

From Rhetoric to Reality: A Critical Analysis of Pedagogical Skill Acquisition and Support Systems for Competence Based Curriculum in Zambia's Rural Periphery

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ABSTRACT: Primary education is one of the key aspects of foundational learning hence its cardinal role in personal, social and economic development. This withstanding, teacher preparedness by means of pedagogical know-how is central. During the initial stages of the implementation of Zambia's 2023 Competence Based Curriculum (CBC), teething issues arose necessitating a study. The research explored teacher pedagogical preparedness in the implementation of the CBC in rural primary schools in the ambit of government rhetoric. The focus was on primary schools in Chongwe District, a District in the Periphery of Lusaka the capital city of Zambia. The primary school teachers teaching grade one learners were informants while school administrators and District standards officers were some of the main targets. All three groups were purposively sampled on the bases of their key roles in curriculum implementation. The research used an explorative case study design and data were collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) with teachers, in-depth interviews with standards officers, school administrators and a lesson observation. Thematic analysis, related literature and the theoretical framework were used to analyse data. The study found that some teachers were confident of their teaching methods based on pre and in-service backgrounds while others were not confident due to inadequate orientation during the transition from the Out Come Based Curriculum (CBC) to the Competence Based Curriculum (CBC). This lack of confidence in some teachers has potential to derail effective CBC implementation. For the effective implementation of the CBC, the study recommends robust continuous professional development (CPD) and refresher or more in-service training in the initial stages of the curriculum implementation.

KEYWORDS: Competence, Curriculum, Pedagogical Skills, Primary Teachers, Rural Schools

I. INTRODUCTION

The Zambian education curriculum has had several revisions since independence in 1964. This has been necessitated by evolving educational needs and the changing socio-economic variables affecting the provision of education (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). Of importance is that the change of governments has successfully played a significant role in shaping the curriculum at all levels of education. In 2022, the government announced the need to review the curriculum, affecting both the structure of the education system and curriculum content from early childhood education up to tertiary level. The most recent changed have been from the 2013/ 2014 OBC and the 2022/2023 CBC. The 2023 curriculum has significant matters of concern at primary school level in line with the aim of primary education which is to cultivate the full potential of each learner, leading to continuation of academic and practical education for continuing education, citizenship and world of work (Ministry of Education, 2023).

The new curriculum rhetoric was based on the implementation of the CBC with adequate teacher pedagogical preparedness along five pillars. Firstly, it is a competence-based curriculum, meant to develop skills of critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving. Secondly, there is the incorporation of life-skills education meant to adequately prepare learners for the workplace, self-empowerment and contributing to solving life's daily challenges. Thirdly, there is environmental education focusing on environmental sustainability for development. The fourth dimension is civic education for citizenship and democratic knowledge and skills. Finally, the new curriculum has incorporated teacher training and professional development. The purpose is to ensure

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that teachers' capacities are developed in order to implement the curriculum and adopt relevant teaching methodologies (Ministry of Education, 2023).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In India, Mohamed, et al., (2018) studied the aspect of teachers' under-preparedness for teaching the national curriculum. Following the integration of life skills into the 2014 curriculum, Mohamed and colleagues established a need for teachers to take up the initiative within the curriculum and achieve the desired outcomes. Four factors were found to have been significant for teacher preparedness. These were attitude, motivation, professional mastery and continuous professional development (CPD). These factors were significant for effective life skills education integration into the curriculum. However, there was a low personal belief among the teachers concerning their capacity to effectively teach life skills education according to the curriculum then due to feelings of being ill-prepared. The study demonstrates the need for incorporating life skill education (LSE) in teacher training or teacher orientation when there is curriculum change and policy shift.

In a similar situation, Ntumi, et al., (2023) studied teacher preparedness and implementation in Ghana. The study showed that curriculum reform was one way of preparing teachers to take on more challenging and emerging phenomena 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. However, the problem was that teacher's challenges emerged at the classroom implementation level, an indication that not much was done prior to the implementation to prepare them. The study also found that 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 Pre-Tertiary Education Curriculum Framework (NPECF) which they were not well acquainted with due inadequate orientation. There was also a lack of coordination and collaboration with other stakeholders such as parents and civic society. The study also shows that teacher preparedness could have been better done if teachers were given opportunities to be part of the design team of the curriculum part from the delivery process. This was the view, expectations and inputs of various participants.

