

Education in Kenya: Barriers to Good-Quality, Consistent Schooling in a Majority-World Context

Assignment: Critically explore the barriers to accessing good-quality, consistent education in a majority-world country (Kenya), applying theory and policy frameworks (UNCRC, ACRWC, SDG 4).

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Abstract

Education is a fundamental human right and a public good, yet global progress towards SDG 4 has stalled, with 251 million children and young people out of school in 2023 and education financing under pressure from rising debt servicing. Kenya offers a salient majority-world case: access expanded markedly after Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003, and the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) promises relevance, but quality and continuity remain uneven—especially across arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) and informal settlements. This essay applies human capital, the capability approach, social reproduction, and postcolonial/coloniality lenses to interrogate five binding barriers: residual and hidden costs; geography, livelihoods and climate shocks; teacher deployment and pedagogy; language of instruction and cultural relevance; and gendered risks, disability and shocks (COVID-19). It triangulates national (Constitution/Basic Education Act; CBC taskforce), regional (ACRWC) and international (UNCRC Articles 28–29; SDG 4 benchmarking) frames, weighing the nature and effects of reforms and partner roles. The recommended, rights-aligned way forward prioritises eliminating cost barriers, investing where marginal learning gains are largest (teachers, feeding and WASH in hardship counties), language-smart foundations, targeted post-COVID recovery, and sustainable, accountable finance and leadership. In doing so, the essay highlights the need to address both structural and historical inequities, recognising that meaningful improvement requires not only technical reform but also political commitment to redistribution, culturally responsive practice, and long-term system strengthening. By situating Kenya within wider majority-world challenges, the discussion underscores the interconnectedness of global policy agendas, local realities and social justice goals, demonstrating why transforming educational access and quality remains central to equitable development.

Introduction: Why this topic matters and learning-outcomes alignment

Education is a fundamental human right and a core public good, essential for human development, social justice, and long-term sustainability. Yet global progress has stalled: in 2023, an estimated 251 million children and young people remained out of school, and the reduction of this figure has almost plateaued over the past decade as education systems struggle to recover from financial pressures and global shocks. Chronic underinvestment, especially in low-income countries, and the rising burden of debt servicing, have significantly restricted the fiscal space needed to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) on inclusive, equitable, quality education. At the same time, global SDG 4 scorecards show that many countries are off track on key indicators—including minimum reading proficiency, trained-teacher targets, and education spending benchmarks—further highlighting the fragility of progress. [\[pubs.lib.umn.edu\]](https://pubs.lib.umn.edu)
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Within this global picture, Kenya offers a compelling and instructive case from the majority world. Since the reintroduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003, enrolment has surged, dramatically reducing financial barriers and contributing to near-universal primary participation. However, these gains have been accompanied by new challenges: quality pressures, rising reliance on low-fee private schools, and widening regional inequalities, particularly in arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs) and urban informal settlements.

The introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) marks a significant policy shift aimed at strengthening relevance, creativity, digital literacy, and learner-centred pedagogy. Yet implementation barriers—including uneven teacher preparation, infrastructure deficits, and assessment overload—continue to hinder consistent learning outcomes across counties. These dynamics underline a critical tension: access has improved, but quality and continuity remain profoundly uneven.

This essay addresses the assignment's core requirement by critically examining the barriers to accessing good-quality, consistent education in Kenya through national, regional, and international policy lenses, including the UNCRC Articles 28 and 29, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC). It explicitly applies relevant social theories—human capital theory, the capability approach, social reproduction theory, and postcolonial/coloniality perspectives—to interrogate how historical legacies, structural inequities, and policy choices shape educational access and outcomes. In doing so, it “marries” the question to key learning outcomes by demonstrating (1) theoretical application, (2) critical policy analysis, (3) evidence-informed evaluation of reforms, and (4) alignment with global agendas such as SDG 4, SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 10 (reducing inequalities), and SDG 13 (climate action). Through this integrated approach, the essay argues that Kenya's progress—while substantial—remains vulnerable without a rights-aligned, equity-centred strategy that strengthens foundations for consistent, high-quality learning for every child.

Historical and policy context: from colonial legacies to contemporary reform

Kenya's education system emerged from a colonial order that entrenched racial and linguistic hierarchies, shaping curricula and assessment around colonial priorities and elevating English as a prestige language.

Post-independence governments pursued universalism, culminating in the 2003 relaunch of FPE, which drastically lowered direct costs and drove enrolment surges, while straining quality and coinciding with growth in low-fee private schools. The language-in-education policy (mandating mother tongue or Kiswahili in the early years, then English from Grade 4) has been unevenly implemented in classrooms, with earlier-than-planned switches to English due to assessments, parental preferences, and materials gaps. More recently, the CBC replaced 8-4-4 with a 2-6-3-3-3

structure oriented to competencies (critical thinking, creativity, digital literacy, citizenship). Government taskforce reviews recognise CBC's ambition but flag teacher preparedness, assessment loads, infrastructure gaps and complications around domiciling Junior Secondary (Grades 7–9).

