

Adaptations Made on Competency-Based Curriculum Assessment Procedures for Learners with Visual Impairments in Special Primary Schools in Kenya

By

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Abstract

We investigated whether the assessments used in the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya are meeting the needs of learners with visual impairments. Our objective was to evaluate the adaptations teachers make to CBC assessment procedures for learners with visual impairments. We interviewed three head teachers, administered structured questionnaires to 44 teachers, and conducted focus group discussions with 36 learners in three special primary schools for learners with visual impairments in Kenya. We find evidence that, in most cases, the design of CBC and the existence of clear guidelines make it easy to adapt the assessments. The majority of teachers in these schools strive to do the adaptations, although the process can be strenuous, requiring them to do “extra work” without additional compensation. Teachers are not using or interpreting assessment procedures and results the same way, raising issues with validity, reliability, and fairness. Much effort has been made to ensure that the assessments cater for individual learner differences, but many are dissatisfied with the summative grading system, claiming that it makes them “lazy.” Recommendations for policy and research are provided.

Key words: Kenya, Competency-Based Curriculum, Learners with Visual Impairments, Special Primary Schools

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1. Introduction

The Competency-Based Education (CBE) movement is rapidly gaining momentum worldwide as many governments reform their education systems to align with today's demands. From the mid-1970s, there were growing concerns that existing education and training programs, especially in higher education, failed to meet practical employment demands (AnderSon-Levitt, 2017). Since the early 2000s, the United Nations has actively advocated for educational reforms away from rote learning towards the acquisition of competencies. Kenya began the journey towards CBE in 2017, with the launch of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which is expected to expand access to quality education for all learners, particularly those with special needs, such as learners with visual impairments (LVI). For such learners, teachers should make suitable adaptations to core curriculum components, including assessment procedures (MOEST, 2018). Assessments play vital functions in the learning environment by providing learners with feedback and informing teachers/learners of the aspects of a curriculum that should be emphasized (Andiema, 2021). When assessment procedures are customised to the needs of LVI, they may achieve comparable performance as their peers without disabilities (Madriaga et al., 2010).

Past research has highlighted several principles for creating effective assessment systems, the most important being validity, reliability, fairness, access, and flexibility (Lindstrom et al., 2017; Singh, 2021). Validity denotes the extent to which an assessment procedure measures what it should measure, while reliability is about consistency between repeated or equivalent assessments (KICD, 2019). These two are critical criteria, especially when considering assessment adaptations for LVI. Adapted tests should not miss the intended purpose and should be equivalent to those presented to regular students (Hannan, 2007). Assessments should also be fair, accessible to all learners, and allow them to choose what is best for them (Allman, 2009). While there is no single all-in-one assessment procedure that meets each learner's needs in all situations, they should have adequate access to multiple assessment options (Allman, 2009).

Reports from around the globe, however, suggest that, in many places, assessments for LVI hardly satisfy their needs. For example, In the US, Hannan (2007) identified several concerns about the existing assessments for LVI, mostly related to reliability and validity. In many cases, the tests did not assess LVI's skills, had visual biases, did not measure small growth increments, and hardly produced valuable results. Ndume (2021) also established that in Zambia, teachers strived to adapt assessments to meet the needs of LVI. Still, the extra time provided for LVI was inadequate, and their scripts were marked using the same criteria for fully sighted peers, leading to biased results. Similarly, in Ghana, Acheampong et al. (2020) noted that while LVI were provided alternative media formats, separate examination

rooms, and extra time to complete exams, there were delays in receiving continuous tests and end-of-semester examinations, leading to repeated frustrations.

In Kenya, there are concerns about the suitability of assessments for LVI (Amunga et al., 2020; Njue, 2021), but empirical research in this area is scarce. Under CBC, assessments for LVI should be modified according to specific learner's needs (KICD, 2019). Yet, Waweru (2018) found that teachers lacked the creativity to design assessment rubrics tailored to various competencies. Similarly, Isaboke et al. (2021) noted that many teachers were inadequately trained to use rubrics, formative assessments, and summative assessments outlined by the curriculum. Waruingi et al. (2022) also observed that most teachers complained about the tedious process of reporting CBC assessment results. In another study, Awuonda et al. (2023) established low confidence among teachers in Homa-Bay County to assess CBC learners due to the tedious process involved. None of these studies examined the assessment procedures used specifically for LVI.

Andiema (2021) assessed teachers' competencies on CBC evaluation for learners with special needs (SNLs) in public primary schools in Kapsaret Sub-County. From their results, teachers in these schools were inadequately prepared to assess and evaluate SNLs as required by the curriculum. They had a limited understanding of formative assessment techniques, a situation that denied SNLs opportunities to nurture the expected competencies and skills. While these findings are insightful, the study targeted the general SNL population and did not focus on LVI. Overall, there is a dearth of research on CBC assessment adaptations for LVI in Kenya, a gap that needs to be addressed for effective CBC implementation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The introduction of CBC in Kenya is expected to expand access to quality education for LVI, but the realization of this goal depends on whether teachers make appropriate assessment adaptations to implement the curriculum in ways that suit the unique needs of this population. There are concerns that many teachers in Kenya are not adequately prepared to conduct CBC assessments in ways recommended by the curriculum. The available evidence, however, comes from studies on general CBC implementation and is not specific to LVI. Specifically, there is a scarcity of research on the adaptations teachers make on CBC assessment procedures to suit the needs of LVI.