Additionally, Masumba (2019) studied the computer studies curriculum implementation in rural schools in Zambia. The major problem found was the lack of computer equipment and facilities for both learners and teachers. The schools lacked computers, computer software, computer laboratories, internet connectivity and computer peripherals. Even when and where qualified teachers available, they could not apply their pedagogical skills well as they lack relevant teaching and learning aids. The study established that where minimal equipment was available, power outages were common and teachers did not have alternative power sources. The study also found that some schools did not have qualified teachers of Computer Studies even though the subject was examinable. Most schools had only managed to teach the subject theoretically and learners' examinations at grade nine were poorly conducted without computer facilities generally, learner performance in the subject was very low (Masumba, 2019).

The literature reveals significant gaps in terms of what has not been done to ensure teachers are prepared for effective implementation of the curriculum. Researchers have concentrated on identifying the challenges of curriculum implementation and teacher preparedness has been suggested among the recommendations. There is a dearth of research on assessing teacher preparedness for new curriculum in the Zambian context especially and specifically for primary teachers and those in rural areas where facilities are usually inadequate.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by the qualitative approach and anchored in the constructivist paradigm, which emphasized understanding phenomena through the subjective experiences of individuals. Constructivism posits that knowledge can be socially co-constructed by researchers and participants and rooted in context-specific interpretations of reality. The selection of constructivism was justified by the study's aim to explore the experiences of teachers and their pedagogical preparedness for curriculum implementation. Constructivism emphasizes that knowledge was socially constructed and shaped by individuals' interactions within their environments (Vygotsky, 1978). The study sought to engage participants as co-creators of knowledge, recognizing the value of their lived experiences in shaping the research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). This study employed a qualitative research methodology, which was appropriate for exploring the complex and context-specific phenomenon of teacher preparedness. Qualitative methods such as purposive sampling, unstructured interview guides, focus groups and a lesson observation were used to gather in-depth insights into teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences. Purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select individuals based on specific criteria, ensuring that participants possessed the knowledge or experience necessary to contribute meaningful insights (Berndt, 2020). This study employed an exploratory case study design, which was well-suited for investigating a qualitative but complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018).

The target population for this study consisted of teachers actively involved in curriculum implementation across various primary schools within Chongwe District. According to Alvi (2016), the target population refers to all individuals who meet the

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criteria specified for a research investigation. In this study, the focus was on teachers, school administrators, and district standards officers. Data saturation was used and considered a critical benchmark for arriving at a sample size of key informants. This ensured that the researcher had captured the full range of perspectives and experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The findings were analysed by means of thematic analysis, reference to literature review and the study's theoretical framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data," making it well-suited for exploring complex qualitative data in this study. Triangulation was essential in qualitative research for increasing credibility and providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

The identities of all participants remained confidential throughout the research process. Data were anonymized to protect participants' privacy and ensure sensitive information was kept secure (Babbie, 2020). Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia review board (where the PhD candidate was a registered student) during data collection process.

IV. RESULTS

The findings revealed a critical gap between theoretical knowledge of required methodologies and the practical ability to execute them effectively. Some teachers demonstrated a strong verbal understanding of the pedagogical shifts mandated by the competence-based curriculum while others were not that confident. The confident teachers could readily list methodologies such as group work, role-play, games, and project-based learning. A significant and frequently cited operational challenge was the instability in lesson planning. However, most teachers expressed immense frustration with the frequent changes to the official lesson plan template. One teacher lamented that:

We have seen three different lesson plan formats since the curriculum started; we don't even know if another one will come next term. It creates confusion and wastes time that we are supposed to use to prepare actual lessons.

Furthermore, the timing of training was criticized for being inadequate and disruptive. One participant noted:

Three days of training were not enough, and they were conducted during teaching time instead of holidays. This meant our learners were left unattended, and we returned to a backlog of work.

It was interesting that while standards officers maintained that teachers were "pedagogically ready," the evidence from the classroom directly contradicted this. The observed lessons were largely characterized by traditional, chalk-and-talk methods, with minimal evidence of the creative, practical, and engaging activities central to the new curriculum's philosophy. This demonstrates that pedagogical application poses a limit on teacher pedagogical preparedness which remains one of the most significant impediments to successful implementation of the CBC.

V. DISCUSSION

This discussion synthesizes the study's qualitative findings regarding teacher preparedness for curriculum implementation, interpreting them through the lens of Vygotsky's social construction of the environment and drawing connections to the broader literature on educational reform.

This section uses the synthesis of the findings with the related literature reviewed in line with the curriculum implementation and education reforms, and Vygotsky's social construction theoretical framework to present the discussion of the results. Firstly, the study established a critical gap between theoretical knowledge of required methodologies and the practical ability to execute them effectively. Some teachers demonstrated a strong verbal understanding of the pedagogical shifts mandated by the competence-based curriculum while others were not that confident. Teachers expressed immense frustration with the frequent changes to the official lesson plan template.

