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Student ownership of learning and competency-based curriculum: A conceptual framework for CBC implementation in Kenya

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Abstract

The implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Kenya (Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development [KICD], 2017) has stimulated growing interest in learner-centred education, competency development and authentic learning. While the principles and intended outcomes of CBC have been widely discussed, less attention has been paid to how learners actually experience this educational transformation. This article addresses that gap by developing a conceptual framework that relates Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning. The article is theoretical in nature and introduces Educational Culture, including the SOL taxonomy, as a framework for understanding and supporting the implementation of CBC. The article argues that Student Ownership of Learning represents a central qualitative dimension of the learner's learning experience through which the intentions of Competency-Based Curriculum become educational reality. Educational Culture is positioned as the school-level framework that connects curriculum implementation with students' learning experiences. Within the Kenyan context, it is proposed that the implementation of CBC is associated with the development of Educational Culture and that schools characterised by more developed Educational Cultures are expected to create conditions that increasingly support students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning. The framework is further grounded in the relational and humanistic philosophy of Ubuntu, which provides a coherent philosophical foundation for Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning. The article concludes by presenting a theoretical hypothesis that will

be examined in an ongoing mixed-methods study conducted by the Foundation for Student Ownership of Learning (SOL) and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST). The proposed framework contributes to the theoretical understanding of Competency-Based Curriculum implementation and provides a foundation for future empirical research on the relationship between Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning in Kenya.

Key terms: Student Ownership of Learning; Competency-Based Curriculum; Educational Culture; Ubuntu; Kenya

1.0 Introduction

Across many educational systems, competency-based curriculum reforms seek to move education beyond the transmission of knowledge towards the development of competencies, learner agency and meaningful participation in learning. Kenya's introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reflects this international movement and represents one of the most significant educational reforms in the country's educational history.

In practice, however, the implementation of CBC has proceeded largely through top-down processes of curriculum design, teacher training and system-wide rollout. This sits uneasily with CBC's own underlying objectives, which call for learners to become active, engaged participants who take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Where implementation is primarily driven from above, it remains uncertain to what extent — and under what conditions — CBC's learner-centred intentions actually reach learners' everyday experience of learning. While considerable attention has been devoted to curriculum design, competency development, assessment and teacher professional development, comparatively little attention has been given to this question of lived experience.

CBC defines the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners are expected to develop, and provides important guidance for learner-centred pedagogy and authentic assessment. However, it offers only limited conceptual language for understanding how learners come to experience their learning as personally meaningful, and as something they genuinely own. This creates the need for an additional theoretical perspective.

Student Ownership of Learning (SOL) provides such a perspective. Developed independently from CBC, SOL describes a qualitative dimension of the learner's learning experience. Rather than focusing primarily on curriculum design or instructional strategies, SOL examines the extent to which learners experience ownership of their own learning. It therefore offers a theoretical lens through which the educational intentions of Competency-Based Curriculum can be understood from the learner's perspective.

This article argues that Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning are conceptually related. Within the Kenyan context, the implementation of CBC appears to be associated with the gradual development of Educational Culture. As Educational Cultures develop, schools are expected to create conditions that increasingly support students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning. This latter relationship constitutes the central theoretical proposition that underpins the forthcoming empirical research this article provides the theoretical foundation for."

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The central problem addressed by this article follows directly from the tension described above: what effect does the introduction of Competency-Based Curriculum have on how learners experience their own learning, when its implementation is largely driven from above rather than growing out of learners' own

participation? CBC defines what learners are expected to develop, but it does not by itself clarify how — or whether — this reaches learners as something they experience as meaningful and their own.

At present, the literature offers limited theoretical language for answering this question. Scholarship on CBC implementation in Kenya has focused primarily on curriculum design, assessment and teacher professional development (Kimanzi, 2021; Ogwora, 2022), while research on Student Ownership of Learning has developed largely independently of the CBC literature. Educational Culture is widely recognised as shaping how curriculum reforms are experienced within schools (Grgić & Jutzi, 2024), yet its specific role in connecting CBC implementation to students' experienced ownership of learning has not been systematically conceptualised.