1.2 Objective of the Study

Our objective was to evaluate the adaptations teachers make to the curriculum's assessment procedures for learners with visual impairments.

2. Materials and Methods

Our study was a descriptive survey. Data came from head teachers, teachers, and learners in three special primary schools for LVI. All three had been offering the 8-4-4 curriculum and were transitioning to CBE. They were selected because of their rich history in education for LVI in Kenya. The total teacher and learner populations in the three schools were 60 and 902, respectively. We included all three head teachers. All had taught LVI for at least 15 years, two had been in their current schools for over ten years, while one of them was directly

involved in CBC adaptation for LVI. Thus, the head teachers were highly experienced and were expected to be highly knowledgeable of the state of CBC implementation for LVI.

We initially targeted all teachers for inclusion, but only 44 were available. Of these, 24 (54.5%) were females, while 20 (45.5%) were males. In terms of their ages, 17 (37.0%) were 50 years and above, 16 (36.4%) were from 40 to 49 years, while 13 (29.5%) were aged below 40. The majority had a diploma (27, 61.4%) or at least an undergraduate degree (15, 34.1%). Their teaching experiences were: 1-5 years = 4 (9.1%), 6-10 years 10 (22.7%), 11-20 years = 15 (34.1%), and > 20 years = 15 (34.1%). Following recommendations in the literature on sample sizes (Saunders et al., 2019), we selected 36 learners, 12 from each school, for focus group discussions (FGDs). The 12 were from grades IV, V, and VI, the highest grades of the primary school level under the CBE model in Kenya. Learners in these grades were expected to have rich experiences with CBC, having been its consumers for at least eight years. They were sampled through a stratified procedure, with the schools and grades serving as the strata. Sixteen (44.4%) were females, while the other 20 (55.6%) were males. The majority (31, 86.1%) were aged between 13 and 18 years.

We employed mixed methods to collect and analyze data. Three data collection tools were used: an interview guide (for head teachers), a structured questionnaire (for teachers), and an FGD guide (for learners). The instruments were piloted in another randomly selected special school for LVI in Kenya. Data from interviews and FGDs were analyzed qualitatively using a content-based thematic approach, while quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, Man-Whitney U, and Kruskal-Wallis tests. Quantitative analyses were performed in SPSS (v. 30). The study was approved by the Kenyatta University Graduate School and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation.

3. Results and Discussions

Head teachers, teachers, and learners had unique perspectives, which allowed us to gain detailed insights into CBC implementation in these schools. Our presentation and discussion of the findings are organized into three sections to bring out the differences in views between them.

3.1 Head Teachers' Perspectives on Assessment Adaptations

The head teachers were of the consensus that CBC assessments are easy to adapt to LVI. A scrutiny of their responses identified two specific themes in this regard: content presentation and timing. Concerning the first theme, interviewees concurred that CBC assessments are presented in formats that meet LVI needs, as illustrated in the following statement:

Assessments are adapted. If you get the exam, which may be in print, you download it from KNEC, we write it in braille. If there are low-visions, we enlarge it. We have some learners that, orally, they are very good. They can speak fluent English, but when it comes to written work, they find it difficult. So, we're to do the assessment orally. (Interviewee A)

The above response indicates that CBC provides for assessments to be presented in formats that cater to individual learner differences. Nevertheless, the process of assessment format adaptation can be cumbersome for teachers. For instance, when asked to comment on the ease assessment adaptation, an interviewee responded,

That is a *problem*. Like the one we are doing now, from KNEC. You must download the exams by at least 10th. We download the print version. It has to be translated into braille. So, as a teacher, you must sit down and do the brailing. *All that process!* (Interviewee B)

It was also revealed that the additional work involved in brailing the content or presenting it in other suitable formats is done without additional compensation or any external motivation. The interviewee above continued,

We are not motivated [externally]. The school cannot get enough resources to do that. All we do is trying to see how these learners can be here. We can't say we are motivated. Even tuition, we don't [ask money for] tuition, but we create time. It has to be from the heart.

The second theme was on exam timing. Head teachers revealed that when sitting for exams, LVI are usually given extra time to complete their work. They also felt the extra time provided was adequate, as captured by the following sentiment:

If it's KNEC, they are given an extra 30 minutes, which is enough to complete. Of course, it depends on how good you are, but 30 should be enough. You see, the paper is also adapted, there are not too many diagrams. Just reading and understanding. (Interviewee C)

In sum, head teachers were confident that CBC assessments cater for LVI needs, but also felt that teachers did much extra work (non-compensated), especially during exams, to ensure they are in suitable formats. How does this non-paid "extra work" affect teachers' preparedness to implement CBC? A possible pathway between the "extra work" and implementation is motivation. Perceived high workload without "extra" compensation may demoralize teachers and lower their motivation (Oguta & Osoro, 2022). Although not investigated in this study, past research indicates that low teacher motivation is a leading obstacle to successful CBC implementation (Akala, 2021; Isaboke et al., 2021). Oguta and Osoro (2022) recommend that teachers be provided with external motivation, specifically material rewards, to encourage them to excel in all areas of the curriculum. There is a need for additional research on how the "extra work" during CBC exams affects teachers' motivation, overall performance, and preparedness to implement the curriculum for LVI.