Theoretical lenses: human capital, capabilities, social reproduction, postcoloniality and globalisation

Four complementary theoretical lenses frame the analysis. First, human capital theory views schooling as an investment that yields productivity gains; high access without learning undermines social returns. Second, the capability approach (Sen) stresses the conversion of schooling into real freedom requiring nutrition, safety, proximity, understandable language and assistive technologies—so nominal access is not enough. Third, social reproduction (Bourdieu) explains how hidden costs, prestige languages and selective pathways allow advantaged families to purchase or navigate quality, while the poorest face intermittent attendance and early exit. Fourth, postcolonial/coloniality perspectives illuminate how language hierarchies and imported assessment regimes perpetuate epistemic marginalisation and complicate the localisation of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. CBC's globalisation genealogy adds a caution: policy borrowing without implementation capacity risks isomorphic mimicry—systems that look modern but deliver uneven results.

Kenya's progress—and the quality/consistency problem

Kenya has approached near-universal primary participation, but transition, retention and learning remain uneven with pronounced geographic disparities. UNICEF documents extreme pupil–teacher ratios (PTRs) in hardship counties such as Turkana (e.g., 77:1), and COVID-19 amplified risks (pregnancy and early marriage for girls; income-earning and substance use for boys) while household shocks depressed re-enrolment. From a rights perspective, these patterns challenge UNCRC Article 28 (free, compulsory primary; accessible secondary; reduced dropout; dignified discipline) and

Article 29 (aims of education—development of personality and abilities; respect for cultural identity and environment), as well as ACRWC Article 11 on non-discriminatory education.

Barrier 1: Cost pressures and the myth of “free” education

Despite constitutional guarantees of free, compulsory basic education and a 100% transition policy into secondary, ancillary costs—uniforms, exam fees, development levies, transport and materials—continue to ration access for the poorest. Evaluations of FPE show enrolment surges alongside growth in low-fee private schooling and, in some public schools, declining results—signalling stratification and an uneven ‘quality shock’. In human-capital terms, such frictions depress returns; in the capability view, cash transfers, bursaries, assistive devices and menstrual health support are essential conversion factors; in a social-reproduction frame, these costs reproduce advantage for families with capital.

Barrier 2: Geography, livelihoods and climate shocks in ASALs

In ASAL counties, outcomes are consistently worse: insufficient numbers of qualified teachers willing to serve in remote posts, long distances to schools, policies that do not accommodate pastoral mobility, high PTRs, and climate-related drought that increase food insecurity and absenteeism. The capability approach clarifies why school feeding, WASH, mobile schooling, flexible calendars and targeted subsidies are core equity instruments that turn enrolment into learning. Regionally and internationally, ACRWC Article 11 and UNCRC Article 28(1)(e) reinforce obligations to ensure equal access and reduce dropout, while SDG 13 linkages underline the need for shock-responsive design.

Barrier 3: Teacher deployment, pedagogy and “learning poverty”

Learning remains uneven due to maldistributed teacher deployment and variable preparedness for CBC’s pedagogical and assessment demands. Infrastructure and staffing gaps—especially around the domiciling of Junior

Secondary—are acute in rural counties. The 2024/5 GEM Report emphasises educational leadership as a powerful but underused lever for improving teacher practice and learning. UNCRC Article 29 and SDG 4.c together frame teacher quality and pedagogy as rights and development issues; thus, equitable deployment, sustained professional development and supportive leadership are central to progress.

Barrier 4: Language of instruction and cultural relevance

Children learn to read most effectively in a language they understand. Kenya’s language-in-education policy is sound but often not implemented; early switches to English—driven by exams, norms, and materials shortages—create comprehension gaps in Grades 1–3 that widen over time, particularly for rural learners without English exposure at home. Postcolonial analysis highlights the prestige of English and assessment regimes that perpetuate coloniality; UNCRC Article 29’s protection of cultural identity and ACRWC’s emphasis on culturally appropriate education strengthen the case for financing bilingual materials, teacher retooling and assessment alignment to support the Grade 3→4 transition.

Barrier 5: Gendered risks, disability and the impact of shocks

COVID-19 was a stress test that magnified inequalities: girls faced heightened risks of pregnancy, early marriage and care burdens; boys faced income-earning and substance use risks; and overall income shocks depressed return to school. Studies report substantial learning losses (e.g., regression in mathematics equivalent to many months’ worth of learning among affected learners). UNCRC Article 28(1)(e) requires measures to reduce dropout, and ACRWC Article 13 highlights the duty to ensure inclusion for children with disabilities, who faced heightened barriers to remote learning and to the return. Targeted remediation, reentry, and inclusive design are therefore essential.

