

Global Convergence Toward Competency-Based Education for the Knowledge Economy

Sixbert Sangwa*¹

¹Office of the President, Open Christian University, Sacramento, CA 95811, United States

*Corresponding Author: ssangwa@openchristian.education

Abstract

Background: Education reforms across regions are converging on competency-based education (CBE) as states pursue knowledge-based economic growth and “future-ready” workforces, while navigating dense transnational and regional policy networks. **Purpose:** This article analyzes how global and regional governance frameworks (OECD skills and assessment initiatives, UNESCO’s Education 2030/SDG4 agenda, the African Union’s CESA, and ASEAN-linked education visions) shape national curriculum redesign toward broadly defined competencies, and it interrogates the epistemic and ethical trade-offs of this shift. **Methods:** The study uses a qualitative secondary design, integrating comparative policy analysis with critical literature review of peer-reviewed studies, strategy documents, and official reports. The analysis is guided by World Society Theory, multi-level governance, and a purpose-of-education critique that contrasts market-oriented human-capital rationales with holistic educational ends. **Results:** Across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, CBE diffusion is propelled by soft-governance mechanisms including benchmarking, policy borrowing, technical assistance, and donor-aligned reform templates, producing convergent curricular language and outcome-based assessment aspirations. Yet persistent implementation frictions emerge where competency constructs remain underspecified, increasing the risk of “thin” competencies, superficial learning, and uneven classroom enactment. The review also identifies governance tensions around educational sovereignty, equity, and youth epistemologies, as curricula are increasingly justified through employability logics that can marginalize local knowledge and amplify resource-based disparities. **Conclusion:** CBE convergence is unlikely to reverse, but its educational value depends on conceptual clarity, knowledge integrity, and context-sensitive governance. The article advances an impact-oriented lens for evaluating reforms and recommends balancing competency aims with robust disciplinary learning, culturally resonant curricula, and accountability systems that preserve national and community agency while engaging global innovation.

Keywords: competency-based education; knowledge economy; 21st-century skills; curriculum policy convergence; global education governance; World Society Theory; multi-level governance

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background: Around the world, education reforms are increasingly converging on competency-based education (CBE) models oriented toward the needs of a knowledge-based economy. From Africa to Latin America and Southeast Asia, national curricula are being re-engineered to focus on “21st-century skills” and transferable competencies, often under the guidance or pressure of international bodies (Anderson-Levitt &

Gardinier, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). Transnational influence is a major driver of this convergence: organizations such as the OECD, UNESCO, and the World Bank, as well as global agreements like the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Education 2030), explicitly advocate for education systems that produce flexible, skilled human capital for the global market (OECD, 2015; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Regional policy frameworks mirror this agenda – for example, the African Union’s Continental Education Strategy for Africa aims to “reorient Africa’s education

and training systems to meet the knowledge, competencies, skills, innovation and creativity required” for sustainable development (AU, 2016), while ASEAN’s Vision 2025 and education action plans emphasize regional integration through skills and competencies (UNESCO, 2016).

1.2. Problem Statement: Despite its promise of modernization, this global shift toward CBE raises critical questions. There is an epistemic tension between the vision of a knowledge-based economy – which ostensibly requires deep expertise, creativity, and innovation – and the often thinly defined competencies promoted in CBE frameworks, which risk prioritizing breadth over depth. Critics argue that poorly specified “competences” can lead to a de-skilling of curricula, reducing education to fragmented skills and behaviors at the expense of substantive knowledge (Ramírez Naranjo, 2012). At stake is whether CBE reforms truly enhance learners’ capabilities or merely produce superficially “competent” workers lacking the higher-order understanding necessary for genuine innovation.

1.3. Research Objectives and Questions: This article aims to examine how global governance agendas shape national curriculum reforms towards CBE, and to analyze the consequences of this trend for educational quality and purpose. Key questions include: (1) How do transnational actors and frameworks influence the design of national curricula in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia toward competency-based models? (2) What tensions arise between global competency frameworks and the cultivation of deep knowledge and critical thinking? (3) In what ways does the CBE movement serve a global market-oriented agenda, and with what implications for national sovereignty, cultural narratives, and youths’ relationship to knowledge? By addressing these questions, the article seeks to contribute a critical interdisciplinary perspective that links comparative education policy with sociology (world society and governance theory) and philosophy of education.

1.4. Expected Contributions: First, this study provides a synthesis of evidence that a global convergence in curriculum is underway, documenting how international norms diffuse into national education policies in multiple regions. Second, it offers a critical analysis of the governance mechanisms – soft power, policy lending, benchmarking (e.g. PISA) – that drives this convergence (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021). Third, it enriches the debate on education’s purpose by highlighting the potential misalignment between economic objectives and educational values: for instance, how an excessive focus on measurable competencies might fuel what some observers describe as a nihilistic or utilitarian outlook among Gen-Z learners, who may feel that schooling has been reduced to employability training. Finally, the article outlines strategic insights and recommendations for stakeholders to rebalance the narrative, advocating for approaches that harness global innovations without eroding educational depth, equity, or cultural identity.

2. Theoretical Framework

To interpret these phenomena, we draw on three complementary theoretical lenses. World Society Theory explains the diffusion of educational models as part of global cultural norms. Multi-level governance illuminates how authority and policy influence are distributed across global, regional, and national levels. Finally, a purpose-of-education critique (grounded in philosophy and critical pedagogy) questions the ultimate ends that education is being steered toward. Together, these perspectives help conceptualize the CBE convergence as a complex interplay between global forces and local meanings (see Figure 1).