This article addresses that problem by proposing Student Ownership of Learning as the theoretical lens for understanding learners' experienced ownership, and Educational Culture as the school-level framework through which the implementation of CBC is — or is not — translated into conditions that support that experience. The relationship between CBC implementation, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning is presented here as a theoretical proposition to be examined in the forthcoming empirical study, rather than as an established finding. Clarifying this relationship is also a necessary step towards the more active involvement of school actors that CBC's own philosophy envisages, since such involvement presupposes a shared understanding of what ownership of learning actually entails.

The article is deliberately theoretical rather than empirical. Its purpose is to develop a conceptual framework that explains the relationships between Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning, and to provide the theoretical foundation for an ongoing mixed-methods study conducted jointly by the Foundation for Student Ownership of Learning (SOL) and Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST).

The objectives of this article are threefold:

1. to conceptualise Student Ownership of Learning as a layered educational phenomenon;
2. to position Educational Culture as the school-level framework through which the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum is understood and supported;
3. to formulate a conceptual framework that explains the relationship between Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning as the basis for subsequent empirical research.

2.0 Student Ownership of Learning: Concept and Significance

Student Ownership of Learning (SOL) refers to the extent to which learners experience themselves as active owners of their own learning. Rather than viewing learning as something that happens to them, learners experience themselves as responsible participants who actively shape, influence and value their own learning. Student Ownership of Learning therefore describes a **qualitative dimension of the learner's learning experience**, rather than an instructional strategy, a pedagogical method or a learner characteristic.

Within the SOL framework, ownership is understood as a layered educational phenomenon. It emerges through the interaction between learners and the multiple contexts in which learning takes place. Consequently, ownership cannot be explained solely by individual learner characteristics, classroom practice or school organisation, but by the dynamic interaction between these different contexts.

The SOL framework distinguishes five interconnected layers, each representing a different dimension of the learner's educational reality (Figure 1).

At the centre lies **Layer A - Personal Experience**, where learners experience ownership through

dimensions such as **ownership, engagement, responsibility, motivation, self-direction and meaningfulness**. This layer represents the learner's direct experience of learning and forms the heart of the framework.

This experience is influenced by **Layer B - Personal Context**, including **competence, autonomy, relatedness, feedback, collaboration and reflection**. These concepts describe the psychological and interpersonal conditions that support learners in developing ownership of their learning.

Beyond the learner lies **Layer C - Learning Context**, where the educational design of learning takes shape. Within the context of Competency-Based Curriculum this includes the **implementation process of CBC, Learning Areas, competencies and assessment**. These elements determine how curriculum intentions are translated into everyday learning experiences.

Learning takes place within **Layer D - School Context**, where **Educational Culture, school leadership, school policy, available resources and community involvement** shape the environment in which teaching and learning occur. Educational Culture occupies a central position within this layer because it influences how responsibilities are shared, how learning is organised and how curriculum intentions are realised in practice.

Finally, all learning is embedded within **Layer E - Society Context**, including **Kenyan society, cultural traditions, national values, Ubuntu philosophy and global influences**. These societal influences shape both educational policy and the broader cultural environment within which schools operate.

Taken together, these five layers demonstrate that Student Ownership of Learning is not the result of a single educational intervention. Rather, it emerges through the interaction between learners and the personal, educational, institutional and societal contexts in which learning takes place.

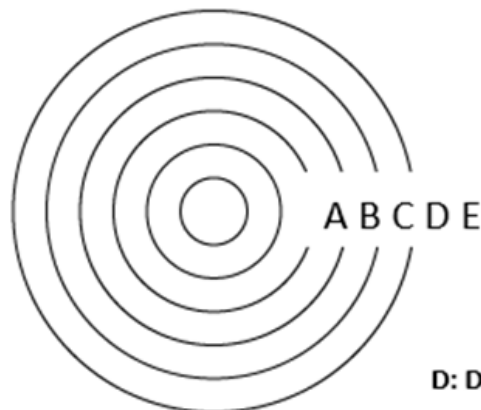
This layered perspective also helps explain why Student Ownership of Learning provides an important theoretical perspective on Competency-Based Curriculum. CBC aims to develop learners who are able to apply knowledge, skills, values and attitudes in meaningful situations. Such competencies can only be fully realised when learners experience learning as meaningful, take increasing responsibility for their own development and recognise themselves as active participants in the learning process. Student Ownership of Learning therefore offers a theoretical perspective for understanding how Competency-Based Curriculum is experienced by learners.

