

Is competency-based curriculum a global template misfit in rural Zambia in view of policy borrowing and local realities?: A case study on selected primary schools of chipata district, east province

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Abstract

The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) was introduced in Zambia to promote learner-centered, skills-oriented education aligned with global standards. However, its implementation in rural contexts faces numerous challenges. This study explores the alignment between CBC and local realities in Chipata District, Eastern Province. Using an exploratory qualitative research design, 50 participants including teachers and school administrators were intentionally sampled from five rural primary schools. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that teacher preparedness, resource limitations, high pupil-teacher ratios, socio-economic barriers, and insufficient institutional support constrain CBC implementation. The study applies Policy Borrowing Theory, Contextualization Theory, and Constructivist Learning Theory to interpret the findings, concluding that CBC functions as a global template misfit in rural contexts without adequate localization. Recommendations include comprehensive teacher training, resource provision, curriculum adaptation, and stronger institutional support.

Keywords: Competency-Based Curriculum; Policy Borrowing; Rural Education; Zambia; Teacher Preparedness and Curriculum Implementation

1. Introduction

Adoption of CBC in Zambia represents a major policy shift from traditional content-based instruction to a learner-centered, outcomes-oriented approach. The reform is anchored in the national aspiration to produce graduates who are not only academically competent but also equipped with practical skills relevant to socio-economic development (Ministry of General Education, 2013). While the policy framework reflects global best practices, its implementation raises critical questions regarding contextual relevance, particularly in rural settings where educational systems operate under significant constraints.

This study critically examines the implementation of CBC in rural primary schools in Chipata District of Eastern Province of Zambia. By exploring the experiences of teachers and the realities of classroom practice, the study seeks to determine whether CBC represents a contextually appropriate reform or a “global template misfit” within rural educational settings.

1.1. Background

Education reforms worldwide increasingly promote learner-centered, skills-oriented curricula. The Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia is a response to these global trends, emphasizing critical thinking, practical skills, and application-based learning (Ministry of General Education, 2013). While urban schools in Zambia have gradually

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resorted to CBC, rural schools face distinct challenges, including limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and socio-economic constraints (Mulenga and Kabombwe, 2019).

Chipata District, in Eastern Province, is predominantly rural, with schools such as Chipangano, Mwami, Vubwi, Mutenguleni, and Kanyebele Community School representing typical rural educational contexts. These schools serve communities with limited infrastructure, high poverty rates, and resource scarcity. Implementing a curriculum designed for global standards in such contexts presents unique challenges.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite the potential benefits of CBC, rural schools in Zambia face barriers to effective implementation. Teachers often lack adequate training, classrooms are overcrowded, and instructional materials are insufficient. Policy borrowing literature suggests that imported reforms may fail if not adapted to local contexts (Phillips and Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). In Chipata, CBC may function as a “global template misfit,” where policy expectations conflict with the realities of rural classrooms.

Research Objectives

Main Objective: To critically examine the implementation of CBC in rural primary schools in Chipata District and assess its alignment with local realities.

Specific Objectives

- Evaluate the extent of CBC implementation in selected schools.
- Examine teachers’ capacity to deliver CBC effectively.
- Analyze the availability of teaching and learning resources.
- Assess relevance between curriculum expectations and rural realities.
- Propose strategies to improve CBC implementation in rural contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Perspectives of CBC

CBC emphasizes learner-centered, skills-oriented education, aligning with international standards (UNESCO, 2017). It aims to equip learners with practical competencies and critical thinking skills. However, its effectiveness depends on teacher capacity, infrastructure, and contextual adaptation (O’Sullivan, 2004).

2.2. Policy Borrowing in Education

Policy Borrowing Theory explains the adoption of foreign policies, such as CBC, by countries seeking global alignment (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). While borrowing facilitates modernization, lack of adaptation can result in ineffective reforms, particularly in resource-constrained environments (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

2.3. CBC in Sub-Saharan Africa and Zambia

African studies indicate uneven CBC implementation, with rural schools struggling due to resource limitations and teacher preparedness challenges (O’Sullivan, 2004; Mulenga and Kabombwe, 2019). In Zambia, the national curriculum promotes competency-based learning, but rural schools face contextual barriers that hinder effective application.

