

The Rural Reality of Competence Based Curriculum: Exploring Teacher Knowledge and Curriculum Implementation in Chongwe Zambia

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ABSTRACT: The strength of any country's education system is based on the quality of its curriculum. While various stakeholders are involved in the formulation and implementation of the curriculum, teachers hold a conspicuous position and need to be well vested in the pedagogical aspects of delivering the curriculum. There is no doubt that teacher preparedness is a crucial determinant of effective curriculum implementation. This study sought to explore primary school teachers' knowledge of the competence-based curriculum in rural public schools in Chongwe District, Zambia. Primary school teachers, school administration and the standards officers were sampled purposively. This was qualitative research which used an exploratory case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and lesson observation. The data were analysed using thematic analysis with reference to related literature and the theoretical framework. The study found that during orientation, the primary teachers struggled to fully understand the methods of teaching lined up for use in the new curriculum after a change from the Outcome-Based Curriculum (OBC) to Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC). The paper argues that teacher preparation is vital in the transition from one curriculum reform to another as they are key implementers. The teachers' knowledge of any new curriculum is needed to ensure that the intended purpose of the CBC curriculum is realised. The study recommends that the Ministry of Education should prioritise teacher professional development in the actualization of the competence-based curriculum.

KEYWORDS: Teacher knowledge, Preparedness, Competence-Based Curriculum, Rural Public Schools, Outcome-Based Curriculum

I. INTRODUCTION

Education in every society is a dependable means of transferring relevant culture, knowledge, skills and values. This social science (education) epitomizes how societies function and prepare their citizens through the what (content) and how (pedagogy and assessment) (Bishop, 2004). According to Carmody (2004), the desire and concerns of how to transfer relevant culture, knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another and to keep on doing so relevantly relates to education reforms, policy changes and curriculum reviews.

A curriculum is the beating heart of the education system as it speaks to the needs of learners, society and the industry. As result, reviewing the curriculum puts teachers at the centre stage in terms of teacher knowledge and competences (Twining, et al., 2021). While various stakeholders are involved in the formulation and implementation of the curriculum, teachers hold a conspicuous position and need to be knowledgeable about the curriculum in order to deliver it (Chaudhary, 2015). This aspect is important especially in the transition from one curriculum to another.

Every time there is the process of rolling out of a new or revised curriculum, there is a need for adequate teacher preparedness (Yurdakul, 2015; Goldman & Pellegrino, 2015). In Zambia, the 2013 Revised Curriculum Framework aimed at creating an inclusive education system, relevant and responsive to industry and global trends. The revised curriculum adopted an outcome-based approach. This required students to acquire both academic and practical knowledge at their level of education. It also adopted a bilingual system, requiring the use of local language at the early levels of education with English being the medium of instruction at higher grades (Minister of Education, Science, Vocational Training and Early Education, (MESVTEE) 2013; Sinyinza, 2023).

There has been a pressing need to investigate the level of preparedness among rural primary school teachers in implementing the new curriculum, the challenges they face, and the types of support required to ensure equitable and meaningful curriculum

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delivery across all regions in Zambia. Addressing this issue is critical for realizing Zambia's Vision 2030 and the goals of the Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP), which emphasize inclusive and quality education for sustainable development (Ministry of Finance and National Planning 2022).

The major reforms that have been made at lower primary level of education include the reduction of lower primary to three years which from grade one to grade three; a shift from local language of instruction to English; implementation of the Early Grade Literacy Programme (EGLP). Under Literacy and Language is English Language and a selected Zambian Language. Creative and Technology Studies comprises of Expressive Arts, Technology Studies and Home Economics. Social Studies has been integrated into the other subjects, (Ministry of Education, 2023). These are the subject areas that are taught at primary level in the competency based curriculum in which teachers must demonstrate knowledge and competency.

At upper primary school level which is from grade four to grade six, the eight core learning areas are English Language (or Sign Language), Zambian Language, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Technology Studies, Expressive Arts and Home Economics. There are a number of reforms that have been undertaken at upper primary level. The level will be for three years (grade 4 to 6). English Language will be the official language of instruction in all subjects except Zambian Language and Sign Language. (Ministry of Education, 2023).