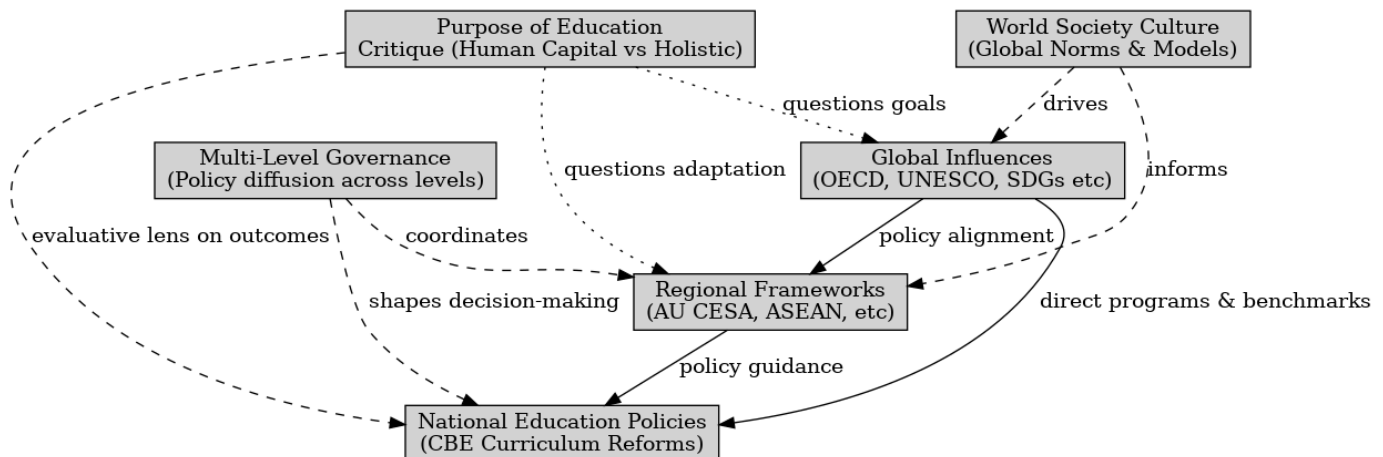


Figure: Conceptual model linking global agendas, governance, and educational purpose in CBE convergence

Figure 1: Conceptual model linking global agendas, multi-level governance, and educational purpose in competency-based education (CBE) convergence.

2.1. World Society Theory: Global Norms and Isomorphic Reforms. World Society Theory (also known as world-polity or global neo-institutionalism) posits that nation-states are embedded in a global cultural framework that powerfully shapes their policies and institutions. Education is a prime example: across very different countries, we see remarkable similarity in schooling reforms, driven not just by local needs but by worldwide models of “best practice” and development. From this perspective, the global promotion of competency-based curricula can be seen as part of an institutionalized world culture that values learner-centered skills, outcomes, and standardized metrics of achievement. Meyer et al. (1997) famously observed that mass education expanded globally as a rationalized myth – countries adopted similar school structures and curricula to attain legitimacy in the world community, even if decoupled from on-the-ground realities.

Applied here, world society theory suggests that CBE’s spread is not a coincidence: international organizations (the OECD, UNESCO, World Bank, etc.) act as carriers of world-cultural norms about “21st-century education,” leading countries to converge on competency-based standards regardless of differing local contexts (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021; Rasmussen et al., 2021). The OECD’s concept of “key competencies,” for example, has been codified in global assessments like PISA and absorbed into national curricula worldwide ((Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021). A 2021 comparative review noted that “as PISA and its international league tables gain attention, CBE is widely

adopted and increasingly integrated into curricular policies in diverse countries and regions”, with dozens of nations defining their own lists of 21st-century competencies for global competitiveness (Anderson-Levitt & Gardinier, 2021). World society theorists interpret this as a form of isomorphism: countries, seeking modernity and legitimacy, emulate the education models promoted by global discourse – in this case, pivoting toward competencies, skills, and “learning outcomes” as the hallmarks of quality. Indeed, schooling around the world now shows strong isomorphism in goals and structures, demonstrating the influence of a world-level cultural script for education.

However, world society theory also notes the phenomenon of decoupling (Meyer et al., 1997): nations may adopt global models superficially (in policy rhetoric or curriculum standards) while classroom practice changes little. This invites investigation into how deeply CBE reforms are being implemented and with what effects – a theme we explore in the findings. Nonetheless, this lens underscores that the global CBE agenda is propelled by cultural authority: being “21st-century” and “competency-based” has become part of the legitimated identity of a modern education system. National policymakers often use international benchmarks and frameworks to justify reforms, aligning with what world society theory calls the “scripts” of global education policy.

2.2. Multi-Level Governance: Transnational Policy Influence and National Responses. While world society theory highlights cultural diffusion, a multi-level

governance (MLG) perspective sheds light on the mechanisms of policy influence across different levels of decision-making. Education governance today is no longer confined within nation-states; it is characterized by interconnected layers – global, regional, national, and even local – through which ideas, regulations, and funding flow (UNESCO, 2016). In the case of competency-based education, we can see MLG dynamics at work in how global ideas are translated into regional agreements and then into national reforms.

