

**MEMORANDUM
(website version)**

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THE REPUBLIC OF KENYA
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Dear Prof Munavu

I hereby refer to the communication inviting me to present my views on the education reforms in Kenya.

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

1. I believe that the connection between **work and schooling in Kenya needs to be fundamentally rethought through a national philosophy of education**. Currently, Kenya has national goals of education which answer the question “what should education do?” but she does not have a philosophy of education. A philosophy would answer the question “why do we educate?” and it would articulate our beliefs in what it means to be human, and what knowledge is.
2. The current ideal of education as a process to provide skills for national development is based on the fact that national development was crafted independently of the ideas and the work of the people of Kenya. **Development goals are set independently of Kenyans, and then Kenyans are expected to go to school to fit within that vision. The reverse should be the case.** Our goals and aspirations should come from the people, as envisioned in the Constitution which affirms the sovereignty of the people.
3. This direction in schooling for development explains why Kenyans experience schooling not as an opportunity to broaden their minds and skills, but as an effort to contain them within a pre-established paradigm. It is for the same reason that the goal of the newly introduced Competency Based Curriculum is flawed, because the competencies are not based on what Kenyans can and want to contribute to their country, but on what employers and development plans require of Kenyans. Yet the complexity of Kenyan life transcends employers and development plans.

WORK AND EDUCATION

4. Some of Kenya’s problems with education stem from the limited space for growth in skills and knowledge through work. There is an assumption in Kenya that people stop learning after school or do not learn outside of school. This explains why there is a dominant public discourse on

“half-baked” or “incompetent” graduates, based on fresh graduates who have not yet had the time to learn from the workplace and from interaction with more experienced experts. As such, knowledge and skills which are gained through work experience are not rewarded socially or financially. Without **the recognition of work as a learning platform**, the government is forced to promise more than it can provide, and to make problematic reforms like the Competency Based Curriculum which promise to provide employers with the impossible product of a work-ready graduate.

5. The insistence on work-ready graduates, in turn, renders education more expensive, because in the name of “quality standards,” learning institutions are forced to purchase the latest equipment when they can teach the principles just as well with older models of machines, or with free software. These standards inevitably disadvantage young people who attend less resourced schools, because those schools are dubbed “low quality,” and yet once in the workplace, those graduates can adjust, excel and innovate just as well as a graduate from a well-resourced school.
6. For the reason stated in no. 5, **there need to be guidelines on internship and probation, including requirements that employers take interns from a diversity of cultural and learning backgrounds**. Should the employers resist, this is where political leadership can convince them that a Kenya where young people gain experience and are happy to work is in the interest of employers, because it means that Kenya will be socially stable, which is good for business.
7. **The guidelines should also tackle the current exploitation of interns** who are held at ransom by professionals to work for senior professionals at no pay, because the interns want to get their licenses to practice. Similarly, **the guidelines should eliminate the use of professional exams to limit the number of fully accredited professionals**, which prevents younger professionals from setting up their own businesses and practices.
8. The education system should be a place where people THINK about what they are doing in the workplace, not to replicate what will happen anyway in the workplace. As such, **technical education should be a place where people who are working and people who will work meet with researchers to figure out different innovations and ways of doing things**. Even the scientific innovations in the West came from enslaved Africans and later on factory workers tweaking machines and trying new approaches in real time, not from professors in laboratories. Technical education which is focused on sending out graduates completely prepared for the workplace will always send out graduates who are ridiculed as incompetent, and yet many times, the graduates are simply inexperienced.

EDUCATION OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL

9. **There needs to be a more coherent linkage between the school system and other centers of knowledge**, such as work, culture, sports, public libraries, museums and other institutions of cultural heritage, and the wisdom of our elders and the experience of our experts. The school system cannot possibly carry the entirety of Kenya’s knowledge needs.

10. Respecting other forms of education outside the school means that **Kenya needs more ways to honor people for their work, knowledge and expertise.** We also need to have decent pay for every profession, even for those without academic credentials.
11. **There is need for ways to celebrate achievements in areas outside politics and government.** One way to do this could be **through national publicity and celebrations of Kenyans** who have excelled in crafts, innovations and ideas in different knowledge, professional and technical fields. There is a commendable rise in awards for different professional and artistic fields. More publicity about these initiatives is one way in which children will believe us when we say that school education is not the only way to earn a living and to achieve social status in Kenya.
12. **The role of parents, families and communities in raising children should be appreciated rather than contained, as is happening with the Competency Based Curriculum.** Homework is not the only way in which parents can participate in the education of children. Attempts to standardize how parents are involved in children's education ends up importing inequality from the parents' world into the classroom.
13. There needs to be an appreciation of the cultural diversity in which families and communities raise their children. I therefore recommend **the removal of the explicit parental involvement in the curriculum, and in its place, the facilitation of educational leaders to involve parents in other ways** such as social events and inviting parents to speak to children about their lives and careers.