2.4. Rural Education Challenges

Rural schools face structural inequalities, including inadequate infrastructure, high pupil-teacher ratios, and poverty, affecting both teachers and learners (World Bank, 2019). These factors constrain learner-centered pedagogy, highlighting the need for contextualized curriculum reforms.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two key theoretical perspectives: **Policy Borrowing Theory** and **Contextualization Theory**, complemented by insights from **Constructivist Learning Theory**.

2.5.1. Policy Borrowing Theory

Policy Borrowing Theory explains how and why countries adopt education policies from other contexts (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). The theory identifies stages of borrowing, including attraction, decision, implementation, and internalization.

In the context of this study, CBC is viewed as a borrowed policy influenced by global education trends. The theory provides a lens for analyzing whether the policy has been effectively adapted to the Zambian context or implemented without sufficient localization.

2.5.2. Contextualization Theory

Contextualization Theory emphasizes that policies must be adapted to local socio-economic, cultural, and institutional conditions to be effective (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). This framework is critical in examining whether CBC aligns with the realities of rural schools in Chipata. It highlights the importance of considering local constraints such as resource availability, teacher capacity and community contexts.

2.5.3. Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist theory posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction and experience (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). CBC is grounded in this perspective, emphasizing learner-centered approaches and active participation. However, the application of constructivist principles requires supportive learning environments, which may be lacking in rural contexts. This creates a tension between theoretical assumptions and practical realities.

2.6. Gaps in Literature

- Limited empirical studies on CBC implementation in rural Zambian schools.
- Inadequate integration of policy borrowing, contextualization, and constructivist perspectives.
- Scarce evidence linking policy expectations to classroom realities in rural contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts an **exploratory qualitative research design**, appropriate for investigating complex and under-researched phenomena within real-life contexts (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). The exploratory approach is particularly suitable for examining the implementation of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in rural primary schools, where limited empirical evidence exists and contextual factors play a significant role.

The design enables an in-depth understanding of how CBC is interpreted and enacted by teachers, as well as the institutional and socio-economic conditions shaping its implementation. By focusing on lived experiences and contextual realities, the study seeks to generate rich, nuanced insights rather than generalizable statistical conclusions.

3.2. Research Approach

The study is grounded in an Interpretivist research paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human experiences and interactions (Creswell, 2014). This approach is appropriate for exploring teachers' perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding CBC implementation in rural settings.

An interpretivist stance allows the researcher to capture multiple perspectives and understand how participants make sense of curriculum reforms within their specific contexts.

3.3. Study Area

The study is conducted in Chipata District, Eastern Province of Zambia, a predominantly rural area characterized by subsistence agriculture, limited infrastructure, and resource-constrained educational institutions.

- Selected primary schools include:
- Chipangano Primary School
- Mwami Primary School
- Vubwi Primary School

- Mutenguleni Primary School
- Kanyebele Community School

These schools provide a representative sample of rural educational contexts, ranging from relatively established institutions to smaller community-based schools.

3.4. Population and Sampling

3.4.1. Target Population

- The target population comprises:
- Primary school teachers implementing CBC
- School administrators (head teachers and deputies)

These groups are directly involved in curriculum implementation and therefore provide relevant insights into the research problem.

3.4.2. Sample Size

A total of 50 participants were selected for the study. This sample size is considered adequate for qualitative exploratory research, allowing for depth of analysis while maintaining manageability (Creswell, 2014).

3.4.3. Sampling Technique

The study employs purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their involvement in CBC implementation. This ensures that data are obtained from individuals with relevant knowledge and experience. Additionally, maximum variation sampling is used to capture diverse perspectives across different schools and roles.

3.5. Data Collection Methods

Multiple data collection methods are used to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of findings:

3.5.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with teachers and administrators to explore their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in implementing CBC. This method allows flexibility while ensuring coverage of key themes.

3.5.2. Classroom Observations

Classroom observations are carried out to assess actual teaching practices and the extent to which CBC principles are applied. This helps bridge the gap between reported practices and observed realities.

3.5.3. Document Analysis

Relevant documents, including curriculum guidelines, lesson plans, and policy frameworks, are reviewed to decipher the intended design and expectations of CBC.

3.6. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involves:

- Familiarization with the data
- Coding of key themes
- Identification of patterns
- Interpretation of findings

Thematic analysis allows for systematic identification of recurring issues related to teacher preparedness, resource constraints, and contextual challenges.