Based on the aspect of adequate teacher preparedness, this study sought to explore primary school teachers' knowledge of the new curriculum among primary school teachers in Chongwe District in Lusaka Province in Zambia. Lessons from the 2013 rolling out of the revised curriculum and reflections ignited the need to interrogate the 2023 curriculum implementation to see if there was the falling in the same pit twice in a space of 10 years.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Michael Fullan's Curriculum Implementation Theory which focuses on the process of how educational reforms are implemented in schools was key to this framework. Fullan and Pomfre (1977) emphasize the importance of understanding the complex relationship among teachers, students, and the curriculum, and argue that the success of curriculum reforms depends on how well teachers are prepared to adopt and adapt new curricular frameworks. Michael Fullan's Curriculum Implementation Theory is a well-known framework that provides insight into how educational reforms, particularly curriculum changes, are adopted and implemented in schools. Fullan, a renowned scholar in educational change, argues that the process of implementing a new curriculum is complex and involves multiple layers of influence, including teachers, students, educational leaders, and external factors such as government policies (Fullan, 2007). Fullan's Curriculum Implementation. The theory has a number of principles that explain curriculum implementation. Three of such principles are addressed here.

i. Theories of Change: Fullan's theory is based on the understanding that change is a process that involves significant shifts in how teachers think, how they approach pedagogy, and how they interact with students. He distinguishes between top-down and bottom-up approaches to change (Fullan, 2007). ii) The Role of Teachers as Change Agents: Teachers are seen as central to the success or failure of curriculum implementation. Fullan argues that teachers need to be both competent (having the skills to teach the new curriculum) and committed (willing to adopt new approaches). Teachers should not be viewed as passive recipients of curriculum changes but as active participants who adapt and modify the curriculum to fit their teaching contexts. (Fullan, 2007). iii) The Importance of Context: Fullan stresses the importance of the context in which curriculum implementation occurs. This includes the school environment, the support structures available, and the broader societal and cultural context. A curriculum that works in one context may not be effective in another, and Fullan suggests that successful implementation requires a deep understanding of the local setting. In the case of rural schools, for example, teachers may face different challenges compared to urban teachers (e.g., limited resources, different student needs, or lower levels of parental involvement) (Fullan, 2007).

Fullan's theory helps to understand how reforms can be sustained over time. For instance, in rural areas where educational reforms may face initial resistance, Fullan's emphasis on creating an environment of ongoing support and feedback (Fullan, (2007) can inform strategies for overcoming these challenges. This is essential for ensuring that new curricula do not merely remain a short-term experiment but are integrated into everyday teaching practices.

Fullan's theory focuses on Teacher Professional Development (TPD) which can be applied in curriculum implementation studies for various reasons. According to Lim, et al., (2020) teacher preparedness is one of the key factors influencing the successful implementation of a new curriculum. As curriculum reforms often require teachers to adopt new pedagogical approaches or content areas, sustained TPD ensures teachers are adequately prepared to implement these changes with confidence. In the case of Zambia's new curriculum, which involves changes to teaching methods, content, or assessments, teachers in rural schools will need specific support to adapt to these changes. Without ongoing professional development, teachers may struggle to integrate new concepts or teaching methods into their classrooms, which could hinder the success of the reform. New curricula often introduce concepts or teaching strategies that may be unfamiliar to teachers. According to Haydarova, (2024) teacher Professional Development recognizes that teachers must be supported through structured learning opportunities to bridge knowledge gaps. This is especially important when a curriculum involves innovations or shifts in pedagogy, such as learner-

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centered approaches or the integration of technology. Without sufficient professional development, teachers may resist or fail to adequately implement the new curriculum.