While the head teachers felt that the extra time allowed during exams was adequate, learners felt otherwise. They wanted more time to be added. It was beyond the scope of this study to conclusively establish whether or not the extra time allowed was adequate. Still, it was evident that teachers and learners read from different scripts. In a study conducted in

Ghana, Acheampong et al. (2020), university students with LVI felt the extra time was inadequate. Ndume (2021) also concluded that the extra time provided for grade 12 LVI learners in Zambia was insufficient. Similar concerns have been reported in Kenya (Njue, 2021). However, most of these findings are based on general learner or teacher opinions and have not been empirically evaluated using controlled experiments. There is a need for higher-level studies to establish the optimal amount of extra time that should be allowed for LVI without compromising the quality of exams and providing them an unfair advantage over their sighted peers.

3.2 Teachers' Perspectives on Assessment Adaptations

Using 16 Likert-scale items, we prompted teachers on whether CBC assessments met the needs of LVI. They were to indicate their views on a five-point scale that ranged from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” (Table 1). The items with the most positive responses were those on the importance of assessments in diagnosing/monitoring learner progress and providing appropriate feedback (item 2), the value of assessments in planning learner-centered lessons (item 3), assessments being conducted in a variety of contexts (such as classroom and outside-classroom activities) (item 9), and using CBC assessment results as per the intended purpose (item 10). The majority agreed or strongly agreed to these items. The majority also agreed or strongly agreed that CBC assessment results allow them to establish the extent to which learners have acquired expected competencies (item 1) (79.6%) and that CBC assessment procedures for LVI reflect, respect, and promote diversity and inclusion (item 14) (75.0%).

Table 1: Teachers' Views on CBC Assessment Procedures and Tools

Item	SD	D	NAD	A	SA
Results allow me to establish the extent to which learners have acquired competencies	1 (2.27)	6 (13.64)	2 (4.55)	29 (65.91)	6 (13.64)
Help diagnose and monitor learner progress and provide appropriate feedback	0 (0.00)	3 (6.82)	5 (11.36)	26 (59.09)	10 (22.73)
CBC assessment results help me to plan lessons effectively to meet learner needs	0 (0.00)	3 (6.82)	4 (9.09)	29 (65.91)	8 (18.18)
Results provide the best guidance on learner promotion and progression to next levels	3 (6.82)	6 (13.64)	6 (13.64)	22 (50.00)	7 (15.91)
I always use assessment results to develop interventions, policies, or programs to ensure learners master the expected competencies	2 (4.55)	6 (13.64)	4 (9.09)	24 (54.55)	8 (18.18)
Management uses results to develop interventions to ensure learners master expected competencies	1 (2.27)	4 (9.09)	4 (9.09)	24 (54.55)	6 (13.64)
Assessments reflect accurately on learner's true capability in each competency	3 (6.82)	7 (15.91)	9 (20.45)	15 (34.09)	10 (22.73)
Assessments reflect accurately on what learners have achieved in each competency	0 (0.00)	10 (22.73)	9 (20.45)	18 (40.91)	7 (15.91)
Conducted in a variety of contexts/ occasions for each core competency	0 (0.00)	3 (6.82)	5 (11.36)	24 (54.55)	12 (27.27)
Results are used according to the intended purpose of the assessment	0 (0.00)	1 (2.27)	7 (15.91)	29 (65.91)	7 (15.91)
All teachers use CBC assessment tools and procedures the same way	3 (6.98)	14 (32.56)	9 (20.93)	12 (27.91)	5 (11.63)
All teachers interpret CBC assessment results the same way	8 (18.18)	16 (36.36)	9 (20.45)	5 (11.36)	6 (13.64)
Assessments ensure LVI have equal opportunities as their sighted peers	6 (13.64)	7 (15.91)	9 (20.45)	16 (36.36)	6 (13.64)
Procedures for LVI reflect, respect, and promote diversity and inclusion	1 (2.27)	4 (9.09)	6 (13.64)	22 (50.0)	11 (25.00)
Procedures give learners autonomy to choose how they want to be assessed	2 (4.55)	10 (22.73)	9 (20.45)	16 (36.36)	7 (15.91)
CBC assessment procedures are presented in ways accessible to LVI	0 (0.00)	7 (15.91)	9 (20.45)	18 (40.91)	10 (22.73)

Note: SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, N = neutral, A = Agree, SA = strongly agree,

Source: Field Data 2025

On the other end, the items “all teachers interpret CBC assessment results the same way” (item 12) and “all teachers use CBC assessment tools/procedures the same way (item 11) had the least positive responses. Only 25.0% were positive that teachers had a shared

interpretation of CBC assessment results, while only 39.5% felt that teachers used assessment tools/procedures the same way. The other items with relatively low number of “agree” or “strongly” agree responses were whether CBC assessment procedures and results guarantee that LVI have equal development/progression opportunities as their sighted peers (item 13) (50.0%, $n = 22$), give learners the autonomy to choose how they want to be assessed (item 15) (52.3%, $n = 23$), reflect accurately on learners’ true capability (item 7) (56.8%, $n = 25$), and reflect accurately on what learners have achieved in each core competency (item 8) (56.8%, $n = 25$).

The three items with the lowest positive responses are related to fairness. Fairness is among the five guiding principles of CBC assessments. The BECF defines fairness as ensuring that the assessment process and procedures do not disadvantage any learner, reflect an inclusive society, and respect diversity (KICD, 2019). Fair assessments are transparent and provide learners with clear expectations of what is to be assessed and how it is assessed (Lindstrom et al, 2017). To meet these criteria for LVI, all teachers should have a shared interpretation of CBC assessment results and use the assessment tools/procedures the same way. The procedures and results should also offer LVI equal progression opportunities as their sighted peers (Lindstrom et al., 2017; Singh, 2021). Yet, from the above findings, many teachers were not confident that CBC assessments meet the above requirements. Over a half felt that teachers did not interpret CBC assessment results the same way, nearly 40% indicated that teachers did not use the tools the same way, while about 30% did not feel that assessment procedures offered LVI equal opportunities as other learners. Thus, a substantial proportion of teachers did not perceive CBC assessments as being fair to LVI.

