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Implementing the Uganda lower secondary competence-based curriculum: the equity question

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the extent to which the Uganda lower secondary curriculum (LSC) reform, instituted in January 2020, has ensured equitable educational opportunities for secondary school learners considering school and learner socio-economic status.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative approach was adopted in which the experiences and perceptions of both facilitators and implementers of the reform were gathered using interviews and lesson observations.

Findings – Data revealed disparities among high and low socio-economic-status schools in their preparedness and capacity to implement the reform, with the consequence of divergent educational opportunities for learners in these contexts.

Research limitations/implications – The sample was limited to government-aided secondary schools and thus excluded private schools; the majority in Uganda. This means that the findings may be limited in generalizability. However, the majority of private schools serve the lower socio-economic demographic, so the study findings and implications may extend to them as well.

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Practical implications – The findings suggest that unless the government intervenes with measures to boost the capacity of schools in low socio-economic contexts to implement the reform, the outcome of the curriculum may be a society further stratified along socio-economic lines.

Social implications – The findings indicate that the new LSC may contribute greatly to social stratification through disparate educational opportunities for different sections of the Ugandan populace. This could work against national socio-economic ambitions and also lead to non-achievement of the UN SDG4 of quality, equitable, inclusive education for all.

Originality/value – This paper demonstrates how Uganda, a developing nation, is faring in the achievement of the global educational policy goal of equity in the implementation of its competence-based LSC reform. It highlights key policy and research gaps that should be addressed to promote equitable learning opportunities for all learners.

Keywords Equity, Socio-economic status, Curriculum implementation, Uganda lower secondary curriculum

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Education exists to equip successive generations of people with the tools to thrive in their contexts, from local to global. An important part of this endeavour is the promotion of social equality; a balancing of the boat so everyone has a fair chance at succeeding in life. Unfortunately, educational inequality is a major root of social inequality both within and across countries. Antoninis *et al.* (2016) asserted that socio-economic inequalities are not only reflected in but also reproduced by the social institution of education. Educational inequality impacts numerous individual factors including earning power, political participation, access to better health care and even future social mobility (Antoninis *et al.*, 2016; Blanden *et al.*, 2023; Ferreira and Gignoux, 2011; International Social Science Council [ISSC] *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, educational inequality is addressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Number 4, which is targetted at ensuring quality, inclusivity and equity in education. Specifically, Target 5 exhorts member nations to work towards educational inclusion and equity for all, especially the vulnerable and disadvantaged (UNESCO, 2016).

The pervasiveness of educational inequality globally is reported in studies like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Studies (Crato, 2021; Blanden *et al.*, 2023). This has been found to be strongly linked to socio-economic status (SES) (Akmal and Pritchett, 2021; Broer *et al.*, 2019). The link between educational inequality and differences in SES has been corroborated by regional and national learning assessment studies in Africa, albeit focused on the primary school level. The Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ, 2023) report, which assessed academic competence of grade six learners in 14 sub-Saharan countries including Uganda, showed that learners from high SES backgrounds consistently outperformed their counterparts from low SES backgrounds in both numeracy and reading achievement. Similarly, the 2018 and 2023 Uganda National Assessment of Progression in Education reports showed disparities in educational achievement between learners in rural and urban and top and lower quartile socio-economic demographics (Uganda National Examinations Board 2018, 2023). Uwezo Uganda (2019) further underscored this by showing that the wealth index of a learner's home had the strongest association with their learning outcomes.

The SACMEQ noted, however, that it is difficult to distinguish between the effects of school resources and the effects of a learner's socio-economic background on educational opportunities and subsequent outcomes. Nonetheless, other studies have shown that school resources are often a reflection of the SES of the surrounding community and hence of the learner (Broer *et al.*, 2019; Coley *et al.*, 2019; Obasuyi *et al.*, 2019; Oppedisano and Turati, 2011; Schmidt *et al.*, 2015). The OECD (2012b) referred to this as stratification, whereby

classes of learners are created in educational systems with the evidence of learners from higher SES attending better-resourced schools simply because their parents were able to finance those facilities. Therefore, school and learner socio-economic factors tag-team to either support or hinder desired educational opportunities and outcomes.

These national, regional and international surveys typically focus on learners at the primary school level, leaving secondary school dynamics underrepresented in existing scholarship. However, secondary education is critical as it serves as the primary transition point for learners entering labour markets in most countries (MasterCard Foundation, 2019). Addressing educational inequalities at this level is thus essential as these disparities directly impact the quality of a country's labour force and, consequently, its economic prospects (Adesina, 2016). This study provides valuable insights into equity in secondary education in Uganda, documenting progress in implementation of the revised lower secondary curriculum (LSC).