At the global level, bodies like UNESCO and the OECD set broad agendas. UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action explicitly encourages regions and countries to coordinate their strategies with global targets for quality and relevant learning (UNESCO, 2016). The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) includes targets on skills for employment and global citizenship, legitimating a focus on competencies. The OECD, through initiatives like Future of Education and Skills 2030, convenes experts and publishes frameworks (e.g. the OECD Learning Compass 2030) that define competencies and “transformative skills” students will need (OECD, 2019). These serve as soft governance tools – they are non-binding, but they heavily influence national policy discourse and provide a template for reform.

At the regional level, organizations adapt global imperatives to local contexts. For instance, the African Union's CESA 2016–25 and forthcoming CESA 2026–35 link continental aspirations (Agenda 2063) with SDG4, calling for education that produces “skilled human capital” and meets the demand for knowledge, innovation, and values (Ashipala & Wodon, 2024; AU, 2016). Similarly, in Southeast Asia, education ministers through ASEAN and partnerships with UNESCO Bangkok have developed regional action plans focusing on “21st-century skills,” “transversal competencies,” and quality assurance for competency-based training (UNESCO, 2016; Yano & Manns, 2015). These regional frameworks create peer pressure and support mechanisms: countries benchmark progress, share best practices, and sometimes set regional targets for skills acquisition or curriculum reforms (UNESCO, 2016). Multi-level governance theory notes that such horizontal networks and vertical linkages can lead to policy harmonization. However, they may also create tension if global/regional priorities clash with local needs.

At the national level, governments navigate these influences, balancing external recommendations with internal priorities. Multi-level governance highlights that national policy-makers are not passive recipients; they often use global frameworks strategically – for example, to marshal political will or donor support for reforms. Yet, concerns arise about national sovereignty: as states are “locked into thickening webs of transnational governance” (Lingard et al., 2021; Hooghe & Marks, 2003), their policy space may shrink (Hooghe & Marks, 2003). In education, accepting funding or technical advice from the World Bank or following OECD indicators can effectively constrain national curriculum choices to align with global norms. This raises questions: Are countries freely choosing CBE, or is it “the new norm” they must follow to signal progress?

The MLG lens thus helps us see the governance architecture of global CBE convergence. It is a story of negotiation: global actors issue guidelines; regional bodies translate and mediate them; national authorities implement, adapt, or sometimes resist. For example, some Latin American countries have eagerly embraced competency-based curricula with support from UNESCO and the Inter-American Development Bank, while others push back, fearing a loss of educational autonomy and cultural relevance (Lundie et al., 2022; Small, 1996). Multi-level governance analysis will be used in our discussion to interpret how African, Asian, and Latin American cases vary in their uptake of the CBE agenda and how power dynamics play out among stakeholders.

2.3. Purpose-of-Education Critique: Human Capital vs. Holistic Development. The third theoretical strand is a normative and philosophical critique concerning the purpose of education. This perspective asks: Education for what? It problematizes the dominant narrative of education as primarily a means to produce human capital for economic growth, which is central to the global competency agenda (Ramírez Naranjo, 2012). Scholars like Gert Biesta (2010, 2015) remind us that education has multiple purposes – qualification (knowledge and skills), socialization (culture and values), and subjectification (personal development, critical autonomy) (Guillemin, 2024). A narrow focus on competencies tied to employability may skew education toward utilitarian ends, neglecting the broader formation of individuals and citizens.

In the context of CBE convergence, a purpose-of-education critique highlights an epistemic and ethical tension. On one hand, proponents argue that modern economies demand certain transversal skills (creative thinking, collaboration, adaptability) and that schools must urgently update curricula to prepare youth for an “*increasingly uncertain, volatile and ambiguous world*” (OECD, 2015). As OECD’s Andreas Schleicher puts it, “*educational success is no longer about reproducing content knowledge, but about extrapolating from what we know and applying it in novel situations... the world no longer rewards people just for what they know – Google knows everything – but for what they can do with what they know*” (OECD, 2015). This view, rooted in human-capital theory, sees purpose primarily in economic and practical terms – education should produce problem-solvers and innovators for the workforce of tomorrow.

On the other hand, critics caution that overemphasis on competencies can lead to a hollowing out of knowledge and meaning in education. Early competency-based models in vocational training were criticized for being reductionist and behaviorist, focusing on observable tasks at the expense of understanding (Ramírez Naranjo, 2012). Even in newer “21st-century skills” guises, there is a concern that some competency frameworks treat knowledge as just one component in a list, potentially devaluing the transmission of rich disciplinary understanding. Philosophers of education argue that if students are taught in a purely outcomes-driven, market-oriented way, they may develop a kind of instrumental rationality or even cynicism about learning. For instance, when all learning is justified by future job utility, students might conclude that anything not immediately “useful” is irrelevant – a mindset observed as a kind of nihilism or disengagement among some youth. Anecdotal reports from educators note “Gen-Z nihilism” in classrooms – a sense that young people see little intrinsic meaning in education beyond ticking competency boxes for a CV (Burn-Murdoch, 2025). Though this is not easily quantified, it aligns with broader concerns about student disillusionment in highly test-driven or skills-driven systems (Armendariz Sucunza & Berehe, 2025).

