



Teachers' Lived Experiences in Implementing the New Competency-Based Curriculum in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The transition toward a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Bangladesh constitutes a major policy reform introduced in 2012, aiming to address documented gaps in students' higher-order thinking skills and learner-centered practices. While prior studies have predominantly focused on structural constraints and attitudinal surveys, there remains limited phenomenological inquiry into how teachers experience and interpret CBC implementation in practice. This study employs a qualitative phenomenological design to investigate how secondary school teachers experience, interpret, and negotiate the implementation of CBC in their professional contexts. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected teachers who had at least one year of experience implementing the new curriculum. The findings identify three major themes: (1) negotiated transformation, reflecting tensions between pedagogical ideals and classroom realities; (2) structural constraints, including limited resources and large class sizes; and (3) adaptive instructional practices. Participants reported a gradual shift in professional identity—from knowledge transmitters to facilitators—emerging through iterative classroom experimentation and reflective practice. Despite structural limitations, teachers demonstrated adaptive agency by contextualizing and creatively integrating competency-based practices into their classrooms. This study contributes to curriculum reform literature by extending phenomenological perspectives on teacher identity and agency, particularly in resource-constrained educational settings. Practically, it offers context-sensitive insights for policymakers and educational leaders seeking sustainable implementation of CBC. Recognizing teachers' lived experiences is essential for aligning policy intentions with classroom realities and ensuring meaningful educational transformation.

Keyword: Competency-Based Curriculum Teachers' Lived Experiences; Teacher Agency; Curriculum Reform

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) has been increasingly adopted across developing and emerging economies, particularly in Asia and Africa, as evidenced by recent policy reforms documented by international agencies (e.g., UNESCO, 2021). In Bangladesh, the introduction of the new national curriculum framework in 2021 marked a significant paradigm shift from content-driven instruction toward competency-oriented learning outcomes. This reform aligns with global educational trends

emphasizing competencies such as critical thinking, collaborative problem-solving, and applied knowledge, which remain underdeveloped in traditional examination-driven systems (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2020). The reform aims to ensure that students are not merely recipients of knowledge but active constructors of competencies relevant to national development and global competitiveness.

Recent empirical studies conducted in Bangladesh have examined the early stages of CBC implementation, primarily focusing on teachers' perceptions, institutional readiness, and structural



challenges. For example, Rahman et al. (2024) reported that although many teachers expressed conceptual support for the competency-based approach, they experienced substantial difficulties related to insufficient professional training, limited instructional resources, and ambiguity in assessment practices. Similarly, Alam and Sarker (2023) found that teachers struggled to translate competency descriptors into classroom activities due to limited pedagogical guidance and heavy workloads. These studies highlight implementation barriers; however, they remain limited in conceptual depth, as they do not examine how teachers construct meaning and professional identity within the reform process.

Beyond the national context, recent scholarship has reconceptualized curriculum reform as a socio-professional process involving teacher identity reconstruction and agency, which are critical yet underexplored in the Bangladeshi CBC context (Priestley et al., 2021; Biesta, 2022). Studies conducted in Asian and African contexts demonstrate that teachers often experience reform as a negotiated process shaped by institutional expectations, cultural norms, and resource constraints (Li & Chen, 2022; Moyo, 2021). While these studies provide valuable theoretical insights into teacher agency and policy enactment, limited research has applied a phenomenological lens to understand how teachers in Bangladesh personally interpret and experience the ongoing CBC reform.

In the Bangladeshi context, most recent investigations have concentrated on systemic readiness and policy evaluation. For instance, Hossain and Akter (2022) assessed institutional preparedness for curriculum reform using mixed methods and concluded that structural limitations significantly hinder effective implementation. Likewise, Karim et al. (2023) examined teacher training programs related to the new curriculum and identified gaps between policy intentions and practical classroom realities. Although these contributions are valuable for policy evaluation, they do not sufficiently explain how teachers interpret policy changes, cope with uncertainty,

and reconstruct pedagogical practices in their everyday professional contexts.