2. Equity in education

In much of the literature the concept of equity is often conflated with that of equality. Whereas equality refers to uniformity, equity has to do with fairness despite the lack of uniformity or as Stabback (2016) framed it, "treating unequals unequally" (p. 18). Sometimes, equality undermines equity as we shall demonstrate in this article. It then becomes essential for educational policy to strive more towards equity rather than equality. The organisation for economic co-operation and development (OECD) defined equity in education as a state in which: "personal or social circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential (fairness) and that all individuals reach at least a basic minimum level of skills (inclusion)" (OECD, 2012a, p. 9). Inasmuch as equity is included among global and regional educational priorities, the goals of access and quality have typically received greater attention. Illustratively, the main policy focus of previous global education agendas like the Millennium Development Goal 2 (MDG2) and Education For All (EFA) was access to quality basic education (UNESCO, 2016). However, the UN 2030 SDG4 and the Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA 16–25) have called for a renewed focus on all three priorities, with emphasis on equity and inclusivity (African Union, 2015; UNESCO and AUC, 2023).

The sources of educational inequality are myriad and are often precursors of educational inequity. Blanden *et al.* (2023) insightfully bracketed these sources into three categories: parents, institutions and nature. According to Blanden *et al*, parents occasion inequality through segregative mating, hence influencing the natural ability of their children; inequality of educational inputs due to differences in economic capacity; and inequality of aspirations towards their children. Parental and community engagement is essential in addressing such inequities as evidence suggests that parents' involvement as co-educators helps teachers better identify and nurture learners' abilities. However, challenges like lack of parental sensitization and limited resources have hindered effective engagement, especially in implementing initiatives like the competence-based curriculum (Atikiya, 2021; Isaboke *et al.*, 2021b). Institutions, on the other hand, bring about inequality through inequality of inputs by the government or school boards (Broer *et al.*, 2019; Dumont and Ready, 2020; Schmidt *et al.*, 2015). Educational inequality may also arise from differences in student characteristics like natural ability and individual effort (Antoninis *et al.*, 2016; Bashir *et al.*, 2018; Wilkinson, 2016). This article underscores the educational inequality occasioned by institutional differences in the Ugandan context as this is a source that can be addressed through relevant policy adjustments.

Evidence from different countries has provided a basis for concluding that, first of all, learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds are disproportionately attending disadvantaged schools,

thereby perpetuating inequality (Boman, 2022; Darling-Hammond, 2019; Thomson, 2021). Such schools are characterised by poor infrastructure, low teacher expertise and teacher and learner absenteeism (Bashir *et al.*, 2018; Thomson, 2021; World Bank Group, 2019). The rapid digitization of education in the 21st century has further highlighted disparities in technological capacities between countries, exacerbating educational inequality. According to the Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2023), while technology can enhance learning for disadvantaged children, it remains unaffordable and unsustainable for most poor nations. In Uganda, significant disparities in IT access between rural and urban areas (National Information Technology Authority Uganda, 2022) exemplify this divide, with the integration of ICT into learning systems often neglecting these critical inequities.

The 2019 World Bank human capital index report on Uganda showed that as a result of such inequality, secondary school completion rates in rural areas stood at 6.5%, whereas in urban areas, it was 14% (World Bank Group, 2019). Research has also shown that greater investment in education, especially for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds, is positively correlated with improved educational outcomes such as academic achievement, attainment and improved prospects for quality employment (Darling-Hammond, 2019; Kirabo, 2018). Indeed, the success of educational systems like Finland has been partly attributed to homogeneity in the provision of education across the country through public funding (Ahonen, 2020; Sahlberg, 2006). Therefore, a big part of the solution to the challenge of equity in education for learners from different socio-economic backgrounds lies in state policies governing the education system.

3. Curriculum implementation and educational equity

The term curriculum implementation belies a simplistic process of translating educational policy directives into classroom realities (OECD, 2020). However, there are numerous considerations to this endeavour including: school contexts, competence of implementers and development of unified meanings of the policy content. Thus, Cho (1998) identified three different perspectives of curriculum implementation: the fidelity perspective wherein strict adherence to policy directives is expected; the adaptive perspective, whereby the context of the change allows for modification of the policy; and the enactment perspective which emphasises contextually-driven interpretations and hence varied realisations of the curriculum. The fidelity perspective is widespread in many educational systems, including Uganda, where the curriculum is standardised in terms of content to be taught, materials to be used and experiences to be provided with the expectation that this will yield equal learning outcomes for all (Hadjar and Gross, 2016). In this article, we contend that Ugandan policymakers ought to expand their perspective of curriculum implementation to provide relevant support to stakeholders in different contexts and hence promote equitable learning opportunities for all.

Assessing PISA data from 33 OECD and 29 non-OECD countries, Schmidt *et al.* (2015) demonstrated that the opportunities to learn contained in a curriculum differ by school characteristics linked to student SES. This means that despite the standardization of the curriculum, implementation in some contexts is constrained and hence prone to dilution, creative non-implementation or even fabrication (Braun *et al.*, 2011), thereby exacerbating educational inequalities. This underscores the fact that the formal or intended curriculum seldom ever translates to the implemented or the attained curriculum (Scanlon *et al.*, 2023; Stabback, 2016). As Scanlon *et al.* (2023) pointed out, the process of translating curriculum policy from the formal version to classroom realities is shaped by the experience, knowledge, practical wisdom and prudence of teachers and the school leadership within their respective contexts.

