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Original Article

Visual Arts Practices, Needs, and Challenges in the Implementation of Competence-Based Education in Selected Schools in Mbarara City, Uganda

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Competence-Based Education (CBE), Visual Arts, Visual Arts education, Curriculum.

Competence-Based Education has emerged as a transformative framework within Uganda's educational landscape, emphasising practical skills, critical thinking, and learner-centred pedagogies. This research investigated the practices, requirements, and challenges associated with implementing competence-based education in Visual Arts across selected secondary schools in Mbarara City, Uganda. Anchored in Constructivist Learning Theory and the Taba Curriculum Model, the study employed a descriptive cross-sectional design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 Visual Arts educators, 6 school administrators, and 2 curriculum coordinators from secondary schools in Mbarara City, Southwestern Uganda. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was employed to investigate classroom, institutional, and curriculum perspectives concerning the implementation of Competence-Based Education (CBE) in Visual Arts. This methodology offered a comprehensive overview of the efforts and experiences of the participants. The findings revealed that although teachers frequently implement project-based and experiential learning strategies aligned with CBE principles, significant gaps persist in professional training, instructional resources, and institutional support. Major challenges identified included insufficient teaching materials, limited opportunities for professional development, large class sizes, and inadequate integration of CBE-aligned assessment strategies. The study concludes that the successful implementation of CBE in Visual Arts education necessitates continuous teacher training, improved resource allocation, and strong policy support. Recommendations entail targeted capacity-building initiatives, the provision of specialised instructional materials, and the establishment of institutional frameworks to monitor and promote the consistent adoption of CBE practices within Visual Arts classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

The educational landscape in Uganda has experienced a notable transformation over the past twenty years as the nation transitions from a traditional, knowledge-based curriculum to a Competence-Based Curriculum. This new approach aims to promote practical skills, creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities among learners. Historically, Uganda's curriculum since independence has been largely exam-oriented and content-centred, tailored to produce academically qualified graduates rather than individuals endowed with applicable competencies suitable for the 21st-century labour market (Namatende-Sakwa et al., 2025).

Competence-based education emphasises the capabilities of learners to apply knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values, rather than solely focusing on their accumulated knowledge. It reorients curriculum development and instruction from a teacher-centred approach to one that prioritises learner-centred outcomes, with an emphasis on practical demonstrations of mastery, critical thinking, and transferable skills. Scholars consider competence-based education a transformative pedagogical approach that aligns educational practices with the real-world competencies required by learners in the 21st century (Mabonga G, 2021).

The competence-based education started in 2020, mainly affecting primary and lower secondary levels as part of Uganda's educational reform by the Ministry of Education and Sports. The change aimed to align education with national and international standards, shifting towards learner-

centred pedagogy, lifelong learning, and skills development, away from rote memorisation and theoretical knowledge (Namatende, Kiambati, Luyima et al, 2025). The visual arts, integral to holistic education with a long history in Ugandan teacher training, still face curriculum gaps and teacher preparedness issues. (Ssegantebuka's (2017) study highlights structural weaknesses, limited practical teaching, and poor assessment methods, leaving visual arts teachers underprepared. Studies also point to resource shortages, inadequate training, and pedagogical challenges affecting both pre-service and in-service teachers.

Conceptually, competence-based education focuses on developing learners' practical skills, creativity, problem-solving, and real-world application of knowledge, moving away from simple memorisation (Kenny et al. 2023). Specifically, in Visual Arts education, CBE aligns with experiential learning methods that encourage creativity, artistic skills, and cultural expression via learner-centred and practice-based teaching approaches.