Policy architecture across scales: national, regional, international

Nationally, the Constitution and Basic Education Act enshrined free, compulsory basic education, with FPE and the 100% transition policy operationalising these commitments. The CBC taskforce acknowledges implementation constraints and sets a roadmap that requires sustained investment in teachers, infrastructure and assessment. Regionally, the ACRWC embeds education in non-discrimination, best interests, survival and development, and participation; internationally, UNCRC Articles 28–29 articulate access, quality and the aims of education. The SDG 4 benchmarking process links these obligations to measurable targets; however, recent scorecards show countries off-track and slipping on finance benchmarks.

Critical appraisal: roles of government and international organisations

Kenya's state action has delivered real gains—FPE, transition policy, textbook reforms, the CBC shift, data systems (e.g., NEMIS) and a pilot National School Census—but teacher deployment and resourcing remain misaligned to need, particularly in ASALs, and hidden costs persist. International partners (UNESCO/UIS, UNICEF, World Bank, GPE) have strengthened data, assessment and foundational literacy and now call for innovative financing (e.g., debt-for-education swaps) given debt pressures. Yet aid fragmentation and compliance burdens can swamp capacity unless aligned to country-led equity priorities (teacher incentives, mother-tongue materials, school feeding and WASH) and tracked via transparent dashboards.

Findings

- Access without consistent quality: learning and continuity are weakest where poverty, distance, climate shocks and language barriers intersect.
- Financial and opportunity costs undermine the guarantee of free, accessible education, especially at the transition to secondary.

- Teachers and language are pivotal levers: equitable deployment, sustained CBC-specific professional development and genuine mother-tongue foundations are necessary for durable gains.
- Shock-responsive policies—catch-up tutoring, re-entry for pregnant/parenting learners and resilient school feeding/WASH—are essential to prevent widening inequalities.
- Financing pressures, including rising debt servicing, threatening progress; protected budgets and aligned external finance are needed to stay on track for SDG 4.

Recommendations: a credible, right-aligned way forward

- Eliminate residual cost barriers (UNCRC 28(1) (a–b)): enforce no-levy policies; expand means-tested bursaries/cash transfers (with disability top-ups); ring-fence funds for uniforms, assistive devices and menstrual health, integrated through NEMIS targeting.
- Invest where marginal learning gains are highest (SDG 4.c; SDG 13): hardship incentives and multi-grade training for remote postings; mobile schooling models; structured coaching for CBC pedagogy; expand school feeding and climate-resilient WASH in drought-prone counties.
- Language-smart foundations (UNCRC 29; SDG 4.1): finance mother-tongue and bilingual materials for Grades 1–3; align early-grade assessment to Lol policy; retool teachers for bilingual pedagogy and the Grade 3→4 transition; engage parents to shift norms.
- Targeted post-COVID recovery and inclusion (UNCRC 28(1)(e); ACRWC 13): high-dosage tutoring/Teaching-at-the-Right-Level in the lowest-performing counties; enforce re-entry with childcare support; second-chance/adult pathways; assistive technologies and reasonable accommodations in CBC projects and assessments.

- Sustainable finance, accountability and leadership (SDG 4 benchmarks): protect education budgets in the MTEF; explore debt-for-education swaps; align donor funds to county equity compacts tracked via NEMIS and school census; publish equity dashboards (PTRs, disability inclusion, LoI use) and invest in school/middle-tier leadership development.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Kenya's progress demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of large-scale education reform in a majority-world context. Expanding access and modernising curriculum are necessary achievements, but they cannot deliver equitable learning without parallel investments in the deeper social, structural and pedagogical conditions that shape children's real opportunities to succeed. As the capability approach reminds us, it is not enough for children to *attend* school—they must have the freedom, resources and linguistic foundations to convert schooling into meaningful learning. Likewise, social reproduction theory highlights how hidden costs, spatial inequalities and linguistic hierarchies continue to advantage some groups while marginalising others, calling for deliberate redistribution and targeted intervention.

A genuinely rights-based system, therefore, requires an ongoing commitment to *implementation justice*: deploying teachers where they are most needed, resourcing ASAL and informal settlement schools at higher levels, embedding mother-tongue instruction with dignity, and protecting learners from the cumulative effects of climate shocks, gendered risks, and poverty. Achieving this will depend not only on national leadership but also on international partners aligning behind Kenya's equity priorities rather than external agendas.

If Kenya sustains this focus—anchoring reforms in UNCRC and ACRWC obligations, strengthening accountability, and financing what works—it can move beyond access to realise consistent, high-quality learning for every

child, fulfilling both SDG 4 and the broader promise of education as a driver of justice and transformation.

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