In the case of the current study, it may be necessary to consider that TPD programmes might focus on low-cost, creative teaching strategies or methods for engaging learning with limited access to educational materials. This contextual approach ensures that professional development is not generic but rather responsive to the teachers' specific circumstances, thus increasing the likelihood of successful curriculum implementation (Fullan, 2007). The Teacher Professional Development (TPD) Theory is integral to the success of curriculum implementation, particularly in rural areas where teachers face unique challenges. The theory underscores the importance of continuous learning, contextualized support, collaboration, and reflection to enhance teachers' preparedness for implementing new curricula. In the case of Zambia's curriculum reform in rural districts like Chongwe, TPD provides a structured and sustainable approach to ensure that teachers have the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to implement the changes. By applying TPD theory, stakeholders can understand how to support teachers in adopting new curricula and ultimately improve learner outcomes

This theory will be central in understanding how professional development opportunities influence teacher awareness and knowledge in the implementation of the 2023 revised curriculum (Competence Based Curriculum - CBC). It is particularly significant in viewing teachers in rural settings like Chongwe District, especially what teachers actually know about the CBC. TPD is directly linked to the teachers' ability to adapt to new pedagogical practices, manage classroom diversity, and use innovative methods consistent with the new curriculum.

III. METHODOLOGY

All Research was informed by philosophical assumptions of constructivism paradigm, which emphasizes understanding phenomena through the subjective experiences of individuals. The qualitative research approach was used (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study's aim was to explore primary school teachers' knowledge of the CBC among primary school teachers in Chongwe District. This study employed an exploratory case study design, with the target population of teachers actively involved in curriculum implementation across the district. In this study, the focus was on teachers, school administrators, and district standards officers. Since this was a qualitative study, the determination of sample size was not based on statistical formulas but rather on the concept of "data saturation," where data collection continued until no new information or themes emerged (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2017; Mason, 2010). Purposive sampling was generally used but specifically, purposive homogeneous sampling was employed. This was because the study selected participants who shared specific characteristics in this case, the participants that were direct involvement in curriculum implementation. Unstructured/in-depth interviews and focus groups discussions were used to gather in-depth insights into teachers' knowledge and experiences (Saldaña, 2021). The presentation and discussion of the findings involved thematic approach and thematic analysis of the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The findings were grouped, summarised, put into themes and synthesised to suit the purpose of the study.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Before the piloting and rolling out of the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC) in the 2023 to 2025 period, the primary teachers as key curriculum implementers were teaching all primary grades by means of the 2013 Outcome Based Curriculum (OBC). This section presents and discusses the findings from the study by elaborating the participants' qualifications and work experience, the quality of the pre-curriculum implementation and teachers' relevant knowledge of the CBC and its new elements that make it different from its predecessor (OBC).

A. Participants' qualifications and work experience

The study engaged a total of forty-three (43) participants from five distinct rural primary school zones within and the district education office in Chongwe District. These participants were purposively selected to capture the perspectives of key actors directly involved in the curriculum implementation process. To appreciate the teachers' knowledge of the CBC, the study explored some demographic characteristics as summarized in TABLE I.

TABLE I: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS (N=43)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Role/Position	Classroom Teacher	36	83.70%
	School administration (Head Teacher/ Deputy Head Teacher)	5	11.60%
	District Standards Officer	2	4.70%
Gender	Female	38	88.40%
	Male	5	11.60%

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Age Range	25 - 34 years	12	28.0%
	35 - 44 years	18	42.0%
	45 - 50 years	13	30.0%
Highest Academic Qualification	None	-	-
	Diploma	13	30.0%
	Bachelor's Degree	28	65.1%
	Master's Degree	2	5.0%
Teaching Experience	3 - 10 years	14	33.0%
	11 - 20 years	19	44.0%
	21 - 25 years	10	23.0%

Source: Field Data, 2025

The demographic data reveals a teaching force that was predominantly female (teachers), which aligned with the national trend in primary school staffing in Zambia. The participants represented a mix of early-career, mid-career, and highly experienced educators, with the majority (65.1%) holding a Bachelor's degree, indicating a reasonably qualified teaching cadre. This diversity in experience and qualification ensured that the study captured a wide spectrum of insights, from the fresh perspectives of recently employed teachers to the seasoned viewpoints of veterans, all of whom were navigating the complexities of the new curriculum. The study also established that all participants were confirmed civil servants except one teacher was not confirmed at the time, all were In-service teachers, no volunteers and the work experience of teachers ranged between three years – 25 years of service. With such factors at play, the school teaching staff was well placed to be vested in curriculum knowledge both in theory and in practice. This was expected especially that the majority of the participants (Diploma holders [13] 30.0%; Bachelor's Degree [28] 65.10%) well qualified and had 11 to 25 years teaching and school administration experience.

