

BETWEEN COMPETENCE AND COMPLIANCE: EXAMINING THE CHALLENGES OF COMPETENCE-BASED CURRICULUM IMPLEMENTATION UNDER CENTRALIZED EXAMINATIONS IN TANZANIA

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Abstract

Tanzania's adoption of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) seeks to foster learner-centered pedagogy, higher-order thinking, and lifelong learning; however, implementation remains constrained by the continued dominance of centralized, summative examinations that privilege content recall over competence demonstration. Using a qualitative document-analysis methodology drawing on national policy frameworks, recent empirical studies, and classroom observation reports, this paper critically examines the structural and pedagogical tensions produced when competence-oriented reforms coexist with exam-driven accountability systems. Findings indicate that high-stakes examinations restrict teachers' instructional autonomy, narrow curriculum interpretation, and perpetuate rote learning, resulting in superficial compliance rather than substantive pedagogical transformation, especially in rural and resource-constrained contexts where professional development support is limited. The analysis argues that without coherent alignment between assessment structures, teacher capacity-building initiatives, and the philosophical foundations of the CBC, Tanzania risks sustaining a cycle of policy innovation without meaningful classroom change. The paper concludes by recommending an integrated reform strategy that decentralises assessment, strengthens teacher professionalism, and reorients accountability mechanisms to ensure that competence becomes an authentic and measurable educational reality.

Keywords: Competence, Compliance, Competence-Based, Curriculum Implementation, Centralized Examinations.

INTRODUCTION

Across much of Sub-Saharan Africa, education reform is marked by a growing paradox: governments are adopting competence-based curricula while retaining examination systems shaped by 20th-century traditions. Tanzania illustrates this tension sharply. Since the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) was introduced in 2005 and later strengthened through the 2016 and 2023 syllabi policy documents have emphasised producing learners

who think critically, communicate clearly, and apply knowledge in real contexts (TIE, 2023). The Ministry of Education has repeatedly affirmed these goals, framing the CBC as a pathway to learner autonomy and lifelong learning (MoEST, 2014). Yet national assessment practices have not kept pace. The school experience for many learners continues to revolve around preparing for high-stakes, summative examinations that privilege recall over competence.

This contradiction has become one of the most persistent barriers to curriculum transformation. While the CBC promotes formative and continuous assessment, the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) continues to define success through centralised, standardised testing. Teachers must therefore navigate two competing expectations: demonstrating competence in everyday instruction while also securing examination results that determine their professional standing. Studies from classroom settings show that this pressure pushes teachers toward test-focused instruction, narrowing the curriculum and limiting opportunities for creative, inquiry-based learning (Komba & Shukia, 2023). Recent field observations similarly report that exam templates often override CBC rubrics, leading to superficial or symbolic use of competence-based methods (Mgaya, 2024).

Experiences from countries that have successfully implemented competence-based reforms highlight the importance of redesigning assessment alongside curriculum change. Finland's decentralised approach places strong emphasis on teacher-led, formative evaluation, reducing reliance on national examinations (Sahlberg, 2019). New Zealand's NCEA model supports project-based assessment and diverse evidence of learning, allowing competence to be demonstrated in multiple ways (Hipkins, 2020). These global examples show that when assessment remains summative and centralised, teachers tend to revert to traditional practices regardless of curriculum philosophy. UNESCO's recent regional analysis reinforces this point, noting that systemic structures, not pedagogical intentions, often determine the real direction of reform (UNESCO, 2023).

The stakes in Tanzania are high. Misalignment between CBC principles and examination practices affects learner confidence, teacher morale, and equity across regions. Students in urban, better-resourced schools may experience

competence-oriented teaching, while those in rural communities remain confined to rote preparation for national tests. Teachers report uncertainty about reconciling CBC's formative assessment requirements with NECTA's templates, leading to fatigue and resistance toward reform (Sumra & Rajani, 2018). Over time, this dissonance weakens trust in both policy vision and classroom implementation.