The findings of Munala et al. (2023) may partly explain why some teachers did not perceive CBC assessments as fair. Similar to the current results, their study generated mixed views. Some head teachers, curriculum support officers, and resource persons felt that the assessments used in CBC promoted equity and supported progress among learners with disabilities. For example, the assessments prioritised practical skills, aligned well with learners’ abilities, and were available in accessible formats. Yet, others felt that the assessments were unfair and hardly encouraged inclusion. However, the reasons they cited, such as the absence of proper assessment tools and limited teacher training, were less to do with the design of the assessments than with external factors. These two issues – inadequate resources and training – have been identified as among the key obstacles to successful CBC implementation (Isaboke et al., 2021; Waweru, 2018). Thus, while the design of CBC assessments is, in itself, fair and inclusive, at present there are some disparities in implementation due to resource and training inadequacies, such that the assessments do not provide equal opportunities for all learners, especially among those with special needs.

Closely related to fairness was the view that the assessments did not reflect learners’ true capabilities and what they have achieved, as was indicated by over 22% of teachers. This is a question of validity, which is crucial, especially for LVI. Assessments for LVI should not miss the intended purpose and should be equivalent to those presented to their sighted peers (Hannan, 2007). The BECF defines competency-based assessment as one that determines learners’ ability to apply the knowledge, skills and abilities required to successfully perform critical tasks in a defined setting (KICD, 2019). Assessments should, therefore, present learners with opportunities to put into practice what they have learned. In contrast, from the

present findings, a substantial proportion of teachers are not convinced that CBC, as implemented presently, is meeting validity and reliability requirements. Part of the reasons may be that teachers do not have adequate resources and training needed to conduct the assessments as required (Munala et al., 2023). These are factors to do with the external environment and not the curriculum’s design. With appropriate resources and teacher training, CBC assessments should fully cater for the needs of LVI.

Table 2: The Extent of Assessment Adaptation as Rated by Teachers

Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	Mean (SD)
Adapting assessment materials/content	0 (0.00)	1 (2.27)	11 (25.00)	32 (72.73)	2.705 (0.509)
Modifying assessment methods	0 (0.00)	1 (2.27)	5 (11.36)	38 (86.36)	2.841 (0.428)
Changing when and where to do exams	0 (0.00)	2 (4.55)	16 (36.36)	26 (59.09)	2.545 (0.589)
Using supplementary tools	1 (2.27)	2 (4.55)	16 (36.36)	25 (56.82)	2.477 (0.699)

Source: Field Data 2025

Teachers were also promoted to indicate the extent to which they made specific assessment adaptations. They were to rate the items using a four-point scale ranging from “never” to “always” (Table 2). In addition to frequencies and percentages, we coded the responses as “never = 0” to “always = 3”. These codes were then used to compute item means scores, which are also indicated in the table. For interpretation, mean scores above 2.25 (75% of maximum possible score) were considered high. The majority (over 93%) sometimes or always made adaptations in all the four areas assessed. In terms of the mean scores, all the items had high ratings (> 2.15). Overall, teachers felt that they highly practiced assessment adaptations.

Table 3: Selected Statistics for Composite Assessment Adaptation Scores

Statistic	Value
Minimum	4
Maximum	12
Mean	10.57
Median	11.00
Std. deviation	1.731
Skewness	-1.629
Kurtosis	3.517

Source: Field Data 2025

Composite assessment adaptation scores were then computed for each participant as the sum of their ratings of each of the items in Table 2. The minimum and maximum scores a participant could attain were 0 (no adaptation) and 12 (highest possible score), respectively. The minimum and maximum ratings were 4/12 (33.3%) and 12/12 (100%), respectively (Table 3). Thus, between individual teachers, assessment adaptation levels ranged from low

to high. The mean score was 10.57 ($SD = 1.731$) or 88.1% of the maximum possible. However, the scores were heavily skewed, suggesting that the median would be a better average than the mean. The median score of 11 (or 91.7% of the maximum possible) suggested that, on average, teachers rated the extent to which they made adaptations as high. The scores were also compared across participants' gender, age category, professional qualification, and work experience (Figures 1-4).

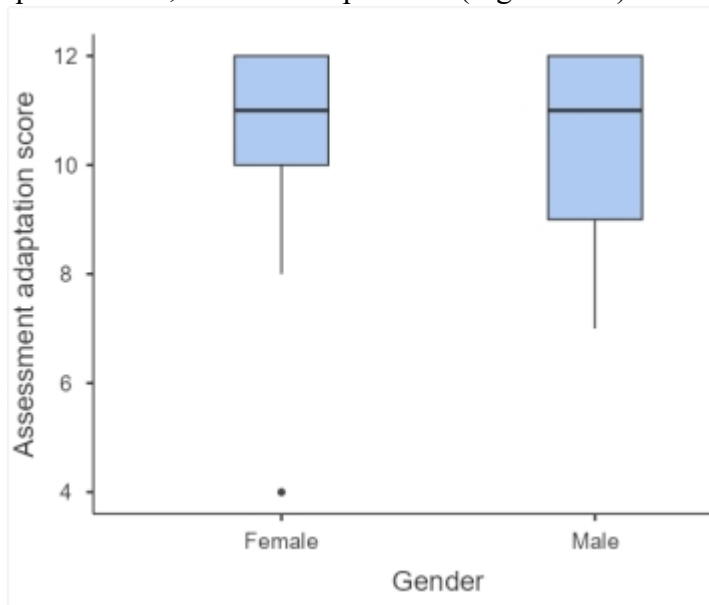


Figure 1: The Extent of CBC Assessment Adaptations by Teachers' Gender. Results of Mann-Whitney Test: $U = 213.0$, $p = 0.492$, $|r| = 0.110$.