The effective implementation of Competency-Based Education within the Visual Arts domain relies on integrating pedagogical methodologies, resource accessibility, and educator expertise. Practices associated with CBE in this discipline include project-based learning, continuous assessment, and the incorporation of local cultural elements to improve relevance and skill development (Biggs, J. B., & Tang, C. K., 2011). Nevertheless, the achievement of these objectives is contingent upon essential prerequisites, including adequate art supplies, suitable studio

infrastructure, curricular support, and ongoing professional development for educators. In developing contexts such as Uganda, and more specifically within urban centres like Mbarara City, the implementation of competence-based education in Visual Arts is constrained by several interrelated challenges. These include inadequate infrastructure, such as specialised art studios and workshops; limited access to instructional and digital learning resources; overcrowded classrooms that limit effective studio-based instruction; and notable gaps in teachers' understanding and application of competence-based assessment practices. Such constraints significantly undermine the realisation of learner-centred, skills-oriented pedagogy envisioned under the CBE framework (van de Kuilen, H. S., Altinyelken, et al., 2025).

These constraints frequently impede learner-centred pedagogies and diminish opportunities for genuine artistic engagement. In Mbarara City, where educational institutions operate within diverse socio-economic and cultural environments, such challenges directly influence the development and assessment of Visual Arts competencies. This study is conceptually grounded in constructivist learning theory, which views learners as active creators of knowledge through meaningful engagement and practice (Vygotsky, 1978). By examining Visual Arts practices, needs, and challenges within selected schools in Mbarara City, the study seeks to understand how contextual factors influence the realisation of CBE goals in Visual Arts education.

Studies conducted across Ugandan educational institutions concerning the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reveal recurrent systemic challenges closely aligned with issues in visual arts education. These challenges encompass inadequate training for educators on innovative pedagogical methods, a deficiency of instructional resources, sizable class populations, and limited engagement from stakeholders in the dissemination of the curriculum. Such challenges are documented in empirical research spanning various subjects, including studies on language

education and general competence-based education implementation (Atuhura & Nambi, 2024).

Arts education faces broader challenges tied to the visual arts' needs, such as materials, studio space, teachers, and assessment methods emphasising creativity and innovation. These are often overlooked, especially in regional areas like Mbarara, where schools have varying capacities for skills-based arts learning. This link between curriculum reforms and discipline offers insights into the practices and challenges faced by Mbarara City schools.

In Visual Arts education in Uganda, particularly in urban secondary schools like Mbarara City, systemic needs and challenges remain underexplored. Evidence shows a gap in understanding how teachers interpret, implement, and adapt Competence-Based Education (CBE). Teachers' professional needs, such as training, resources, and assessment strategies, also warrant further study to inform policy and practice. This study examines Visual Arts teaching practices, needs, and challenges in implementing CBE in selected Mbarara City schools. It looks at how teachers enact CBE pedagogies, the support they receive, and barriers affecting their work. The research adds to the limited empirical work on curriculum reform in Uganda, providing insights to improve teacher preparedness, resource planning, and support systems for effective CBE implementation in Visual Arts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional design approach to capture qualitative perspectives. It provided measurable data on teaching practices, perceived needs, challenges, administrators, and curriculum coordinators regarding systemic and institutional factors.

Study Area, Population, and Sampling

The research was conducted in Mbarara City, Southwestern Uganda, targeting 12 Visual Arts teachers across different selected secondary schools. Additionally, six school administrators and two curriculum coordinators were interviewed. Teachers were selected using simple random sampling to ensure representativeness, whereas administrators and coordinators were purposively sampled based on their knowledge and involvement in curriculum implementation.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected via structured questionnaires for Visual Arts teachers and semi-structured interviews with school administrators and curriculum coordinators. Teacher questionnaires included five-point Likert-scale items measuring the frequency of competence-based education practices (such as project-based learning, studio assessments, and reflection), teachers' training and support needs, and challenges such as class size, art materials, and assessment workload. Interviews explored support systems, resource availability, and policy and administrative barriers affecting CBE implementation in Visual Arts.

Validity and Reliability

Content validity was ensured through expert review by educational researchers, while a pilot study in two non-participating schools confirmed clarity and reliability. The questionnaire achieved a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency. Qualitative reliability was enhanced through consistent interview procedures, audio recording, and careful transcription.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25, with descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) summarising teacher practices, needs, and challenges. Qualitative data were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2019), with emergent themes triangulated

with quantitative findings to enhance interpretation.

PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

Data Analysis Overview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve Visual Arts educators, six school administrators, and two curriculum coordinators from secondary schools within Mbarara City, Southwestern Uganda. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was employed to investigate classroom, institutional, and curriculum perspectives concerning the implementation of Competence-Based Education (CBE) in Visual Arts. This methodology provided a comprehensive overview of the participants' efforts and experiences.

Theme 1: Learner-Centred Visual Arts Practices and Constructivist Theory

Teachers reported a heightened utilisation of project-based learning, studio practice, collaborative group work, and exhibition activities, indicating a transition towards learner-centred pedagogical approaches. *"We now focus more on what the learner can do."* (Teacher 4). However, large class sizes and time constraints limited sustained practical engagement and continuous assessment:

"With over sixty students, it is hard to assess each learner's competence." (Teacher 9)

Curriculum coordinators observed a sustained dependence on summative assessment notwithstanding the CBE guidelines.

Theoretically, these findings are consistent with constructivist learning theory, which emphasises experiential and learner-driven knowledge construction (Vygotsky, 1978). The partial implementation indicates that constructivist pedagogy is limited more by contextual factors than by conceptual resistance.

Theme 2: Teacher Capacity Needs and Educational Change Theory

Teachers persistently emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development specifically tailored to the Visual Arts, with a particular focus on competency-based planning and assessment. *"We received general training on CBE, but not on its application in specific contexts Art."* (Teacher 2)

Curriculum coordinators indicated that inadequate subject-specific training hindered the effective implementation of curriculum objectives in the classroom.

Theoretically, this theme aligns with Fullan's (2007) theory of educational change, emphasising that teacher capacity and ownership are crucial for sustaining reform. Without focused CPD, CBE may remain procedural rather than become pedagogically transformative.

Theme 3: Resource Constraints and Systems Theory

Resource inadequacy, including limited materials, insufficient studio facilities, large class sizes, and restricted timetables, emerged as significant barriers.

"Sometimes, we teach painting without the use of paints." (Teacher 7)

Administrators attributed these challenges to financial limitations and competing school priorities.

From a systems theory perspective, curriculum reform depends on the alignment of policy, infrastructure, and classroom conditions (UNESCO, 2017). The findings underscore systemic gaps that impede the effective implementation of competency-based education in practice-based subjects.

Theme 4: Instructional Leadership and Leadership Theory

Although administrators expressed support for CBE, their engagement was predominantly managerial rather than instructional.

"We support the policy despite limited supervision of art lessons. We appreciate everyone's efforts to make lessons engaging and safe". (Administrator 3)

Curriculum coordinators emphasised the inadequate feedback mechanisms between educational institutions and curriculum developers.

Theoretically, this aligns with instructional leadership theory, highlighting the role of active pedagogical support, supervision, and professional development in driving curriculum implementation (Hallinger, 2011).

Therefore, the integration of the aforementioned information illustrates that the implementation of Competency-Based Education in Visual Arts within Mbarara City exemplifies emerging constructivist methodologies. However, this approach faces challenges due to limited teacher capacity, systemic resource deficiencies, and weak instructional leadership. Although stakeholder commitment to CBE is evident, a misalignment between curriculum expectations and practical implementation conditions hampers the full realisation of competency-based Visual Arts education.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the implementation of competence-based education in Visual Arts at selected secondary schools within Mbarara City, Uganda. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers, six administrators, and two curriculum coordinators. The data underwent thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006), which identified four primary themes: learner-centred practices, teacher capacity, resource constraints, and instructional leadership.

The educators indicated that they have implemented learner-centred practices, including project-based learning, collaborative studio activities, peer critiques, and student exhibitions, thereby demonstrating a transition towards experiential and constructivist pedagogical approaches (Vygotsky, 1978). Nevertheless, challenges such as large class sizes, limited temporal resources, and extensive assessment requirements have impeded personalised student engagement, corroborating the findings of Altinyelken (2018) and van de Kuilen et al. (2025).

