

there wasn't adequate training and support in HCD approach to make use of non-textbook materials a reality. They also observed that the NCDC largely holds on to the old system of determining coursework textbooks that are developed by experts at national level without significant involvement of users. Coupled with adoption of thematic learning areas relevant to the local environment of the learner provided for in the thematic curriculum, non-textbook materials provided a rich source of authentic knowledge drawn from the learners' own environment. It can therefore be argued that this change in the curriculum led to observed improvement of learning.

The provision of continuous assessment in the thematic curriculum was also observed to influence quality of learning. Continuous assessment is a form of educational examination that evaluates a student's progress throughout a prescribed course. It is often used as an alternative or a complimentary to the final examination system (UNESCO, 2017). Assessment methods chosen in an educational program are fundamentally driven by the purpose of conducting such an assessment. Thus, the form of assessment is geared towards a particular purpose and to achieve certain outcomes. There are largely two forms of assessment in an educational program – formative assessment (otherwise known as assessment for learning), which is executed through continuous assessment approach during learning and summative assessment (otherwise known as assessment of learning), which is executed at the end of an educational program largely to determine scores and overall grades (UNESCO, 2017; Guba and Lincoln, 1981). The thematic curriculum brought some emphasis on continuous assessment to enable teachers undertake learner assessment not only for purposes of giving grades but also to improve the learning process. From the study, teachers were able to share how continuous assessment had helped them restructure and adapt lesson plans and methods of teaching to address emerging gaps. This action research type of curriculum management enabled an adaptive management approach that used implementation experiences and assessment outcomes to improve curriculum planning and implementation. It can be argued that this component had its fair share of observed learning improvement among P-3 learners. A challenge that emerged was the society and system's mindset and philosophy of success in an educational program can only be determined by test scores through a formal examination. Thus, many schools and teachers teach to the exam as opposed to embracing the continuous assessment to improve the quality of learning process. It was also observed that student scores from continuous assessments were not necessarily considered in the final grading exam, and this explains why there could be low interest in embracing the approach.

Policy recommendations

Based on findings from this study, seven policy recommendations are made. While noting that thematic curriculum in Uganda is a desirable reform initiative that has huge potential to improve the quality of learning, there are policy lacunas that emerged which if addressed would improve implementation of the curriculum and lead to desired outcomes of improved quality of learning.

1. It emerged that capacity of teachers was crucial if the objectives of thematic curriculum are to be fully realized. The government of Uganda has a policy on Continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers, which mainly involves in-service courses and field support from CCTs and quality assurance officers. This approach may not be giving adequate space for teacher participation in designing and implementation of the CPD courses. It is important to note that authentic professional development calls for involvement of teachers since they bring practical pedagogical experiences from their daily practices. The CPD policy should therefore be expanded to emphasis on using small school-based collaborative learning teams of teachers in an action research approach to

offer authentic solutions to pedagogical problems. This method leads to empowering schoolteachers and ameliorating school-based problems related to the teaching learning process as observed by Delta, Chalchisa and Lemma (2014).

2. The study noted thematic curriculum potential to improve learning by using non-textbook materials since they are made from locally available materials through a participatory process that involves both the teacher and the learner. It however emerged that execution of an elaborate program to train and support teachers in this process was necessary. Thus, not all teachers were active in developing non-textbook materials. This study recommends that the teaching and learning materials policy be reviewed to significantly adopt the Human Centered Design (HCD) approach which promotes co-creation at school level where teachers, learners, and community members – especially parents – are involved. This will reduce over reliance on technical experts who design teaching and learning materials at national level. The policy should further provide a structured program of training and supporting teachers to lead the HCD approach of developing materials at school level.
3. Research has proven that use of a familiar language of instruction in early grades has significant effect on learning. And thus, thematic curriculum's emphasis on use of local language in lower primary school is a step in the right direction. While it is worth noting that learning in the colonial language (English in the case of Uganda) may be economically valuable, as many jobs in the local economy and abroad require those language skills, it is important to observe that since gaining independence, many former colonies have faced the dilemma of whether to continue using the colonial language in the education system or revert to their native language (Soh, Carpio and Wang, 2022). Some countries maintained the colonial language as the language of instruction in schools while others replaced the colonial language with their local language. This study makes a policy recommendation that the language of instruction policy makes a clear distinction between using local languages for learning and teaching English as a language. It appears that these two concepts are not delineated which has led to low adoption of local languages in lower grade learning.
4. The study also noted that while there was a lot of emphasis on use of familiar language in the push to localization of learning, adoption of indigenous knowledge and methods of teaching and learning – which is inherent in a local language – wasn't equally considered. It therefore becomes problematic to teach content originated by foreign philosophy in a local language. In fact, the problem emerges when the local language has no words to refer to concepts drawn from foreign foundations. This study therefore recommends that the language of instruction policy be expanded to localize not just the language but also to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems and methods of teaching and learning.
5. The study noted that while thematic curriculum is an excellent design, implementation at school level was not meeting expectations. Curriculum implementation is centrally controlled by the national government and many teachers wait for implementation guides which are developed at national level. However, the nature of Uganda's thematic curriculum is akin to the Competency Based Curriculum (CBC) which calls for greater teacher, student, and community (parental) involvement. This study recommends that a School Based Curriculum Development (SBCD) approach be adopted to improve implementation of thematic curriculum in Uganda. The approach is strongly tied to the view that teachers should be developers, rather than transmitters of curriculum (Bolstad,

2004). Marsh et al. (1990) observes that SBCD enables development of curricula that reflect local needs, bringing students, teachers, parents, and stakeholders into the school curriculum development process through local level action that connotes participation, grass-roots control, and attributes which are held to be near and dear to the public. From this understanding, SBCD requires action from a community of stakeholders within the school locality. It also brings in an element of participatory and democratic process where stakeholders express their opinions and preferences as far as curriculum management at school level is concerned. To address the challenges of implementation, this study recommends that the curriculum development policy be expanded to incorporate SBCD approach where teachers, learners, parents, and community participate in curriculum planning, co-creation, and implementation of the curriculum at school level.

6. From the study, it also emerged that although continuous assessment is a core element of thematic curriculum and that it was applied in varying proportions across schools, scores from the assessment were not considered in the end of term or year grading of learners. To enhance the use of continuous assessment as a method to improve learning, this study recommends that examinations and learning assessment policy enhances incorporation of continuous assessment scores in the final performance assessment of learners and determination of learners' overall performance, especially in transition grades.
7. Findings from the study suggested that the foundational philosophy of education system in Uganda is still anchored on colonial thought and culture. The debates around language of instruction, examination methods of assessing performance and curriculum content vis a vis adoption of indigenous languages and knowledge systems are some of the pointers to the need to purposively decolonize education in the country. This study recommends that policy reforms that focus on redefining the foundational philosophy of education in the country be pursued with emphasis on decolonizing the entire education system. This will respond to learning needs of respective communities for relevance, with emphasis on economic, social, political, and cultural priorities considering historically and environmentally relevant content and methods that resonate with learners and local community. It is believed this move will have significant positive impact on quality of learning.

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