

Embracing the Competency-Based Curriculum in Uganda: A Marxist-Leninist Analysis of Education Reform and Socioeconomic Transformation.

Wasike David

Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Business and Management (FBM), International University of East Africa (IUEA), Doctoral Student, Faculty of Business and Management (BAM), Uganda Martyrs University (UMU), Kampala, Uganda, <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1829-2083>

ABSTRACT: This article examines Uganda's transition from a traditional Knowledge-Based Curriculum (KBC) to a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), analyzing its implications for socio-economic transformation through a Marxist-Leninist lens. The reform responds to a structural crisis in the education system, where the KBC's emphasis on rote learning and credentialism perpetuated social stratification and created a disconnect between academic output and labor market demands. Empirical evidence, including high youth unemployment and significant NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) rates, demonstrates how the KBC functioned as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), reproducing capitalist relations and maintaining elite dominance. The introduction of CBC represents a revolutionary opportunity—a dialectical intervention aligning education with productive labor and the material interests of the working class. Grounded in dialectical materialism, CBC is conceptualized as a tool to dismantle bourgeois pedagogical dominance, bridge labor skills gaps, and cultivate proletarian self-reliance. By emphasizing practical mastery, critical thinking, entrepreneurship, and continuous assessment, the CBC aims to transform learners into productive forces, directly contributing to Uganda's industrialization goals outlined in Vision 2040. Employing a qualitative, conceptual methodology, the study synthesizes Marxist-Leninist theory with documentary analyses of national policy frameworks (MoES, NCDC) and labor market reports (UBOS). The findings suggest that the CBC reform constitutes both an ideological and structural reorientation toward socialist transformation. Its success depends on sustained political commitment, equitable resource allocation, and ideological clarity, ensuring that education functions as an instrument of collective empowerment and human emancipation rather than a superficial adaptation within global capitalist structures.

KEYWORDS: Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC); Knowledge-Based Curriculum (KBC); Marxism-Leninism; Education Reform; Proletariat; Class Consciousness; Skills Development; Socialist Transformation; Uganda.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Education is widely seen as the foundation for both ideological and material change in any society (Apple, 2013). In Uganda, the previous Knowledge-Based Curriculum (KBC) promoted rote learning and unintentionally reinforced social divisions by favoring theoretical knowledge that was detached from practical labor (Ssekamwa & Lugumba, 2001). This systemic issue is reflected in recent data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS, 2024), which shows that over 67% of Ugandan university graduates are unemployed or underemployed. This highlights a serious and ongoing gap between what is taught in schools and what industries need (Muwanga & Nakayi, 2021). From a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, this mismatch reveals how the bourgeoisie control education, which acts as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) (Althusser, 1971) to reproduce capitalist ideas and support the elite's dominance. The shift to the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) aims to change this by incorporating practical learning, critical thinking, and vocational relevance. This connects education more closely with society's productive needs and national development goals (NCDC, 2020; Tumwesige, 2023). This change marks a transition from theoretical concepts to practical application, where knowledge directly supports social production and class liberation. It aligns with the materialist view that philosophy should not just interpret the world but change it (Marx, 1867).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Uganda's education system is in a deep crisis of relevance and effectiveness. Despite relatively high enrollment in primary school and completion rates in secondary school (MoES, 2023), the system still produces graduates who are not connected to the job market. This contradiction is evident in the fact that nearly 30% of Ugandan youth aged 18 to 30 are classified as NEET (World Bank, 2023), indicating significant underutilization of human talent. The KBC maintains capitalist structures by prioritizing

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credentials over actual skills, which alienates workers from their means of production (Marx, 1867/1976). This system systematically creates a managerial elite while pushing the working class into unskilled or informal jobs, deepening inequality and economic reliance (Lenin, 1917; Freire, 1970).