Source: Field Data 2025

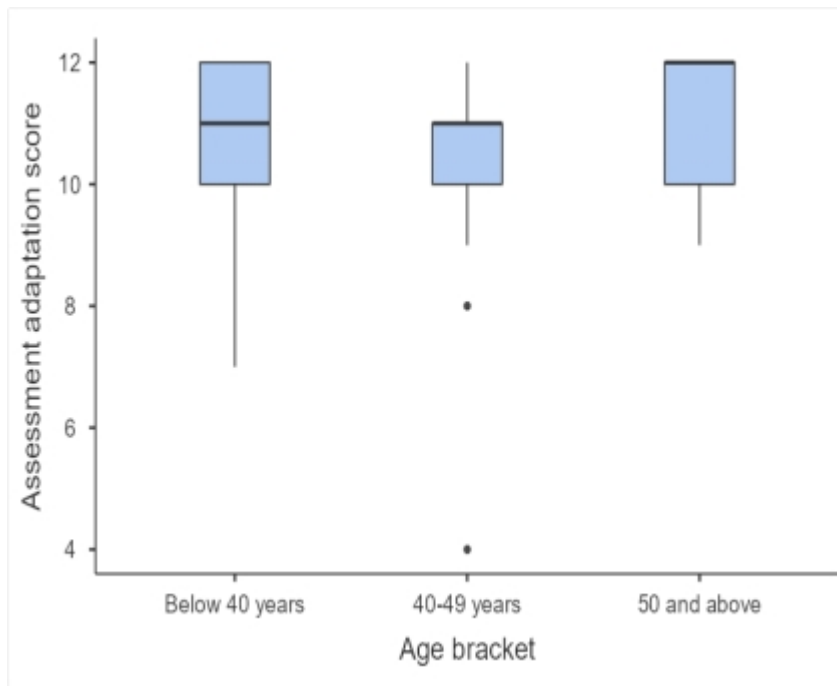


Figure 2: The Extent of CBC Assessment Adaptations by Teachers' Age. Results of Kruskal-Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 1.549$, $p = 0.461$, $\epsilon^2 = 0.036$.

Source: Field Data 2025

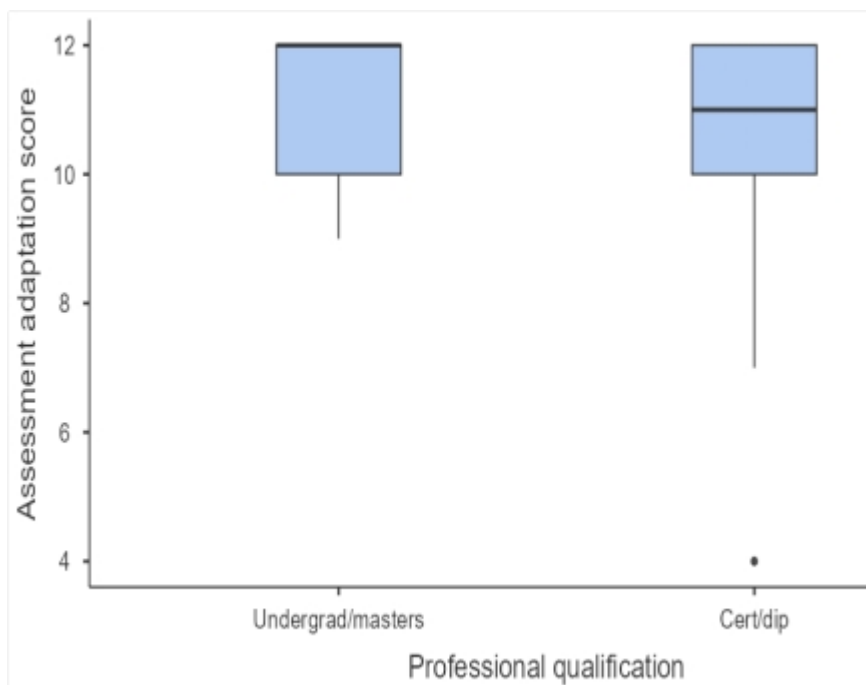


Figure 3: The Extent of CBC Assessment Adaptations by Professional Qualification.

Results of Mann-Whitney Test: $U = 175.0$, $p = 0.278$, $|r| = 0.195$.