The importance of contexts in delivery of curriculum was explained by Braun *et al.* (2011) in their theorisation on policy enactment contexts. They argued that, despite being much undermined during policy formulation, it is the school contexts that determine the quality of enactment of curriculum policy. Braun *et al* insisted that in comparison to the term implementation, the term enactment better conveyed the complexity involved in engaging with and adopting policy within varied contexts. They espoused that curriculum enactment is best understood through analysis of the interactions between four contextual dimensions: the situated context (school history, locale and intakes); the professional context (teacher experience and commitment and school management and ethos); the material context (school infrastructure, financial capacity and human resource) and external contexts (support from and accountability to stakeholders). Therefore, it is imperative that educational policy makers recognise the interplay between these dimensions in different socio-economic contexts to aptly anticipate and manage curricular outcomes.

In the same vein, Rogan and Grayson (2003) proposed a framework of curriculum implementation in developing countries, which comprised three constructs: outside influences, profile of implementation and the capacity to innovate. Inasmuch as these constructs are interconnected, our attention is drawn to the construct of Capacity to Support Innovation and its four indicators: physical resources, teacher factors, learner factors and school ethos and management. According to Rogan and Grayson, this construct foregrounds the highly contextual nature of curriculum implementation. It is evident from literature that schools in low SES contexts operate from a point of disadvantage on each of the four indicators, however, equity can be realised with appropriate support from government and external agents. Against the backdrop of these two theories, educational policy makers must appreciate that their ambitious, well-meaning policies are likely to yield diverse outcomes due to diversity of contexts.

Nonetheless, intensification of efforts towards curricular cohesion can help to minimise this disharmony. It is worthwhile to attend to the curriculum implementation framework proposed by OECD (2020) wherein curricular coherence is achieved when the three dimensions of: smart policy design, inclusive stakeholder engagement and conducive environment are aligned. The contention in this article is that the while the developers of the Uganda LSC have endeavoured to attend to the first two dimensions, less attention has been given to the third. Effective translation of the intended curriculum requires a conducive environment in which the socio-economic contexts as well as the capacity of the implementing parties is taken into account (Gouëdard *et al.*, 2020; OECD, 2020). Failing this, whatever changes have been introduced are likely to be superficial and short-lived despite an excellent theory of change and widespread appreciation by stakeholders (Fullan, 2015). Moreover, with the mandatory nature of the curriculum reform, widespread inequalities may result unless significant policy changes are made to align the curricular structure to the environment of implementation.

4. Secondary education in Uganda

In Uganda, secondary education is offered at two levels: the ordinary (O) level that spans four years and the advanced (A) level that spans two (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Due to the large number of learners completing primary school education following the introduction of the Universal Primary Education programme in 1997, the government introduced the Universal Secondary Education (USE) programme in 2007. This programme was aimed at increasing access to secondary education for learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Huylebroeck and Kristof, 2014; Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Consequently, the country saw a manifold increase in secondary school enrolment

(Huylebroeck and Kristof, 2014; Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, 2022; World Bank Group, 2019). However, it would seem that these gains have been hampered by limitations in capacity of schools to absorb learners, resulting in compromise to access and educational quality (Universalia, 2020).

Under the USE programme, the government invited both public and private schools to offer free education to learners. This invitation was extended to schools that typically charged less than USD 50 per learner per year (Masuda and Yamauchi, 2018) and hence attracted learners from the lower socio-economic demographic. The expectation was that the government would partner with parents and the schools to offer subsidised secondary education (Huylebroeck and Kristof, 2014). Schools would receive support from the government in form of capitation, teacher and school administrator deployment, remuneration for both teaching and non-teaching staff, provision of instructional materials, funding of co-curricular activities and support supervision (Education Act Uganda, 2008; Huylebroeck and Kristof, 2014).

Government-aided schools that opted out of the USE programme, while receiving similar capitation as USE schools, additionally charge fees thereby creating a larger disposable income base. Akyeampong *et al.* (2018) found that these non-USE schools and private institutions demonstrated higher technical efficiency by attracting students from more affluent backgrounds. This superiority was evidenced through metrics like school infrastructure quality, student–teacher ratios and teacher compensation. In terms of educational outcomes, therefore, non-USE schools often outperformed USE schools. This can be explained in part by the USE policies of lower cut-off grades for intake as well as automatic promotion for all learners (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2018; Masuda and Yamauchi, 2018). In addition, the quality of education in schools operating the USE programme is unanimously considered very poor; challenged by issues such as high congestion in classrooms; poor-quality and poorly-motivated teaching staff; and poor infrastructure and resourcing (Huylebroeck and Kristof, 2014; Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, 2022; Bashir *et al.*, 2018).