Reports show that over 67% of Ugandan university graduates struggle with unemployment or underemployment (UBOS, 2024). This illustrates the education system's ongoing failure to meet today's economic demands (Muwanga & Nakayi, 2021). Additionally, research from the Economic Policy Research Centre (EPRC, 2023) points out that the KBC's focus on theoretical knowledge leads to a skills mismatch among youth. Graduates often lack the soft and technical skills that high-growth industries need, thus perpetuating class divisions and unequal access to valuable economic opportunities (Althusser, 1971). The overall lack of practical skills among the working class emphasizes the need for the educational transformation promised by the CBC to address this serious structural problem (Freire, 1970; Tumwesige, 2023).

1.2 Statement of Opportunity

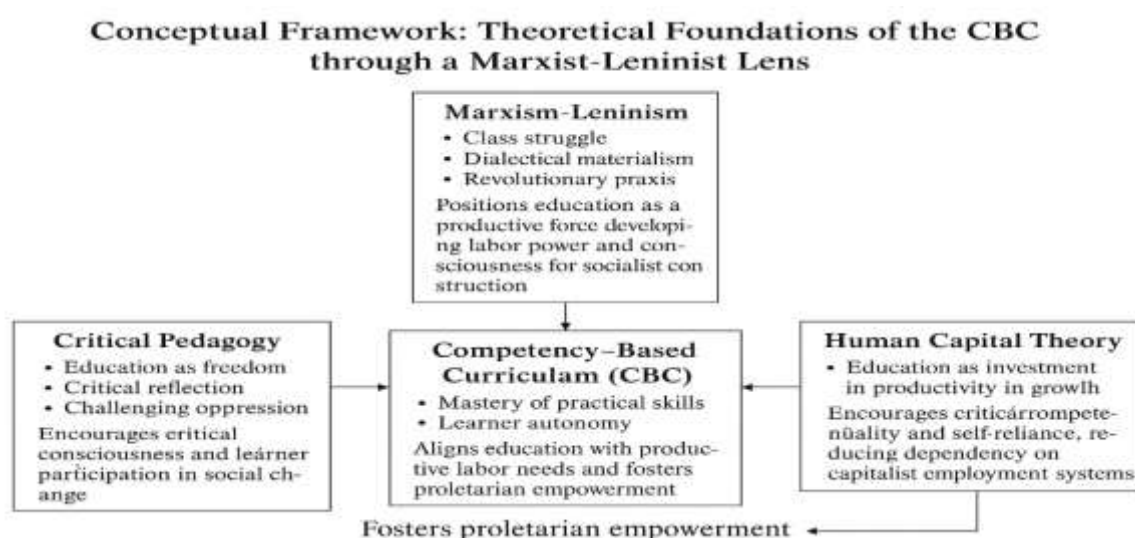
The rollout of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) offers a key chance for structural change in Uganda's education system. The curriculum focuses on mastering practical skills, solving problems, being creative, and fostering entrepreneurship, which are crucial for closing the ongoing skills gap in the national labor market. Research by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC, 2024) shows that around 70% of schools using the CBC report better student engagement and participation in learning. Additionally, 55% of employers see that CBC-trained graduates are better prepared for jobs and can adapt to workplace needs. From a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, this change means more than just an educational reform; it is a strategic move toward helping workers and learners take control of productive knowledge. It aims to make education a tool for empowerment and awareness (Nyerere, 1968; Freire, 1970). By connecting educational outcomes with local production, innovation, and community problem-solving, the CBC directly supports Uganda's long-term goals for industrialization, social fairness, and economic independence as outlined in the Vision 2040 development framework (Government of Uganda, 2020).

2.0 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

2.1 Philosophical Underpinning: Marxism-Leninism

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reform in Uganda is best understood through the Marxist-Leninist framework of dialectical materialism. This perspective views education as both a reflection and a driver of material and social relations within society. Marx and Engels (1848) stated that the structure of every society is based on the mode of production and the class relations it supports. Similarly, Marx (1859) noted that education reproduces the dominant ideology of the ruling class. However, it also has the potential for revolutionary change when aimed at collective empowerment.

The transition from the Knowledge-Based Curriculum (KBC) to the CBC represents a response to the contradictions between elitist education systems that promote social inequality and the need for a skilled, productive workforce that can support national industrialization. Althusser's (1971) concept of the school as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) is relevant here. It emphasizes how curriculum changes can challenge ideological control by making education more practical, inclusive, and aware of class issues. Lenin (1920) further defined this as praxis—the combination of theory and action—arguing that education must adapt through interaction with material reality to meet the needs of socialist development.