3.7. Validity and Reliability

To ensure the rigor of the study, several strategies are employed:

- **Triangulation:** Use of multiple data sources (interviews, observations, documents)
- **Member checking:** Participants validate interpretations of their responses
- **Thick description:** Detailed contextual analysis to enhance transferability

These measures strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

3.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly adhered throughout the study as per the following terms:

- **Informed consent:** Participants are fully informed about the study's purpose and voluntarily agree to participate
- **Confidentiality:** Participant identities and responses are kept anonymous
- **Non-maleficence:** The study avoids harm or discomfort to participants
- **Ethical clearance:** Approval is obtained from relevant institutional review bodies

4. Results

4.1. Introduction

This section presents the findings of the study based on data collected from 50 participants, including teachers and school administrators from selected rural primary schools in Chipata District. The data were subjected to the thematic analysis, resulting in key themes that reflect the realities of Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) implementation in rural contexts. The findings are presented descriptively, focusing on patterns emerging from interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

4.2. Participant Profile

The study involved:

- 40 teachers implementing CBC
- 10 school administrators (head teachers and deputies)

Participants had varying levels of teaching experience, ranging from newly trained teachers (1–3 years) to experienced educators (over 15 years). Most participants reported having received only basic orientation on CBC rather than comprehensive training.

4.3. Key Themes Emerging from the Data

4.3.1. Limited Teacher Preparedness

- A dominant theme across all schools was the inadequate preparation of teachers to effectively implement CBC.
- The majority of participants indicated that they had received short-term workshops rather than in-depth training.
- Teachers reported uncertainty in applying competency-based assessment methods.
- Some participants expressed difficulty in shifting from traditional teaching approaches to learner-centered methods.

A typical response from participants indicated: "We were introduced to CBC, but we were not fully trained on how to implement it in class." Classroom observations confirmed that many teachers continued to use lecture-based methods, with minimal learner participation.

4.3.2. Inadequate Teaching and Learning Materials

- Another significant finding was the lack of instructional resources, which constrained CBC implementation.
- Most schools reported shortages of textbooks aligned with the CBC framework.
- Teaching aids such as charts, models, and activity-based materials were largely absent.
- Continuous assessment tools required under CBC were not readily available or standardized.

In smaller schools such as Kanyebele Community School, teachers relied heavily on improvised materials, which limited the effectiveness of lesson delivery.

4.4. Overcrowded Classrooms and High Pupil-Teacher Ratios

The study found that large class sizes significantly affected the implementation of learner-centered approaches.

- In several schools, classrooms had more than 50–60 learners per teacher.
- Teachers reported difficulty in managing group work and individual assessment.
- Observations indicated limited interaction between teachers and individual learners.
- These conditions constrained the practical application of CBC, which emphasizes individualized learning and continuous assessment.

4.5. Partial Implementation of Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Although CBC promotes learner-centered teaching, findings indicate that implementation remains partial and inconsistent.

- Some teachers attempted group work and participatory activities, but these were limited in scope.
- Lessons were often dominated by teacher explanations rather than active learner engagement.
- Assessment practices remained largely exam-oriented rather than competency-based.
- This suggests a gap between curriculum expectations and classroom practices.

4.6. Contextual Misalignment of Curriculum Content

- Participants highlighted challenges related to the relevance of CBC content to rural contexts.
- Some curriculum activities required resources that were not available in rural settings.
- Examples and learning materials were sometimes perceived as more applicable to urban environments.
- Teachers reported difficulty in contextualizing content to local realities.
- This created barriers to effective teaching and meaningful learning.

4.7. Socio-Economic Constraints Affecting Learners

- The findings also reveal that learners' socio-economic conditions significantly influence CBC implementation.
- Many learners come from low-income households and lack basic school materials.
- Irregular attendance due to household responsibilities (e.g., farming activities) was reported.
- Limited parental support affected learners' ability to complete assignments and participate fully.
- These factors contributed to inconsistent learning outcomes and reduced engagement.

4.8. Limited Institutional Support

- The study found that institutional support for CBC implementation was insufficient.
- Schools reported limited monitoring and support from education authorities.
- Professional development opportunities for teachers were infrequent.
- There was a lack of clear guidance on assessment and reporting under CBC.
- This created uncertainty and inconsistency in implementation practices.

