



Research Article

Investigating the Implementation of Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia: Challenges and Implications for National Development

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18467145>

Abstract

This research paper investigates the implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia's education sector, focusing on the challenges encountered and their implications for national development. Since its introduction in 2013, CBC has been positioned as a transformative approach aimed at equipping learners with relevant skills, competencies, and attitudes needed for the 21st century. However, empirical evidence suggests varied success in its practical application. The study reveals significant gaps in teacher training coverage and quality, inadequate teaching materials, infrastructure deficits, and inconsistent use of learner-centred approaches. Assessment practices remained predominantly traditional, limiting the full realisation of competency-based evaluation. The research concludes that while CBC holds promise for advancing education quality and contributing to Zambia's development goals, its effective implementation requires coordinated efforts involving policy refinement, increased resource allocation, continuous professional development, and strengthened stakeholder partnerships.

Manuscript Information

- ISSN No: 2583-7397
- Received: 10-12-2025
- Accepted: 29-01-2026
- Published: 03-02-2026
- IJCRM:5(1); 2026: 439-444
- ©2026, All Rights Reserved
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes
- Peer Review Process: Yes

How to Cite this Article

Vincent Phiri. Investigating the Implementation of Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia: Challenges and Implications for National Development. Int J Contemp Res Multidiscip. 2026;5(1):439-444.

Access this Article Online



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KEYWORDS: Competence-Based Curriculum, Teacher Preparedness, Curriculum Implementation, National Development, Educational Reform, Zambia

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

Globally, education systems have evolved to adopt curricula that respond to dynamic social, economic, and technological realities. The Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) represents a paradigm shift from traditional content-based models to learner-centred approaches that emphasise the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning and productivity. In countries such as Finland and Singapore, CBC has facilitated holistic education, equipping learners with competencies aligned with 21st-century demands. The shift is underpinned by constructivist learning theories, which emphasise active learner engagement in authentic problem-solving contexts. As globalisation reshapes labour markets and societies, nations are revising educational content and methodologies to ensure relevance and competitiveness.

The adoption of CBC in Africa has been influenced by the desire to bridge the gap between schooling and real-life applicability. Traditional education systems in many African countries, including Zambia, have been criticised for promoting rote learning and theoretical knowledge that does not match labour market needs. CBC seeks to address this challenge by aligning learning outcomes with the competencies required in society and the economy. In Kenya, the Basic Education Curriculum Framework (BECF), introduced in 2017, emphasises practical skills, creativity, and critical thinking to enhance learner potential and national development. Similarly, Rwanda's education reforms highlight CBC as a response to post-genocide reconstruction and national reconciliation.

In Zambia, the shift towards a Competence-Based Curriculum has been a deliberate policy decision embedded in broader national development plans. The Ministry of Education introduced CBC in 2013 as part of the revised education curriculum aimed at promoting learner-centred pedagogy and practical skills development across all levels of education. This shift was intended to address deficiencies in the existing curriculum, which had been criticised for being exam-oriented and disconnected from societal needs. The revised curriculum aimed to integrate entrepreneurship, environmental education, civic education, and ICT as cross-cutting themes in line with Vision 2030 and the Seventh National Development Plan. By focusing on measurable competencies, the government hoped to enhance learner outcomes, promote national productivity, and prepare Zambians for regional and global competitiveness.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The introduction of the Competence-Based Curriculum in Zambia represented a significant shift from rote memorisation to skill acquisition and learner-centred pedagogy. Despite the promising policy framework introduced in 2013, the practical realisation of CBC goals has been marred by systemic challenges across the education sector. Teachers remain inadequately trained in CBC principles, and many still rely on outdated content-based teaching strategies. Furthermore, schools lack the essential infrastructure and learning materials needed to support interactive, experiential learning

environments. These implementation gaps raise concerns about the disconnection between the curriculum's theoretical design and its actual classroom delivery.

Another pressing problem lies in the misalignment between the CBC's learner-centred assessment philosophy and Zambia's prevailing examination practices. While CBC calls for continuous and formative assessments that evaluate competencies, most schools continue to depend on traditional summative testing models that emphasise memory recall over skill demonstration. This creates tension between classroom practices and national examinations, leading to confusion among educators and students regarding learning expectations. The limited stakeholder engagement in CBC implementation poses a further challenge that threatens its long-term sustainability. CBC requires active collaboration between schools, parents, communities, and industry stakeholders to create learning environments that reflect real-world contexts. However, in Zambia, community awareness and participation in curriculum reform remain minimal.