Source: Author, 2025

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2.2 Reclaiming Education as a Productive Force

In capitalist systems, education often works as a tool of alienation, separating mental from manual labor and obscuring the social relations within production (Marx, 1867). The CBC's focus on hands-on learning, measurable skills, and vocational relevance directly challenges this alienation. It shifts education from a passive gathering of knowledge into an active and engaging process. This corresponds with Freire's (1970) idea of education as a form of liberation—what he called the “practice of freedom”—where learners actively question and reshape their environment. Through the CBC, Uganda aims to connect education with work by grounding learning in real-world situations. The use of ongoing assessment reflects the Marxist idea of self-improvement through productive labor. Individuals develop their knowledge and skills through continuous interaction with their surroundings instead of relying solely on high-stakes tests that reinforce educational elitism (Wasike, 2025). Thus, implementing CBC can be seen as a move toward reclaiming education as a social and productive force.

2.3 Conceptual Alignment with Critical and Human Capital Theories

While rooted in Marxist-Leninist thought, the rationale behind the CBC draws on supportive theoretical traditions that enrich its analysis. Critical Pedagogy, as described by Freire (1970), provides a framework for viewing education as a dialogical process in which learners develop critical awareness (*conscientização*) to confront systems of oppression. The CBC's learner-centered methods reflect this principle by promoting reflection, participation, and community problem-solving. At the same time, Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) adds an economic perspective by framing education as an investment that improves individual productivity and national competitiveness. From a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint, this investment goes beyond individual benefits. It becomes a collective effort to strengthen national abilities, decrease reliance on foreign expertise, and build an independent productive base (NPA, 2020; Tumwesige, 2023). By combining these perspectives, CBC reform acts as both a tool for class empowerment and a means for sustainable economic growth.

2.4 Ideological Transformation and Social Equity

Marxism-Leninism views education as more than a neutral institution; it sees it as a space for ideological conflict. The CBC reform offers a way for the Ugandan state to counter the effects of colonial and neoliberal education models that favored theoretical learning over practical skills (Rodney, 1972). By shifting the curriculum toward competencies, innovation, and entrepreneurship, the government reclaims education as a means for national self-determination and social justice. This reflects Lenin's (1920) idea that education should nurture citizens who think critically and collaborate to change society. Furthermore, the CBC helps reduce class and gender gaps by encouraging inclusive participation and equal access to learning opportunities. In this light, education becomes a powerful force capable of transforming both thinking and material conditions—a dual change aligned with dialectical materialism (Marx, 1859).

2.5 Methodological Implications

The methodological approach influenced by Marxism-Leninism stresses research that connects theory with transformative action. It values practical inquiry based on real conditions, where education policies are evaluated not only for efficiency but also for their ability to empower the working class (Engels, 1878). In examining the CBC, analysis should go beyond mere description to explore the socio-economic forces that affect curriculum development and execution. This approach relies on critical discourse analysis and historical-materialist interpretations to reveal how educational reforms either reinforce or resist capitalist dominance (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, the study of CBC becomes both a theoretical and practical effort—an investigation into how knowledge production can serve as a catalyst for collective freedom rather than just a means of social reproduction.

2.6 Synthesis of Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives

Combining Marxism-Leninism, Critical Pedagogy, and Human Capital Theory provides a complete understanding of the CBC as both a political and developmental reform. It incorporates the liberating power of critical thinking, the economic reasons for skill development, and the commitment to equality and social change. The CBC thus serves as a link between philosophy and policy, connecting Marx's advocacy for education connected to production with Freire's vision of learner empowerment and Becker's focus on skill development. Together, these views emphasize that effective education reform in Uganda must develop human capabilities, challenge social inequalities, and promote national independence (NCDC, 2024; Tumwesige, 2023). In this unified framework, education shifts from being a simple transmission of knowledge to an active process of nation-building and collective liberation.

