



The Role of Competency-Based Education in Building Inclusive and Sustainable Communities

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Abstract

In the face of pressing global challenges and widening social inequalities, education must move beyond conventional models to address the complex needs of contemporary communities. Competency-Based Education (CBE) emerges as a transformative approach that emphasizes mastery of skills over memorization, while fostering critical thinking, civic engagement, and problem-solving abilities. This chapter applies a conceptual and analytical method by reviewing policy frameworks, academic literature, and case-based evidence to explore how CBE can be effectively aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysis highlights that CBE not only strengthens individual competencies but also enhances social cohesion, encourages local innovation, and builds resilience against socioeconomic and environmental pressures. Findings demonstrate that when implemented systematically, CBE contributes to inclusive educational practices, equips learners with context-relevant skills, and creates pathways for meaningful community participation. Furthermore, CBE frameworks can serve as catalysts for sustainable development by integrating educational outcomes with broader community development initiatives. The study concludes that the integration of CBE into educational policy and practice requires bold reforms, intersect oral collaboration, and long-term commitment from governments, institutions, and civil society. By positioning CBE as both a response to current challenges and a roadmap for future development, this chapter contributes to the growing body of research that underscores the role of education as a driver of inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies.

Keywords: Competency-based education, sustainability, SDGs, community empowerment, equity in learning, lifelong learning, educational transformation.

Introduction

In an increasingly fragmented world where inequalities persist and sustainability remains a critical challenge, education stands at a crossroads. Traditional education systems, while historically effective in expanding access, are now insufficient to meet the multidimensional demands of the 21st century, which extend beyond economic productivity to encompass social justice, inclusion, resilience, and sustainability. The notion of universal education is thus being redefined, shifting the focus from simple access and attainment toward relevance—what learners are equipped with and how their

learning translates into the development of thriving, sustainable communities (Kakar et al., 2019).

Within this context, Competency-Based Education (CBE) has emerged as a transformative paradigm that reimagines the purpose and practice of education. Unlike conventional models centered on memorization and content acquisition, CBE emphasizes mastery, meaningful application, and lifelong adaptability (Rhoney et al., 2024). Scholars argue that CBE goes beyond technical skills or vocational preparation; it fosters critical thinking, civic engagement, and equity-driven learning that is personalized, culturally responsive, and inclusive (Shatten, 2024). Importantly, CBE aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by equipping learners with key competencies such as systems thinking, collaboration, resilience, and ethical reasoning, which are vital to addressing global challenges like poverty, climate change, and inequality (Wao, 2024).

Despite its growing recognition, research on CBE highlights several gaps. While theoretical advancements have underscored its potential, empirical studies exploring its integration into community development strategies remain limited. Moreover, systemic adoption faces barriers including policy inertia, unequal resource allocation, and resistance to pedagogical change (Rahmani, 2020). These challenges underscore the need for more rigorous examination of how CBE can be strategically embedded in education systems to empower communities and support sustainable development.

The purpose of this study is therefore twofold: first, to critically analyze the alignment between CBE principles and strategies for inclusive community empowerment; and second, to propose actionable pathways for integrating CBE into national and local development agendas. By addressing the research gaps and exploring both opportunities and challenges, this chapter seeks to advance the debate on how education can serve not merely as preparation for employment, but as a fundamental solution for equity, sustainability, and collective well-being. Ultimately, the work positions CBE as a bridge between individual agency and societal transformation, contributing to the discourse on education as a driver of sustainable development.

Material and Method

This study employed a conceptual and analytical approach to examine the transformative role of Competency-Based Education (CBE) in addressing global challenges and supporting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Rather than relying on empirical fieldwork, the research was conducted through an extensive review of policy frameworks, academic literature, and case-based evidence drawn from international and regional contexts. These sources were carefully selected to capture both theoretical foundations and practical applications of CBE, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of its potential impact on community development.

The analysis followed a documentary review method, which involved the systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of relevant documents, including government reports, institutional policy papers, peer-reviewed journal articles, and case studies. The reviewed materials were critically assessed to identify recurring themes, gaps, and patterns in the integration of CBE with educational and community development strategies.

Data synthesis was guided by a thematic analytical framework, which enabled the categorization of findings into core domains: (1) individual competency development, (2) social cohesion and community resilience, (3) innovation and sustainability, and (4) policy and institutional reforms. This structure allowed the study to highlight both the micro-level benefits of CBE for learners and the macro-level contributions to societal transformation.