Currently, government USE schools outnumber government non-USE schools nationally. The Uganda 2017 Education abstract published that, of the 1,019 government schools in Uganda, 89.9% were USE schools, whereas 10.1% were non-USE schools (Ministry of Education and Sports [MoES], 2017). The distinction between government USE and government non-USE schools is important for the purposes of the present study as it provides an excellent picture of differences in implementation conditions of the new curriculum in schools within divergent socio-economic contexts, despite both being under government support. Private schools were excluded from this study as their funding models and hence socio-economic representation is too varied for a reliable analysis. Moreover, government support and regulatory oversight for private schools is extremely limited (Education Act, 2008). Therefore, government schools were ideal for presenting key policy intervention points that could then be extended to private schools. Moreover, in a country with 30.1% of the population living under the poverty line by 2021 (Makanga, 2022), it may be safely deduced that majority of the private secondary schools in Uganda serve the lower socio-economic demographic and thus reflect the USE model in capacity and efficiency. Though the competence-based LSC bears much optimism for national socio-economic transformation, it remains to be seen how effective it will be given this milieu of implementation.

4.1 Lower secondary competence-based curriculum

The recently instituted Uganda LSC provided the setting for analysis of the socio-economic dynamics at work in the provision of quality learning opportunities for secondary school students. The LSC was formulated to remedy the perceived maladies of secondary-level

education in Uganda as articulated by the World Bank funded Curriculum, Assessment and Examinations report (Clegg *et al.*, 2007). These were ineffective teaching methodologies, an overloaded curriculum menu, exclusivity to a small academic elite, failure to address contemporary national socio-economic needs, inflexibility to emerging fields of knowledge, absence of key 21st-century skills and unsustainably high costs [National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC) 2020a, 2020b]. A competence-based approach was adopted, in line with the 2014 Harmonised Curriculum Framework for the East African Community, which advocated for competence-based approaches as a basis for socio-economic development (D'Agostino, 2023; EAC Secretariat, 2014). The LSC was instituted in 2020 but due to disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, it was delayed by a year and thereafter rolled out progressively starting with the senior one class.

The curriculum was rolled out across the country in January 2020 despite objections from various quarters including parliamentarians and the Uganda National Teachers' Union. Major concerns were raised regarding teacher training; availability of instructional materials; the subject menu; inadequate stakeholder engagement; and inadequacy of school infrastructure including technological facilities and libraries (Ahimbisibwe, 2020; Museveni, 2020). The MoES, however, insisted that the new curriculum would take advantage of structures already existing within the schools (Museveni, 2020). Thus, previous administrative and funding arrangements were maintained in government schools despite the multitude of increased demands courtesy of the new curriculum. This article therefore explores how schools have adapted to the LSC given their divergent resource systems. The following questions guided our analysis:

RQ1. How have school socio-economic characteristics influenced preparedness for implementation of the curriculum?

RQ2. What are the differences in the implementation of the LSC as a result of school and learner socio-economic characteristics?

This article demonstrates how Uganda, a developing nation, is faring in achievement of the global educational policy goal of equity in the implementation of its competence-based curriculum LSC reform. It responds to the paucity of empirical data on the general implementation of the reform since much of the literature that has so far offered commentary on this reform has consisted of literature reviews (Kidega *et al.*, 2023; Muwanguzi *et al.*, 2023; Olema *et al.*, 2021). Other studies have relied on data from surrounding East African countries, mainly Kenya (D'Agostino, 2023) and a few empirical studies have been confined to specific subjects (Muhwezi, 2022; Muwanguzi *et al.*, 2023). It is shown that school and learner socio-economic disparities present a significant obstacle to the effective implementation of the Uganda LSC.

5. Methodology

The findings in this article are based on the qualitative portion of a doctoral study on teacher concerns in the Uganda LSC reform.

5.1 Sampling

Four officials from the MoES and five master trainers from the NCDC were purposively selected as key informants to provide commentary on progress in implementation of the LSC countrywide. Two instrumental case study schools on either end of the socio-economic spectrum were also purposively selected for comparison of LSC implementation in low and high socio-economic contexts. Thus, these schools were typical of Ugandan secondary

schools in the USE and non-USE categories. They were pseudo-named M Secondary School (MSS) for the USE school and N Secondary School (NSS) for the non-USE school.

MSS is a rural school in Wakiso district. It is patronised by children of peasant farmers and traditional artisans and exemplifies a low SES school. As a USE school, MSS is required to offer free education. However, parents make a small contribution to supplement government capitation and support provision of learners' meals, remuneration of teachers employed on a private arrangement and supplementation of instructional materials. NSS is located in an urban area within Kampala, the capital city. Being a non-USE school, NSS charges school fees. Its patronage comprises children from the middle and upper socio-economic class and a few on scholarship from corporate entities. The differences between MSS and NSS are shown in Table 1.

5.2 Data gathering

Two school administrators and five teachers from each school granted permission for interviews. All the teachers also allowed observation of one 80-min lesson in a senior two class. In total, 10 lessons were observed. Senior two was deemed ideal since they were the second batch of learners to experience the LSC, at which point the teachers had gained some mastery of it and schools had acclimatised to it somewhat. The lesson observation checklist comprised four requirements for implementation of the LSC as stipulated by NCDC (2020a, 2020b): a conducive learning environment, relevant instructional materials and resources, teacher–learner interactions and language. After every lesson, teachers were asked to reflect on how well aligned their lesson was to an ideal competence-based lesson as prescribed in the Uganda LSC framework. They were asked about what concerns they had before, during and after the lesson, and what support they had received or wished to receive from their supervisors. Finally, these teachers were requested to avail samples of schemes of work and lesson plans.