The distinction between “perception studies” and “lived experience studies” is methodologically and epistemologically significant. Unlike perception-based studies, a phenomenological approach enables deeper exploration of how teachers experience and assign meaning to curriculum reform in practice. In contrast, phenomenological inquiry seeks to uncover the essence of experience how individuals consciously experience a phenomenon and attribute meaning to it (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Within the context of curriculum reform, a phenomenological approach enables researchers to explore teachers’ emotional responses, identity negotiations, moral commitments, and adaptive strategies in a holistic manner. Such depth is particularly important in transitional educational systems like Bangladesh, where reform intersects with socio-economic disparities, examination-oriented traditions, and centralized governance structures.

Moreover, post-pandemic educational restructuring has further complicated CBC implementation, particularly in terms of digital adaptation and learning recovery demands placed on teachers. Studies conducted after 2020 indicate that teachers worldwide face compounded pressures, including digital adaptation, learning recovery, and assessment redesign (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Zhao & Watterston, 2021). In Bangladesh, these pressures coexist with the introduction of CBC, potentially amplifying the challenges experienced by teachers. Yet, current empirical literature does not comprehensively address how teachers navigate this layered transformation at the experiential level.

Another limitation in prior research lies in its predominant focus on urban or well-resourced institutions. Rural and semi-urban schools where infrastructural and pedagogical constraints are more pronounced remain underrepresented, limiting understanding of contextual variability in CBC implementation (Islam & Habib, 2022). Consequently, there is insufficient understanding



of contextual variability in teachers' experiences across different geographical and socio-economic settings. Without capturing such variation, policy recommendations risk being overly generalized and detached from classroom realities.

Therefore, a key gap lies in the lack of phenomenological studies examining how teachers experience, interpret, and negotiate CBC implementation in practice. While earlier studies have identified structural barriers and attitudinal trends, they have not systematically examined the essence of teachers' experiences—how they interpret policy directives, reconstruct pedagogical meaning, and negotiate professional identity amid reform. Addressing this gap is essential not only for theoretical advancement but also for developing contextually grounded policy interventions.

The present study proposes a qualitative phenomenological investigation to explore teachers' lived experiences during the implementation of CBC in secondary schools in Bangladesh. Unlike previous research that primarily documents challenges and perceptions, this study seeks to examine how teachers construct meaning, negotiate professional identity, and develop adaptive strategies during CBC implementation. It aims to capture the nuanced interplay between policy expectations, institutional conditions, and personal professional commitments. By focusing on lived experiences, the study moves beyond descriptive evaluation toward an interpretive understanding of curriculum enactment.

The study offers three main contributions: (1) a phenomenological examination of teacher experience, (2) integration of teacher agency and identity in CBC reform, and (3) context-specific insights from Bangladesh. First, it adopts a phenomenological framework to examine the essence of teachers' experiences, rather than merely cataloguing obstacles or attitudes. Second, it integrates the concepts of teacher agency and professional identity within the context of competency-based reform, thereby contributing to contemporary curriculum theory. Third, it

provides context-sensitive insights from Bangladesh that can enrich comparative scholarship on curriculum reform in the Global South.

In sum, while existing studies in Bangladesh have laid important groundwork by identifying implementation challenges and institutional limitations, a deeper phenomenological understanding remains absent. By addressing this gap, the present study contributes both theoretically and practically: theoretically, by expanding knowledge on teacher experience and curriculum enactment; practically, by offering empirically grounded insights that may inform professional development, policy refinement, and sustainable educational transformation in Bangladesh.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology to explore teachers' lived experiences in implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in secondary schools in Bangladesh. Phenomenology is appropriate for this study as it enables an in-depth exploration of how teachers in Bangladesh experience and interpret CBC implementation within their specific institutional and socio-cultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Rather than measuring attitudes or testing predefined variables, this approach seeks to understand how teachers make sense of curriculum reform within their professional, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Given that curriculum implementation is both a pedagogical and existential experience affecting teachers' identity and agency, a phenomenological design allows for a deep, interpretive engagement with participants' narratives.

The study adopts a transcendental phenomenological orientation, emphasizing the description of participants' experiences while practicing *epoché* or bracketing to minimize researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019). Although complete bracketing is



philosophically debated, systematic reflexivity enhances credibility by ensuring that interpretations remain grounded in participants' accounts rather than researchers' assumptions (Berger, 2021). A reflexive journal will be systematically maintained to document preconceptions, analytic decisions, and emerging interpretations at each stage of data collection and analysis.