Given the conceptual nature of the research, no ethical approval was required, as no human or animal participants were directly involved. However, all sources were properly acknowledged to ensure academic integrity. The method adopted thus ensures replicability by other researchers interested in further exploring the alignment of CBE with sustainable development initiatives.

Findings

Reframing Education for Sustainable and Inclusive Development

There are moments in history when the familiar must be questioned—when the systems we take for granted reveal themselves to be inadequate in the face of new realities. Education, for all its promise and noble intentions, has reached such a moment (Deguine et al, 2021). While it has undeniably lifted lives, opened doors, and advanced civilizations, the truth is this: in many places, it is still falling short. The world is more connected than ever, but also more unequal. Environmental collapse looms, but remains politically paralyzed. Marginalized voices grow louder, yet still struggle to be heard. In the face of such complexity, conventional schooling—structured around uniformity, competition, and memorization—can no longer claim to be enough. If we are to prepare learners for a sustainable and inclusive future, education itself must be reimagined. Not rebranded. Not tweaked at the edges. But fundamentally reframed. To reframe education means to challenge the long-standing assumption that its highest purpose is the production of human capital for economic growth. That model—rooted in industrial logic—has had its time (Selwyn, 2023). While it brought about undeniable prosperity in some corners of the world, it also deepened inequalities, entrenched a narrow view of success, and severed learning from life. Education became something to survive, a pathway to status, a test of endurance rather than enlightenment. But we no longer have the luxury of schooling that measures success by GDP or test scores alone. Our survival now depends on something else: our capacity to live well together on a finite planet, with dignity and justice for all.

This is where the call to align education with sustainable and inclusive development finds its urgency. Sustainable development, as defined by the United Nations, is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own. It demands a long view. It asks us to think systemically, ethically, intergenerationally. Inclusive development, on the other hand, insists that no one be left behind—that progress is not truly progress if it excludes the marginalized, exploits the vulnerable, or silences the different (Gupta & Vegelin, 2023). When taken seriously, these two principles transform what education should be—not a conveyor belt of credentials, but a space of awakening, dialogue, and shared responsibility. This reframing begins with purpose. Why do we educate? In a world where ecosystems are collapsing, misinformation spreads like wildfire, and cultural polarization fractures communities, surely education must serve more than employment or social status. It must cultivate

critical thinkers who can discern truth from propaganda. It must nurture empathy across lines of difference. It must prepare learners to question not just how to live, but how to live well – with others, with the Earth, with themselves. It must awaken a moral imagination. This shift in purpose also demands a shift in content. The curriculum can no longer be limited to abstract knowledge and siloed subjects. It must embrace systems thinking, environmental literacy, global citizenship, ethical reasoning, and civic responsibility (Chhatlani, 2023). Learners must understand the complex interdependencies that define our world: how climate change intersects with health, how inequality feeds conflict, how technological progress without ethics can do harm. But this content cannot be imposed as moral preaching. It must be lived, explored, debated, questioned. Sustainability is not a topic; it is a way of seeing and acting. The reframing of education must include a deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Husic, 2024). In most conventional systems, learners are treated as identical units – expected to learn in the same way, at the same pace, under the same conditions. Those who cannot, or do not, are often pushed out or deemed failures. This is not only unjust – it is inefficient, wasteful, inhumane. An inclusive approach to education recognizes that learners arrive with different histories, needs, talents, and burdens. It does not aim to make them the same, but to honor their uniqueness while providing the scaffolding for everyone to succeed. This requires flexible pathways, adaptive teaching, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the humility to listen before teaching.

Inclusion also means confronting the invisible hierarchies within knowledge itself. For too long, Western, formal, academic knowledge has been privileged as superior (Kikabhai, 2022). Yet traditional knowledge systems – indigenous practices, oral histories, community wisdom – offer vital insights into sustainability, resilience, and social cohesion. Reframing education means expanding whose knowledge counts, and where it comes from. It means making room for pluriversality: the recognition that there are many ways of knowing, being, and learning, and that true understanding emerges from dialogue, not domination (Lamberti, 2022). But even with a new purpose, new content, and new inclusivity, the reframing is incomplete unless we also transform how education is practiced. Pedagogy matters. You cannot teach democracy through authoritarian methods. You cannot foster curiosity through rigid conformity. You cannot inspire cooperation through ranking and competition. Sustainable and inclusive development requires an education that is participatory, dialogical, experiential, and inquiry-driven. One that invites learners to co-create knowledge, to take action, to reflect on their assumptions, and to learn from failure. It requires teachers who are not gatekeepers, but facilitators, mentors, companions on a shared journey of growth.