3. DISCUSSION: CBC AND MARXIST-LENINIST PRINCIPLES

3.1 Education as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA)

The KBC operated as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). It upheld capitalist dominance by separating theoretical knowledge from real labor (Althusser, 1971). The CBC challenges this dominance by incorporating production-based skills and encouraging critical awareness. This changes education into a tool for empowering the working class.

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Historically, the KBC supported a bourgeois perspective by prioritizing theoretical knowledge, which was often disconnected from the realities of the Ugandan population. This approach legitimized the division of intellectual labor (Apple, 2013). It reinforced the mental work of the elite while undermining the physical work of the working class. This was a key factor in maintaining capitalist class structures (Althusser, 1971). By emphasizing standardized testing and credentials, the KBC trained people to accept their predetermined roles in society. It promoted the idea that success was based on individual skill rather than systemic class advantage (Freire, 1970).

In contrast, the CBC is positioned as a counter-force. By requiring the integration of practical skills and problem-solving across all subjects, it aims to combine mental and physical labor, a key Marxist idea for freeing workers (Marx, 1867). This shift encourages learners to think critically about their surroundings and challenge unjust social conditions (Freire, 1970). Education is redefined not as a barrier for the elite, but as a platform for developing collective skills and revolutionary awareness needed for socialist construction and national self-reliance (Nyerere, 1967).

3.2 Bridging the Labor Skills Gap

The CBC directly tackles the gap between education and work. It empowers individuals with practical skills, matching Marx's idea of combining intellectual and physical labor (Marx, 1867). This is essential in a setting where only a small percentage of people are in "skilled" (~14.3%) or "highly skilled" (~5.8%) jobs. Additionally, about 42.6% of youth are not in employment, education, or training (UBOS, 2024). The transition from the KBC's reinforcement of bourgeois class divisions to the CBC's focus on practical skills aims to create aware and capable workers.

High unemployment and graduates feeling disconnected from productive work highlight the issues in a capitalist-focused education system (Marx, 1859). The KBC's inability to provide relevant skills has left many graduates unutilized, contributing to a surplus labor force that depresses wages and supports the existing economic setup. The high NEET rate, especially among the youth, is not just a number, but proof of a systemic crisis. Education should foster social development, yet it often leads to collective dissatisfaction and economic dependency (MoES, 2023; UBOS, 2024).

The CBC's focus on mastering skills in areas like digital literacy, finance, and hands-on trades reinstates education as a crucial productive force (Lenin, 1920). This shift aligns with the socialist aim of transforming the working class into a skilled and conscious workforce capable of driving industrial growth and achieving economic independence, as outlined in Vision 2040 (NPA, 2020). By connecting classroom learning to the local economy and providing marketable skills, the CBC aims to break down the historical divide between intellectual and physical labor. This builds a foundation for a fairer, self-sufficient socialist society (Tumwesige, 2023).

3.3 Fostering Proletarian Self-Reliance

The CBC encourages entrepreneurship, promoting economic independence and collective production, which are essential for socialist self-reliance (Nyerere, 1967; Lenin, 1920). However, there remains a significant challenge: around 49% of vocational graduates struggle to find jobs because they lack start-up funds or equipment (Africa Press Arabic). This shows that ideological change must happen alongside improving access to resources and production means for true self-reliance.

Julius Nyerere's (1967) principle of Education for Self-Reliance offers the philosophical basis for the CBC's focus on entrepreneurship. This is not just about creating job-seekers but about nurturing a culture of cooperation and independence from neocolonial capitalist structures. By teaching students to spot local opportunities and build sustainable businesses, the CBC aims to distribute economic power and develop a generation dedicated to addressing community issues through local cooperative efforts, a vital step toward socialism (Lenin, 1920).

Yet, the high unemployment rate among vocational graduates due to insufficient capital reveals the contradiction between the CBC's progressive goals and the reality of a capital-limited economy. To enable the CBC to cultivate true socialist self-reliance, the state needs to follow through on its promise by providing the necessary production means. This would help convert skill mastery into real economic power (Ssekamwa & Lugumba, 2001).