A: The Personal Experience

- Flow Experience
- Creativity
- Constructive Learning
- Intrinsic Motivation
- Sense of Responsibility
- Psychological Ownership

B: The personal Context:

- Autonomy
- Relatedness
- Competence
- Acquisition



C: The Learning Context

- Curriculum
- Didactics
- Pedagogy
- Learning relationships
- Learning Strategies
- Learning environment

D: De school context

- The Formal School
- The Pragmatic school
- The Strategic School
- The Incremental School
- The Competent School
- The Cultural school

E: The societal Context

- Educational Environment
- Sociological Environment
- Historical Environment
- Economical Environment
- Political Environment
- Philosophical Environment

Figure 1. The layered model of Student Ownership of Learning.

Source: Adapted from Van Woudenberg (2023).

3.0 Educational Culture as the Connecting Framework

The previous chapter introduced Student Ownership of Learning as a layered educational phenomenon that emerges through the interaction between learners and the personal, learning, school and societal contexts in which learning takes place. Within this layered framework, the school context occupies a distinctive position because it shapes the educational conditions under which curriculum intentions are translated into everyday learning experiences. This article therefore positions Educational Culture as the connecting framework between Competency-Based Curriculum and students' experienced Student

Ownership of Learning.

Educational Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, relationships and practices that characterise everyday educational life within a school. It influences how teachers teach, how learners participate, how leadership is exercised, how decisions are made and how responsibility for learning is distributed. In more developed Educational Cultures, leadership is increasingly understood as a matter of shared, everyday practice distributed across teachers, learners and school leaders, rather than as a role concentrated in a single position (MacBeath, 2005). Educational Culture therefore determines not only how schools function organisationally, but also how learning is experienced by students.

Within the Kenyan context, the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum appears to be associated with the gradual development of Educational Culture. As schools increasingly organise learning around learner participation, collaboration, reflection and shared responsibility, Educational Cultures also develop. Educational Culture should therefore not be understood as a static characteristic of a school, but as a dynamic feature that develops alongside the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum.

3.1 A Taxonomy of Educational Cultures

To understand these developmental differences, the SOL framework distinguishes six Educational Cultures. Within the Kenyan CBC context, these Educational Cultures represent a **developmental pathway** through which schools gradually evolve. The taxonomy therefore does not simply classify schools; it describes successive stages in the development of educational practice.

Educational Culture	Main characteristics	Relation to Student Ownership of Learning
Formal	Hierarchical, rule-oriented, teacher-directed	Ownership is largely constrained.
Pragmatic	Practical, relationship-oriented, dependent on individual initiative	Ownership occurs incidentally rather than systematically.
Strategic	Goal-oriented, professionally organised and management-driven	Ownership is recognised but remains largely organised from above.
Incremental	Reflective, developmental and increasingly learner-oriented	Ownership becomes an explicit educational objective.
Competent	Shared responsibility, professional trust and collaboration	Ownership is systematically supported throughout the school.
Cultural	Ownership embedded in the school's identity, values and daily practice	Ownership becomes an integral characteristic of the Educational Culture itself.

Figure 2. The SOL taxonomy of Educational Cultures

The taxonomy provides a conceptual framework for understanding differences in school development during the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum. Schools that are further developed along this pathway are expected to create conditions that are increasingly supportive of students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning.

3.2 Educational Culture as a Developmental Framework

Educational Culture serves both an analytical and a developmental purpose. Analytically, it helps explain why schools implementing the same curriculum may nevertheless differ substantially in their educational practices and learning experiences. From a developmental perspective, the taxonomy enables schools to reflect on their current Educational Culture and to identify possible directions for further development.

Rather than prescribing a single route towards school improvement, the taxonomy provides a common language for discussing educational development. It encourages reflection on leadership, school policy, professional collaboration, available resources and community involvement as interconnected elements of Educational Culture.

Within the Kenyan context, the taxonomy therefore functions not only as a conceptual framework for understanding Educational Culture but also as a practical framework for supporting school development during the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum.