The role of the teacher, then, must be reimagined too. In many systems, teachers are overworked, underpaid, and constrained by outdated curricula and punitive accountability measures. Yet we ask them to be innovators, guides, and emotional anchors. This is not fair. Nor is it sustainable. If education is to serve the future, teachers must be supported as professionals and as people. They must be trusted, given time to learn, collaborate, and experiment. Their wellbeing must be protected, and their insights must shape policy. Reframing education means reframing our relationship with those who deliver it. There are also broader structural and political questions that must be addressed. If sustainable and inclusive education is the goal, then education systems must be financed accordingly (Shutaleva et al, 2023). They must be insulated from political short-termism

and empowered to innovate. Curricula must be localized, allowing communities to adapt learning to their specific realities. Accreditation systems must evolve to recognize competencies, not just credentials. And international cooperation must prioritize educational justice—not the export of one model, but the mutual exchange of ideas, support, and solidarity.

We must also be vigilant about the seductive promises of technology. Digital tools can certainly enhance access, personalize learning, and connect learners globally. But they are not neutral. Who designs them? Who owns the data? Who benefits? In the rush to digitalize, we must not lose sight of the human dimension of education. Learning is not a transaction—it is a relationship. It involves emotion, trust, presence. No app can replace that. At its core, this reframing of education is a spiritual task. interdependence, compassion, justice, reverence for life. It asks us to move beyond efficiency and performance, to embrace vulnerability, uncertainty, and hope. To educate not only for knowledge, but for wisdom. Not only for answers, but for better questions (Smith et al, 2022). Not only for the individual, but for the common good. And perhaps most importantly, it asks us to trust young people. They are not empty vessels waiting to be filled. They are bearers of vision, courage, and creativity. They are not just future citizens—they are current stakeholders in a world that urgently needs their voice, their energy, their dreams. A reframed education listens to them. It empowers them. It walks beside them. None of this is easy. Reframing education means letting go of what is familiar. It means risking failure. It means pushing against systems that resist change. But the stakes are too high for business as usual. The crises we face—ecological, economic, social, and spiritual—are deeply interwoven. And so too must our response be. Education, reimagined, can be the thread that weaves resilience, equity, and sustainability into the fabric of our shared future. To reframe education is not just a technical challenge. It is an ethical imperative. A moral call. A leap of faith that says: another world is possible—and it begins in the classroom, in the community, in the hearts and minds of learners who are not just preparing for the future, but shaping it right now.

The Core Principles of Competency-Based Education (CBE)

At the heart of educational reform lies a deceptively simple question: What should learners walk away with at the end of their education? For far too long, systems of learning around the world have answered this question with metrics and checklists—years completed, tests passed, grades achieved. But these proxies for knowledge have often left learners unprepared for the intricacies of life beyond the classroom. In contrast, Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers a different proposition. It reframes learning not as a passive absorption of content, but as an intentional journey toward mastery, self-awareness, adaptability, and action. CBE is not just a method; it is a philosophy grounded in human development, social relevance, and the belief that every individual can and should be equipped to contribute meaningfully to society.

One of the most fundamental tenets of CBE is its focus on measurable competencies—clear, observable, and transferable abilities that encompass not just knowledge, but the application of that knowledge in real-world contexts (Holmes et al, 2021). A learner does not merely study a concept; they demonstrate their ability to use it, refine it, and relate it to broader challenges. In this way, CBE shifts the goalposts. It doesn't reward memorization or speed but values depth, clarity, and fluency. It encourages learners to grow into thinkers, problem-solvers, collaborators, and citizens. Yet, competency is not a destination

reached in isolation. CBE emphasizes personalized learning pathways, recognizing that learners progress at different rates and arrive with different strengths, needs, and aspirations (Natale, 2024). Traditional education systems often bind learners to fixed timelines, expecting uniformity in pace and performance. CBE pushes back against this rigidity. It insists that learning is a personal journey, and that equity means giving each learner the time and tools they need to achieve mastery—not just to survive the system, but to thrive within and beyond it.