Regarding teacher capacity, a significant obstacle was the lack of adequate subject-specific professional development in CBE planning and assessment. While educators comprehended the concept of CBE in theory, many encountered challenges in its practical application. This observation is consistent with Fullan's (2007) perspective that reform necessitates robust teacher capacity and is supported by regional studies (Ssentanda & Asiimwe, 2023).

The issue of resource constraints indicates that limited art materials, inadequate studios, restricted access to digital tools, and rigid timetables have impeded the effective implementation of Competency-Based Education (CBE). Systems theory (UNESCO, 2017) emphasises that alignment among policy, infrastructure, and classroom conditions is crucial, a discrepancy that is evident in Mbarara City.

According to instructional leadership principles, administrators provided managerial support but offered limited pedagogical guidance, supervision, and feedback, thereby undermining the implementation of competency-based education. Hallinger (2011) underscores that active instructional leadership is vital for the success of reforms. Similar challenges were observed by Namatende-Sakwa et al. (2025) in Uganda.

Ultimately, competency-based education in the Visual Arts sector within Mbarara City demonstrates emerging constructivist practices; however, it remains limited by teacher capacity, resource shortages, and insufficient instructional leadership. For sustainable implementation, targeted professional development, improved infrastructure, and proactive administrative engagement are essential to bridge the gap between policy objectives and classroom practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The study reveals that the implementation of Competence-Based Education (CBE) in Visual Arts within selected schools in Mbarara City is characterised by the emergence of learner-centred practices, such as project-based learning, practical studio activities, and collaborative assignments. Nonetheless, these practices are applied inconsistently due to large class sizes, limited instructional time, and dependence on conventional assessment methods.

Teachers need ongoing subject-specific professional development to effectively apply competencies in the classroom. Resource limitations, such as shortages of materials, insufficient studio spaces, and restricted access to digital tools, further impede practical learning. Moreover, administrative and curriculum support tends to be mostly procedural, with little active instructional leadership or feedback mechanisms.

Overall, although stakeholders show dedication to CBE principles, systemic, professional, and infrastructural challenges limit its full implementation in Visual Arts. Successful adoption of CBE depends on improved teacher training, increased resources, and active instructional leadership to ensure classroom practices reflect curriculum goals.

Recommendations

To improve the implementation of Competence-Based Education (CBE) in Visual Arts within Mbarara City, it is essential to undertake several interconnected measures. The capacity of educators should be augmented through continuous, subject-specific professional development programs that emphasise the design of competency-based lesson plans, the application of authentic assessment strategies, and the utilisation of practical, hands-on teaching approaches. Furthermore, the establishment of structured mentorship and peer-collaboration initiatives is recommended to support novice and less experienced educators, thereby enabling them to effectively translate curriculum competencies into classroom practices.

The allocation of resources is of equal importance. Educational institutions ought to be furnished with sufficient art materials, well-designed studio environments, and access to digital technologies that support experiential and project-based learning. Timetables should be revised to provide adequate periods for practical instruction and ongoing assessment, thereby ensuring students have opportunities to cultivate and demonstrate their creative, technical, and problem-solving abilities.

Administrative and instructional leadership must also be enhanced. School leaders should actively engage in the supervision of Visual Arts lessons, providing guidance, monitoring teaching practices, and fostering a culture of reflective professional practice. Feedback mechanisms between teachers, school administrators, and curriculum developers should be strengthened to ensure continuous improvement, responsiveness to classroom realities, and alignment with competency objectives.

At the policy and curriculum level, clear and actionable guidelines are required to establish a direct connection between practical activities and competency outcomes. Policymakers should allocate targeted funding and structural support to address material shortages, infrastructure gaps, and systemic challenges that impede effective

competency-based education (CBE) implementation.

Together, these initiatives aim to foster an educational environment that is supportive, resource-rich, and student-centred, thereby empowering Visual Arts learners to develop competencies, creativity, and critical thinking skills essential for academic and personal success, in accordance with the principles of Competence-Based Education.

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