COMPETENCY BASED CURRICULUM

14. I began with the question of knowledge and work because central to my disagreement with **competency as a teaching approach is the fact it is based on flawed views of work and knowledge.** The competency approach is based on the promise that a child can apply to real life everything that the child learns in school. This expectation is unreasonable because, as I have already stated, learning is a life-long process that continues even outside formal learning. Moreover, it is a violation of the child's rights to expect application of skills before the child attains the age of majority, when they will most likely be in a situation where they will need to apply their knowledge. **Competency as a dominant approach in teaching Kenya's children below the age of 18 should therefore be abandoned.**
15. It is inevitable that children will learn material which they may not immediately apply to work and real life situations. **Not everything we learn has a tangible and practical application.** Otherwise we would need to deliberately put our hands in the fire to learn that we can burn. The reason why we saw class activities where children are enacting a wedding is because of lack of trust that a child will learn what weddings are by simply attending many of them in their lifetime.
16. A curriculum that separates skills from knowledge, as Competency Based Curriculum seeks to do, is a violent system. There is no action that is not informed by knowledge, or that does not build our knowledge. The Competency Based Curriculum is offering the false promise that a

Kenyan worker is an unthinking one, yet it ironically promises that it can teach critical thinking as well.

17. With the view that knowledge is only useful when it can be practically applied, the obsession with examinations will never end. Teachers will need tangible evidence from children that they learned, and the education ministry will need tangible evidence that the children learned, as tangible evidence that the teacher taught. The result is a multiplying effect where the focus is on production of evidence rather than the experience of learning. That is why **an inevitable consequence of Competency Based Curriculum was more assignments and more assessments.**
18. It is important to state that despite the best intentions of the curriculum designers, **Competency as an approach directly contradicts thinking and creativity.** As many scholars note, competency is based on Taylorism and organizing labor in factory contexts. Competence has no room for freedom and creativity of thought. The Kenyan CBC tried to overcome this problem by suggesting that critical thinking and creativity are competences, but the opposite is true because critical thinking and creativity thrive on transcending boundaries and they cannot be measured. Advocates of CBC who say, on one hand, that CBC has no use for knowledge, while on the other hand, promise that CBC will promote critical thinking, are contradicting themselves and may have not understood what competence is.
19. Competence is about the bare minimum according to a publicly declared standard of achievement, rather than about excellence or creativity. As John Preston (2017) says, no worker would consider being called “competent” a compliment. They would understand that they are being told that they have the bare minimum skills, and they are not excellent at what they do. Eric Kipchoge is not a competent runner; he is an excellent one. Creativity can only be recognized post-facto, and education is, by its very nature, an open-ended enterprise. Unfortunately, this reality makes education administrators uncomfortable, because administrators want assessments and measurements to prove that work is being done. However, **administrators have to come up with another way of assessing the effective education without reducing the entirety of education to measureable outputs and tangible evidence.**
20. Competency based training fragments knowledge because students learn skills in separate competencies disconnected from each other. It therefore stunts the growth of graduates’ abilities to deal with unforeseen circumstances once they begin working. (See: Hodge (2016) “After competency-based training: deepening critique, imagining alternatives”, and James (2001), “The double edge of competency training: contradictory discourses and lived experience”).
21. The focus of competence on behavior basically denies the thinking, emotional and spiritual aspects of the human being. Once again, the Kenyan CBC tries to make up for this problem by proposing a separate value education as a way of catering to the life of the mind and the soul. However, it still remains a contradiction to teach values through an approach that denies the

importance of values, and worse, to teach non-behavioral aspects of life through behaviourist methods.

COMPETENCE BASED EDUCATION IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

22. There has been talk that the implementation of CBC was in tandem with global trends from which Kenya could not afford to miss out. The implication is that competency based approaches had been implemented globally. **The truth is that while the attempts to implement competency have been global, so has been the resistance to it. The success rate of implementation has not been global.**
23. Part of my initial public engagement was a persistent request to KICD to furnish the public with the research and documentation proving their claims about the global spread and popularity of CBC, and second, to respond to research that disputes those claims. Out of the numerous research publications about competence based curricula, I will cite two academic journal articles.
24. Tahirsylaj, A., Sundberg, D. (2020). The unfinished business of defining competences for 21st century curricula—a systematic research review. *Curriculum Perspectives* 40, 131–145. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41297-020-00112-6>
- 24.1. In the above article, Tahirsylaj and Sundberg provide an overview of 84 peer-reviewed academic publications on competency based education published between 1997 and 2017 (a 20-year period).
- 24.2. The article was motivated by the writers' observation **that talk of competence based education is widespread in policy circles but it is little talked about in educational academic research.** Moreover, the definition of competence/competency remains vague.
- 24.3. Tahirsylaj and Sundberg arrive at the following conclusions:
- 24.3.1. The **academic research publication on competence-based research is little. The field is dominated by policy bodies**, especially economic ones like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).
- 24.3.2. The bulk of the publications (74%) are on grey-literature, meaning **they not specific to education systems or subjects or levels of education**; the few that discuss subjects are heavily skewed towards ICT, Mathematics and STEM
- 24.3.3. Out of the articles surveyed, only 7.8% were on primary and lower secondary schools, reflecting the fact that **the competency approach is rarely applied below tertiary and technical education**
- 24.3.4. Academic research on competency does not provide specific, national information outside policy implementation. Worse, the writers say, the publications apply “a