Another central principle is the emphasis on authentic assessment. In CBE, the test is not a moment of anxiety or finality—it is a part of the learning. Assessments are integrated, formative, and performance-based. They ask: Can the learner apply this skill in a meaningful way? Can they connect theory to action, reflect on their decisions, and improve through feedback? Gone are the days of one-size-fits-all exams. Instead, CBE embraces portfolios, projects, community engagement, and other methods that allow learners to show what they know in diverse, human-centered ways. This also means that assessment becomes a tool for empowerment, not judgment. Closely tied to this is the principle of transparency and clarity. Competency-based learning is grounded in clearly defined expectations. Learners understand from the outset what is expected of them, why it matters, and how they will be assessed (Tovani, 2023). This transparency not only demystifies the learning process but fosters a sense of ownership and motivation. The learner is no longer at the mercy of hidden rubrics or shifting standards; instead, they are partners in their own education, able to track their progress and direct their energy with purpose.

CBE also places significant weight on relevance. Education is not an abstraction—it must speak to the world learners inhabit. That world is full of uncertainty, complexity, and change (Kayyali, 2024 a). Whether it's climate change, economic volatility, migration, technological disruption, or social polarization, today's learners must be equipped with more than academic facts. They need the tools to adapt, communicate, and innovate across boundaries. CBE meets this challenge by anchoring learning in real-life contexts (Shatten, 2024). The curriculum is not simply about what is traditionally considered 'important'—it is about what is useful, ethical, and urgent in today's communities and tomorrow's societies. This relevance energizes learners because they see the connection between their education and the lives they hope to lead. Embedded within all of this is a deep respect for learner agency. CBE treats learners not as empty vessels, but as active participants in shaping their educational journey (Reynolds & Penczak, 2023). They are given choices in how they learn, space to reflect, and voice in their development. This fosters not only better learning outcomes but also a stronger sense of self-efficacy, which is crucial for lifelong learning. After all, education should not end with graduation. The aim is to build individuals who can continue learning, adapting, and contributing across the span of their lives.

Collaboration and feedback are essential practices in CBE environments (Freyn et al, 2021). Unlike competitive models that isolate learners and rank them against one another, CBE fosters communities of practice. Learners are encouraged to work together, support each other, and learn through interaction. Feedback is not a punishment but a gift—something that fuels improvement and affirms effort. Teachers, in this model, act less as gatekeepers and more as facilitators, coaches, and mentors. Their role is not just to deliver content, but to guide, question, encourage, and unlock potential. Importantly, CBE invites a rethinking

of the role of teachers, institutions, and policy frameworks. Teachers need not only content expertise but pedagogical flexibility and relational skills. Institutions must redesign their structures to support individualized pacing, cross-disciplinary projects, and diverse forms of assessment. Policymakers, too, must shift their emphasis from compliance to learning outcomes, ensuring that accountability measures reflect real-world competence rather than surface-level performance (Kayyali, 2025). These systemic changes are not easy – but they are necessary if education is to become a tool for transformation rather than reproduction. What makes the core principles of CBE particularly resonant in our time is their alignment with both human development and social justice. In placing learners at the center, CBE rejects elitism and exclusion. It is designed not for the top 10% but for the full range of learners, regardless of background. It speaks powerfully to the idea that everyone, given the right support, can grow. It embraces diversity not as a challenge to overcome but as a source of strength and insight. This inclusiveness makes CBE a compelling model for countries and communities committed to addressing educational disparities and building resilient, participatory societies (Swindell, 2022). Yet, these principles are not always easy to implement. They require courage, creativity, and a willingness to move beyond comfort zones. Institutions must let go of outdated models; teachers must retool their methods; learners must step into new levels of responsibility. But in return, education becomes something far more dynamic and democratic. It becomes a living, breathing process of empowerment.

In the final analysis, the principles of Competency-Based Education are not merely educational strategies – they are commitments. Commitments to learning that matters. To assessment that affirms (Maki, 2023). To systems that serve all. And to futures that are not only imaginable but attainable. In a world that often feels fractured and uncertain, CBE offers a way to ground learning in purpose, people, and possibility. It dares to believe that when individuals are equipped with the right competencies, they can shape communities that are not only more inclusive, but more sustainable, more just, and more hopeful. That belief, grounded in both practice and principle, is what makes Competency-Based Education not only relevant – but revolutionary.