The same interview protocol was used to interview the three categories of change facilitators: school administrators, NCDC master trainers and MoES officials. These change facilitators were queried on their experiences and perspectives about four aspects of the curriculum implementation process: change management, teacher professional development, resourcing of the curriculum and monitoring and evaluation of the curriculum.

Table 1. Characteristics of case schools: MSS and NSS

	NSS	MSS
Funding status	Non-USE (government capitation and school fees)	USE (heavy reliance on government capitation)
Socio-economic status (SES)	High	Low
Average termly parental contribution (USD 3,762 to 1USh)	USD 532–797 (all boarding)	USD 32 (day scholars); USD 120 (boarding school)
Location	Urban	Rural
School population	1,700	800
Number of learners per stream (av.)	70	100
Number of streams per class in 'O' level	4	2
Teacher enrolment	105 (102 on government payroll, 3 private)	42 (27 on government payroll, 15 private)

Source: Authors' own work

While none of the questions was specific to educational inequality, we found that all the participants alluded to it at one point or another hence the development of this article.

Interview data were analysed through thematic analysis, whereby themes within the participants' responses were identified and analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Firstly, all interviews were transcribed, during which process Author 1 familiarised herself with the data through reading and re-reading of responses. The transcripts were uploaded onto QDA Miner Lite version 3.0 software for generation of codes, categories and themes. The codes were generated inductively, reflecting upon the research questions on differences in preparation for and implementation of the LSC in low and high SES contexts. Thus, the codes were organised into two categories: low SES context and high SES context. Thereafter, codes were collated into themes under each research question as discussed in Section 7. An example of the code-generation process is offered in Table 2. Authors 2 and 3 reviewed the codes and themes against the data to refine them. The findings from the interviews were scaffolded with data from the lesson observations, which were analysed using an observation checklist. The points of observation were checked for evidence and quality of the recommendations by the NCDC as mentioned above.

The roles and characteristics of the teacher participants are shown in Table 3. The NCDC master trainers and MoES officials are hereafter identified the prefix NCDC or MoES followed by a number, for example, NCDC1 and MoES1. The MoES officials included commissioners of secondary education and a district education officer.

6. Ethical considerations

The parent study on which this article is based was authorised by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology under the reference number SS1541ES. Access to the schools was obtained through the consent of the senior-most school administrator present at the school: the headteacher at MSS and the deputy headteacher at NSS. The lessons were observed and interviews audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. All participants were assured of anonymity.

Table 2. Sample of codes and themes extracted from interview excerpts

RQ	Category	Transcript excerpt	Coded	Theme
RQ1: Preparation	High SES schools	Twice-yearly workshops As master trainers we usually go for trainings, when we come back we train others or we bring someone external to supplement on the training	Consistent training	Teacher training
	Low SES schools	I still need guidance with the CBC I have never done the training with the NCDC We are just getting some little information from our colleagues; they tell you this, you go by that	Inadequate training	

Source: Authors' own work

Table 3. Characteristics of the study participants

Case	Role	School category	Subject	Experience (years)
SA1	Deputy headteacher	USE		
SA2	Director of studies	USE		
T1	Teacher	USE	Agriculture	6–10
T2	Teacher	USE	Cre	11–15
T3	Teacher	USE	English	11–15
T4	Teacher	USE	Geography	11–15
T5	Teacher	USE	Chemistry	11–15
SA3	Dean lower school	Non-USE		
SA4	Head of department	Non-USE		
T10	Teacher	Non-USE	Physical education	0–5
T6	Teacher	Non-USE	English	6–10
T7	Teacher	Non-USE	Geography	Over 15
T8	Teacher	Non-USE	German	0–5
T9	Teacher	Non-USE	Math	6–10

Source: Authors' own work

7. Findings

7.1 Influence of school socio-economic characteristics on preparedness for implementation of the curriculum

7.1.1 Learning environment. In general, by the time of the study, it appeared that the curriculum was being implemented within the existing at structures NSS and MSS. Administrators at NSS spoke of conducting renovations to classrooms to support curriculum implementation but there were no such plans at MSS. The stipulation for the learning environment by the NCDC (2020a, 2020b) was that it should be safe, equipped with adequate learning facilities and commensurate with learners' needs. Classrooms at NSS checked all these boxes with clean, well-aerated and illuminated classrooms. They were equipped with electrical sockets into which both teachers and learners could plug their electrical devices. Designated spaces for display of learners' work were also available. However, these classrooms were congested, which limited teacher movement among the learners. At MSS too, the classrooms were well aerated and illuminated. Their safety was questionable with unfinished walls, and exposed electrical wiring. There were no designated spaces for learners' work. Here, too, classrooms were congested.