predominantly technical and instrumental understanding of the curriculum and teaching practices that are decontextualised from societal, cultural and political embeddedness. This may at least partially explain the fast and global spread of the CBE reforms.”

25. Anderson-Levitt, K. (2017). Global Flows of Competence-based Approaches in Primary and Secondary Education, *Cahiers de la recherche sur l'éducation et les savoirs* 16.
<http://journals.openedition.org/cres/3010>

25.1. The author categorically states **that competence based approaches “have not been implemented in the United States, contrary to claims by some advocates.”**

25.2. Anderson-Levitt cautions that **the word “global,” as was used to describe competence-based education, does not reflect the reality, but a publicity move to persuade governments to adopt it for fear of being left out.** I quote:

“[C]onstructing a reform as “global” or as very widely adopted by other countries is a mechanism for persuading other countries—or one’s own country—to embrace the reform. To make such an argument persuasively can be an exercise, deliberate or not, of “soft power” when the argument is backed by an aura of expertise. Therefore it is always important for would-be reformers to investigate such claims with an appropriate level of skepticism.”

25.3. Anderson-Levitt clarifies that **competence-based approaches focus “on what students learn to do with knowledge rather than on the knowledge itself.”** Competence is also about “industry efficiency” meaning that it is for workers. This means that CBE is not for children who have not acquired sufficient knowledge to apply.

25.4. Country-wide replacement of education system in the US is technically impossible because curriculum is a state function, rather than a federal one, and so **attempts to impose the logic of competency across the US backfired.** Anderson-Levitt states:

“[S]ince US education is decentralized and since the federal government exercised no accountability over this “voluntary” reform, few states or individual districts actually changed their curricula. The reform quickly withered, and the movement behind it evolved into movement about standards rather than outcomes.”

25.5. **Competence based approaches remain largely driven by monopoly businesses,** but have not been adopted in American classrooms.

25.6. Anderson-Levitt speculates that **adoption of competence based approaches in Africa was largely at government level rather than based on contextual or local considerations.**

25.7. Anderson-Levitt also says that England, Japan and South Africa withdrew from implementing the competency based approaches. China, India and Russia are also cited as not having adopted the competence based curriculum. **In France and Belgium, the competence-based approach is considered an “evolution,” rather than a “revolution,” meaning that competence based approaches were integrated into the curriculum, rather than adopted as a replacement.** This means that adoption of competence based approaches in Kenya did not require a drastic system replacement, and that it can be withdrawn without much damage to the system.

25.8. Anderson-Levitt calls **competence based approaches ephemeral**, *“like a wave, liable to recede when the reform has played itself out or faced growing political opposition locally, and liable to be replaced by the next wave of reform.”*

25.9. Anderson-Levitt sees the **enthusiasm of competence based curriculum** *“as examples of ‘externalization,’ ... one of the mechanisms through which a practice gets socially constructed as ‘global’ or as a ‘best practice’.”*

ARTS vs STEM

26. One of fundamental rationales of Competency Based Curriculum is that the arts have no use in development and the focus of education should be on STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics). **This hard split between arts and sciences enforces a violent split that is detrimental to knowledge and skills.**
27. **Many applied sciences, such as digital arts, medicine, engineering and architecture, require some form of artistic skill, human interaction and esthetics that comes from the arts. It is therefore misadvised to make children abandon the arts or the sciences as they pursue a pathway of either.** I quote Yvonne Odhiambo Owuor, one of Kenya’s most celebrated writers, who once wondered: *“I hear that high schools are sending students to university engineering, design and architecture faculties, who cannot draw, who cannot even describe a painting. How? Really, how? Is it ignorance or is there a secret plan to bankrupt the Kenyan imagination?”*
28. **Even scientists confirm that learning the arts is an important part of their skill in science.** In an interview with *The Lancet*, one of medicine’s most prestigious academic journals, Thomas Südhof, a 2010 co-recipient of the Nobel Prize for Medicine and Physiology, cited his bassoon teacher [bassoon is a musical instrument] as his most influential teacher. Südhof later elaborated in a different interview:

“[I learned] the value of disciplined study, or repetitive learning, for creativity. You cannot be creative on a bassoon if you don’t know it inside out, and you cannot be creative in science if you don’t have a deep knowledge of the details... I learned to value traditions as a musician, but at the same time the importance of trying to transcend tradition. The tradition is the basis that allows you to progress, the starting point, but it cannot become a limitation, because then both in music and in science creativity and progress end.”