Another aspect is the potential loss of civilizational narratives and values. National curricula traditionally have included history, literature, philosophy – content that connects youth to their cultural heritage and collective memory. A shift to a competency framework

often comes with curriculum slimming (to accommodate skill activities) and sometimes a deemphasis of local content in favor of generic global themes. There is a risk of a “fragmented knowledge” experience, where students learn bits of information or practice isolated skills without a coherent narrative or knowledge structure (Ramírez, 2012). Michael Young’s concept of “powerful knowledge” argues that knowledge matters: students, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, deserve access to the powerful concepts and stories that structure our understanding of the world (Rasmussen et al., 2021). From this perspective, thin competency curricula could inadvertently de-skill by denying learners depth, leaving them with formulaic abilities but not the conceptual frameworks to innovate or to situate themselves in a cultural context (OECD, 2015).

In summary, the purpose-of-education critique alerts us to what might be lost in translation when education is redesigned as merely a tool for global competitiveness. It encourages a holistic view: education should indeed impart skills for life and work, but also cultivate critical thinking, ethical judgment, and a sense of identity and agency. These are harder to quantify in competency checklists. Thus, our analysis will use this lens to question whether the global CBE agenda adequately safeguards the intellectual and moral development of learners, or whether it represents, as some critics claim, a “technocratic” vision that reduces education to an “input-output” production process (Ramírez, 2012).

Having established these theoretical foundations, we proceed with a methodology for examining the convergence toward CBE across multiple regions, followed by findings that weave together comparative insights and the above theoretical interpretations.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design: This study employs a qualitative secondary research design, combining comparative policy analysis with critical literature review (Bowen, 2009). We did not collect primary field data; instead, we systematically gathered and analyzed peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and official reports that address competency-based education reforms and knowledge-economy agendas across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. By triangulating multiple sources – including global policy frameworks (e.g., OECD reports,

UNESCO publications), regional strategy documents (AU's CESA, ASEAN declarations), and national curriculum policies – we constructed a cross-regional picture of the CBE convergence phenomenon. Our approach is inherently interdisciplinary, bridging insights from education policy, sociology, and philosophy.

3.2. Data Sources: Key sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases and organizational repositories. We prioritized high-quality, credible sources: for academic perspectives, we focused on Q1-ranked journals and scholarly books on global education policy; for official viewpoints, we used documents from UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank, African Union, ASEAN, and national education ministries. For example, we examined UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring reports and OECD's Education 2030 series for global context, the African Union's CESA strategy for continental objectives, and specific country policy papers (such as Uruguay's 2022 National Curriculum Framework) for on-the-ground reform content (UNESCO, 2024). We also incorporated thought leader quotations (e.g., from Andreas Schleicher of OECD, UNESCO education directors, and prominent education scholars) to capture the discourse around competencies and knowledge.

3.3. Analytical Techniques: We conducted a thematic analysis of the collected texts, coding for themes such as “transnational policy influence,” “competency framework content,” “knowledge vs. skills,” “human capital rhetoric,” “educational sovereignty,” and “equity implications” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Bowen, 2009). Using the theoretical framework, we mapped instances in the data to conceptual constructs: for instance, references to “21st-century skills” promoted in multiple countries were mapped to world society diffusion; mentions of SDG4 or OECD benchmarks in national plans were mapped to multi-level governance; critiques about loss of knowledge depth were mapped to the purpose-of-education theme. A comparative matrix was created to organize findings by region (Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America) and by thematic category, which enabled us to identify similarities and differences in how the CBE agenda manifests across contexts.

3.4. Reproducibility and Transparency: To ensure transparency, we have provided inline citations for specific evidence and quotations from our sources, using a consistent reference format (with DOIs or URLs where available). This allows readers to verify our interpretations

against the original documents. While the selection of literature inherently involved researcher judgment (e.g., focusing on certain countries as exemplars of regional trends), we aimed for comprehensiveness by including multiple perspectives – not only policy endorsements of CBE but also critical analyses. Future researchers can replicate or update this study by following the trail of sources we cite (e.g., examining the same policy documents or extending the comparison to additional countries).

3.5. Limitations: As a secondary analysis, this research is limited by the scope and quality of available sources. Some regions or countries may have less documentation accessible in English, which could bias the analysis toward more reported cases (for instance, we had ample data on East African and Latin American reforms, but less on francophone Africa or smaller ASEAN states). Additionally, while we link policies to theoretical implications, establishing causal claims (e.g., that a given reform was caused by OECD influence) can be challenging without insider interviews or process tracing; our method infers influence from documented evidence but cannot fully account for behind-the-scenes politics. Nonetheless, the methodological triangulation provides a robust basis for the qualitative insights and arguments presented in the discussion.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Global Convergence in Policy Discourse and Designs: Across the three regions studied – Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America – we found strong evidence of a convergence in education policy discourse around competency-based models. Policymakers everywhere articulate similar goals: to equip learners with the skills, competencies, and attitudes needed for the 21st-century global economy and society. This rhetoric aligns closely with transnational agendas. For example, the African Union's CESA 16-25 strategy explicitly mirrors global language, aiming to produce “efficient human resources adapted to African core values” by meeting the knowledge and competency requirements of sustainable development (AU, 2016). It calls for a “paradigm shift” toward transformative education and lifelong learning, echoing UNESCO and SDG4 slogans (Ashipala & Wodon, 2024). In Southeast Asia, ministries of education have integrated “21st Century Skills” into curricula, often under the guidance of UNESCO Bangkok's framework on

transversal competencies (UNESCO, 2016). A UNESCO survey of 10 Asia-Pacific countries reported that “all ten... have policy documents or curricula that promote... transversal competencies”, with critical thinking, creativity, teamwork and other skills emphasized alongside knowledge (UNESCO, 2016). Likewise, in Latin America, governments are reforming curricula around competencias. A recent UNESCO report noted that “In 2022, Uruguay introduced the *Marco Curricular Nacional*, a reform based on the competency-based approach” with the aim that graduates can “*know, think and act with knowledge and responsibility... take initiative... and develop their well-being*” in various domains (UNESCO, 2024). Similarly, Ecuador in 2023 proposed a new curriculum framework centered on developing competencies (UNESCO, 2024). These examples illustrate how competency-based education has become a global lingua franca of curriculum reform.