7.1.2 Physical resources. Participant experiences and perceptions from the interviews revealed that the quality of implementation rested greatly upon the resources at the disposal of a school. This was voiced by one commissioner for secondary education: *Implementation is varying from school to school with schools that are better resourced doing much better than schools that are terribly under-resourced* (MoES 1). Participant MoES 3, a senior education officer for a district in Western Uganda, added: *The curriculum is good but the equipment is not there. The equipment is only in good schools.* Thus, participants revealed, whereas high SES schools were endowed with relevant resources including sufficient instructional materials, adequate infrastructure including classrooms and libraries where learners could comfortably conduct research and a large disposable income, low SES schools often faced gross insufficiencies.

Inasmuch as both schools received direct government support, there were distinct differences in the availability and use of instructional materials. At NSS, the learner to textbook ratio was three to one on average. This was possible because the school

supplemented all government-issued materials. On the other hand, at MSS learners' books were shared between five to 10 learners. NCDC trainers and MoES officials revealed that this low textbook-to-learner ratio was commonplace across the country. The expectation was that schools would supplement government-issued materials from their local resources as explained by participant MoES 1:

> They are required to replenish using the little resources they have at school level, through capitation grants, or through parental contributions as in some of the schools. But the challenge is that where Government programs are running, beneficiaries expect Government to replenish which may or may not happen for the next two to three years.

In two of the lessons at MSS, teachers made black and white copies so more learners could comfortably access lesson content. Due to the low quality of copy, these learners had poor-quality visual aids for their learning. On top of this, the problem of unreliable electricity supply affected efforts by teachers to improvise as explained by participant T1 from MSS:

> I photocopied the materials and some of the pictures were not even clear. I do that for every lesson though for senior two; we do not have enough textbooks. It is expensive because every lesson photocopying. I had wanted copies for senior one but there was no electricity.

7.1.3 ICT infrastructure. The biggest difference in preparedness for LSC implementation was in the integration of ICT into learning. At MSS, this was non-existent. It was rendered difficult by the lack of proper electrical connections in the classrooms. The school boasted a total of 30 desktop computers in the computer laboratory which were used exclusively by A-level students. The school had no Wi-Fi connections. Teachers did, however, have the option of bringing the staffroom smart television into the classroom and connecting it to electricity via a long extension cable. Unsurprisingly, none of the teachers went to this trouble, instead they instructed learners to ignore the ICT section in their learners' books. None of the teachers used a smart phone to provide some element of ICT as guided by NCDC trainers and MoES; not even in the English lesson whose topic was modern communication. In their post-lesson interviews, teachers also admitted to neglecting ICT integration as they had no means to implement it. MSS had a strict no-gadgets policy which participant SA2 defended as follows: *No, we can't allow them. Because they cannot only use these phones for education purposes, automatically they can use them to watch pornographic movies, they can't use them only for educational purposes*.

The story at NSS was pleasantly different. The school had two Wi-Fi networks with free access for both learners and teachers. In addition, due to a school policy of allowing learners to bring their laptops into school, there was a laptop for every five learners. During the geography lesson, for instance, the teacher asked learners to research on landforms resulting from plate tectonics. The learners' answers to subsequent questions raised by the teacher revealed a greater understanding of what would otherwise have been an abstract concept. In the math lesson, learners were assigned a task of developing a timetable in Microsoft Word; a valuable basic ICT skill. These are examples of the many learning opportunities that learners at MSS missed out on.

Therefore, even though ICT was a core component of the curriculum, it was largely omitted from curriculum implementation in low SES schools due to lack of supporting infrastructure. This was revealed by the director of studies from MSS. Sitting in his office, cluttered with files and papers and devoid of any technological gadgets save for his smartphone and a small radio, the participant remarked:

> ICT they're not okay (the teachers), because a teacher handling competence-based curriculum is supposed to have a laptop and majority they don't have. We have like two teachers, the deputy

> inclusive, the third one. We have one who is handling physical education and another who is teaching agriculture. They are the ones who use technology as far as the competence-based curriculum is concerned. But the rest, they do use chalk and talk. (SA 1)

One education commissioner lamented, in addition, that even though some telecommunications companies had offered subsidised internet connectivity for schools to enable them implement the LSC, many schools could not even afford to take advantage of that offer because they were so severely under-equipped.

7.1.4 Teacher training. Another important aspect of preparation for curriculum implementation was teacher training. Participants revealed glaring differences in teacher training between low and high SES schools. NSS invested heavily in teacher training for the LSC right from inception with the result that 100% of the teachers had undergone training. Moreover, NSS had nine teachers who had been trained to the level of master trainers in the curriculum and were often deployed to regional trainings by the NCDC. These in-house experts were an asset to the school. School administrators at NSS even went as far as hiring an official from the NCDC to supervise their teachers as they implemented the LSC. At MSS however, by the time of study, only 60% of the teachers had been trained in the LSC. This was tagged to limited finances. Thus, teachers relied on guidance from their peers. MSS had just one master trainer; a difference that was also tagged to availability of finances to facilitate teachers in training. The impact of this lack of proper training was evident in the lessons at MSS where some teachers seemed unsure about what they were doing. By the time of the visit, the school had only token evidence of learners' projects, which, the director of studies explained, resulted from lack of understanding by teachers on how to conduct projects.