Empowering Communities through Skills-Oriented Learning

Empowerment is a word we often encounter in development discourse, but one that is rarely unpacked with the depth it deserves. To empower is not merely to provide – whether it be resources, tools, or knowledge – but to restore agency, to awaken possibility, and to equip individuals and communities to navigate life on their own terms. In this spirit, skills-oriented learning becomes more than a pedagogical strategy – it becomes a vehicle for reclaiming dignity, expanding opportunity, and fostering resilience from the ground up. It is in this context that Competency-Based Education (CBE) reveals its transformative potential – not only for learners as individuals but for the communities to which they belong and contribute.

Communities are not abstract units; they are made up of people whose lived realities are often shaped by overlapping systems of inequality, exclusion, and generational disadvantage. In many places around the world, formal education has operated in parallel to these communities rather than in partnership with them. Curricula are designed in distant offices, standards are imposed without consultation, and the promise of learning often feels disconnected from the realities of local life (Nichols, 2022). As a result, education, rather than being a bridge to opportunity, too often becomes a sorting

mechanism—identifying those who can “make it out” and leaving the rest behind. But what if education worked the other way around? What if instead of pulling the most talented individuals out of communities, it poured energy and skills into them? What if learning was rooted not in abstraction, but in the practical and pressing challenges that communities themselves identify? That is the vision that underpins skills-oriented learning within a CBE framework—a model where skills are not simply for employment, but for empowerment. For solving local problems. For building networks of trust. For strengthening the social and economic fabric of a place, one learner at a time.

Skills-oriented learning thrives when it begins with context. A community facing food insecurity may prioritize agricultural innovation and food processing; one facing youth unemployment may seek out digital literacy or entrepreneurship skills; one recovering from conflict may focus on peacebuilding and trauma-informed communication (Kote et al, 2024). These aren't just educational topics—they are lifelines. And when the learning aligns with what matters most in people's daily lives, motivation deepens, engagement sharpens, and outcomes become more meaningful. This is education that listens first, teaches second. Skills in the CBE paradigm are not limited to technical know-how. While vocational and professional skills are essential, the broader landscape includes soft skills—critical thinking, emotional intelligence, intercultural communication, collaboration, leadership, and adaptability. These capacities are crucial for any community navigating the pressures of globalization, environmental change, or shifting demographics. They allow people not only to survive but to shape their future together. When these skills are developed within a communal setting, they begin to redefine what development looks like—not as charity or infrastructure alone, but as human capability in action.

An important dimension of this empowerment is intergenerational. Skills-oriented learning in a community does not stop with the individual learner—it ripples outward. When a young person learns how to start a business or advocate for their community, that knowledge often feeds back into family structures, peer networks, and local institutions (Kayyali & Christiansen, 2024). Elders learn from youth; parents learn from children; formal and informal knowledge systems begin to blend. The classroom spills into the street, the home, the market. Learning becomes part of the community's rhythm. And in this fluid exchange of skills and stories, new forms of solidarity are born. This also touches on the notion of ownership. Traditional models of education often cast the institution as the sole purveyor of knowledge, and the student as the recipient. But in community-centered, skills-based models, learning is co-produced (Kayyali, 2024 b). A teacher might design a curriculum with the input of local artisans, farmers, or health workers. A student's final project might address a tangible community need—installing solar panels, organizing a recycling campaign, or creating a mobile app for local trade. In each case, the learner becomes an actor, not just a subject. And when people see that their learning has real impact, the sense of ownership grows. That ownership, in turn, builds pride, responsibility, and long-term engagement with both learning and community wellbeing.

This is particularly powerful in communities that have been historically marginalized. Whether through colonization, systemic racism, economic exclusion, or forced displacement, many communities have been told—implicitly or explicitly—that their knowledge systems don't count, that their contributions are lesser, that their development must come from outside. Skills-oriented learning challenges this narrative. It asserts that knowledge is everywhere (Martin, 2024). That dignity resides in every language, every

tradition, every struggle. It invites communities to draw on their own strengths, while also accessing new tools and frameworks that expand their capacity to solve problems in their own way. For example, consider a rural community confronting water scarcity. In a traditional system, external experts may arrive with a prepackaged curriculum or a technology-driven solution. In a CBE-informed, skills-oriented approach, however, learners would investigate the problem through community interviews, analyze water usage data, compare traditional conservation practices with modern systems, and then co-develop a solution that is ecologically and culturally appropriate. The process itself becomes a form of empowerment—not only is a problem addressed, but trust is built, voices are heard, and learning becomes embedded in the community’s fabric.