This paper examines the persistence of this policy-practice gap. It analyses how centralised examinations shape teacher behaviour, curriculum interpretation, and learner outcomes within the CBC framework. Drawing on empirical studies, policy analyses, and regional comparisons, the paper argues that Tanzania's education system is structurally misaligned for competence development. The following sections review theoretical perspectives on competence-based learning, assess implementation realities in schools, and propose pathways for reform that prioritise redesigned assessment, strengthened teacher capacity, and improved institutional coordination as foundations for meaningful change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) is anchored in constructivist and experiential learning theories, which view knowledge not as a fixed body of content but as something learners actively build through interaction, reflection, and application. Foundational thinkers such as Kolb (1984) highlight the cyclical nature of experiential learning, while Ainscow and Miles (2008) stress inclusive pedagogies that cultivate meaningful participation. In this paradigm, competence is conceptualized as the integration of knowledge, skills, and values expressed through authentic performance rather than isolated recall.

Tanzanian curriculum reforms draw heavily on these ideas, positioning assessment as a tool for fostering transfer of learning and lifelong

capability rather than simply ranking learners (TIE, 2016). However, the literature also acknowledges that translating these conceptual aspirations into practice requires structural alignment across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, an alignment that remains fragile in many reforming systems.

International cases demonstrate that successful CBC implementation depends not merely on changing curricular documents but on reshaping the underlying *assessment culture*. Finland, for example, integrates formative and teacher-led evaluations within a broader ethos of professional trust, limiting the role of national examinations and encouraging diverse evidence of learning (Sahlberg, 2019). New Zealand's NCEA reforms similarly reflect a shift toward modular, performance-based assessment, where creativity, collaboration, and reflective thinking count toward certification (Hipkins, 2020).

Singapore offers a hybrid model that retains national exams for benchmarking while embedding school-based and digital formative assessments to promote 21st-century competencies (Tan & Koh, 2022). Across these systems, coherence is the defining feature: assessment practices reinforce curriculum intentions rather than contradict them. Literature emphasizes that where centralized summative examinations remain dominant, "assessment inertia" often neutralizes the transformative aims of CBC by drawing teachers back into traditional modes of instruction (Zamora and Torres, 2020).

Within the African region, studies highlight the difficulty of shifting long-standing examination cultures while attempting to introduce competency reforms. Kenya's School-Based Assessments (SBA) mark a significant turn toward continuous evaluation, yet the pressure of high-stakes selection into secondary and tertiary institutions continues to drive exam-

oriented teaching (Kafwa and Wambua, 2022). Rwanda's 2015 curriculum overhaul reveals how weak teacher preparation in formative assessment can hinder the adoption of reflective and learner-centered pedagogy (Habimana, 2021).

Two cross-cutting constraints emerge in the literature. First, multilingual classrooms complicate the fair assessment of competencies, as limited language proficiency may mask conceptual understanding (UNESCO, 2023). Second, uneven teacher assessment literacy—particularly in under-resourced rural contexts—creates gaps between policy expectations and classroom realities (African Development Bank, 2021). These studies collectively illustrate that CBC reforms succeed only when supported through sustained professional development and assessment frameworks that reduce the dominance of high-stakes testing. Tanzania's experience mirrors these systemic tensions rather than uniquely diverging from them.

The Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) has articulated a clear pedagogical vision that foregrounds active learning, classroom-based assessment, and reflective practice (TIE, 2023). Yet scholarship consistently reveals a misalignment between this vision and the summative orientation of national examinations. Komba and Shukia (2023) describe this as a "dual curriculum": one progressive in policy language and another traditional in examination practice. Nzima (2016) further notes that some teachers conflate competence with exam success, interpreting CBC through the lens of performance metrics rather than deep learning. Structural constraints such as overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, and fragmented in-service training compound these conceptual misunderstandings (Mgaya, 2024). Additionally, strong cultural attachments to examination results, reinforced by parents, school owners, and community leaders, sustain assessment practices that privilege

memorization over performance (Sumra and Rajani, 2018; Oduor, 2021).