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to:

1. Examine the key challenges affecting the implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum in selected Zambian schools.
2. Evaluate the preparedness and capacity of teachers and schools to deliver the CBC effectively.
3. Analyse the implications of CBC implementation for learner outcomes and national development objectives.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the implementation of CBC in Zambia. The mixed-methods approach was deemed appropriate because it allows for the collection of statistical data through questionnaires while simultaneously capturing in-depth insights through interviews and document reviews. By combining these methods, the study was able to triangulate findings and enhance the validity and reliability of conclusions. The quantitative component facilitated the measurement of variables such as teacher preparedness, availability of resources, and student performance trends. The qualitative component, on the other hand, provided contextual understanding of stakeholder perceptions, challenges, and lived experiences within the education system.

2.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised teachers, school administrators, education officials, and learners from selected secondary schools across urban and rural settings in Zambia. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select schools representing diverse socio-economic contexts, ensuring that findings reflected the heterogeneity of CBC implementation experiences. From this population, a sample of 150 respondents was drawn, including 100 teachers, 30 school administrators,

and 20 education officials. This sample size was considered adequate for generating statistically significant results while remaining logistically manageable within the time and resource constraints of the study.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data collection employed two primary instruments: structured questionnaires and semi-structured interview guides. The questionnaires were administered to teachers to gather quantitative data on their training background, pedagogical practices, and availability of teaching materials, infrastructural adequacy, and assessment methods. Questions were designed using a Likert scale to measure attitudes and perceptions, alongside multiple-choice and open-ended items for additional insights. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with school administrators and education officials to explore policy implementation processes, institutional support systems, and systemic challenges in greater depth. Document reviews of curriculum frameworks, policy documents, and school records complemented these instruments by providing contextual and historical data on CBC rollout and monitoring.

2.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data collected through questionnaires were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarise respondent demographics, resource availability, and classroom practices. Inferential analysis involved chi-square tests and correlation analysis to examine relationships between variables such as teacher training and implementation effectiveness. Qualitative data from interviews and document reviews were analysed thematically. Interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to policy gaps, resource constraints, and stakeholder experiences. Data triangulation was employed to cross-verify findings from different sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and robustness of conclusions.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Teacher Preparedness and Training

Findings revealed that a significant proportion of teachers had received limited or no formal training in CBC methodologies. Only 42% of respondents reported having attended structured professional development sessions on competency-based pedagogy, while the remaining 58% relied on self-directed learning or ad hoc workshops. This training gap was more pronounced in rural areas, where logistical challenges and resource constraints hindered access to continuous professional development opportunities. The absence of comprehensive training programs meant that many teachers struggled to shift from traditional teacher-centred instruction to learner-centred approaches that emphasise critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative learning.

The transition to CBC necessitates a paradigm shift in teacher education. Pre-service training institutions in Zambia have been

mandated to revise their curricula to reflect CBC principles, including learner-centred pedagogy, formative assessment, and inclusive education. However, many colleges of education still emphasise content delivery over pedagogical innovation. Prospective teachers graduate without adequate exposure to the philosophy, structure, and practical application of CBC. This mismatch between initial training and classroom realities creates a disconnect that weakens implementation fidelity. In-service training programs have attempted to bridge this gap, but they suffer from inconsistencies in quality, coverage, and duration. Many workshops are conducted as one-off events without follow-up support or mentorship.

Furthermore, self-rated preparedness among teachers was generally low. Approximately 63% of respondents indicated that they felt inadequately prepared to effectively implement CBC, citing a lack of clarity on curriculum expectations, insufficient training materials, and limited mentorship support. This sentiment was echoed in qualitative interviews, where teachers expressed frustration over the absence of ongoing support systems and feedback mechanisms. The study found that effective CBC implementation requires sustained professional development that extends beyond one-time training sessions to include regular mentorship, peer learning communities, and access to practical teaching resources aligned with competency-based principles. Teachers particularly emphasised the need for subject-specific guidance and exemplars showing how to translate competency frameworks into daily lesson plans and activities.

3.2 Infrastructural and Resource Challenges

The study documented widespread infrastructural deficits that significantly constrain CBC delivery. Over 70% of respondents reported inadequate availability of teaching and learning materials, including textbooks, laboratory equipment, and ICT devices. Many schools, particularly in rural settings, lacked basic resources such as electricity, internet connectivity, and functional classrooms. These limitations undermined the curriculum's emphasis on practical, hands-on learning and technology integration. For example, science teachers were unable to conduct experiments due to the absence of laboratory facilities, while ICT teachers struggled to teach computer skills without functional computers or internet access.