Participants will be selected using purposive sampling, targeting secondary school teachers who have directly implemented the new CBC for at least one academic year. This criterion ensures that participants possess substantial experiential knowledge of the reform process. To capture contextual diversity, teachers will be recruited from urban, semi-urban, and rural schools. Recent qualitative scholarship underscores the importance of information-rich cases and contextual variation in generating meaningful phenomenological insights (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2022). The anticipated sample size ranges from 10 to 15 participants, consistent with phenomenological studies that prioritize depth over breadth (Vagle, 2018). Recruitment will continue until experiential saturation is reached, meaning that no substantially new thematic meanings emerge from additional interviews (Hennink et al., 2020).

Data will be collected primarily through in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility to probe participants' reflections while maintaining alignment with the research focus (Kallio et al., 2016). Interview protocols will be organized into key domains, including (1) understanding of CBC, (2) classroom implementation practices, (3) perceived challenges, (4) emotional and professional responses, and (5) identity transformation. With participants' consent, interviews be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and cross-checked against recordings to ensure transcription accuracy. Field notes will complement interview data by capturing non-verbal cues and contextual observations.

Data analysis will follow a systematic phenomenological procedure inspired by Moustakas (1994) and recent qualitative analytic refinements (Neubauer et al., 2019). First, significant statements will be identified based on their relevance to the research focus and their capacity to reveal meaningful aspects of teachers' experiences. Second, these statements will be clustered into meaning units and themes that reflect shared experiential patterns. Third, textural descriptions (what participants experienced) and structural descriptions (how they experienced it within specific contexts) will be developed. Finally, these descriptions will be synthesized into a composite essence capturing the fundamental nature of teachers' lived experiences in implementing CBC. Throughout analysis, iterative reading and constant comparison will be employed to ensure analytic rigor and coherence.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study will adhere to established qualitative criteria, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility will be enhanced through member checking, whereby member checking will be conducted by sharing synthesized themes with participants for validation and feedback after initial data analysis. Thick description will support transferability by providing detailed contextual accounts of participants and settings. Dependability and confirmability will be strengthened through an audit trail will include raw data, coding schemes, theme development records, and reflexive notes to ensure transparency and replicability. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review authority, and participants' confidentiality will be safeguarded through pseudonyms and secure data storage.

By employing a rigorous phenomenological methodology, this study seeks not merely to catalogue challenges but to illuminate the essence of teachers' experiences, thereby offering a nuanced and contextually grounded understanding of curriculum reform implementation in Bangladesh.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The phenomenological analysis identified three overarching themes: (1) tension between professional commitment and structural constraints, (2) identity reconfiguration, and (3) adaptive pedagogical negotiation, which collectively characterize teachers' lived experiences in implementing CBC. Across interviews, participants consistently expressed ideological alignment with the principles of competency-based education, particularly its emphasis on critical thinking, collaborative learning, and applied knowledge. Teachers frequently described the reform as "necessary" and "forward-looking"; however, one participant noted, "although the curriculum sounds modern, I am not always sure how to apply it in my daily teaching practice," reflecting a gap between conceptual agreement and practical enactment. However, beneath this conceptual endorsement lay narratives of uncertainty, adaptation fatigue, and identity negotiation. This duality suggests that support for reform at the level of discourse does not automatically translate into seamless pedagogical transformation, a pattern similarly observed in recent curriculum reform studies in Asia and Africa (Li & Chen, 2022; Moyo, 2021).

Participants frequently articulated that while they understood the theoretical foundations of CBC, they struggled with operationalizing competencies into daily lesson planning and assessment practices. Several teachers reported ambiguity regarding performance indicators and formative assessment strategies, leading to reliance on traditional examination-oriented approaches. This finding resonates with Rahman et al. (2024), who identified gaps between curriculum design and classroom enactment in Bangladesh. However, unlike prior descriptive studies that merely catalogued implementation challenges, the present phenomenological inquiry uncovered the deeper experiential dimension of this gap. Teachers described feelings of professional vulnerability, particularly when experimenting with unfamiliar instructional strategies in front of students without clear evaluative benchmarks or

institutional reassurance. Such emotional responses are consistent with research emphasizing that curriculum reform often destabilizes teachers' professional identity and sense of competence (Biesta, 2022; Priestley et al., 2021).