Recent policy developments offer tentative signs of system-wide recalibration. The National Digital Education Strategy (2024/25) proposes integrating digital portfolios, continuous feedback systems, and AI-assisted assessment tools into routine classroom practice (MoEST, 2025). Early pilot initiatives in Arusha and Mwanza provide emerging evidence that School-Based Continuous Assessment (SBCA) can enhance learner engagement when teachers are supported with practical tools such as performance rubrics, observation checklists, and structured peer assessments (Mgaya, 2024).

The literature increasingly converges on three interdependent levers for successful CBC reform: assessment redesign that foregrounds authentic, performance-based tasks; sustained teacher professional learning that deepens assessment literacy; and institutional coherence among curriculum developers, examination bodies, and teacher training institutions. Where these conditions align, CBC can shift from policy rhetoric to classroom reality; where they do not, competence remains aspirational, constrained by the gravitational pull of examination-driven culture.

THE TENSION BETWEEN COMPETENCE AND EXAMINATION CULTURE

The implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Tanzania reveals not only a pedagogical tension, but also a deeper historical and ideological divide between two philosophies of education: competence and compliance. The competence-based approach envisions learning as an active, transformative process through which learners construct meaning, apply knowledge creatively, and demonstrate understanding in real-life situations. It values collaboration, inquiry, and adaptability skills essential for participation in

the twenty-first-century economy. Within this paradigm, the classroom becomes a site of discovery where learners engage critically with content and develop the ability to transfer knowledge to new contexts (Ainscow & Miles, 2008; TIE, 2023).

The opposing paradigm, compliance-based education, has its roots in the colonial legacy of schooling that prioritized obedience, uniformity, and rote mastery of prescribed content. This tradition, inherited and institutionalized in post-independence Tanzania, reinforced examinations as the principal mechanism of control, both over learners and teachers. Assessment was designed not to measure competence but to rank, select, and certify. Success became synonymous with memorization and reproduction rather than reasoning and innovation. Over time, this examination-oriented mindset solidified into what many scholars describe as a “culture of compliance,” where teachers teach to the test and learners study to pass rather than to understand (Sumra & Rajani, 2018; Oduor, 2021).

Today, the CBC attempts to challenge this inherited order, yet the old system continues to dominate the structures of evaluation, teacher accountability, and public perception of quality. Examinations remain the gatekeepers of progression and opportunity, shaping what is taught and how it is taught. Teachers, constrained by limited resources and the weight of national expectations, often revert to traditional, teacher-centered practices to ensure predictable examination outcomes. The result is a hybrid classroom reality in which progressive pedagogy coexists uneasily with conservative assessment regimes.

This contradiction lies at the heart of Tanzania’s reform struggle progressive policy anchored to regressive practice. The CBC advocates for learners who are creative problem-solvers, communicators, and innovators, yet the dominant assessment system rewards

conformity, speed, and recall. As UNESCO (2023) observes, this tension between innovation and standardization reflects a global challenge for many education systems in transition. However, in Tanzania, the problem is intensified by the structural legacy of centralization and the lingering belief that examinations are the ultimate arbiters of intelligence and merit. Until these two philosophies, competence and compliance, are reconciled through coherent reform, the transformative potential of the CBC will remain constrained within a system designed to preserve control rather than cultivate capability.

The Legacy of Examinations in Tanzanian Education

The centralized examination system in Tanzania has historically served as both a measure of learning and a mechanism for social mobility. From the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) to the Certificate of Secondary Education Examination (CSEE), these high-stakes assessments determine promotion, school ranking, and in many cases, employment prospects. Such centralized examinations were designed for administrative efficiency and comparability, rather than for measuring applied competencies. They reflect an industrial-era model of education where learning is standardized, and success is determined by the ability to reproduce predetermined answers (Mgaya, 2024; MoEST, 2014).

Under this regime, teachers face intense pressure to produce high pass rates, often the metric used for promotions, school reputation, and even political accountability. Consequently, many teachers prioritize examination preparation at the expense of competence development. Classroom observations reveal that lessons often revolve around past papers, predicted questions, and exam strategies rather than inquiry-based or collaborative activities (Komba and Shukia, 2023). Students learn to succeed in tests but fail to develop the analytical and communicative skills envisioned in the CBC.