A striking finding is the role of international benchmarks and assistance in catalyzing these reforms (OECD, 2023). Many countries tie their CBE initiatives to global drivers: participation in PISA or other international assessments often acts as a trigger for curricular change. For instance, after lower-than-desired results in international learning metrics, countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Peru undertook curriculum revisions focusing on core competencies and essential learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2024). In Africa, donor-supported projects frequently promote competency-based approaches (e.g., the World Bank’s SABER initiative and various EU-funded teacher training programs). By 2020, over half of sub-Saharan African countries were in some stage of revising curricula to emphasize “*skills for employability*” and entrepreneurship, aligning with the AU and global youth employment agendas (World Bank, 2020). This supports a multi-level governance interpretation: global norms filtered through regional plans (CESA) and funding conditionalities are steering national policies toward convergence. Even where national governments maintain authority, their reform choices are constrained by expectations set in global forums.

4.2. Regional Variations: Africa, Southeast Asia, Latin America: While convergence is evident, we also observe regional inflections in how CBE is adopted. In Africa, the competency agenda is often framed in terms of addressing historical education quality gaps and unemployment. Governments emphasize not only generic skills but also the development of STEM capabilities and

entrepreneurial skills to transform agrarian economies into knowledge economies (AU, 2016). For example, Kenya’s high-profile curriculum reform, launched in 2017, explicitly moved away from content-laden syllabi to a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) intended to nurture “*innovativeness, critical thinking and problem solving*” from early grades (KICD, 2017). This reform was influenced by both internal critiques of rote learning and external advice from UNESCO and others. However, Kenya’s experience also highlights challenges (KICD, 2017): implementation has been rocky, with teachers and parents struggling to understand the new competency-based assessments and some complaining that basic knowledge was being sidelined. Similarly, South Africa’s curriculum has gone through waves (from outcomes-based education in the 2000s to a “caps” curriculum with more knowledge reinstated), showing a tension between competency ideals and practical feasibility.

In Southeast Asia, many countries have rapidly growing economies and have been keen to integrate global skills to stay competitive. Education plans in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand all trumpet “21st-century competencies” including communication, digital literacy, and global awareness. Southeast Asia has benefited from regional collaboration via SEAMEO (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization) and support from the OECD and UNESCO on frameworks like Global Citizenship Education. A distinctive feature here is the blending of global competencies with local values: for instance, Indonesia’s curriculum incorporates character education alongside competencies, and Singapore balances its “21st Century Competencies” framework with an emphasis on national values and identity. This suggests that while world society pressures push toward homogenization, local policymakers exercise agency to hybridize global models – adopting the competency language but infusing it with local priorities (religious/moral education, national history, etc.). Notably, countries like Vietnam and Cambodia, with support from UNICEF and UNESCO, are revising curricula to be more competency-based as part of broader quality reforms, but they face resource constraints in training teachers and developing new materials. Southeast Asia thus illustrates uneven implementation: Singapore and Malaysia, more resourced, have sophisticated competency assessment systems; poorer countries may have the new policy on paper but little change in classroom practice (a case of

decoupling under global pressure) (Yano & Manns, 2015; UNESCO, 2016).

In Latin America, competency-based education took root somewhat earlier (many countries embraced “competencias” in the 1990s-2000s during neoliberal education reforms). Today, there is a renewed push in the context of the Education 2030 Agenda and the region’s need to improve learning outcomes. Mexico’s 2019 Nueva Escuela Mexicana reform, for example, promotes a humanistic and competency-oriented curriculum, aiming to integrate community and foster critical thinking (UNESCO, 2024). Uruguay’s aforementioned 2022 reform is significant because it represents a comprehensive national shift to competencies and has been accompanied by extensive teacher retraining and new assessment methods. A concern in Latin America is equity: the region has stark disparities, and some fear that competency-based models, if not carefully designed, could widen gaps (for example, students in well-resourced private schools might gain the critical thinking and soft skills that employers value, while those in under-resourced rural schools could be left with minimal competencies). However, proponents argue the opposite – that focusing on essential competencies (like reading, problem-solving, socio-emotional skills) can help address inequality by ensuring all students acquire a baseline of “21st-century skills.” The data is mixed: Chile and Colombia have seen slight improvements in PISA problem-solving scores after introducing skills-focused curricula, but critics note that content knowledge in areas like science has not markedly improved, raising questions about trade-offs.

4.3. Epistemic Tensions: Depth of Knowledge vs. Breadth of Skills. A recurring theme in our findings is the tension between deep knowledge and broad skills. Many officials insist that it’s not an either/or – they talk of “integrating knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.” In practice, however, educators report struggles in balancing the curriculum. For example, South African teachers during the outcomes-based education period voiced that in trying to teach generic outcomes, basic content (like grammar rules or multiplication tables) was neglected, leading to student confusion. This was one reason South Africa partially rolled back to a more content-guided curriculum in 2011. Similarly, in some competency-based pilots in East Africa, evaluations found that students enjoyed more activity-based learning but sometimes lacked factual grounding, making it hard to transfer or apply skills (MINEDUC Rwanda, 2015; NCDC Uganda, 2019). These

cases echo the critique by curriculum theorists like Michael Young, who warned that competency-led curricula might result in a “knowledge-lite” education that deprives especially disadvantaged students of the powerful knowledge needed to transcend their immediate experiences (Rasmussen et al., 2021). Our literature review found support for this concern: one study concluded that early CBE programs in the U.K. “focused on competencies to the detriment of the role of knowledge”, and that complex professional learning could not be fully captured by a checklist of competencies (Ramírez, 2012).