4.0 Competency-Based Curriculum and Student Ownership of Learning

The preceding chapters have introduced Student Ownership of Learning as a central qualitative dimension of the learner's learning experience and Educational Culture as the school-level framework through which learning is organised and experienced. This chapter brings these perspectives together by examining their relationship with Competency-Based Curriculum.

Competency-Based Curriculum and Student Ownership of Learning should not be understood as competing educational approaches. Rather, they illuminate the same educational reality from complementary perspectives. Competency-Based Curriculum defines the educational intentions of learning by specifying the competencies learners are expected to develop. Student Ownership of Learning focuses on how these educational intentions are experienced by learners in everyday educational practice.

Competency-Based Curriculum aims to prepare learners who are able to apply knowledge, skills, values and attitudes in authentic situations. This requires learning environments in which learners actively participate, reflect on their progress, collaborate with others and increasingly assume responsibility for their own learning. These characteristics closely correspond with the conditions under which learners experience Student Ownership of Learning.

From the perspective of Student Ownership of Learning, competencies cannot simply be transmitted through curriculum documents or measured through assessment. They develop through meaningful learning experiences in which learners actively engage with knowledge, recognise its personal relevance and increasingly experience responsibility for their own learning. Student Ownership of Learning therefore represents the experiential dimension through which competency development becomes educational reality.

Educational Culture provides the connecting framework between these two perspectives. Curriculum intentions alone do not determine how learning is experienced. Rather, learning experiences are shaped by the Educational Culture within which Competency-Based Curriculum is implemented. Leadership, school policy, professional collaboration, available resources and community involvement all contribute to the educational conditions under which learners experience ownership of learning.

Within the Kenyan context, the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum appears to be associated with the gradual development of Educational Culture. As schools increasingly adopt learner-

centred educational practices, opportunities for participation, collaboration, reflection and shared responsibility also increase. Schools characterised by more developed Educational Cultures are therefore expected to create conditions that are more supportive of students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning.

The relationship presented in this article can therefore be understood as a developmental process. The implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum contributes to the development of Educational Culture, while Educational Culture provides the conditions within which students experience increasing levels of Student Ownership of Learning. This latter relationship forms the central theoretical proposition that underpins the empirical study.

Figure 3 integrates these perspectives into a single conceptual framework. The layered SOL model illustrates how students' personal learning experiences are embedded within personal, learning, school and societal contexts. Competency-Based Curriculum is positioned within the Learning Context (Layer C), while Educational Culture occupies a central position within the School Context (Layer D). Together they provide the theoretical framework for understanding how curriculum implementation is related to students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning.