This phenomenon is not unique to Tanzania. Across Africa, centralized exams have created what Oduor (2021) calls a “compliance mindset,” where both teachers and learners view success as mastering the test rather than mastering the skill. In Kenya and Uganda, similar tensions between CBC principles and high-stakes testing have led to hybrid classroom practices that blend old and new pedagogies, often with limited effectiveness (Kafwa and Wambua, 2022).

Misalignment of Pedagogy and Assessment

The most critical barrier to CBC realization in Tanzania lies in the misalignment between the curriculum’s philosophical foundation and the tools used to measure learning outcomes. The Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) syllabi emphasize continuous and formative assessment tasks that require learners to demonstrate competence through projects, oral communication, and problem-solving (TIE, 2023). However, the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) continues to design summative assessments that rely heavily on written recall.

This inconsistency sends contradictory signals to teachers. On paper, they are encouraged to nurture independent, reflective learners, while in practice, their performance is judged through exam outcomes. Nzima (2016) notes that this creates “double accountability,” forcing teachers to choose between curriculum fidelity and institutional survival. Many default to teaching examination content because it guarantees measurable outcomes. As a result, formative assessment intended to guide learning becomes a marginal activity rather than a pedagogical core.

Furthermore, assessment items often fail to measure higher-order competencies. Studies show that NECTA exam questions rarely assess application or synthesis; instead, they emphasize factual recall and grammar accuracy

(RISE Programme, 2023). This narrow focus limits opportunities for learners to display creativity or contextual understanding, effectively undermining the curriculum's objectives. The pressure to prepare students for such exams leads teachers to suppress exploratory learning, limit classroom discussions, and discourage risk-taking habits that contradict the competence-based ethos (Sumra & Rajani, 2018).

Psychological and Cultural Dimensions

The examination culture also exerts a powerful psychological and cultural influence on learners and educators alike. In Tanzanian society, academic success is often equated with examination performance. Parents, school heads, and even political leaders celebrate high scores as evidence of institutional quality, reinforcing the perception that examinations are synonymous with education (UNICEF, 2017). Failure in examinations carries social stigma, which in turn fuels anxiety and fear among learners. Derwing and Munro (2015) argue that such anxiety impedes language competence, as learners avoid communicative engagement for fear of error. This dynamic extends to other subjects, where students seek "safe" answers rather than engage in exploratory reasoning.

Teachers, too, internalize this culture of compliance. Many perceive curriculum reform as an external imposition rather than a professional opportunity (Mgaya, 2024). When competence-based principles conflict with long-established norms of authority and discipline, teachers revert to the familiar terrain of lecturing and note-taking. The result is what Sumra and Rajani (2018) term "surface-level reform," a change in vocabulary rather than in classroom reality.

Structural and Resource Constraints

The persistence of examination-driven instruction is compounded by structural barriers. Large class sizes, averaging 60 to 80

learners in many public schools, make individualized assessment unrealistic (UNESCO, 2023). Teachers lack access to diagnostic tools or sufficient time to conduct continuous evaluation. Furthermore, while the National Digital Education Strategy (2024/25) has expanded ICT infrastructure, many schools still operate without stable internet or adequate devices for digital assessment (MoEST, 2025). The gap between urban and rural schools remains particularly stark, reproducing inequalities in learning outcomes.

Limited teacher preparation compounds the problem. In-service training programs often focus on content delivery rather than assessment literacy. As Komba and Shukia (2023) observed, most teachers equate continuous assessment with frequent testing, missing its formative purpose. Without comprehensive professional development in competence-based pedagogy, reforms remain superficial and inconsistently applied.

Consequences for Learner Outcomes

The consequences of this misalignment are far-reaching. Learners emerge from the school system well-versed in examination techniques but ill-equipped for complex problem-solving, communication, or collaboration skills essential for higher education and employment. The result is a growing mismatch between education outcomes and labour market needs. World Bank (2021) data suggest that while literacy and numeracy rates have improved, applied competence remains low across East Africa, with employers frequently citing graduates' lack of practical skills.