Another central theme concerned the reconfiguration of teacher identity. This identity shift was experienced as a process of role destabilization, where teachers had to renegotiate authority, redefine classroom relationships, and reconstruct their sense of professional competence. Teachers reported that adopting facilitative roles required relinquishing authoritative classroom control, encouraging student autonomy, and embracing collaborative inquiry. While some participants experienced this transition as professionally empowering, others perceived it as conflicting with entrenched cultural expectations of teacher authority. This ambivalence aligns with global findings that teacher agency is mediated by cultural norms and institutional histories (Priestley et al., 2021). In the Bangladeshi context, where hierarchical classroom structures remain prevalent, the facilitative model introduced by CBC can generate internal professional tension.

The analysis further revealed that structural constraints did not merely limit implementation but actively shaped how teachers experienced and interpreted CBC, influencing their sense of agency, motivation, and pedagogical choices. Participants from rural and semi-urban schools described limited instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, and inconsistent access to professional development. Although national policy documents promote learner-centered methodologies, teachers reported difficulty implementing group-based and project-oriented tasks in large classes exceeding 50 students. This structural misalignment echoes Hossain and Akter's (2022) findings that systemic readiness remains uneven across regions. However, the present study extends prior research by illustrating how such structural limitations are experienced subjectively. Teachers narrated feelings of frustration and moral dilemma, as they



perceived a discrepancy between their pedagogical aspirations and contextual realities. This experiential conflict highlights the importance of understanding curriculum reform not merely as policy execution but as a lived professional struggle.

Professional development was experienced as insufficient, particularly due to its short duration, lack of practical classroom focus, and absence of sustained mentoring or follow-up support. Teachers expressed a desire for sustained mentoring, peer collaboration, and classroom-based coaching rather than one-off workshops. This critique aligns with international scholarship emphasizing that effective professional learning for curriculum reform must be continuous, collaborative, and context-sensitive (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The present findings reinforce the argument that without long-term professional scaffolding, competency-based reforms risk superficial adoption. Teachers' narratives suggest that professional learning is not solely about acquiring technical knowledge but about reconstructing pedagogical belief systems.

Emotionally, teachers experienced ambivalence, characterized by simultaneous enthusiasm for pedagogical innovation and anxiety related to uncertainty, performance expectations, and classroom management challenges. Several participants described excitement about innovative assessment strategies and student engagement. They recounted instances where project-based activities fostered creativity and participation, particularly among previously disengaged learners. These positive experiences illustrate the transformative potential of CBC when contextual conditions permit meaningful implementation. Similar outcomes have been documented in competency-based reforms in comparable contexts, where active learning approaches increased student motivation and collaborative skills (Zhao & Watterston, 2021). Nevertheless, positive experiences were often episodic rather than systemic, contingent upon manageable class sizes and supportive school leadership.

Leadership functioned as an enabling or constraining condition for teacher agency, shaping the extent to which teachers felt psychologically safe to experiment with new pedagogical practices. Participants working under principals who encouraged experimentation and peer dialogue reported greater confidence in implementing CBC. Conversely, schools with rigid administrative expectations and exam-driven performance metrics constrained teachers' willingness to innovate. This finding corroborates the argument that curriculum enactment is co-constructed within institutional ecologies (Biesta, 2022). Teachers' agency flourishes when leadership fosters psychological safety and collective reflection. The phenomenological accounts in this study demonstrate that reform success depends not only on policy clarity but also on relational trust within school communities.

A further dimension of lived experience involved negotiation between traditional examination culture and competency-based assessment. Teachers described tension between preparing students for high-stakes national examinations and cultivating holistic competencies. Many perceived that despite curricular rhetoric promoting formative assessment, societal expectations remain anchored in summative examination performance. This misalignment compelled teachers to engage in strategic compromise, oscillating between competency-based approaches and exam-oriented instruction depending on temporal pressures and institutional expectations. Comparable tensions have been identified in other centralized education systems undergoing reform (Li & Chen, 2022). The persistence of examination culture suggests that sustainable CBC implementation requires systemic alignment across curriculum, assessment, and accountability mechanisms.