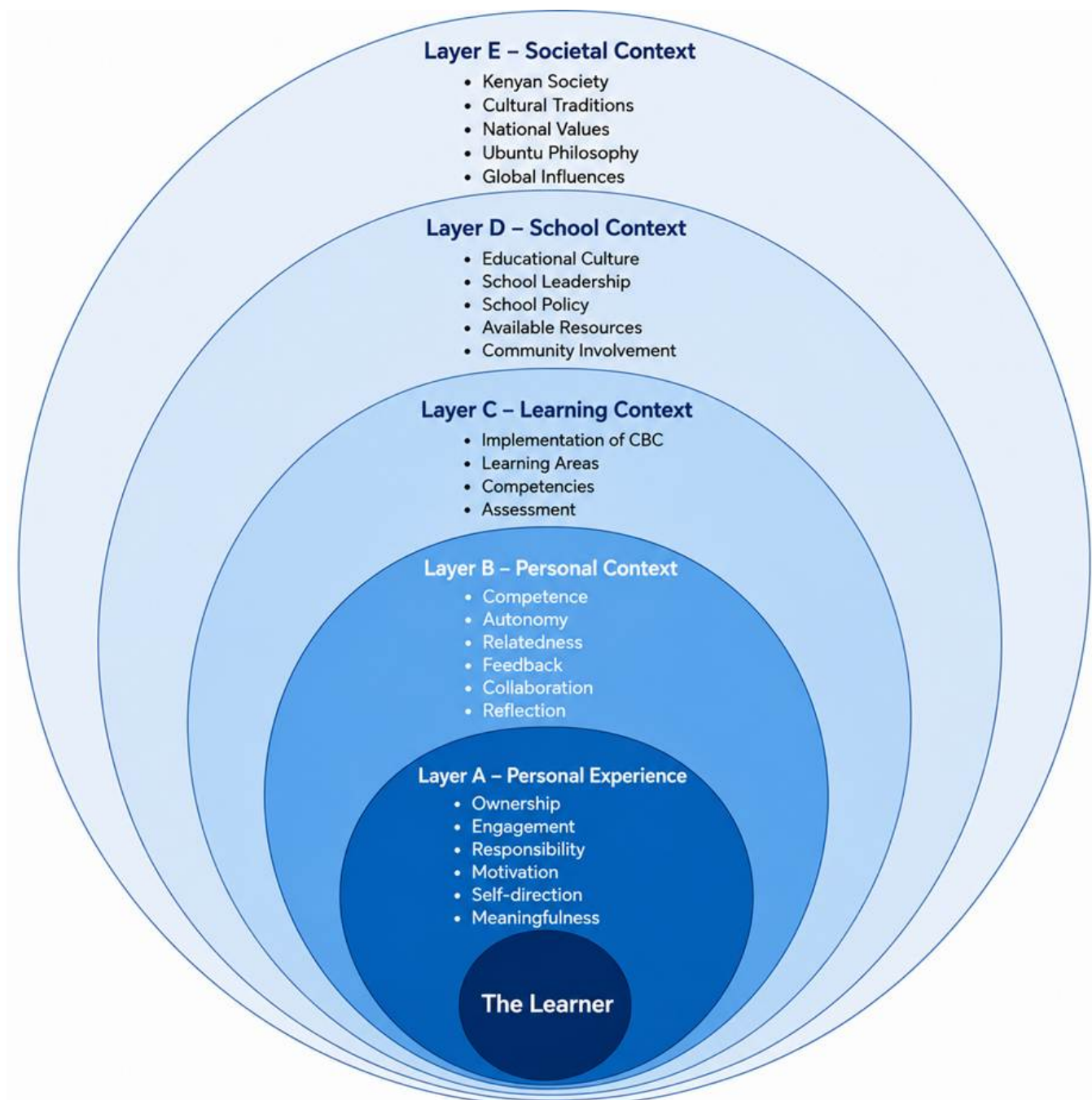


Figure 3. An integrated conceptual framework illustrating the SOL layers in relation to the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum.

Source: Adapted from Van Woudenberg (2023).

5.0 A Relational and Humanistic Philosophy of Learning

The relationship between Competency-Based Curriculum and Student Ownership of Learning extends beyond educational methodology. Both are grounded in a broader philosophical understanding of what it means to be human and how people learn. This philosophical perspective explains why Student Ownership of Learning should not be regarded as an additional educational objective, but rather as a natural outcome of Competency-Based Curriculum when its underlying principles are realised in educational practice.

Within the Kenyan context, this philosophical perspective is closely associated with **Ubuntu**, an African humanist philosophy that emphasises the interconnectedness of human existence. Ubuntu understands individuals not as isolated persons, but as human beings whose identities are formed and realised through relationships with others and with the wider community (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). Human existence is therefore fundamentally relational.

Learning is understood in the same way. Learners do not simply acquire knowledge; they develop understanding, competencies, values and attitudes through continuous interaction with other people, their environment and the realities they encounter (Abdi, 2022). Education is therefore concerned not merely with the transmission of knowledge, but with the formation of persons who are able to participate responsibly and meaningfully in society.

This philosophical perspective resonates strongly with the foundations of Competency-Based Curriculum. CBC places learners at the centre of the educational process and emphasises the development of competencies through meaningful learning, collaboration, reflection and authentic participation. (Ejuu & Opiyo, 2022) Knowledge, skills, values and attitudes are understood as interconnected dimensions of learning that develop through active engagement with meaningful educational experiences.

Student Ownership of Learning complements this philosophical perspective by focusing on the learner's experience. Whereas Ubuntu provides the philosophical foundation and Competency-Based Curriculum defines the educational intentions, Student Ownership of Learning explains how learners experience this educational process. It describes the extent to which learners experience themselves as active participants who increasingly take responsibility for and give personal meaning to their own learning.

This relational perspective also explains the central position of **Educational Culture** within the theoretical framework presented in this article. If learning is fundamentally relational, Student Ownership of Learning cannot be understood as an individual characteristic alone. It develops through the interaction between learners and the educational environments in which they participate. Educational Culture therefore provides the school-level conditions through which the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum is translated into learning experiences that increasingly support Student Ownership of Learning.