Source: Field Data 2025

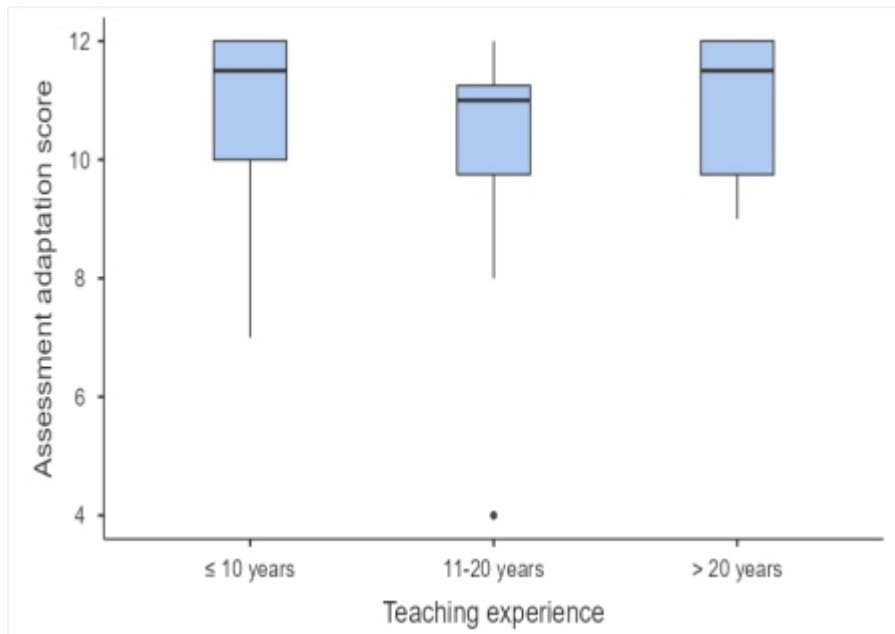


Figure 4: The Extent of CBC Assessment Adaptations by Experience. Results of Kruskal-Wallis test: $\chi^2 = 1.102$, $p = 0.576$, $\varepsilon^2 = 0.026$.

Source: Field Data 2025

The median scores were the same for females and males, while those for experience were also nearly the same across the three groups. For age, the scores were marginally higher among those above 50 than those in the other categories. Undergraduates also scored marginally higher, on average, than those with a P-1 certificate or diploma. Still, the four plots suggest that neither of the four factors influenced the adaptation scores. These results were verified by Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests, as indicated by corresponding notes to the figures. These results support those of Munala et al. (2023) that many teachers make relevant assessment adaptations for LVI, irrespective of their individual characteristics. An important picture emerges when these results are compared with those in Table 1. Although some teachers may not feel that CBC assessments, are appropriate for LVI, they, nevertheless, endeavored to make the required adaptations.

Teachers were also asked to indicate whether the design of the CBC made it easy to realize the above adaptations. Over two-thirds (69.1%) agreed or strongly agreed, about a quarter (26.2%) disagreed, while 4.8% were undecided. When prompted on the reasons for their answers, only 33 responded. Among those who were positive, the most cited reasons were related to the view that the curriculum/content has already been adapted and that it offers clear guidance on how to make adapt. In total, 54.6% felt that the curriculum is already adapted to suit LVI needs (27.3%) or that it offers clear guidelines on how to do the assessments (27.3%) (Table 4). These two reasons may explain why some teachers felt the assessments catered for individual differences (9.1%), making it possible for teachers to adapt (3.0%). One teacher, in each case, stated that the curriculum has specific outcomes, the content covered has been reduced, and that CBC simplifies the learning process. Comparable findings are reported by Munala et al. (2023).

Table 4: Reasons the Design of CBC Makes/Does Not Make Assessment Adaptations

Easy	Reasons For	Reasons Against
	Caters for all learner/individual differences/ based on learner's ability (3, 9.09%)	Insufficient/no resources to cater for LVI (3, 9.09%)
	Teachers can make necessary adaptations (1, 3.03%)	Adaptation to be enhanced to fully accommodate LVI (1, 3.03%)
	Curriculum has specific outcomes (1, 3.03%)	Difficult to determine due to individual learner differences (1, 3.03%)
	Content to be covered has been reduced (1, 3.03%)	The design favors regular learners only (1, 3.03%)
	Design has already been adapted to suit VI/ advocates/good/allows/makes it easy/gives room for adaptation (9, 27.27%)	Knowledge in making the adaptations (2, 6.06%)
	Exams assess the content (1, 3.03%)	
	Gives clear guidance/recommendations on assessment tools to be used/ provides adaptation strategies (9, 27.27%)	
	Has simplified learning (1, 3.03%)	

Source: Field Data 2025

On the other end, issues with resources (9.1%) were the most cited difficulties with CBC adaptations. It was also claimed that the design favors regular learners only (3.0%) and makes it difficult to determine progress due to individual learner differences (3.0%). These issues are similar to the ones discussed previously and have been reported by other authors (Awuonda et al., 2023; Isaboke et al., 2021; Waruingi et al., 2022). Further, as highlighted earlier, issues related to resources and training do not necessarily imply that CBC assessments are, in themselves, bad, but highlight the need for relevant stakeholders to ensure the availability of resources needed to fully implement the curriculum.

3.3 Learners' Perspectives on Assessment Adaptations

Learners offered some of the most thought-provoking views on CBC. With few exceptions, they felt that the assessments catered to their needs. An area that generated interesting debates was the exam grading system. Under CBC, exam grading is summative using four descriptors that range from "below expectation" to "exceeding expectation" (KICD, 2019). The curriculum discourages learner ranking or comparison based on their performances. Participants voiced strong views against this approach. Content analysis of their responses isolated two themes related to the grading system: laxity and issues with parents.

The "laxity" theme represented the view that the CBC grading system makes learners lax, primarily because there is no positioning and competition. In all schools, most FGD participants felt that the summative approach makes them, as they said, "lazy," with little motivation to work hard. For these individuals, they would be more motivated if marks and positions were included in their assessment reports. The following sentiments demonstrate this view:

The grading system makes people lazy. Those not good academically always say, ‘Even if I get 20 and you get 25, we are the same.’ If we had marks, it would make one try so that he can get, say, 100% or 90%. So, marks and ranking should be reintroduced. (School A).