Importantly, the findings reveal that teachers exercised contextually situated agency by selectively adapting, modifying, and reinterpreting CBC principles to align with their classroom realities and professional judgment. Participants described adapting CBC principles creatively



within contextual constraints. Some integrated micro-projects into traditional lessons; others collaborated informally with colleagues to design competency-based rubrics. These adaptive strategies illustrate teacher agency in practice, supporting Priestley et al.'s (2021) conceptualization of agency as temporally and contextually achieved. The present study contributes to this theoretical discourse by demonstrating how agency manifests in a resource-constrained Global South context. Rather than rejecting reform, teachers engaged in pragmatic reinterpretation, blending innovation with tradition.

From an argumentative standpoint, the results challenge purely technocratic approaches to curriculum reform. Prior research in Bangladesh has predominantly emphasized infrastructural deficits and training gaps (Rahman et al., 2024; Karim et al., 2023). While these factors are undeniably significant, the present findings suggest that experiential and identity-based dimensions are equally critical. Curriculum reform intersects with teachers' moral commitments, professional self-concept, and emotional resilience. Neglecting these dimensions risks oversimplifying reform challenges as merely logistical. International scholarship increasingly recognizes the affective and identity-related aspects of educational change (Biesta, 2022), and this study provides context-specific empirical support for that perspective.

Moreover, the phenomenological synthesis indicates that the essence of teachers' lived experience can be conceptualized as "negotiated transformation," encompassing (1) alignment with reform ideals, (2) confrontation with structural and cultural constraints, and (3) adaptive reinterpretation in practice. Teachers neither fully resisted nor seamlessly embraced CBC; instead, they navigated a complex terrain of aspiration, constraint, experimentation, and compromise. This nuanced characterization advances existing literature by moving beyond binary narratives of success versus failure. It affirms that

implementation is an evolving process shaped by human meaning-making.

The discussion also underscores implications for policy. If teachers experience reform as a moral and professional negotiation, policy frameworks should incorporate structured reflective forums, school-based mentoring systems, and continuous professional learning communities to support teachers' experiential engagement with CBC. Sustainable CBC implementation requires alignment between curriculum goals, assessment systems, and teacher professional development. As Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) argue, systemic coherence enhances reform durability. In Bangladesh, strengthening mentorship networks and contextualized training could mitigate experiential uncertainty.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrate that implementing a Competency-Based Curriculum in Bangladesh is a complex experiential process shaped by the interaction of structural conditions, professional identity, and contextually enacted teacher agency. While structural challenges persist, teachers exhibit resilience and adaptive agency. By illuminating the experiential essence of reform, this study enriches theoretical understanding of curriculum enactment and offers empirically grounded insights for more humane and context-sensitive educational transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to explore the lived experiences of secondary school teachers in implementing the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Bangladesh through a phenomenological lens. The findings demonstrate that curriculum reform in Bangladesh is experienced through three interrelated dimensions: structural constraint, identity reconfiguration, and adaptive pedagogical negotiation, indicating that reform is not merely procedural but deeply experiential and identity-shaping. Teachers' narratives reveal a pattern of negotiated transformation, characterized by conceptual support for competency-based principles alongside practical struggles shaped by



structural constraints, cultural expectations, and assessment pressures.

The essence of teachers' lived experience can be understood as a continuous process of meaning-making, reflected in how teachers reinterpret curriculum guidelines, adjust instructional strategies, and balance competency-based approaches with examination demands. Participants did not simply adopt or reject the reform; rather, they interpreted, adapted, and recontextualized CBC within their specific institutional realities. Their experiences reflect a dynamic interplay between professional agency and systemic limitation. While infrastructural challenges, insufficient professional development, and examination-oriented traditions complicate implementation, teachers demonstrate resilience and creativity in mediating reform demands.

Importantly, the study highlights that sustainable curriculum transformation requires more than policy directives and short-term training initiatives. Reform efforts must recognize the emotional, professional, and contextual dimensions of teachers' work. Strengthening long-term mentoring systems through school-based coaching, establishing professional learning communities, and redesigning assessment frameworks to integrate formative evaluation are essential steps to reduce experiential tension and enhance implementation coherence.

Theoretically, this research contributes to curriculum studies by foregrounding teacher identity and agency within the context of educational reform in the Global South. Practically, it offers policy-relevant insights grounded in lived realities rather than abstract prescriptions. Ultimately, meaningful implementation of CBC depends on acknowledging teachers not as passive implementers of policy, but as reflective professionals whose lived experiences shape the trajectory of educational change.

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