B. The Teachers' knowledge of the CBC and its elements

The key objective of the study was to explore the level of knowledge rural primary school teachers possessed regarding the 2023 (CBC) curriculum. The findings indicated a strong theoretical awareness of the curriculum's overarching framework and philosophical shifts among the majority of teachers. Teachers indicated good understanding of the new curriculum by identifying the changes that took place such as the shift from local languages to English as the language of instruction from Early Childhood Education to grade 4; merging of some subjects, the structure changes inclusive of the child entry age in primary school from 7 years to 6 years and emphasis on teaching and learning to learner-centredness and more practical and competence based. A study by Ntumi, et al., (2023) indicated that the process of implementing a new curriculum is complex and involves multiple layers of influence, including teachers, learners, educational leaders, and external factors such as government policies. Ntumi, et al., (2023) studied teacher preparedness and implementation. The study showed that curriculum reform was one way of preparing teachers to take on a more challenging and emerging phenomenon in line with trends across the world. The responses of teachers to curriculum reforms in the implementation process were supposed to be in line with their pre-tertiary education curriculum framework. The problem was that the teachers' challenges emerged at the classroom implementation level, an indication that not much was done prior to the implementation to prepare them. Teachers and schools were also not well resourced. Although teachers were the front-line implementers of the curriculum, they did not have the autonomy and independence to design and deliver instruction. They were required to refer to the National Preschool Education Curriculum Framework (NPECF) which they were not well acquainted with. There was lack of coordination and collaboration with other stakeholders.

This aspect of change in curriculum is supported by Fullan's theory of curriculum change and implementation. Fullan's theory is based on the understanding that change is a process that involves significant shifts in how teachers think, how they approach pedagogy, and how they interact with learners. He distinguishes between top-down and bottom-up approaches to change. (Fullan, 2007). TABLE II illustrates this knowledge among the targeted teachers.

TABLE II: TEACHER KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF KEY CURRICULUM CHANGES

Aspect of Curriculum Knowledge	Percentage of Teachers Able to Articulate It	Key Participant Illustrative Quote
Structural Change (2-6-4-2 model)	85%	"Before it was 3-7-2-3, now it is 2-6-4-2. This means more focus on foundational skills in early grades." (Teacher, Kasis Zone)
Shift to Learner-Centred Pedagogy	90%	"We are no longer just talking in class; the curriculum demands that we let the learners discover knowledge through activities." (Teacher,

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			Chongwe North Zone)
Emphasis on Competence-Based Learning	80%		"It's not about memorizing facts anymore. We are assessing skills, values, and the ability to solve problems." (Deputy Head, Silver Rest Zone)
Change in Language of Instruction	95%		"We are to use English as a medium of instruction in this new curriculum, which is a big shift from the previous policy." (Teacher, silver rest Zone)
Subject Mergers (e.g., Creative and Technology Studies)	75%		"They have combined what used to be several subjects into one, like Creative and Technology Studies, which is a new area for us." (Teacher, Chongwe south Zone)

Source: Field Data, 2025

The study found that all teachers, school administration and standards officers were formally introduced to the new curriculum. This was by various avenues mainly by Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) workshops; National Science Centre workshops, Teacher Group Meetings (TGMs). The FGDs with teachers, checklist inventory data and lesson observation collaborated these findings.

Explaining the change of structure of the primary school system, one teacher from Kasisi Zone said: "Before it was 3-7-2-3 to 2-6-4-2 (3 years of ECE, 7 years of primary school education, 2 years of junior secondary and 3 years of senior secondary) to 2-6-4-2 (2 years of ECE, 6 years of primary school education, 4 years of secondary education and 2 years of A-levels) to 2-6-4-2.