Of course, this kind of transformation cannot happen without a shift in how we think about teachers and facilitators. In a CBE model, the role of the educator changes dramatically (Prokes et al, 2021). No longer are they the gatekeepers of truth; they become designers of learning experiences, mentors, and connectors. They must be able to relate to the community, adapt content to different needs, and value both academic and experiential knowledge. This requires professional development, yes—but more than that, it requires humility, cultural sensitivity, and a willingness to learn alongside students. In this way, the educator is also empowered—because they are no longer isolated in delivering a rigid curriculum but engaged in a dynamic, evolving, and impactful process. And what of the broader systems—institutions, governments, funders? Empowering communities through skills-oriented learning means they too must adapt. Policymakers must be willing to fund flexible programs, support alternative credentials, and evaluate success in new ways. Accreditation bodies must recognize non-formal learning. Donors must resist the urge to measure only short-term outputs and invest in long-term community capacity. In short, systems must align not just with efficiency, but with empowerment.

Technology, too, has a role to play—if used wisely. Digital tools can connect learners across geographies, offer simulations, amplify voices, and provide access to resources that would otherwise be out of reach. But tech must be a means, not an end. It should support community goals, not replace human connection (Kayyali, 2025 b). The most effective tools are those that are co-designed with users, accessible offline, and sensitive to local languages and cultures. Empowering communities through skills-oriented learning is not about teaching people to “catch up” to some imagined norm (Mariaye, 2022). It is about acknowledging that they have always had the capacity to lead, innovate, and create—if only systems would get out of the way, or better yet, stand alongside them. It is about replacing models of dependency with models of agency. It is about building bridges between tradition and innovation, between formal and informal knowledge, between local wisdom and global possibility. This approach does not pretend to solve every problem. It is not a silver bullet. But it is a pathway—honest, human, and hopeful. A pathway that says development is not something done to communities, but something created with them. A pathway that recognizes that the greatest resource any community has is its people—and that the most powerful investment we can make is in their skills, their stories, and their shared future. When we see learning this way, we no longer talk about education as something that ends at the school gate. We begin to see it as a lifelong, community-wide process of becoming—of becoming skilled, becoming connected, and most importantly, becoming empowered.

Challenges, Transformations, and the Path Ahead

The promise of Competency-Based Education (CBE) is undeniable: an educational model rooted in equity, personalized learning, relevance, and practical application—capable of transforming not only learners but the communities they belong to (Rhoney et al, 2024). Yet between the vision and the realization lies a complicated terrain, one marked by systemic inertia, cultural resistance, logistical limitations, and deeply entrenched educational paradigms. As we look toward the path ahead, it is crucial to pause and reflect on the multifaceted challenges that must be navigated, the transformations already unfolding, and the future possibilities that continue to emerge—slowly, unevenly, but unmistakably. To begin with, institutional inertia remains one of the greatest barriers to meaningful transformation. Traditional education systems are not merely outdated—they are deeply rooted in bureaucracies, funding models, certification systems, and societal expectations that are difficult to shift. Time-based models of advancement, standardized testing, and rigid curricula still dominate in most countries. The idea of letting learners move at their own pace, demonstrate competencies through diverse assessments, or pursue interdisciplinary pathways is often seen as impractical or too radical. Even when policy supports CBE in theory, implementation in practice often stumbles against a wall of logistical and cultural resistance. Schools, universities, and ministries may struggle to translate vision into action—not because they lack belief in the model, but because the surrounding systems are not yet equipped to support it (Kshetri, 2024).

Equally significant are the questions of assessment and accountability. In a competency-based model, traditional assessments—exams, term papers, final grades—lose their central authority. Instead, learners are evaluated on their ability to demonstrate and apply skills in real-world contexts. But how do we ensure consistency and fairness across different learners, institutions, and geographies? How do we train educators to make reliable judgments, design authentic assessments, and avoid bias in performance evaluations? And perhaps most importantly, how do we convince policymakers, parents, and even students themselves that these new ways of measuring learning are not inferior, but richer and more meaningful? Then there is the capacity gap—a challenge that cuts across all levels. Educators are at the frontlines of CBE, yet many have not been trained to teach this way (Nombo, 2022). They are expected to shift from content delivery to facilitation, from grading to mentoring, from compliance to creativity—all while managing classrooms, meeting targets, and often working in under-resourced environments. Without proper support, professional development, and time to adapt, even the most enthusiastic teachers can become disillusioned. Similarly, school leaders and administrators need a different kind of training to lead CBE institutions. They must foster cultures of experimentation, collaboration, and learner-centeredness, while navigating complex external pressures and often contradictory demands from oversight bodies.

