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**Key Note Address**

**Strategies for improving competence-based Education in  
Tanzania: Experiences Insights and Possibilities**

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## **Key Note Address; Strategies for improving competence-based Education in Tanzania: Experiences Insights and Possibilities**

### **Introduction**

The field of education is evolving new ways of thinking, practice, and methods of enquiry. We as practitioners are responding to the situation with vitality and determination. To keep pace with the changes, Tanzania is working hard to implement a vision of high quality education for quality life by helping learners develop various key competencies which they would use in life. This conference examines what competence-based education means to us, our work, our understanding and future developments in education and the potentials for improving it in our schools.

From the time of independence there has been debate on how the quality of education can be improved. Right after independence, the policy of education for self reliance was adopted with the aim that education should provide the individual with knowledge and skills which will make individuals self reliant in his/her community, thus contributing to his/her community (Nyerere, 1967). Unfortunately, education for self reliance did not succeed because it was misinterpreted by those who had to realize it. Again of recent, Tanzania has moved towards a reform in pedagogical practices in that there is a shift from teaching to learning as a result of changes in education theories. This shift has required teachers to adopt learner centred approaches.

It is widely believed that when people get knowledge and skills, they would be able to take action to address various issues and problems both at the individual and societal levels. But that is not the case because emphasis was still on mastery of content. In order to be able to cope with societal changes, advances in technology and globalization, education has to enable people to not only acquire knowledge and generate knowledge but also to reflect on further effects and the complexity of behaviour and decisions in a future oriented and global perspective of responsibility. This requires individuals to develop various competencies.

In the struggle to improve the quality of education and enable learners develop various competencies in different spheres of life, Tanzania has made a shift from content based curriculum to competence-based curriculum. With the introduction of the competence-based curriculum in our schools, a number of questions have arisen. Some of these questions are:

- What is competence?
- How is the competence-based curriculum structured?
- How are competencies taught?
- Does the subject content determine the competence or does the competence to be developed determine the content to be taught?
- To what extent are the teachers competent in implementing the competence-based curriculum?

Therefore in developing strategies of improving competence-based education in Tanzania, there is need to address the issues of conception of competence, curriculum, teaching and learning, assessment and evaluation, and teacher competence.

### **The concept of competence**

The action competence approach has been a key concept in education in countries like South Africa, and Denmark since the 1980s (Mogensen and Schanack, 2010) and now it is being used in Tanzania. The need to understand teachers' conceptions of competence is crucial because their conception influence their practices.

Experience has shown that some teachers define it as "ujuzi" meaning knowledge and others define it as "uwezo" meaning ability. You will often find the two words being used interchangeably by the teachers and curriculum developers. The question is, are these two words the same? If not, which one defines competence?

The concept of competence was initially used to describe the need for relevant knowledge, will, skills, critical reflection including value clarification. In education, qualification was used to refer to the knowledge, and skills necessary for the workplace, to be able to do a good job. From the 1990s the competence discourse entered the education arena but with different meanings. Generally, competence-based education focuses on helping learners develop various competencies which they can use in life. Competence is associated with being able and willing to act effectively and efficiently. In order to be able to act, one has to have knowledge, skills, attitudes, and personal qualities. So, competence can be defined as a complex set of behaviours built on the components of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and competence as personal ability (Albanese, Mejicano, Mullan, Kokotailo, and Gruppen, 2008).

The use of the concept of competence has expanded from the description of workplace demands to educational ideals. Therefore, contemporary use of the word competence includes subject-related and general use of the concept.

### **Subject related use of competence**

Subject oriented curriculum is characterized by different subjects. This approach to curriculum approach has been criticized for being a reductionist view of the subject and for being difficult to compare the different forms of the subject matter at different levels and different parts of the education system. To overcome these limitations, a competence-based description of the subjects has been proposed. This is also a move towards quality education. However, different subjects use competence descriptions in different ways. The main point is a change in focus from gaining mere knowledge and skills to a deeper understanding and finding an answer to the question: "What does it mean to master a given subject (e.g. biology, mathematics or geography) knowledge? The answers point to the competencies that are characteristic for the subject, for example, posing and solving mathematical problems.

The value of a subject-oriented notion of competence is that it points to a shift in curriculum thinking, from enumeration of isolated knowledge and skills to handling or mastering of knowledge, reflection, and action that meet the challenges of a given situation.

### **A general use of Competence**

When competence is used in general, it is not related to specific subjects. The use focuses on key competencies as used in the workplace. Therefore, it is functional, demand oriented and contextualized. This general use of the concept of competence is holistic and dynamic as it combines complex demands, psychological prerequisites (cognitive, motivational, ethical, volitional, and social components) and context into a complex system that makes competent performance or effective action possible.