Beyond classroom space, the lack of specialised facilities such as science laboratories, technical workshops, and ICT centres further restricted CBC implementation. Competency-based learning is inherently practical and often requires learners to engage in simulations, experiments, and digital tasks. However, many Zambian schools lack these essential facilities. The absence of laboratories and tools in science and vocational subjects limits learners' exposure to applied learning, reducing CBC to theoretical instruction in many settings. Similarly, without access to computers or the internet, the integration of digital literacy remains aspirational. UNESCO notes that approximately 70% of schools in low-income areas lack even basic ICT infrastructure. Bridging this digital and technical

resource gap is vital to ensuring that all learners can access the full range of competencies envisioned in the curriculum.

The availability and quality of teaching and learning materials (TLMs) significantly influence the success of CBC. TLMs such as textbooks, workbooks, instructional guides, and manipulative tools are essential for operationalising competency-based strategies. However, many Zambian schools face chronic shortages. Teachers often resort to outdated textbooks developed for content-based curricula, which do not align with CBC's competency frameworks. In some instances, learners are forced to share textbooks at a ratio of 5:1, limiting engagement and comprehension. Moreover, locally developed materials that reflect learners' contexts and experiences are lacking. The Ministry of Education has acknowledged the challenge but faces budgetary constraints that limit procurement and distribution of appropriate materials.

Classroom overcrowding was another critical issue identified in the research. Average class sizes exceeded 50 students in many schools, making it difficult for teachers to employ differentiated instruction or provide individualised feedback as required by CBC. Large class sizes also limited opportunities for interactive activities, group work, and practical demonstrations. The infrastructural gap between urban and rural schools further exacerbated educational inequalities, with learners in well-resourced urban schools receiving a qualitatively different education experience compared to their rural counterparts. This disparity threatens the equity and inclusiveness goals of CBC and raises questions about social justice in educational provision.

3.3 Assessment Practices and Challenges

Assessment emerged as a major area of concern in CBC implementation. While the curriculum advocates for continuous, formative, and competency-based assessments, the study found that traditional summative testing methods dominated classroom practice. Approximately 78% of teachers indicated that they primarily used written tests and examinations to evaluate student learning, with minimal use of performance-based assessments such as projects, portfolios, or practical demonstrations. This reliance on conventional testing methods contradicts CBC principles and limits the curriculum's ability to accurately measure learner competencies in real-world contexts. Teachers cited several reasons for the persistence of traditional assessment practices, including lack of training in alternative assessment methods, time constraints, large class sizes, and pressure to align with national examination formats. Interviews revealed that many educators were uncertain about how to design and implement authentic assessments that align with competency outcomes. Additionally, the national examination system, which remains heavily focused on content recall, creates tension between classroom assessment practices and high-stakes testing requirements. This misalignment undermines the credibility of CBC and sends mixed signals to learners about the nature and purpose of their education.

3.4 Stakeholder Involvement and Community Engagement

The study found minimal stakeholder involvement in CBC implementation, particularly among parents and community members. Survey data indicated that only 35% of parents were aware of the objectives and requirements of CBC, while the majority lacked understanding of how the curriculum differs from previous models. This knowledge gap limits parental capacity to support learners at home or advocate for necessary school resources. Furthermore, there was little evidence of systematic engagement between schools and industry stakeholders to align curriculum content with labour market needs. Education administrators acknowledged the importance of multisectoral collaboration but cited resource constraints and coordination challenges as barriers to effective stakeholder engagement. The absence of structured platforms for dialogue between educators, parents, employers, and policymakers weakens the relevance and contextual grounding of CBC. For the curriculum to achieve its transformative goals, there is a need for deliberate strategies to enhance community awareness, foster partnerships with industry, and create feedback mechanisms that enable continuous improvement based on stakeholder input.

3.5 Implications for National Development

The findings highlight critical implications for Zambia's development agenda, particularly in relation to Vision 2030 and Sustainable Development Goal 4, which emphasise quality education and human capital development. Effective implementation of CBC is essential for producing a skilled, innovative, and adaptable workforce capable of driving economic growth and social transformation. However, the documented challenges in teacher preparedness, infrastructure, assessment, and stakeholder involvement threaten to undermine these development objectives. Without addressing these systemic barriers, CBC risks becoming a policy document with limited practical impact, perpetuating educational inequality and failing to deliver the competencies required for national competitiveness in an increasingly globalised economy.