7.2 Differences in the implementation of the lower secondary curriculum as a result of school and learner socio-economic characteristics

7.2.1 Teacher–learner interaction. The teacher–learner interaction at both schools was similar to a great extent implying a shift in teaching methodologies by teachers. Learner participation was encouraged, though in all subjects, it mostly consisted of brief group discussions followed by a few presentations by learners. It was interesting to note that while all learners were at the senior two-level, learners at NSS expressed themselves eloquently and confidently in English. This was significant because English is the designated language of instruction in the LSC. At MSS though, learners had great difficulty expressing themselves in English, often shying away from answering questions. Thus, teachers often had to encourage them to speak in *Luganda*, the lingua franca in the Central region. Even then, only a few learners dominated the presentations. This situation greatly slowed down the learning process leading to more teacher-dominated lessons and hence missed opportunities for training in competences such as communication. These differences in learner disposition could be explained by the differences in their social backgrounds. Learners from higher socio-economic backgrounds thus had an edge in progress through this curriculum.

7.2.2 Learner-to-teacher ratios. Participants also revealed that high learner-to-teacher ratios were a major impediment to the effective implementation of the LSC as the curriculum requires that teachers be well acquainted with the progress of every individual learner. This was perceived as a very difficult ask as illustrated in the following comment:

> Classrooms are congested with three-seater desks that are not suitable for the effective delivery of this curriculum and worse still, the class sizes are still too big. If you are to use the project mode of teaching, learner inquiry, and the recommended modalities for delivering this curriculum, the teachers are raising a concern that the environment in which they are operating cannot effectively

> enable them do so. We have class sizes ranging from 60 to 120 under the stewardship of only one teacher. So, in such a situation how do you ensure that there is effective participation of all learners? (MoES 1)

However, this was more of a problem in low SES schools where low capitation limited expansion of infrastructure and recruitment of more teachers to ease the situation. The large disposable income in high SES schools allowed them to improve or expand infrastructure as explained by participant SA3 from NSS, commenting on the suitability of their learner-to-teacher ratios for the LSC: *The ratio is friendly for the CBC but as a school we are looking at adding more classrooms so the classes can be smaller. We are looking at 50 as recommended.*

7.2.3 Teacher factors. Differences in LSC implementation between high and low SES schools were also evident in various teacher factors, specifically: staff numbers, teacher competence, remuneration and motivation. Whereas participants considered teachers in high SES schools to be highly competent in aspects directly affecting the LSC such as use of ICT, teachers in low SES schools were judged to be mostly incompetent. An assistant commissioner for government secondary schools had this to say:

> We thought we would be better at secondary (compared to primary) but in the provincial regions upcountry many teachers do not have even the basic knowledge of computer so we can't expect them to leverage ICT in their implementation. (MoES 4)

Low SES schools were also found to have more teachers recruited on private arrangement with very low remuneration. As a result, these were perceived to have low competence in interpreting and delivering the LSC as required. Participant NCDC4, a national trainer expounded:

> There are very many untrained teachers in upcountry schools; young people who are teaching but have not gone to any teacher training institute. So, they just cannot cope. There is need for trained teachers in schools to teach the curriculum because this is a technical pedagogical activity that somebody can't just do by wish.

Another pertinent issue arising in low SES schools was teacher absenteeism. This was observed by the first author whereby on one of the site visits at the low SES school, only two teachers were engaging learners by 8 am and by 11 am only four classes in the whole school had a teacher. At the high SES school, the first author observed that on all days of site visits, teachers were in class from 7:30 am when lessons started, to 4 pm when the school day ended. Participant SA 1, deputy head teacher at MSS decried the impact that absenteeism had on curriculum implementation:

> The new curriculum needs a lot of time. You document almost every aspect of learning in school. That means you are close to the learners. But the environment we are in does not make the teachers close to the learners. Imagine, we are struggling with them; absenteeism is too much! (SA 1)

Whereas most teachers at both USE and non-USE schools are on government payroll, differences do exist in welfare packages and allowances. According to school administrators at MSS, this was the main reason for high absenteeism. Adding salt to injury, it emerged that absenteeism in low SES schools even extended to school administrators. Participant NCDC4 revealed:

> Administrators are not there to ensure supervision of implementation. They have no housing. Some of the schools are far, deep in the rural. Some head teachers stay as far as Kampala. So they

> leave the schools to natives who have been appointed as directors of studies who actually have no full mandate, neither the capacity to ensure that things are done in the right way.