Therefore, competencies do not exist independent of action and context. Instead they are conceptualized in relation to demands and actualized by actions (which imply intentions, reasons, and goals taken by individuals in a particular situation (Rychen and Salganik, 2003, pp. 46-47).

However, the general use of the concept of competence does not contradict the concept of competence in the subject-related use of the notion. They both help the learner not to be objects of control and guidance exercised by other people or idiots who take no part, but instead contribute to qualifying their own process of schooling. Teachers have to both focus on the development of subject specific competencies and the development of competencies in general. Taking the example of the primary school curriculum: The broad aims of education are to prepare the learners for the second level of education and to enter the world of work (Tanzania Institute of Education, 1997, p. iii). The curriculum is divided into different subject areas. This requires teachers to focus both on the subject related competence and the general use related competence as pointed out earlier. It is hoped that the competence-based approach to education will meet the training needs of our youths and market demands and will to a large extent contribute to eradicating poverty.

Although we have seen two perspectives of the use of the concept of competence, it can be seen that competence is usually linked to an individual in an educational context. Blomhoj and Jensen (2003) see competence as someone's insightful readiness to act in a way that meets the challenges of a given situation. According to Mogensen and Schanack, (2010), student competence to take action is basically a matter of organizing learning situations that make it possible for students to transform themselves into critical, democratic, and political human beings.

Having seen what competence is when do we consider an individual to be competent? When we want to consider an individual to be competent, we consider three elements which are what he/she is able to do, how he/she approaches his/her practice and how he/she acts as a professional (Albanese et. al. 2008). These elements can be considered as concentric circles with what the individual can do at

the core followed by the approach to practice and the outer circle representing the individual as a professional.

### **What the individual is able to do**

These are the technical skills that the individual possesses. For example, a teacher possesses teaching skills, subject matter knowledge, classroom management, and organization, assessment skills etc.

### **How the individual approaches his/her practice.**

This element includes attitudes, ethical issues, responsibilities, decision making skills etc. These build on what the individual can do.

### **The individual as a professional**

This element is built from the two previous elements to yield an individual who is a professional. Taking an example of a teacher, this includes his/her role in the education system and personal development, knowledgebase, self autonomy, reflective practice, etc.

### **Competence-based Curriculum**

Curriculum is all the things that go on in the school including classroom and out of classroom activities. The main aim of education is to make the world a better place to live for all the generations. Therefore, the curriculum is expected to give people knowledge and skills which they would use to lead quality life. For Tanzania, a curriculum that would be appropriate would be one that would liberate people mentally and psychologically and emotionally and empower them. The new competence-based education which defines specific competencies to be developed by learners through education is the direct outcome of democratization and a concerted struggle to address the issue of meaningful education in Tanzania. Therefore, the primary emphases of competence-based curriculum is on the powers of becoming i.e. powers which can transform and be transformed and powers which can generate other powers infinitely(Doll, 1993).

In designing competence-based curriculum, the main components include:

- Description of the competencies to be developed.
- Specific objectives describing the outcomes which are expected at the end of the unit.
- Content for developing the competence
- Teaching and learning methods and strategies
- Assessment criteria. competence-based assessment involves the assessment of the abilities (which include knowledge, skills and attitudes) which an individual demonstrates in his/her immediate environment and in other contexts.

Sometimes it is difficult to separate a competence from what we refer to as objectives and goals. Goals are very general and global statements which are

supposed to an overall frame of reference. Objectives are precise statements which begin with an action verb and characterises observable behaviour pertaining to intended direct outcomes which are realistic and at an appropriate level of generality.

What distinguishes a competence from a goal and objective is that it focuses on the end product of the instructional process rather than on the instructional process it or it can be said that it embraces the larger picture rather than the content of a single course. Competencies are used to set performance standards that must be met.

### **Teaching and learning for competence development**

The acquisition of competence is not the same as the acquisition of knowledge. The action competence approach points to democratic participatory and action oriented teaching and learning that can help students develop their abilities, motivation, and desire to play an active role in finding democratic solutions to problems and issues in the society. The government's move towards competence-based rather than content-base curricular necessitates student-centred teaching and learning (Woods, 2001). The move towards the constructivist approach and now to competence development is aimed at raising the quality of education in schools and colleges, which is necessary for national development because knowledge is considered a vital form of capital (Vavrus, 2009). In addition, Tabulawa (2003) contends that developing countries have the task of promoting the neo-liberal vision of democracy, hence the need for the promotion of the constructivist approach to teaching.

Teaching for competencies requires critical teaching as advocated by Freire,(1997) and Carr and Kemmis, (1986). For example, Frere stressed the importance of respecting learners' experiences and that in learning one should therefore begin with the learners' experiences and linking the knowledge to be learned with the learners real-life situations (Friere, 1997). Carr and Kemmis claim that education should address societal problems. Critical teaching is the kind of teaching where teachers help learners find alternative ways of solving problems and looking at issues from different perspectives. Teachers, therefore, have to expose learners to contradictions, encourage them to ask critical questions, and deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge.