29. Thankfully, the new government has ended the attack on the arts and has appreciated the capacity of the arts to enable artists to earn a living. However, **if the arts remain under the CBC banner of “talent,” or as an option for those who have failed at everything else, which is what some CBC supporters said, the arts will remain disparaged by the Kenyan public.** And when the arts are disparaged by the public, the public will not be willing to pay adequate dues to artists, or respect their work or copyright. This point has been hilariously implied in a YouTube video series by Yafesi Musoke and Wamwirua Musoke entitled “If other careers were treated like the arts.”
30. I therefore think that **the early specialization in pathways is a grave mistake and should be removed from the school system.** The children are too young to know what their careers will be 10 years after they graduate, in any case.
31. Given the above, one benefit of children studying the arts for all their high school life, and hopefully beyond, is that Kenya will have a significant public who will appreciate the importance of arts and spend their resources on entertainment and hiring of artists, as opposed to now when people look for excuses to pay artists less than they pay other professionals. It is also useful for children to appreciate the wonders of the world revealed by science. **Every child should have the opportunity to learn both arts and science below tertiary level.**

THE TEACHING PROFESSION

32. In my view, the profession of teaching in Kenya has suffered from being disparaged and disrespected. The responsibility of economic problems is placed on the shoulders of the teacher. Teachers are mocked for not updating their knowledge of current affairs or of their subjects, yet they cannot have time for intellectual rejuvenation when they are overwhelmed with large classes, limited resources, and an overwhelming amount of reporting to their employer, the Teachers’ Service Commission. This paperwork has increased with CBC assessments.
33. To reiterate my point in No. 4 above, about gaining knowledge through work, experienced teachers have deep and fruitful insights about children and how to teach. **There should be a way of harnessing that knowledge through fellowships, teaching exchanges and opportunities to become Master teachers who coach the younger ones joining the profession. There should also be avenues for teachers to do action research.** This would motivate teachers to become better at what they do, would save the exchequer the resources spent on quality assurance, and would reduce the reliance on academic credentials for promotion. However, it should be teachers, not administrators, in charge of such a program.
34. The kind of knowledge generated from teachers would have been more useful in improving our education system, as opposed to reforming our education based on external inputs. **Similarly, more effort should have been put into engaging academics, as a collective, about the proposed education reforms, before implementing them,** and should have been done outside the framework of paid consultancies for individuals.

35. Academics have also suffered the same stress as teachers, thanks to the commercial logic of higher education. Lecturers can no longer research or mentor students because of the emphasis on the commercial value of degrees which has killed Kenyan students' interest in knowledge for humanity's sake. I have pointed to these issues in points 1-5 above.
36. **More attention needs to be paid to the cruelty of the education system, to teachers, children and students.** Teachers report are suffering from burnout due to being overwhelmed by work, and they are mistreated by their employer. Some cases of the inhumanity visited on teachers include transfer letters being delivered to them in hospital and expectations to report to a new work station 400 km away in two days. Universities are suffering with unpaid salaries and the bulk of teaching is done by teachers on contracts, many times unpaid.
37. Children and students suffer cruelty across the system, from primary school to tertiary education. The trend of injuries from caning, of sexual harassment at the hands of adults who are supposed to care for the younger ones is a troubling indicator of the larger intellectual rigidity and desperation for credentials that make teachers aggressive and the younger ones vulnerable.

GENERAL COMMENTS

My overall critique of Kenya's education system is that

- a. **Our education system seeks to solve all problems** – social, economic, ethical and emotional – through curricula and education policies.
- b. **There is need for more humility among educators** in accepting the limits of what we can do, and in seeking collaboration across the different sectors of society. Since 1963, the education system has been biting more than it can chew, and has been taking blame for problems it cannot solve.
- c. **The Kenyan education system is also notoriously insulated from interaction with other sectors of society**, which has made our school system rigid and violent (unfortunately), and has fueled an obsession with credentialism at the expense of humanity, knowledge and creativity.
- d. However, to tackle these issues, **Kenya needs to finally come up with a national philosophy of education** that sees people as more than employees or economic machines, and that enables us to harness the resources of the village in raising our children and in nurturing humanity.

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