Cultural perceptions also play a subtle but powerful role. In many societies, education is closely tied to status, formality, and tradition (Fuentelsaz et al, 2023). There are deep expectations about what school should look like, how learning should feel, and what success should mean. Parents may fear that without standardized tests or rigid curricula, their children will be left behind. Employers may hesitate to recognize alternative credentials. Students themselves, conditioned by years of rote learning, may find it difficult to adjust to a system that asks them to take ownership, question assumptions, and move at their own pace. These shifts require not just structural change, but cultural

dialogue—conversations that reframe what it means to learn, achieve, and grow. Technology, while offering great promise, also presents a double-edged sword. On one hand, digital platforms can support personalized learning, real-time feedback, and flexible access to resources. On the other hand, reliance on technology can deepen inequalities, especially in communities with limited infrastructure, internet access, or digital literacy. If not implemented thoughtfully, tech-enhanced CBE could reinforce the very exclusions it seeks to overcome. Moreover, overemphasis on digital solutions can risk reducing the richness of human learning to algorithmic interactions. Education, especially when framed around competencies like empathy, communication, and cultural understanding, must remain deeply human—even in a digital age.

Yet, despite these obstacles, transformation is underway. Around the world, pilot programs and grassroots initiatives are challenging the dominant narrative of what education can and should be. In rural areas, CBE is enabling learners to acquire life-relevant skills while remaining rooted in their communities. In refugee contexts, it provides a pathway for learners with interrupted education to re-engage without shame or delay. In vocational training centers, CBE frameworks are being used to recognize skills learned informally and open new doors for employment and entrepreneurship (Cates et al, 2021). These are not hypotheticals—they are real, evolving models that show what is possible when learning is centered around people, not institutions. Some countries are moving beyond pilots. Rwanda, for example, has integrated competency-based curricula into its national education strategy, embedding skills like critical thinking, communication, and entrepreneurship into every subject. Finland, long a leader in educational innovation, emphasizes transversal competencies and project-based learning in both primary and secondary education. In Canada and the United States, a growing number of colleges and universities are offering competency-based degree programs tailored for adult learners, recognizing prior experience and focusing on demonstrable outcomes rather than seat time. These transformations are not without challenges, but they offer glimpses of what the path forward might look like when political will, professional commitment, and community engagement align.

Looking ahead, the future of CBE must be shaped by a few guiding convictions (Reynolds & Penczak, 2023). First, change must be inclusive. If CBE becomes a model only for elite institutions or well-funded programs, its transformative power will be blunted. It must take root in public schools, underserved communities, non-formal learning environments, and across different cultural contexts. That means investing in local capacity, respecting indigenous knowledge systems, and designing models that are adaptable rather than imported wholesale. Second, partnership is essential. Education cannot bear the burden of transformation alone. Governments, civil society, employers, and learners themselves must be co-architects of change (Bingham & Porter, 2021). Employers, for instance, can play a key role in validating new forms of certification, offering mentorship opportunities, and aligning learning outcomes with real-world needs. Community organizations can help bridge formal and informal learning, ensuring that competencies reflect not just economic goals, but social, cultural, and ecological priorities. Third, learning must remain open and lifelong. Competency does not end with graduation—it evolves with life. We must move beyond the outdated notion that education is something confined to a specific age range or institutional setting. CBE, with its emphasis on transferable skills, prior learning recognition, and self-directed growth, is well-suited to support lifelong learning in an age

where careers, technologies, and societal challenges are constantly changing. Policymakers must support flexible pathways, modular learning systems, and recognition of learning across life stages and sectors.