To achieve this, teachers have to make learners interact with various real-life situations. This suggests that the design of learning tasks is at the heart of competence-based learning. Therefore, learning tasks should involve a combination of learning activities like analysis of case studies, working on given problems, doing experiments and various hands on activities, which will enhance thinking among the learners. The teacher should focus on how to deliver the designed tasks and resources in diverse environments. As the learners work on the various tasks, he/she should know how to diagnose learners' progress (diagnostic teaching) on the basis of their complex task performance. The competence approach to learning encourages intrinsic motivation and mastery, hence they have the potential for deep learning.

## **Teachers' Competence**

Teachers need to be competent so that they can help learners develop the competencies required. Teacher's competence is determined by the knowledge base which he/she needs. Shulman (1987) referred to the knowledge base that the teacher needs as pedagogical content knowledge (PCK). In general, it is defined as the knowledge developed by teachers to enable learners learn.

The teachers' pedagogical content knowledge is influenced by three other knowledge bases: subject matter knowledge (SMK), pedagogical knowledge (PK), and knowledge of context (KofC) (Shulman, 1987, Abell, 2007).

Subject matter knowledge is defined as the knowledge that the teacher needs to have to be able to organize the concepts, facts principles, and theories of a given discipline and also the knowledge of the rules of evidence and proof used to generate and to justify knowledge claims in the discipline.

Teachers' pedagogical knowledge involves knowledge of instructional principles, classroom organization and management, knowledge of the learners and how they learn and educational aims (Abell, 2007). According to Bransford, Darling-Hammond and LePage (2005) in order to be able to communicate content to the learners teachers need to have an understanding of the principles that guide instruction, how to organize and manage the class to enhance learning, knowledge of the learners and the learning process and the general educational aims for teaching.

Knowledge of context includes knowledge about the community, school, learner's backgrounds and the larger context like the district Grossman, (1990). Knowledge of context by the teacher helps the teachers in contextualizing the content being taught in order to make learning meaningful and related to real-life situations. Therefore, in order for the teacher to be able to help learners develop various competencies as outlined in the curriculum, she/he has to be competent.

## **Assessment and evaluation of competence-based learning**

The issue of assessment and evaluation poses challenges to the competence-based approach to learning. The culture of assessing student performance using written examinations has been dominant in Tanzania for a long time. This culture has a lot of influence on the educational aims, as well as the role of the teacher and nature of the classroom activities. As a result, current practices in schools focus on the maintenance of classroom order and the efficiency of transmission of knowledge. Very little attention is directed to the individual learner with regard to the skills and competencies that he/she has to develop.

Competence-based learning is learning that makes a learner able to perform the learned skills as need arises. At the end of a learning programme a learner needs to be able to demonstrate the competence in a new skill. Competency based assessment should help learners develop the capacity of being able to act, now and in the future, and to assume responsibility for their actions. Such competency is referred to as Applied Competence, which is a combination of Practical competence,

Foundational Competence and Reflexive competence. **Practical competence** is when learners can demonstrate that they **can do** something. **Foundational competence** is when the learners show that **they know what and why they are doing**.

**Reflexive competence** is referred to when the learners show that they can reflect in-and-on their actions and are able to apply their practice and knowledge to new situations.

Therefore, when planning for competence-based assessment, teachers should aim at assessing reflexive competence; meaning that, higher level thinking skills assessment tools, are the determinant factor in assessment. In general, competence-based learning assessment, seeks to find out how much knowledge, skills and attitudes students have acquired in learning, and how well they can use the knowledge and skills for better life. Doll (1993) points out that in assessing a competence-based curriculum we need to conceive of the curriculum as a conversation between “from” and “towards” and not as a deficit from towards.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Implementation of the competence-based curriculum in schools has been complex since its introduction in schools. Up to this moment teachers focus on developing content with the hope that learners will develop the intended competencies. In most cases the focus is towards the content to be learned instead of focusing on the competencies to be developed, then choose the content for developing the competencies.

Therefore, what is done in the classroom is not very much different from the content based curriculum. Just like education for self reliance, emphasis was put on education that would produce people who are self reliant, self confident, have a sense of responsibility, self motivated, cooperation, and dedicated to service. Competence-based education aims at developing people who have various abilities, who can take action to address issues both at individual and societal levels.

It is therefore our duty as educators to see the importance of ensuring that learners in our institutions develop the necessary competencies needed to lead quality lives and to keep pace with the current developments in science and technology. As we seek to set strategies for enhancing competence-based learning in our schools, we should think and rethink about the nature of curriculum that guides learning in our schools, the teaching and learning process, the assessment procedures and how we can develop the academic and professional capacities of our teachers to enable them help learners develop various competencies.

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