From this perspective, Student Ownership of Learning is neither an instructional technique nor a pedagogical strategy. Rather, it represents a qualitative dimension of the learner's learning experience that naturally emerges when the relational and humanistic principles underlying Competency-Based Curriculum are realised in educational practice. This philosophical foundation completes the conceptual framework presented in this article and provides the basis for the theoretical model introduced in the following chapter.

6.0 Hypothesis and Implications for Research and Practice

The theoretical framework presented in this article provides the conceptual foundation for an empirical investigation into the relationship between the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning. Rather than assuming these relationships, this article has developed a theoretical explanation of how they are expected to be connected.

The central proposition of the framework is that the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum is associated with the development of Educational Culture and that more developed Educational Cultures

are expected to provide conditions that increasingly support students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning. The empirical study is designed to examine this theoretical proposition.

The central research question of the ongoing SOL-MMUST mixed-methods study is therefore:

What is the relationship between Educational Culture and students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning in the context of the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum?

Based on the theoretical framework presented in this article, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Schools characterised by Educational Cultures that are further developed according to the SOL taxonomy are expected to report higher levels of students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning during the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum.

As this article is deliberately theoretical in scope, the detailed operationalisation of Competency-Based Curriculum implementation, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning — including the analytical treatment of Educational Culture as a mediating variable and the statistical procedures used to test the proposed relationships — will be set out in full in the forthcoming paper reporting the SOL-MMUST mixed-methods study.

This hypothesis follows directly from the conceptual framework developed in the preceding chapters. The framework does not assume that Educational Culture causes Student Ownership of Learning. Rather, it proposes that schools with more developed Educational Cultures are expected to create educational conditions in which students are more likely to experience ownership of their learning. The empirical study is intended to examine whether this expected relationship is supported by the evidence.

The framework also has important implications for educational practice. It suggests that the successful implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum depends not only on curriculum design, teacher professional development or assessment practices, but also on the Educational Culture within which learning takes place. Schools seeking to strengthen the implementation of CBC should therefore invest in the development of Educational Culture alongside curriculum implementation.

For educational research, the framework offers a theoretical basis for examining how Educational Culture is related to students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning and how these relationships may contribute to the continuing implementation and further development of Competency-Based Curriculum in Kenya. The ongoing SOL-MMUST mixed-methods study is intended both to examine the proposed relationships empirically and to further refine the theoretical framework presented in this article.

7.0 Conclusion

This article has developed a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning. Rather than presenting these concepts as separate educational approaches, it has argued that they represent complementary perspectives on the same educational philosophy. Competency-Based Curriculum defines the educational intentions of learning, Educational Culture provides the school-level conditions through which these intentions are realised, and Student Ownership of Learning represents a qualitative dimension of the learner's learning experience.

The article has further argued that, within the Kenyan context, the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum is associated with the development of Educational Culture. As Educational Cultures develop, schools are expected to create educational conditions that increasingly support students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning. This conceptual relationship forms the central theoretical proposition of the framework presented in this article.

The philosophy of Ubuntu provides the broader humanistic and relational foundation for this framework. It reinforces the view that learning is fundamentally a relational process in which knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes develop through meaningful participation in educational communities. Student Ownership of Learning therefore emerges not as an instructional technique, but as a natural educational outcome of learning environments that reflect these relational principles.

The SOL taxonomy of Educational Cultures contributes both a conceptual and a practical framework for understanding educational development. It provides schools with a language for reflecting on their own Educational Culture while offering researchers a theoretical model for examining differences in students' experienced Student Ownership of Learning during the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum.

As this article is deliberately theoretical in scope, it does not formulate specific recommendations for school leaders, teachers and learners. Such recommendations require empirical grounding and will be developed on the basis of the findings of the forthcoming SOL-MMUST empirical study.

Finally, this article has formulated a theoretical framework and a corresponding hypothesis that will be examined in the ongoing SOL-MMUST mixed-methods study. The empirical findings will contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum, Educational Culture and Student Ownership of Learning, while at the same time providing opportunities to further refine the theoretical framework presented in this article.

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