On the other hand, advocates of competencies argue that traditional curricula often involve rote memorization of facts that students quickly forget or cannot use. They claim CBE, when done properly, actually increases depth by focusing on core concepts and their application. For instance, an OECD paper notes that “we always learn by learning something”, and insists state-of-the-art disciplinary knowledge remains important (OECD, 2015); it’s just that education should go further to ensure students can use that knowledge creatively (OECD, 2015). The OECD’s Learning Compass uses the term “transformative competencies” – implying that mastery of knowledge plus the ability to create new value from it is the goal (OECD, n.d.; OECD, 2019). In some of the countries studied, efforts are being made to define competencies in a rich way that includes knowledge. Uruguay’s new framework, for example, did not discard subject content; rather, it organized subjects around competency goals and interdisciplinary projects, so that knowledge is learned in context. Whether this yields better learning outcomes is yet to be seen, but it represents a middle path approach.

Our findings thus suggest that the epistemic outcome of CBE reforms is highly dependent on implementation quality. Where competency frameworks are “thin” or overly generic, teachers may be left without clear guidance, potentially reducing rigor. UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (IBE) cautioned in a global guide that there is “varying, and sometimes contradictory, understanding of competence... confusion between competence and its constituent parts”, with many lists of competencies mixing skills and content without clarity (Marope et al., 2017). This confusion can lead to superficial implementation. Conversely, well-designed competency curricula that identify key knowledge alongside skills might achieve both depth and breadth. The tension is not resolved universally; it remains a point of

contention and active experimentation in many educational systems.

4.4. Human Capital Formation and Governance: A Globalist Agenda? The research indicates that the push for competencies is closely tied to a globalist economic agenda – viewing education as instrumental to producing human capital for competitive markets. In multiple sources, we encountered language framing students as future workers in need of skills for productivity and innovation. The African Union’s CESA guiding principles state plainly: “*Knowledge societies called for by Agenda 2063 are driven by skilled human capital*”, linking education directly to labor force quality (AU, 2016). The critical perspective would label this the neoliberal turn in education – where policies align education with the needs of global capitalism, sometimes at the expense of other aims (civic, moral, spiritual, etc.) (Sangwa, 2025a). One telling quote from a critical review: “CBE is tied to a neoliberal model of education that adopts narrow, functional approaches... embedding existing economic power relationships”, serving an agenda of output efficiency and accountability (Ramírez, 2012). Our findings support that many CBE reforms come packaged with accountability systems (competency standards, testing of skills, outcome metrics) that make education governance more technocratic. This can be seen as using education as a governance tool – by defining what outcomes are expected (e.g., a globally competent, entrepreneurial graduate), governments and international agencies set a form of social control or conditioning, aligning the population with economic needs (Sangwa, 2025b).

We must note, however, that branding this as a purely top-down “globalist agenda” oversimplifies reality. National actors are not just pawns; often they have internalized the human capital ideology and pursue it willingly, believing it is the route to development. For example, Asian tiger economies historically prioritized education for economic growth – now they too are shifting to competencies as they move up the value chain. There is a kind of convergence of interests: global agencies provide the templates and comparative data, while national elites see aligning with these as beneficial for their country’s progress. Yet, when scrutinizing the consequences for national sovereignty, some interesting dynamics emerge. In Latin America, a few countries (like Bolivia under Evo Morales, or Venezuela) rhetorically resisted OECD/World Bank education prescriptions, emphasizing education’s

role in cultural identity and sovereignty. But even they eventually incorporated aspects of the global skills discourse (for instance, Bolivia’s 2023 curriculum update includes productive and technological competencies). It appears that opting out of the global competency agenda is difficult without feeling “left behind” – a testament to how pervasive the norm has become.

4.5. Equity, Ethics, and Youth Epistemology: A critical area of discussion is how the CBE convergence affects equity and the ethical dimensions of education. Proponents argue that competency-based curricula, by focusing on what each learner can do, support a more personalized approach and can help identify and uplift students who might be left behind in a one-size-fits-all content system. For instance, competency frameworks often include socio-emotional skills and values (teamwork, resilience, empathy), which if taught in schools, could benefit all students’ personal development, not just the academically inclined. We saw in some African contexts an explicit equity rationale: curricula are being redesigned to be more inclusive and relevant, so that marginalized learners see purpose in education (e.g., integrating local knowledge and life skills for rural students, or flexible pathways in upper secondary to cater to different talents). There is also the argument that lifelong learning competencies (learning to learn, adaptability) are crucial for disadvantaged learners who may need to retrain throughout life.