With this system, you can’t know your level. Take my case, for example, I have had EE throughout, but I haven’t known the level I am. There are many of us with EE. I can’t tell whether I’m [ranked] ahead or below them (School B).

The most serious mistake with CBC is that there is no giving of marks and positions. You find that some people came to school and just relaxed because they are not looking forward to any competition or ranking. They are content with whatever they achieve, even if it is not a good result. (School C)

Similar sentiments echoed prominently throughout the FGDs. The interpretation is that, for most learners, without positioning and ranking, they have little motivation to study hard. In fact, some, while acknowledging the value of CBC in nurturing practical skills among learners, indicated that what is more important to them than such skills is what they termed as ‘results,’ evidently referring to marks and ranking. As a participant from School C remarked,

Yes, you can gain all those [soft skills] with CBC, but remember what brought you here is *kusoma*. What I mean is that we should study and get *results*. *Kusoma ndio ya maana*. Yes, skills or talents are important, we don’t deny that, but we want to see results.

At least two conclusions can be drawn from this comment. Firstly, although LVI appreciates the importance of soft skills nurtured by CBC, some do not consider such skills as part of what they term *kusoma*, evidently referring to academic work. They seem not consider these skills as part of learning. For them, school learning is purely academic. Interestingly, this is the view that prevailed under the 8-4-4 system and is what the government is shifting away from. As outlined by the CBC implementation framework, “The aim of assessment is to establish the extent to which the learner has acquired the *expected competencies* with a view to informing interventions for further acquisition and mastery of *expected competencies*” (KICD, 2019). Here, the emphasis is on *expected competencies*, not just academic content.

These competencies encompass the skills/knowledge gained in both classroom and co-curricular activities (KICD, 2019). Similarly, KNEC (2021) emphasizes that the overall goal of competency-based assessments is to provide a systematic way of “collecting information and documenting what the learner knows and can do before they learn, as they learn, and as they transit from one level to another based on specified competencies.” While these goals are commendable, the present findings suggest that many learners have not yet differentiated the competency-oriented CBC from the academic/theory-oriented 8-4-4. Even though they claim that they understand what CBC entails, they have yet to appreciate its fundamental essence.

Secondly, the phrase “*kusoma ndio ya maana*,” which loosely translates into “learning is what matters most,” implies that for some learners, academic pursuits are more important

than practical skills. Anything that discourages them from pursuing academic ‘results’ is bad. Head teachers concurred that, to an extent, grading without positioning/ranking may discourage some (but not all) learners. One head teacher insinuated that learners complaining about marks and ranking are likely those who top their classes in regular examinations. Asked whether the CBC grading system may demotivate learners, she said, “I agree with them, to some extent. The current system may discourage some learners” (Interviewee B). The other two also concurred, as illustrated below:

The learners, especially those who do not *understand* the essence of the current grading system, would want to see *tangible* results. ‘How many marks did I get in this? What was my position?’ That’s what they *understand*. Somewhat, they don’t *understand* this ‘expectation’ thing (Interviewee C).

This interviewee agreed that, to an extent, the current grading system may demotivate some (but not all) learners. His comment provides further insight into the issue. According to him, part of the complaints among learners is because they do not *understand* the essence of expectations. Without such comprehension, they may feel discouraged that the assessments do not cater for their needs. Learners, however, had divided opinions on the use of expectations. Some (the minority) were content with the grading system and wanted it to stay, claiming that, among other things, it minimizes discouragements, while also upholding the dignity of those who may not excel academically. Supporting this view, an FGD participant in School C stated,

If it were 8-4-4, some of us would have dropped out school. For example, you can imagine being given positions and every time you are ranked last. That one may lead to discouragement. In CBC, it’s just about meeting (or not meeting) expectations.

This learner advocated for the use of competency-based assessments other than marks and ranking. Her main argument was that positioning/ranking may lead to long-term discouragement among some learners. This view was shared by all the head teachers, who claimed that the use of marks alone discourages some and fails to reflect the true capability of a learner. They said,

The advantage of this grading system is to do with competition, where children are being demoralized; they are arranged from position one to the last. It’s really demoralizing, but nowadays, you do according to your ability (Interviewee A)

When we’re doing the assessment, there are different activities we are assessing. There is that activity in which the learner has strength, and there are weaknesses, so we balance them. Here, we have children who cannot take a bath, cannot button, and you expect us to award this child marks! What will we give him? Zero? (Interviewee B)

With CBC, it is *my* expectation, not the student's expectation. It's only that he didn't meet what *I* expected. That's different from being told, 'You are poor.' The government wants to make learners not feel that they are not able to do something just because they failed a test. They still have some ability, even with low marks. (Interviewee C)

The above responses highlight at least three advantages of the assessment procedures used in CBC that make them learner-centered. Firstly, the assessments cater for different learning areas, both in-class and out-of-class activities. Secondly, they balance learners' strengths with their weaknesses to provide a complete picture of their capabilities. As one head teacher explained,

There are those doing better in other areas than even those who 'exceeded expectation'. Maybe someone is not doing well in class, but doing very well in games or other skills, that person is 'exceeding expectations' in such skills. If they are told that, they feel balanced with those who exceeded in academics but not in such skills (Interviewee C).