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These findings were in line with Masumba (2019) who also revealed a situation in Zambia where qualified teachers were available but they could not effectively apply their pedagogical skills well as they indicated that the orientation and training were inadequate. Vygotsky guided theoretical framework supports this finding through its principle of balancing theory and practice work/activities in the classroom environment. The gap established was on pedagogical application due to teachers feeling of inadequate trained or orientation. Inadequacy of teacher training or orientation during curriculum change or curriculum reforms if not addressed has the potential of negatively affecting classroom practices, meaningful lesson delivery and overall implementation of the CBC in the primary schools. These findings were consistent with the findings established by Penuel, et al., (2017) affirm that content mastery requires teachers to have a deep understanding of the subject matter they are teaching. Teachers must be provided with essential knowledge concerning the curriculum content which they should teach competently. Pedagogical content

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knowledge includes the ability to explain complex concepts in line with the curriculum. This is in agreement with the Vygotsky lens where verbal transmission of knowledge to learners without practical tools showed that new pedagogies have not been fully internalized or scaffolded into the teachers' established teaching practices. The classroom environment lacks the supportive tools and practices necessary for the teachers to co-construct the new, complex skill set required by the competency-based curriculum (CBC). This, therefore, implies the practical or hands-on competences desired to be achieved by learners and by the CBC may remain a pipe-dream if teachers were to heavily rely on verbal transmission of knowledge to learners more than practical lessons.

Lastly, Vygotsky emphasised a need to teach with concern on the role of what he referred as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The study found that the initial implementation process of the CBC appears to have failed in providing adequate scaffolding to move teachers from their 2013-2022 traditional teaching methods (the actual developmental level) toward the desired CBC-aligned instruction (the potential developmental level). The inadequate, few days orientations conducted during teaching time, as lamented by participants, was insufficient to move teachers through their ZPD, leaving them ill-equipped to perform independently. This aligns with the literature (Ntumi et al., 2023) which noted that teacher challenges emerged at the classroom level due to inadequate preparation. Vygotsky's framework emphasizes that the surrounding environment, including tools, institutions, and cultural artifacts, mediates an individual's development. The findings reveal that the immediate instructional environment for the teachers in Chongwe District is characterized by instability and lack of teacher agency, which fundamentally undermines effective curriculum construction. The Shifting Ground of Policy over frequent changes to the official lesson plan template introduces an element of institutional instability that works against the development of mastery. When the basic "tool" of instruction (the lesson plan format) is constantly changing, it inhibits teachers' ability to build consistent, confident and practice. This constant bureaucratic shift creates unnecessary cognitive load and distraction, preventing teachers from focusing on the challenging pedagogical transition itself.

The contradiction between standards officers' assertion of "pedagogical application" and the observed reality highlights a systemic failure in the social construction of preparation. The official institutional narrative did not match the lived reality of the teachers. The literature (Ntumi et al., 2023) supports this, suggesting that teachers need more than delivery responsibility; they need autonomy and independence and to be part of the curriculum's design process. When teachers are not included in shaping the curriculum that is to shape their practice, their buy-in and sense of professional ownership, critical components of motivation and positive attitude (Mohamed et al., 2018) are significantly diminished.

While the study in India (Mohamed et al., 2018) focused on factors like attitude and professional development, and Ntumi et al. (2023) noted the lack of resources as an impediment to effective curriculum implementation while Masumba, (2019) points to resource inadequacies as a material barrier to the social construction of new learning environments. The observation of traditional methods of chalk and talk as supposed to knowledge of competence based ones, is likely exacerbated by inadequate orientation and training (Ntumi et al., 2023). The lack of or inadequate training of teachers in pedagogy for a revised curriculum constrains the ZPD, making the required CBC practices functionally difficult to achieve, regardless of the teacher's personal attitude or mastery level.

VI. CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that successful curriculum implementation requires more than just informational training. It demands that policymakers focus on creating a stable, resource-rich, and professionally collaborative social environment where teachers are empowered, not just commanded, to co-construct the new pedagogical reality in their classrooms. According to the findings, generally, teachers felt that they were not adequately prepared to implement the new curriculum's pedagogical demands. For the effective implementation of the CBC in Zambia's primary schools, the study recommends robust continuous professional development (CPD) and refresher or more in-service training accompanied by lesson demonstrations and stable lesson plan template in all stages of the curriculum implementation.

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