Finally, we must hold on to the human spirit of learning. At a time when data, metrics, and systems thinking dominate the educational landscape, it is easy to forget that education is fundamentally a human endeavor. It is about discovery, relationship, transformation, and hope. CBE, if implemented with integrity and care, can restore this spirit. It can reconnect learners to their passions, communities to their values, and societies to the deeper purposes of education—equity, justice, sustainability, and human flourishing. The road ahead will be uneven. There will be pushback, confusion, and moments of failure. But if we remain grounded in the core principles of CBE—learner-centeredness, equity, relevance, and demonstrable growth—we can navigate the complexity with courage. We can build educational systems that don't just respond to the world as it is, but shape the world as it could be. This journey is not about replacing one model with another. It is about expanding our imagination. About reclaiming education as a public good. About believing that when we build systems that honor the full humanity of learners, we create not only better students—but stronger, more resilient, and more inclusive societies.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Competency-Based Education (CBE) represents a transformative model for addressing the interconnected challenges of sustainability, inclusion, and human development. Evidence from policy frameworks, literature, and case-based practices indicates that CBE enhances not only individual competencies but also broader community resilience, social cohesion, and innovation capacity. By reframing education from memorization-driven processes to mastery-based, skills-oriented learning, CBE enables learners to become active contributors to their communities while aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The analysis highlights three major domains of contribution: (1) reframing education for sustainable and inclusive development through equity and diversity, (2) embedding the core principles of CBE such as mastery, authentic assessment, and learner agency, and (3) empowering communities through skills-oriented learning that prioritizes local relevance and ownership.

When compared with prior studies, these findings resonate strongly with earlier research emphasizing the limitations of conventional, exam-oriented education systems in fostering long-term resilience (Deguine et al., 2021; Selwyn, 2023). They also extend the work of Holmes et al. (2021) and Natale (2024), who highlighted the necessity of measurable, transferable competencies for preparing learners for complex societal demands. Moreover, this study supports Chhatlani (2023) and Husic (2024) by confirming that inclusive, culturally responsive pedagogies strengthen the integration of marginalized learners. The emphasis on skills for community empowerment aligns with Nichols (2022) and Kayyali & Christiansen (2024), who argue that education must be embedded in local contexts and intergenerational knowledge transfer.

Nevertheless, challenges remain in implementation. Similar to the concerns raised by Kshetri (2024) and Fuentelsaz et al. (2023), this research acknowledges systemic inertia, cultural resistance, and assessment complexities as persistent barriers. The reliance on

digital tools, while potentially beneficial, risks exacerbating inequalities if not designed inclusively (Rhoney et al., 2024). Teachers' readiness and institutional support are also crucial, echoing the findings of Nombo (2022) and Prokes et al. (2021), who emphasize the need for professional development and systemic alignment.

The implications of these findings extend beyond individual learners to societal transformation. Education, when reframed through the CBE lens, can serve as both a response to current inequities and a roadmap for future sustainability. Policymakers and institutions are therefore encouraged to invest in flexible curricula, community-centered pedagogies, and cross-sectoral partnerships that reinforce education as a public good.

Future research should focus on three directions. First, comparative longitudinal studies are needed to measure the long-term impacts of CBE on community resilience and social cohesion (Wakiyama, 2016). Second, more empirical studies should explore how digital tools can be localized to complement, rather than replace, human-centered learning. Finally, research must critically examine how CBE can be adapted across diverse cultural contexts without losing its foundational principles of equity, agency, and relevance.

In sum, this study contributes to the expanding literature by situating CBE not merely as a pedagogical reform, but as a framework for sustainable and inclusive development. It affirms the transformative potential of CBE while acknowledging the need for systemic reforms and further investigation to ensure its equitable and effective implementation.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Competency-Based Education (CBE) offers a powerful foundation for reimagining education as a driver of inclusive and sustainable communities. Unlike conventional models focused on memorization, CBE builds critical thinking, problem-solving, empathy, and ethical reasoning—competencies essential for addressing environmental, economic, and social challenges. By aligning learning with real-world needs, CBE not only enhances individual growth but also strengthens community resilience and advances the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Importantly, its learner-centered design promotes inclusivity through flexible pathways, contextualized content, and culturally responsive pedagogy, enabling marginalized populations to participate meaningfully in education and community development. At the same time, scaling CBE requires systemic reforms, including new approaches to assessment, teacher training, policy frameworks, and resource allocation. While challenges remain, the evidence shows that CBE is a transformative tool when rooted in local contexts and supported by strong institutional and political commitment. Ultimately, the journey toward sustainable and equitable societies begins with competence, but its true impact lies in fostering dignity, participation, and shared well-being.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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