This ability to balance between academic and practical skills is considered one of the key strengths of competency-based assessments (KICD, 2019; KNEC, 2021). Thirdly, by eliminating competition and negative reports, such as "poor" or "very poor," the assessments are a form of motivation to learners who may not excel in academics. The advantages notwithstanding, it was also apparent that the summative approach to grading may be discouraging some learners, especially the "bright" ones who focus primarily on academics. Learner motivation is a key variable in curriculum design and implementation. A learner-centered curriculum should account for not only individual learner background and physical characteristics, but also their motivation sources and learning styles (Filgona et al., 2020). The fact that the grading system used by CBC demotivates some learners should, thus, be an urgent concern for relevant stakeholders.

The question that begs, therefore, is: can CBC assessments be designed in such a way that they account for the motivational needs of all learner categories? In other words, can they be designed in a way that those excelling in academics (those emphasizing ranking and positioning) are not discouraged and, at the same time, those who may not be gifted academically do not feel demoralized? The answers to this question were beyond the scope of this study and could form a basis for further research. Besides, the conversations revealed that the grading issue may not be unique to LVI, but a feeling among the general learner population, including those without specific disabilities. One head teacher offered the following suggestion:

The ranking and expectations have to be combined. The teacher should create a kind of competition in class when carrying out *practicals*. The learners award themselves the marks so that a task can be divided and learners can see. The learners are in a position to evaluate the works of others. (Interviewee A)

For this participant, a possible solution to the above dilemma would be to combine competencies and ranking during assessments. This integration could be achieved by, for example, ranking learners in practical and other skills-oriented activities and allowing them to self-assess their work. The feasibility and potential effects of this suggestion on learner motivation could not be verified in this study. Still, it offers a plausible mechanism for addressing the “laxity” issue raised by learners. The intent of CBC is to provide differentiated assessment that caters for individual learner needs. Despite the tremendous progress that has been achieved so far, there remain many areas for improvement, including the need for an all-encompassing grading system.

Concerning the second theme, some learners complained that their parents struggled to comprehend or appreciate the criteria used to grade learners under CBC. Similar to learners, such parents wanted to see marks and positions. An FGD participant from School C hilariously stated, “When I took my report form to my parent, she saw many EEs (exceeding expectation) and was shocked, thought of how stupid I had become, to the extent of getting double Es.” Learners in all three schools shared similar experiences. Although we could not authenticate such claims, interviews with head teachers indicated that many parents may not be conversant with the grading system used in CBC. As one interviewee admitted,

Sensitization should be done to parents. Parents want to see marks. We keep on having parents’ meetings or clinics where we sensitize them. We direct them to the teachers who explain the child’s weaknesses and strengths (Interviewee B).

In addition to acknowledging issues with parents, the above response highlights the need for creating awareness among parents on the assessment procedures used in CBC. Parents are important stakeholders in educational contexts. Consequently, their active involvement in curriculum implementation is vital. However, there are suggestions that levels of parental involvement in CBC implementation across Kenya are, at the moment, low or inadequate (Amunga et al., 2020; Njeru & Kirimi, 2023). Njeru and Kirimi (2023), for example, concluded that a general lack of parent sensitization and involvement is among the leading barriers to successful CBC implementation in the country. The low involvement may, to a large extent, explain why some parents do not appreciate the grading and other assessment aspects used in CBC. There is a growing need for programs designed to sensitize parents on CBC design, tools, and procedures.

4. Conclusion

Our findings show that CBC assessments are easy to adapt to LVI. In most cases, assessments are already adapted (provided in formats that suit LVI needs). Where such modifications have not been made, teachers are provided with clear guidelines on the same. The majority of teachers in special primary schools for LVI endeavor to make the needed adjustments, although format adaptation can be highly demanding. The “extra work” involved in brailleing the content or presenting it in other suitable formats is usually done without additional compensation or any external motivation. Resource inadequacies also make it challenging for teachers to make the adaptations. We also found sufficient evidence

that CBC assessments are valuable for diagnosing and monitoring learner progress, planning learner-centered lessons, and evaluating learner progress. They are also conducted in a variety of contexts as per learner needs, used as per the intended purpose, while also reflecting respect and promoting diversity/inclusion.

Still, teachers may not be using or interpreting assessment results and procedures the same way. Besides, the assessments may not always guarantee that LVI have equal opportunities as their sighted peers, give them the autonomy to choose how they want to be assessed, and accurately reflect their true capability and what learners have achieved in each core competency. These issues bring into question the fairness, validity, and reliability of CBC assessments, especially concerning LVI. While there are significant efforts to cater to individual needs and differences, many learners are dissatisfied with the summative approach used in CBC grading, claiming that it makes them “lazy.” This is particularly true of academically “bright” learners, who prefer ranking and positioning, the very elements that CBC is doing away with. While they acknowledged the value of CBC in nurturing practical skills, such learners feel that *kusoma* is the most important thing. They feel that the grading system does not allow them to rate or assess themselves in terms of *kusoma*. A minority are, however, content with the grading system, claiming that it minimizes discouragements and protects the dignity of those who may not excel academically.

We recommend that KICD consider reviewing the grading system used in CBC to ensure it accounts for the needs of all learners, those who prefer hard marks and ranks, and those who are comfortable with “expectations.” The specific changes that should be made to the system to accommodate all learners could be a subject of further research. We also recommend that the education ministry conduct further teacher training on CBC grading, specifically, on how to interpret and use assessment procedures and results. This would be crucial for improving assessment validity and reliability.

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