Moreover, centralized examinations reinforce inequities. Students in well-resourced private or urban schools, often exposed to richer learning environments and exam preparation materials, outperform those in underfunded public schools. This deepens the divide the CBC sought to reduce. Measuring success through standardized

tests, the system privileges memorization over creativity and access over ability.

The persistence of Tanzania's examination culture sustains a cycle of compliance that undermines the transformative vision of the Competence-Based Curriculum. The challenge is not the lack of reform intent but the endurance of structures and beliefs that define learning through performance on paper rather than performance in practice. Breaking this cycle will require not only technical reform of assessments but also cultural realignment and an educational ethos that values demonstration of understanding as much as demonstration of recall.

TEACHER CAPACITY AND SYSTEMIC READINESS

The effective implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum in Tanzania depends not only on well-crafted policies but on the readiness, mindset, and professional capacity of teachers who serve as its primary interpreters. Teachers bridge the gap between policy intention and classroom practice, transforming reform language into concrete learning experiences. Despite Tanzania's commitment to education reform under frameworks such as the Education and Training Policy of 2014 and Tanzania Vision 2025, many teachers remain underprepared to deliver competence-oriented instruction. This reflects a wider trend across sub-Saharan Africa, where curriculum innovations often move faster than the support systems meant to prepare and sustain those responsible for implementing them (UNESCO, 2023).

Although Tanzania has invested heavily in designing and disseminating the curriculum, the professional infrastructure that should empower teachers to enact it remains weak. Pre-service programs still emphasise content mastery and exam-oriented teaching rather than inquiry, collaboration, and performance-based learning. In-service programs, when they exist,

tend to orient teachers toward policy compliance instead of pedagogical transformation, offering limited mentorship or follow-up support (Komba & Shukia, 2023; Nzima, 2016). In rural areas, where classrooms are overcrowded and materials scarce, teachers struggle to personalise instruction or provide formative feedback, both essential for competence development. Many thus return to traditional methods of lecturing and dictation, not from resistance but out of necessity, responding to institutional pressures that measure success through examination results rather than demonstrated skills.

The issue lies less in teachers' resistance to change and more in the lack of consistent professional support and empowerment. Accountability systems continue to evaluate teachers through learners' exam performance instead of growth in competencies such as problem-solving, communication, and creativity. This emphasis on compliance over reflection suppresses innovation and erodes professional autonomy (Mgaya, 2024). Limited access to teaching aids, weak digital infrastructure, and poor coordination among key institutions, including the Tanzania Institute of Education, NECTA, and the Teacher Service Department, further restrict teachers' ability to translate reform into practice. For CBC to achieve its vision, teachers must be repositioned from passive executors of directives to active co-creators of educational change, supported through sustained professional development, peer collaboration, and well-aligned institutional resources (MoEST, 2025).

Many teachers still operate within a framework of content delivery rather than competence facilitation. Studies show that teachers often interpret "competence" as achieving correct answers or covering prescribed topics instead of nurturing inquiry, critical thinking, or real-world application (Komba & Shukia, 2023;

Nzima, 2016). This misunderstanding arises from decades of training rooted in a knowledge-based system reinforced by a strong examination culture. Even recent teacher education programs at diploma and degree levels, though updated to include modules on competence-based instruction, continue to prioritise subject content over pedagogy. Field supervision remains focused on coverage, discipline, and administrative compliance rather than formative assessment and reflective teaching (Mgaya, 2024). As a result, many new teachers enter classrooms lacking the confidence or skill to design learning activities that assess creativity, communication, and problem-solving.

In contrast, countries that have effectively transitioned to competence-based education, such as Finland, Singapore, and New Zealand, invest heavily in teacher autonomy, mentorship, and reflective practice (Sahlberg, 2019; Tan & Koh, 2022). Teachers in these systems are trusted as designers of curriculum who adapt national goals to local realities. In Tanzania, however, reforms have largely cast teachers as implementers of centrally prescribed syllabi, limiting their sense of ownership and stifling innovation. The success of CBC, therefore, hinges on building assessment literacy alongside content expertise. Teachers must understand how to generate, interpret, and use evidence of learning to guide instruction. Assessment literacy involves knowing how feedback supports progress and how various forms of assessment, oral, written, or digital, complement one another (Zamora & Torres, 2020). Yet, in Tanzania, in-service opportunities that could cultivate these skills remain irregular and unequally distributed.

