

Practical skills. This mode of education is steadily shifting from memorising notes to students applying classroom knowledge to practical skills in problem solving and innovations that encourage research beyond classrooms, in real life situations.

CURRICULUM

BY SYLVIA KATUSHABE

For many learners, education is no longer just about passing exams. Under the lower secondary school, or competence-based curriculum rolled out in schools in 2020, students apply the acquired knowledge in real life situations, rather than just memorizing information for examinations, skills that educationists say were missing in the previous system.

This mode of education is steadily shifting from memorising notes to students applying classroom knowledge to practical skills in problem solving, innovations, that encourage research beyond classrooms, in real life situations.

Henry Tumusiime, a learner at Boston High School in Entebbe, is one of the many students benefiting from this curriculum's emphasis on competence based learning.

He notes that the curriculum emphasises bringing classroom situations to real life, noting that at the end of the topic, they are required to identify a problem and in the name of project work.

Tumusiime developed a project on proper waste management, aimed at addressing plastic pollution in his communities by collecting discarded plastic bottle tops and recycling them.

"Before I joined secondary school, I didn't know that plastic waste could turn into something useful. But through the project work, I learnt how to turn the waste into something useful," Tumusiime said.

Tumusiime, who is now in his senior four vacation, said he has extended the skill to his home, and when he is not helping his parents at the farm, he makes door mats for his home.

"I have made door mats for my home and I have also trained my young sibling," Tumusiime said.

Benitah Nanyonga, a student at St Denis Secondary School in Kampala, said that the competence based curriculum has helped her discover talents beyond academics.

Through the project work, Nanyonga learnt baking, which she describes as a skill that cuts across several subjects.

"In baking, you apply mathematics through measurements, art through cake designs and shape, and you also find chemistry through understanding the heat regulation and mixing ingredients," Nanyonga said.

What began as a school project, with support from her mother, has grown into a small baking business providing her with a source of income.

Nanyonga now makes cakes in her home in Mukono for sale and is able to get customers.

"I have come to understand that

How new curriculum is empowering learners



Students of Mityana Secondary School showcase how they manufacture pavers from plastic waste as part of their project work. PHOTO DAVID WALUGEMBE

learning is not only about reading and passing exams but also acquiring a skill that can support you even outside school," she said.

The Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) through the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) revised and rolled out a New Competency-based Curriculum to learners of senior one in January 2020.

However, the Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent closure of schools delayed the progress of implementation.

The curriculum aims at improving the quality and relevance of secondary education and ensuring that post primary students are armed with skills needed in the workforce.

Under this curriculum learners benefit from high order thinking exercises while slow learners will benefit from peer interaction, which is different from the old curriculum that was competitive in nature and assessment aimed at realising the best student.

The new curriculum is accommodative as it provides room for skill development for every student across the board.

According to the National Curriculum Development Center (NCDC), the lower secondary curriculum, the syllabus provides three chapters to be covered each term in every subject. Students get an activity of integration at the end of every chapter or topic. The marks are added and converted to 10 at the end of the term.

Students also choose at least two subjects from three chapters or a topic covered every term, with the teacher's guidance. Project marks are also added and converted to 10. At the end of the term, a student has 20 percent and the examination is marked out of 80 percent.

Educationists argued that the only system was producing learners who would pass exams but struggled with critical thinking, creativ-

ity and problem solving.

According to Kato Walusimbi, the headteacher of Kansanga Seed School, the competence based curriculum was designed to shift education from assessing what learners know to evaluating what they can do with the knowledge acquired.

"Under the new framework, learning is learner-centered, with emphasis on continuous assessment, project work, collaboration and practical application of the knowledge acquired," Walusimbi said.

Walusimbi explained that project work forms a significant part of final assessment with marks submitted to Uganda National Examination Board (Uneb) contributing 20 percent as the end of cycle exams are marked at 80 percent.

He adds that the curriculum has positively changed learners' attitude towards education, especially questions on why they were learning certain topics.

"It is a very good curriculum when implemented because it unveils the abilities/potentials of the learners into real life situations. They now understand why they are being taught certain concepts and how these apply in our daily lives," Walusimbi stated.

He added, "When it comes to project work, a learner identifies a problem in the community and is able to identify a solution."

He highlighted that one of the best projects is the automated school bell system developed by the student that the school has since adopted.

"I asked him why he came up with the idea, and said we have two block and one is behind the other, so when the time keeper rings the manual bell, student in the behind block don't hear it, so some times enter or come out of class late and decide he to develop an automated bell that can be heard to all the blocks and time management will be better," Walusimbi said.

He explained that learners undertaking project work are attached to a supervising teacher who guides them through idea development, production and final assessment.

The other projects developed by learners include organics fertilizers, liquid soap, cough syrup, eco-friendly dustbins among others addressing community challenges.

Challenges

Despite the progress, Walusimbi said that funding remains a major challenge, particularly for project work that requires materials that are sometimes beyond the readily available in schools.

"A student may identify a very good problem but the material to be used to come up with that good project is very expensive because it must be documented from the

time of identification of the problem up to the end," Walusimbi said.

He noted that since the government has not provided funds to that effect, parents should always come in to support their children although the school encourages learners to develop projects that are cost friendly.

Walusimbi further said that the curriculum demands research yet some learners lack access to computers and smartphones, limiting their full potential to explore ideas.

He called on the government to increase funding and support outstanding learners' innovations beyond the classroom.

Another teacher, Perez Bwire, a Physics teacher at Seeta High School in Mukono said that the competence based curriculum has transformed how learners relate with the topic.

"When we teach electricity, learners immediately connect it to what they use at home. They understand power consumption and how to reduce costs," Bwire said. "Indeed it has changed the perception of why we study something."

However, he noted that challenges including large class sizes in some schools, limited materials, and inadequate time for project work affects the learning process.

"In schools, which are not well equipped. The learners don't have the physical touch of those items because most of the learning outcomes are obtained after doing something. So there is a challenge of a lack of items, like instructional materials for a topic."

He recommended dedicated project supervisors, increased inspection and documentation of learners' projects to increase their scope out of the classroom level.

Bwire said that although these projects are for examination purposes, there is need to follow up the best ideas to develop further and can be used at national level.

"The ideas are there, the learners have them. There should be an inspection from UNEB, check on those ideas and the best should be picked up and can be taken to another level," Bwire said.

The Education Ministry spokesperson, Dr Dennis Mugimba said that the sector encourages schools to use the materials that can easily be accessed in their localities.

On developing the best projects further, Mugimba encouraged the schools to involve the private sector, noting that the government has limited resource envelope.

"We do have any resource set aside for prompting the student ideas, however, the encouragement to school is to always involve the private sector because it can look at some of these projects and get interested and decide to take them on into product development," Mugimba said.

He stated that at the moment the project work is mainly for learning and assessment purposes.

ABOUT THE NEW CURRICULUM

Menu

The Lower Secondary Curriculum Menu consists of 20 subjects. A school is expected to select 12 subjects to be offered out of the 20 subjects on the menu. At S1 and S2, learners are expected to offer 11 compulsory subjects plus one elective. At S3 and S4 learners are expected to offer a minimum of 8 and maximum of 9 subjects, out of which 7 are compulsory.

Source: Ministry of Education

The game changer.

Before I joined secondary school, I didn't know that plastic waste could turn into something useful. But through the project work, I learnt how to turn the waste into something useful.

- Henry Tumusiime, learner at Boston High School in Entebbe.