Curriculum reform is widely recognised as a central driver of national development, particularly in emerging economies where education plays a pivotal role in human capital formation. In Zambia, the introduction of CBC aligns with national aspirations outlined in the Seventh National Development Plan. The CBC reform aims to equip learners with skills relevant to the labour market, foster entrepreneurship, and prepare citizens for active participation in democratic governance. However, the gap between policy intentions and implementation realities raises concerns about the curriculum's actual contribution to these national goals. For instance, if learners continue to receive theoretical instruction without practical application, the anticipated improvement in employability and productivity may not materialise.

Moreover, educational inequality exacerbated by uneven CBC implementation threatens social cohesion and inclusive development. When urban schools provide superior learning experiences compared to rural institutions, the divide between

privileged and marginalised populations widens. This not only undermines the principle of equal opportunity but also limits the nation's ability to fully utilise its human resource potential. Regional disparities in educational quality can perpetuate cycles of poverty and undermine efforts to achieve balanced regional development. Therefore, ensuring equitable CBC implementation across all geographic and socio-economic contexts is not merely an educational imperative but a national development necessity.

The study also reveals that stakeholder perceptions and engagement levels significantly influence CBC outcomes. Parents, learners, and community members are essential partners in education delivery, yet their limited awareness and involvement weaken the support system necessary for sustained curriculum implementation. Active stakeholder participation ensures contextual relevance, enhances accountability, and creates shared ownership of educational outcomes. In the absence of meaningful engagement, CBC risks being perceived as an externally imposed initiative rather than a locally owned transformation. Building collaborative partnerships across the education ecosystem is, therefore, critical for aligning CBC with community needs and national development priorities.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that while the Competence-Based Curriculum holds significant promise for transforming Zambia's education system and supporting national development, its implementation faces substantial challenges that compromise its effectiveness. The key barriers identified include inadequate teacher training, insufficient teaching and learning resources, infrastructural deficits, misalignment between CBC assessment principles and existing examination practices, and limited stakeholder engagement. These challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating a complex web of obstacles that require coordinated, multi-level interventions.

The research further reveals that the urban-rural divide in educational resource distribution exacerbates inequalities and threatens the inclusive nature of CBC. Learners in under-resourced schools are denied equitable access to quality education, undermining social cohesion and limiting the curriculum's potential to contribute to broad-based national development. Moreover, the persistence of traditional teaching and assessment methods despite curriculum reforms suggests a need for more robust implementation support mechanisms, including continuous professional development, curriculum monitoring, and policy coherence.

Cultural attitudes and entrenched teaching traditions also present significant challenges to CBC's transformative agenda. Many educators and learners remain accustomed to didactic, teacher-centred methods and high-stakes examinations focused on memorisation. Changing these mindsets requires not only training but also comprehensive cultural change management strategies. Resistance from teachers, parents, and communities slows the uptake of new pedagogies and assessment

approaches. Addressing these socio-cultural factors is critical to achieving the intended shift in classroom practices under CBC. Despite these challenges, the study identified areas of progress and potential. The 2023 curriculum update introduced enhanced guidelines and frameworks that provide clearer direction for implementation. Some schools, particularly in urban areas, have made notable strides in adopting learner-centred approaches and integrating technology into instruction. These pockets of success demonstrate that effective CBC implementation is possible when adequate resources, training, and institutional support are in place. Learning from these examples and scaling successful innovations across the education system can accelerate progress toward achieving CBC's transformative goals.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- 1. Strengthen Teacher Professional Development:** The Ministry of Education should establish comprehensive, ongoing teacher training programs focused on competency-based pedagogy, learner-centred instruction, and authentic assessment methods. These programs should include mentorship schemes, teacher learning communities, and regular refresher courses to ensure sustained capacity building.
- 2. Increase Investment in Educational Infrastructure:** Government and development partners must prioritise infrastructural improvements, particularly in rural and underserved areas. This includes constructing adequate classrooms, equipping laboratories, providing ICT facilities, and ensuring reliable electricity and internet connectivity to support practical and technology-enhanced learning.
- 3. Reform the National Assessment System:** There is an urgent need to align national examinations with CBC principles by incorporating performance-based assessments, continuous evaluation, and competency measurement. This will ensure coherence between classroom practices and high-stakes testing, reducing confusion and enhancing the credibility of learning outcomes.
- 4. Enhance Stakeholder Engagement:** Schools should develop structured mechanisms for involving parents, community members, and industry stakeholders in curriculum implementation. This includes awareness campaigns, school-community partnerships, and platforms for dialogue to ensure that CBC reflects local contexts and labour market needs.
- 5. Establish Monitoring and Evaluation Systems:** Robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks should be instituted to track CBC implementation progress, identify challenges in real-time, and inform evidence-based policy adjustments. Regular audits, feedback loops, and data-driven decision-making will enhance accountability and continuous improvement.

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