Workshops organised through the Teacher Service Department and the Tanzania Institute of Education typically introduce curriculum content without demonstrating practical strategies for implementation. These sessions

are often brief, one-off interventions that lack follow-up, reflection, and peer exchange (Sumra & Rajani, 2018). Teachers rarely engage in sustained professional learning communities, and the use of digital platforms for ongoing training remains minimal. The National Digital Education Strategy (2024/25) offers a potential turning point by introducing AI-enabled teacher training and online professional learning environments (MoEST, 2025).

Pilot projects in Arusha and Dodoma, supported by the World Bank, have shown that blended professional development models combining in-person workshops with mobile-based mentoring can strengthen teacher confidence in formative assessment and classroom facilitation (World Bank, 2023). Expanding such models nationally could shift professional learning from a culture of compliance toward one of competence, fostering reflective practitioners who embody the skills the CBC seeks to cultivate in learners.

Teacher readiness is deeply tied to the institutional environment in which teachers work. Overcrowded classrooms, heavy workloads, and insufficient materials constrain opportunities for innovation. A teacher managing seventy pupils in a poorly equipped classroom cannot reasonably conduct individualised assessments or collaborative projects.

Research in Tanzania and elsewhere shows that competence-based reforms often falter when these systemic constraints are left unaddressed (UNESCO, 2023; Habimana, 2021). Institutional fragmentation also undermines coherence. Curriculum design, assessment, teacher management, and quality assurance are handled by separate agencies operating with little coordination. This leads to conflicting directives, TIE promoting formative assessment while NECTA's grading remains summative, which leaves teachers uncertain about which expectations to prioritise. Such misalignment creates what Komba and Shukia

(2023) describe as “pedagogical paralysis.” A coherent system with consistent messages, coordinated monitoring, and joint capacity-building would stabilise the reform and provide teachers with clarity and confidence.

At the heart of these challenges lies the issue of professional identity. Teachers’ willingness to internalise CBC principles depends on whether they perceive the reform as empowering or restrictive. Historically, Tanzanian teachers have functioned within hierarchical accountability systems that limited their autonomy and rewarded compliance. This bureaucratic culture, as Sumra and Rajani (2018) observe, discourages creativity and initiative. Rebuilding professional trust means treating teachers as partners in reform through participatory curriculum review, recognition programs, and peer-led learning networks. When teachers are valued as professionals rather than implementers, their engagement deepens (Sahlberg, 2019). Emerging teacher clusters under NECTA’s Continuous Professional Development Framework (2023) provide a promising foundation for such collaboration. Embedding reflective journals, peer observations, and joint assessment design within these clusters could help teachers internalise competence-based approaches while reclaiming their sense of agency.

Digital competence has become an essential dimension of teacher readiness. The government’s post-2022 distribution of tablets to teachers acknowledged this shift, yet studies show that many still use the devices mainly for administrative purposes rather than instructional innovation (Mgaya, 2024). Integrating digital pedagogy into both pre-service and in-service teacher education, covering areas such as digital content creation, data analytics, and e-assessment tools, could enhance implementation considerably. Global evidence supports hybrid professional development models that use mobile and AI

technologies to connect educators, encourage reflection, and provide real-time mentorship. Rwanda’s digital mentorship initiative, which links rural teachers with national trainers for continuous support, illustrates how technology can overcome distance and isolation (Habimana, 2021). A similar model could empower Tanzanian teachers to navigate CBC demands while easing workloads and fostering collaboration.

POLICY GAPS AND MISALIGNMENT

The Education and Training Policy (2014) articulates an ambitious vision of quality education grounded in competence, equity, and innovation. Yet, between intent and implementation lies a deep structural disconnect. Policy responsibility is scattered across agencies with overlapping but uncoordinated mandates. The Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) oversees curriculum design and teacher guidance, while the National Examinations Council of Tanzania (NECTA) retains authority over standardized testing. The result is two parallel agendas, one focused on developing competences, the other on measuring content recall. Without a unified assessment framework to link what is taught to what is tested, coherence in the learning process remains elusive (RISE Programme, 2023).