3.4 Continuous Assessment and Praxis

The CBC's approach to continuous assessment reflects the Leninist idea of praxis, which involves ongoing reflection and change through work. The impressive pass rate (~98.05%) for the first CBC cohort in the 2024 UCE exam shows promising support from institutions. However, early signs of difficulties in science subjects (physics and chemistry) indicate that the reform is still in its early stages and that changes in teacher training and assessment methods need careful evaluation. The government's funding for a national "Education Census" (UGX 27 billion) supports the idea of praxis, using data to shape policies for effective reform.

Continuous assessment significantly changes how evaluation is seen. It moves away from high-stakes final exams, typical of a bourgeois sorting system, to a process that values gradual growth and critical thinking during learning (Freire, 1970). This method embodies the concept of praxis by ensuring that theory is constantly applied, tested, and improved through real-world experiences (Lenin, 1920). By evaluating a student's ability to apply knowledge and tackle real problems over time, the CBC supports the

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socialist values of hard work, practical usefulness, and accountability through consistent effort, rather than focusing only on performance during stressful times (Wasike, 2025).

However, effectively implementing a continuous assessment system requires significant investment in teacher training and a cultural shift away from strict adherence to bureaucracy. Early reports showing challenges in teaching and assessing science subjects highlight that the educational system still largely supports the old KBC (MoES, 2023). Therefore, the government's substantial investment in the "Education Census" (UGX 27 billion) must be seen as a key part of this ongoing process—using comprehensive data to guide policy changes—to ensure that the CBC's assessment model truly measures practical skills, rather than becoming just a simplified version of the old system (NCDC, 2020).

4. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

4.1 Conclusion

Uganda's CBC reform represents a major ideological and structural shift towards socialist change. Rooted in Marxist-Leninist thought, CBC ties learning to the realities of production, breaks down the dominance of bourgeois teaching, and encourages collective empowerment (Marx & Engels, 1848). The heart of this transition is the practice of integrating theory with hands-on work and critical thinking. This approach changes students from passive recipients of information into active and aware workers (Lenin, 1920; Freire, 1970). The success of this reform relies heavily on ongoing political support, fair resource distribution, and clear ideological goals. These elements are essential to ensure that education becomes a tool for human freedom and socialist change, rather than just a means for getting jobs in a dominant capitalist system (Nyerere, 1967).

However, realizing this revolutionary potential involves more than changing the curriculum. It requires a real transformation of the education system to address current infrastructure and resource problems (MoES, 2023). For instance, the high pass rate of the first CBC cohort (98.05%) shows initial institutional readiness, but difficulties in subjects like physics and chemistry highlight the need for specialized teacher training and equipment. These material issues can threaten the goal of creating a skilled working class (Monitor+1). As Karl Marx (1845) pointed out, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it" (Marx, 1845, Thesis XI on Feuerbach). Uganda's CBC presents an opportunity to turn education into a force for change by directing the nation's intellectual efforts towards its material and productive progress.

4.2 Further Research and Debate

Future research should evaluate CBC's long-term effects on employment, skill development, and socio-economic progress in Uganda (UBOS, 2024). Important areas to explore include an analysis of teaching practices within the new model. This should assess whether the change truly goes beyond rote learning to allow for genuine competency-based education (Tumwesige, 2023). Additionally, a thorough review of how adaptable the curriculum is, the integration of local knowledge systems, and studies comparing it to similar reforms in Kenya or Tanzania will be crucial for understanding its success and improving its implementation (UNESCO, 2024).

Finally, a critical theoretical and political discussion is necessary to determine if the CBC really marks a radical departure from colonial and neoliberal education systems or if it merely serves as a reform designed to make labor more acceptable and effective within global capitalism (Althusser, 1971). If the CBC only creates a more skilled workforce without fundamentally addressing the ownership and distribution of production resources—the core issue of capitalism—it risks becoming just another Ideological State Apparatus in disguise (Freire, 1970). This important dialogue is key to ensuring that the results of CBC meet its goals of fostering class awareness and true national self-sufficiency (Wasike, 2025).

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