However, skeptics raise several equity concerns. One is the assessment issue: measuring competencies (like critical thinking or collaboration) is more complex and subjective than marking factual recall. Well-resourced schools may implement rich performance assessments (presentations, projects) and give qualitative feedback, while under-resourced schools might resort to superficial checklists or ignore the harder-to-teach competencies, thereby widening the gap in actual skill development. Another concern is cultural bias – global competencies often implicitly carry Western-centric notions of, say, what “critical thinking” looks like or what values should be upheld. Indigenous or local forms of knowledge and skill might be undervalued. For example, some Pacific Island educators have worried that global 21st-century skills discourse undervalues community-oriented skills and traditional knowledge systems. The ethical question is whether this constitutes a form of cultural imperialism under the banner of modernization (Marope et al., 2017).

Our findings also touch on the youth experience of these changes. Through the theoretical lens, we speculated about “Gen-Z nihilism” – while hard to measure, there is evidence of growing student anxiety and questioning of the system. The World Economic Forum’s Global Risks Report (2021) listed “youth disillusionment” as a rising risk worldwide (WEF, 2021; Advani, 2021), partly due to economic uncertainties and perhaps the feeling that education is not delivering on its promise. Interviews with students in some countries undergoing heavy reforms reveal mixed feelings: some appreciate the new focus on real-world skills and find school more engaging; others feel like “guinea pigs” in endless experiments, with older generations telling them they lack basics or discipline. If education becomes too overtly utilitarian, some youths may indeed feel a loss of meaning or identity in their learning. This ties to what we discussed as fragmented knowledge – a common refrain from older teachers is that students know “a little about a lot, but not a lot about anything.” From an epistemological standpoint, that fragmentation can feed a sense of nihilism: if knowledge isn’t presented as a coherent, truth-seeking enterprise but rather as modular competences to tick off, students might doubt the value of what they learn beyond the immediate task or test.

Conversely, an optimistic view is that today’s youth, having grown up with information at their fingertips, actually resonate with a competency approach that values what you can do with knowledge. They might find traditional lecture-memorize-test models pointless when Google can provide facts. The Schleicher quote earlier captures this zeitgeist. Many young people want education to be “relevant” – and the competency movement, at least rhetorically, is about relevance (applying knowledge to life, solving community problems, etc.). Programs like project-based learning and community service components (now incorporated in some competency-based curricula) can indeed give students a sense of purpose and agency, countering nihilism. So the impact on youth epistemology is not uniform; it likely depends on how reforms are communicated and enacted. Education can either become a hollow credential chase or a meaningful preparation for life – the difference often lies in implementation fidelity and philosophical clarity at the school level.

4.6. Thought Leaders on the Future of Education: To ground the discussion, it’s worth

highlighting a few voices of thought leaders that encapsulate the debates we’ve found:

Andreas Schleicher (OECD), in championing the competency approach, argues that in today’s economy “the kind of skills that are easiest to teach and test are also easiest to digitize, automate, and outsource”. He suggests education must shift to developing uniquely human capacities – creativity, critical thinking, collaboration – as these will set people apart (OECD, 2015). Schleicher’s stance reinforces the knowledge economy narrative: content knowledge is necessary but not sufficient; the premium is on using knowledge in novel ways. This justifies a lot of OECD’s push for curricula redesign and new forms of assessment (like PISA’s problem-solving tests).

UNESCO Leaders (e.g., former Director-General Irina Bokova or current education heads) often emphasize a balance. They endorse competencies (especially for Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship), but also underscore education’s humanistic mission. A quote from the Incheon Declaration 2015: “Education is a public good... essential for peace, tolerance, human fulfillment and sustainable development”. The Framework for Action calls for relevant learning outcomes including “*foundational skills, transferable skills, and learner attitudes*” but in the context of equity and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2016). UNESCO thus tries to position the competency agenda within a broader vision that includes values and social justice, not just market needs.

Michael Young (Education Sociologist) provides a counterpoint, arguing for the centrality of disciplinary knowledge. He coined “powerful knowledge” to describe the concepts that allow students to think beyond their everyday experience (Rasmussen et al., 2021). Young is skeptical of generic competencies divorced from content, warning that without a knowledge-rich curriculum, we perpetuate inequality (since only those who acquire powerful knowledge – often the already privileged – will truly benefit). He doesn’t reject skills, but insists skills and values should “*come from engaging with knowledge*” rather than replacing it. This perspective is influencing some curriculum designers to ensure that competency-based reforms do not lead to an impoverished curriculum, but rather to one that strategically selects essential knowledge and builds skills around it.

Regional Thought Leaders: In Africa, an educationist like Oby Ezekwesili (former Nigerian Minister of Education) has spoken about the need for curriculum sovereignty – that Africa must adopt global best practices but adapt them to local realities (such as multilingual contexts, indigenous knowledge). She supports competencies in principle but cautions against wholesale importation of models that ignore, for instance, Africa’s class sizes or infrastructure limitations. Latin America’s Pablo Gentili has critiqued “market-driven education” and urged that any competency framework be paired with citizenship education and critical pedagogy so that students become not just workers, but informed, critical citizens.

In synthesizing these perspectives, it’s evident that the CBE convergence is a nuanced phenomenon: it carries the promise of modernizing education and making learning more relevant, but it also embodies ideological choices about what education is for. The interplay of ideas from global technocrats, local educators, and critical scholars will continue to shape how this movement evolves.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The global convergence toward competency-based education is a defining trend of 21st-century education reform – one that reflects both aspirations and anxieties of our time. On one level, it represents a hopeful vision: that by cultivating a broad set of competencies, education can empower individuals to thrive in a rapidly changing, interconnected world. It is a vision propelled by transnational consensus that education is the key to sustainable development and competitive knowledge economies. Yet, as our analysis shows, this movement also raises profound questions about what we value in education and who gets to decide.