This fragmentation filters directly into schools. Teachers are expected to operationalize a learner-centred curriculum while simultaneously preparing students for examinations that still emphasize rote memorization. Policy documents promote formative and continuous assessment, but examination syllabi continue to prescribe fixed content to be mastered within rigid timelines. The tension between these expectations fosters confusion and fatigue among educators, who must constantly negotiate between ideals of autonomy and the demands of accountability. The situation exemplifies what Fullan (2020)

calls “policy incoherence” reforms that pull teachers in opposite directions without offering integrative guidance.

The National Digital Education Strategy (2024/25) introduces a promising technological framework for modernizing learning through digital content, connectivity, and teacher upskilling (MoEST, 2025). Yet, the strategy remains silent on how digital infrastructure will support competence-based assessment. Tablets and connectivity initiatives have improved administrative efficiency, but few link directly to formative evaluation or feedback systems. In effect, Tanzania is digitizing traditional pedagogy instead of transforming assessment itself. The absence of a policy bridge between the Digital Strategy, TIE’s CBC syllabi, and NECTA’s examination policies perpetuates a fragmented ecosystem where innovation and accountability remain misaligned.

Ultimately, these policy gaps reflect a deeper challenge of systemic coordination. Without a shared vision that integrates technology, pedagogy, and assessment within one coherent framework, each reform operates in isolation. Schools become the arena where these competing policies collide, forcing teachers to choose between compliance and creativity, a choice that continues to compromise the promise of competence-based education.

REIMAGINING ASSESSMENT: PRACTICAL ALTERNATIVES FOR COMPETENCE-BASED EVALUATION

Transforming assessment is central to realising the ambitions of Tanzania’s Competence-Based Curriculum. Although the CBC emphasises critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and the practical use of knowledge, these competencies cannot be meaningfully captured through traditional written examinations. International experience demonstrates this clearly. Finland’s teacher-led

evaluation, Singapore’s blended digital formative systems, and New Zealand’s inquiry-driven NCEA all reveal that curriculum reform succeeds only when assessment practice evolves in parallel (Sahlberg, 2019; Tan and Koh, 2022). These systems foreground performance, reflection, and application rather than memorisation. For Tanzania, achieving a similar shift is essential if assessment is to measure how learners *use* knowledge, not merely how well they recall it.

Yet Tanzania’s current assessment structure remains dominated by centralised summative examinations, which privilege standardisation over authentic performance. This creates a persistent pull toward rote learning. Teachers often narrow instruction to exam prescriptions, even when curriculum guidelines encourage formative assessment and learner-centred pedagogy. The National Examinations Council of Tanzania still benchmarks success using summative grading, while the Tanzania Institute of Education promotes continuous, classroom-based evaluation (Komba & Shukia, 2023). This institutional misalignment generates structural tension: one part of the system calls for competence, another rewards compliance. Repositioning assessment as an ongoing process of feedback, not simply a terminal judgment, would help align classroom practice with CBC intentions

A more coherent pathway forward lies in adopting diversified assessment models that balance national accountability with classroom autonomy. Regional experience provides workable precedents. Rwanda’s blended approach, which allocates 40 percent of final grades to continuous assessment, has shifted teaching toward applied learning and increased learner engagement (Habimana, 2021). South Africa’s performance-based school assessments show similar gains when supported by moderation structures (Mahlangu, 2020). Tanzania could adapt this logic by weighting

continuous assessment at 30 - 40 percent of national results while retaining NECTA oversight through systematic moderation. Such a model would signal to schools that applied performance matters without compromising national comparability.

Performance-based assessment offers an avenue for learners to *demonstrate* competence through oral presentations, debates, practical tasks, creative projects, or problem-solving scenarios. Countries such as Finland and South Africa integrate these forms of evidence into high-stakes evaluation, ensuring that assessment reflects authentic learning rather than test-taking ability (Sahlberg, 2019; Mahlangu, 2020). In the Tanzanian context, project-based tasks could draw on local realities, designing simple technologies, analysing community challenges, or producing dramatic performances that require interpretation, collaboration, and communication. With clear rubrics aligned to CBC descriptors (TIE, 2023), teachers could assess higher-order skills more consistently and transparently.