7.2.4 Learner socio-economic background. Learner family and social background emerged as a key factor determining the quality of learning opportunities. High SES schools enjoyed support from the parents, who were purchasing textbooks to supplement those provided by the school, funding school projects, contributing to teacher welfare and providing their children with other required resources. Conversely, implementation in low SES schools was hampered by: inability of parents to supplement school resources, learner laxity and absenteeism and low learner competence to tackle the basic tasks demanded by the curriculum. For instance, NCDC national trainers remarked:

> The secondary school learners themselves are extremely sub-standard; they were not well taught in primary school. So, their literacy levels are very low. It is surprising that they crossed over to secondary. (NCDC 4)

> Teachers are saying, "these learners are very dense; even if we try to probe them, they are totally dry. Even if we try to tell them to come and present, they have no resources at all! So, I end up just teaching them the old way". (NCDC 3)

Nonetheless, participant NCDC 2 revealed that due to their socio-economic context, low SES schools seemed to be faring much better in the aspect of projects: *Upcountry schools took off in projects better than urban schools. For many of these rural schools, the projects carried a lot of meaning but in urban areas, there is a sense of sufficiency which limits creativity of projects.* (NCDC 2). This is because learners from low SES backgrounds were accustomed to improvising and creating things; a skill which served them well in the project requirement of the LSC.

8. Discussion

Our analysis of the experiences and perceptions of change facilitators and implementers of the Uganda LSC revealed significant disparities in curriculum implementation conditions and hence practices between schools in high and low socio-economic contexts. Schools within high socio-economic contexts were found to be not just well-resourced but to also have the capacity to adapt to the demands of the new curriculum in terms of infrastructure, human resource and instructional materials. In contrast, schools within low socio-economic contexts were operating within the exact conditions they had in the previous curriculum with little capacity to adjust to the demands of the new curriculum; the proverbial pouring of new wine into old wineskins. This corroborated the assertion in the policy enactment contexts framework by Braun *et al* (2011) that realisation of curriculum goals is ultimately subject to school contextual factors.

These findings have confirmed the assertion that learning in low socio-economic contexts is adversely affected by poor infrastructure, low teacher quality and motivation coupled with rampant absenteeism and poorer interpretation and implementation of the curriculum (Schmidt *et al.*, 2015; Antoninis *et al.*, 2016; Bashir *et al.*, 2018; Broer, Bai and Fonseca, 2019; Dumont and Ready, 2020). Specifically, studies on implementation of competence-based curricula within sub-Saharan Africa have reported similar findings, whereby inadequate resources, high student to teacher ratios, poor infrastructure and low teacher competence have presented major obstacles to effective curriculum implementation (Makunja, 2016; Cunningham, 2018; Fleisch *et al.*, 2019;

Akala, 2021; Isaboke *et al.*, 2021a). More importantly, the findings imply that the LSC is most effective in schools with higher technical efficiency as described by (Akyeampong *et al.*, 2018). Thus, USE schools and private lower SES schools are inevitably disadvantaged.

Consequently, the findings indicate a lack of curricular coherence in the LSC implementation. This presents the risk of a superficial implementation, dilution or even non-implementation where teachers and schools do just enough to present the semblance of compliance but with no lasting impact on learning (Rogan and Grayson, 2003; Braun *et al.*, 2011; Fullan, 2015). It is evident from this study that, *ceteris paribus*, the level of parental contribution makes the difference in quality of implementation of the LSC. With government providing equal support to both USE and non-USE schools, it was the level of investment by parents that shaped the learning environment, thus reinforcing the assertion by Rogan and Grayson (2003) that curriculum reform can only succeed if differences in school contexts are taken into account when designing an implementation plan.

9. Conclusion and recommendations

There is strong justification for approaching the issue of educational equity from the vantage point of the curriculum. Curriculum represents the opportunity to learn so it is a fundamental starting point for addressing inequalities in education. The findings of this study have shown that the Uganda LSC is poised to cause even more stratification of secondary school learners due to the demands it places upon schools and learners. The LSC is relatively more resource-intensive than the old curriculum; a feature that favours high SES schools and severely disadvantages low SES ones. The demand by the government and other change facilitators that schools improvise to fill gaps has not helped the situation due to severe capacity challenges in low SES contexts. Consequently, the differences in learning opportunities continue to widen as high SES schools capably fulfil curricular requirements and low SES schools struggle to do so. Granted, a few schools around the country receive various forms of support from development partners like the UN, Belgian Embassy, Promoting Equality in African Schools and the World Bank. However, this support is grossly insufficient as it only reaches pockets of learners in the most poverty-stricken areas.

Therefore, there is need for the Ministry of Education through the NCDC to review the curriculum structure to ensure that it leverages the resources readily available to learners from diverse socio-economic contexts for inclusivity and equity. This should be supported by research into how the LSC can be customised to better align with the unique challenges and opportunities in low socio-economic schools, ensuring curricular coherence and meaningful learning outcomes. The MoES should consider channelling relatively more funding into USE schools; which serve the poor in society, to raise their capacity to effectively implement the LSC. This study demonstrated that for low SES schools, capitation is lifeblood, whereas for high SES schools, it is, as put by a school administrator at NSS, “just a drop in the ocean”. As legislation and regulation of parental support for curriculum implementation is a complex prospect, equity in implementation of the Uganda LSC will largely be dependent on the government “treating unequal schools unequally”. Further research could evaluate how government policies can be designed or adjusted to better address the disparities in implementation conditions between high and low socio-economic schools. It will also be important to investigate strategies to mitigate disparities in curriculum implementation between

schools in high and low socio-economic contexts, focusing on infrastructure, teacher quality and resource availability.

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