Exhibiting such knowledge, one participant indicated that It's not about memorizing facts anymore. We are assessing skills, values, and the ability to solve problems." (school administrator, Silver Rest Zone). Adding to her view, another teacher from silver rest Zone added: "We are to use English as a medium of instruction in this new curriculum, which is a shift from the previous policy."

From such several themes, it was evident that most participants had good knowledge about the CBC. The study found that despite this high level of surface-level awareness, a deeper investigation revealed significant concerns regarding the quality and depth of their understanding. The primary mechanism for knowledge dissemination was through in-service training workshops. However, teachers consistently described these sessions as inadequate.

All school administrators and the two standard officers were very knowledgeable vividly clear from how they explained the reasons for curriculum revision, the differences between the OBC from 2013 to 2022 and the CBC from 2023 to the time of the study, the structure of primary education and pedagogy. These participants stated that they were confident that the teachers were well knowledgeable about the CBC.

Interestingly, the study established a variety of views concerning confidence of the trainings; most teachers said the process was fair to poor. One FGD participant from Silver Rest Zone said: "It seemed like sometimes some trainers were not also sure of the practical aspect of going about the new curriculum. And there were no practical lesson demonstrations done." On one side, school administrators had split views such as fair and moderate with few indicating good enough training. On the other hand, the standards officers were very much satisfied by the standard of training.

C. The quality of training and awareness or orientation workshops

The study established a variety of views concerning confidence of the training; most teachers said the process was fair to inadequate. The study found that despite this high level of surface-level awareness, a deeper investigation revealed significant concerns regarding the quality and depth of their understanding. The primary mechanism for knowledge dissemination was through in-service training workshops. However, teachers consistently described these sessions as inadequate.

Participants revealed that there was insufficient duration and Practicality during the orientation process. A recurring theme was that the training was rushed and theoretical. During a Focus Group Discussion (FGD), a teacher from Silver Rest Zone stated: "The training was for three days, but it was too crowded with information and no lesson demonstration was done. How do we implement what we have only heard about?"

The study also established a perceptual gap among the teachers. During the study, a clear disparity emerged between different levels of the education hierarchy. While Head Teachers expressed moderate satisfaction with the training, Standards Officers unanimously rated the preparedness process as "highly satisfactory." In contrast, classroom teachers reported feeling underprepared. One teacher summarized this gap: "facilitators think we are ready because we attended a workshop. But attending and being capable are two different things."

On the quality of orientation or in-service training, school administrators had split views such as fair and moderate with few indicating good enough training To the contrary, the standards officers were very much satisfied by the standard of training. Concerning the role of teachers as change agents, teachers are seen as central to the success or failure of curriculum

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implementation. Nambusi and Christine, (2024) evaluated teachers' readiness to implement the learner-centered curriculum in Uganda. The study affirms that teacher preparedness was indispensable. The study found that to cater for the diverse urban and rural schools' needs, challenges and opportunities in implementing the curriculum, thorough orientation with the school location in view was paramount. It was found to be important to address teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and competencies. The study demonstrates a need to identify geographical and individual teachers' characteristics when preparing for curriculum implementation. Fullan (2007) argues that teachers need to be both competent (having the skills to teach the new curriculum) and committed (willing to adopt new approaches). Teachers should not be viewed as passive recipients of curriculum changes but as active participants who adapt and modify the curriculum to fit their teaching contexts, in preparation for the new revised curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION

The research has presented its findings and analyzed rural primary teachers' knowledge of the CBC in the initial stages of implementation in 2025. Although some basic expected masterly knowledge was evident among those interviewed and engaged, expert and technical knowledge was missing. This was evident in the teachers' views of having had a 'rushed' orientation hence some expressing lack confidence in the trainers, training process and themselves to adequately deliver in class. In summary, while teachers in Chongwe District are broadly cognizant of 'what' (content) of the 2023 curriculum, their confidence and depth of knowledge regarding the 'how' (methodology) are substantially limited by the superficial nature of the professional development provided. A successful implementation of the 2023 CBC is more than possible if teachers are given a robust teacher support programme and teaching materials relevant to this mammoth but progressive educational trajectory.

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