Digital transformation strengthens this shift. The National Digital Education Strategy (2024/25) lays the foundation for tools such as digital portfolios, adaptive quizzes, and mobile-supported progress tracking. Internationally, Estonia and Singapore have national portfolio systems that document learner growth over time, supported by analytics that provide tailored feedback (OECD, 2022; Tan & Koh, 2022). Tanzania's growing use of tablets and mobile devices makes simplified, offline-capable portfolios feasible. Early pilots in Arusha under the Digital Tanzania Initiative suggest that digital tracking can improve feedback and continuity in teaching (World Bank, 2023).

A competence-based approach also benefits from learner participation in assessment. Peer

and self-assessment used extensively in New Zealand's NCEA promote reflection, metacognition, and ownership of learning (Hipkins, 2020). These strategies can be gradually introduced in Tanzania, where pupils might review one another's presentations or track their weekly progress. Such involvement strengthens autonomy and aligns with CBC's emphasis on learner agency.

To maintain fairness and credibility, decentralised assessment must be supported by strong moderation systems. Australia and Rwanda offer models where teachers collectively review student work to calibrate grading and ensure consistency (Masters, 2018; Habimana, 2021). Tanzania could institutionalise regional moderation panels coordinated by NECTA and TIE, fostering shared professional standards across schools and reducing variation in assessment quality. The goal is not to eliminate national examinations but to rebalance them, ensuring that applied performance has meaningful weight alongside factual recall.

THE WAY FORWARD: TOWARDS COHERENT REFORM

Achieving meaningful implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum requires Tanzania to realign its structures, practices, and expectations so that curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment reinforce rather than contradict one another. The evidence reviewed in this paper shows that assessment remains the core bottleneck: as long as NECTA examinations reward recall, teachers will continue to prioritise test preparation over competence development. Reform must therefore begin with assessment redesign and proceed through coordinated, system-wide adjustments.

A practical transition model would unfold in three phases. Short-term (1 - 2 years): NECTA introduces pilot hybrid assessments in selected

regions, combining written tests with moderated school-based tasks such as projects and classroom performance demonstrations. Weighing continuous assessment at 30 - 40 percent of final marks, following the Kenyan and Rwandan precedents, would gradually shift school priorities toward applied learning. Medium-term (3 - 5 years): TIE, NECTA, and MoEST operationalise a joint “Assessment for Competence” task force to harmonise rubrics, moderation standards, and teacher guidelines, ensuring policy coherence across institutions. Long-term (5+ years): digital portfolios, adaptive assessments, and real-time analytics become integrated into national systems, enabling continuous monitoring of competence development and supporting individualized learning even in overcrowded classrooms.

Teacher capacity remains the decisive factor across all phases. Findings consistently show that gaps in assessment literacy and limited practical training undermine CBC implementation. Therefore, pre-service teacher education must embed CBC pedagogy, digital assessment design, and formative feedback as core modules. In-service development should shift from one-off workshops to sustained, mentorship-driven models using blended, peer-supported, and AI-enabled coaching. As international evidence from Singapore and Rwanda illustrates, lasting classroom transformation occurs where teachers receive ongoing guidance, not episodic orientation.

Finally, reform will only take root if cultural expectations surrounding assessment evolve. Stakeholders must redefine educational success as growth in creativity, reasoning, and ethical competence rather than as test-based rankings. Public communication strategies and school–community dialogues can help reposition assessment as a learning process rather than a sorting mechanism. This cultural realignment directly addresses the system’s current identity conflict between competence and compliance.

Bridging Tanzania’s assessment curriculum divide requires coordinated action on three fronts: redesigning examinations to measure authentic performance, professionalising teacher capacity to implement competence-based assessment, and fostering an enabling institutional and cultural environment. When assessment begins to validate the competences learners genuinely acquire, the CBC will move from policy aspiration to lived classroom practice, marking a shift from reform on paper to reform in action.

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