5.1. Strategic Insights: The convergence is being driven by a potent mix of global norm-setting and local buy-in, which means it is likely irreversible in the near term. However, the form it takes is not monolithic. There is room for strategic adjustment to ensure that the competency agenda strengthens rather than undermines educational quality and equity. A core insight is that balance and integration are crucial: countries that manage to integrate competencies with solid knowledge foundations and local relevance will likely see positive

outcomes, whereas those that swing to extremes (either rigid traditionalism or vague skills-only curricula) may falter. Another insight is that implementing CBE is resource-intensive – it requires continuous teacher development, new materials, and often new assessment approaches. This has implications for international support: global bodies championing these reforms have a responsibility to assist with capacity building, lest the reforms remain on paper only.

To address the identified tensions and risks, we propose an Impact Assessment Framework for competency-based curriculum reforms. This framework would guide policymakers to evaluate: (1) Knowledge Integrity – does the curriculum maintain a core of powerful, contextually relevant knowledge? (2) Skill Transferability – are competencies taught in a way that students can transfer to real contexts, and how is this measured? (3) Equity Impact – are disadvantaged groups benefiting equally, and what differentiation/support is in place to prevent widening gaps? (4) Cultural Resonance – does the curriculum honor local languages, values, and narratives even as it introduces global competencies? (5) Student Agency and Well-being – do students find the learning meaningful and are they developing as whole persons (not experiencing alienation or excessive stress)? By assessing these dimensions, governments can adjust course as needed – for example, if “knowledge integrity” is low, they might reintegrate more content; if “cultural resonance” is weak, involve community stakeholders to localize the curriculum.

5.2. Recommendations: Based on our study, we offer the following stakeholder-specific recommendations:

For National Policymakers and Curriculum Designers: Embrace the competency framework critically and selectively. Do not simply copy international models; instead, convene local experts, employers, academics, and teachers to define what competencies truly matter for your society’s future – including civic and ethical competencies, not just economic ones. Ensure that essential disciplinary knowledge (literacy, numeracy, scientific thinking, historical understanding) is woven into competency development – these are not mutually exclusive. Plan extensive teacher training and phase-in periods; a new curriculum fails if teachers are not confident and supported in delivering it. Also, build robust feedback loops: pilot the reforms, gather data from classrooms, and be willing to iterate. Guard educational sovereignty by aligning global

ideas with national goals – for instance, if global benchmarks push something irrelevant, don't be afraid to adapt or reject it in favor of local needs.

For International Organizations (OECD, UNESCO, Donors): Promote competencies in a way that respects diversity and avoids one-size-fits-all prescriptions. Provide technical support that helps countries develop their own contextualized competency frameworks. When benchmarking or comparing, use dashboards that include multiple outcomes (not only cognitive skills but also equity indices, well-being measures, etc.) to avoid perverse incentives. Recognize the risk of superficial implementation: invest in knowledge-sharing of best practices in teaching competencies (e.g., communities of practice for teachers across countries). Also, calibrate expectations – acknowledge that rebuilding curricula is a long-term endeavor and be patient with countries' gradual progress rather than pushing rapid, disruptive change. Finally, consider ethical implications: ensure that global education agendas remain anchored in the humanistic values of education as a right and public good, not just a means to produce workers.

For Educators and Schools: At the ground level, educators should interpret competency-based standards as an opportunity to innovate in pedagogy – using project-based learning, inquiry methods, and formative assessments that give students more active roles. However, teachers should also act as critical gatekeepers of quality: if they feel certain basics are being lost, they should voice this and supplement as needed. School leaders should provide continuous professional development on how to teach and assess competencies meaningfully. Importantly, educators can help students connect the dots: explicitly teach the relationship between skills and knowledge (e.g., show how mastering historical facts enables critical analysis of current events). This will help students see their learning as a cohesive whole rather than disjointed tasks, mitigating the fragmentation issue. In addition, schools should engage parents and communities in the reform – explaining the changes and the reasons, to build support and understanding.

For Researchers and Civil Society: Continued independent monitoring and research are needed to evaluate the outcomes of competency-based reforms. Are students graduating with better problem-solving abilities? Are innovation and entrepreneurship indicators improving in society? Or are gaps widening? Scholars should

examine these questions empirically, including longitudinal studies. Civil society organizations, including teacher unions and student groups, should have a voice in policy adjustments – ensuring that the reforms serve learners' interests, not just economic metrics. Advocacy may be needed to keep important subjects (arts, history, local culture) from being squeezed out by an over-emphasis on measurable competencies.

In conclusion, the globalist agenda in education – encapsulated in the rise of competency-based curricula – is a double-edged sword. It carries the promise of modernization and common progress towards a knowledge society, but it also embodies a project of governance that risks narrowing the purpose of education to economic ends. We have argued that awareness of the underlying influences and potential trade-offs is vital. By applying theories of world society, governance, and educational purpose, we shed light on how deeply interwoven global and local forces have become in shaping what and how children learn. The challenge and opportunity now is to guide this convergence in ways that truly empower learners – not only as future workers, but as whole human beings capable of critical thought, compassionate citizenship, and creative contribution to their cultures and the world.

Education has always been about more than the sum of its parts; as we transform curricula for a new era, we must ensure we do not lose sight of the transformative potential of education itself – to build not just human capital, but humane and knowledgeable societies.

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