4.9. Summary of Findings

The findings reveal several interconnected challenges affecting the implementation of CBC in rural primary schools in Chipata District:

- Teachers are not adequately trained to implement CBC effectively.
- Schools lack essential teaching and learning materials.
- Large class sizes hinder learner-centered approaches.
- CBC is only partially implemented in classroom practice.
- Curriculum content is not always aligned with rural realities.
- Learners face socio-economic barriers that affect participation.
- Institutional support is limited and inconsistent.

These findings highlight a complex interaction between policy expectations and contextual realities, setting the stage for further analysis in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction

The discussion interprets the findings of this study on the implementation of Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in selected rural primary schools in Chipata District. It critically examines the extent to which CBC aligns with local realities, linking the results to theoretical frameworks, namely Policy Borrowing Theory, Contextualization Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory. The discussion also infers the findings within existing literature to identify consistencies, contradictions, and implications for policy and practice.

5.2. Teacher Preparedness and Policy Borrowing Theory

One of the key findings is that teachers in rural schools were inadequately prepared to implement CBC. This aligns with previous research indicating that teacher capacity is critical for effective curriculum reform (Mulenga and Kabombwe, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2004).

From the perspective of Policy Borrowing Theory (Phillips and Ochs, 2004), the introduction of CBC in Zambia exemplifies a classic case of policy transfer from global models to a local context. While the policy framework represents international best practices, the insufficient teacher training reflects a failure in the "implementation" and "internalization" stages of policy borrowing. In other words, while Zambia adopted CBC as a borrowed innovation, the necessary local adaptation to ensure teacher readiness was not fully achieved.

The finding also underscores a critical lesson in policy transfer: the mere adoption of a foreign curriculum does not guarantee successful outcomes, particularly when implementers lack the capacity to operationalize it in practice.

5.3. Resource Constraints and Contextualization Theory

The study revealed that rural schools face severe shortages of textbooks, teaching aids, and classroom infrastructure, which limits CBC implementation. These challenges resonate with the literature on rural education in Sub-Saharan Africa, where resource scarcity undermines learner-centered pedagogies (World Bank, 2019; O'Sullivan, 2004).

Contextualization Theory (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014) provides a useful lens for interpreting these findings. The theory posits that educational policies must be adapted to the socio-economic, institutional, and cultural contexts in which they are applied. In the case of Chipata's rural schools, CBC assumes access to instructional resources, small class sizes, and supportive infrastructure conditions that are largely absent.

The mismatch between policy expectations and local realities demonstrates that CBC, while theoretically sound, is not fully contextualized for rural Zambia. This supports the argument that policy borrowing without adequate localization leads to implementation gaps and may exacerbate existing inequities.

5.4. Classroom Practices and Constructivist Learning Theory

The study found that CBC is only partially implemented, with many teachers reverting to lecture-based methods despite the curriculum's emphasis on learner-centered pedagogy. Classroom observations indicated minimal learner participation, group work, or continuous assessment.

These findings can be analyzed using Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978), which underpins CBC. Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge through experience, interaction, and reflection. Effective implementation of CBC requires teachers to facilitate participatory learning, scaffold activities, and assess competencies dynamically.

In the rural schools studied, however, structural constraints—such as high pupil-teacher ratios and resource scarcity—prevented teachers from applying constructivist principles effectively. Consequently, CBC remains largely theoretical rather than practical, reflecting a tension between the curriculum's underlying pedagogy and classroom realities.

5.5. Socio-Economic Barriers and Policy-Practice Misalignment

Socio-economic factors, including poverty, household responsibilities, and limited parental support, were identified as barriers affecting learner engagement and participation. These findings are consistent with existing literature on rural education in Zambia, which emphasizes the influence of contextual conditions on learning outcomes (Mulenga and Kabombwe, 2019; World Bank, 2019).

When viewed through Contextualization Theory, these findings highlight that CBC does not fully account for the lived realities of learners in rural communities. The policy assumes that all learners can engage equally in classroom activities and complete competency-based tasks, yet socio-economic constraints create systemic inequities that hinder policy effectiveness.

5.6. Institutional Support and Policy Borrowing Challenges

Limited institutional support, including insufficient supervision, professional development, and guidance, emerged as another critical factor constraining CBC implementation. From the perspective of Policy Borrowing Theory, this reflects a breakdown in the adaptation and internalization processes. While CBC is a globally borrowed innovation, its local implementation is weakened by inadequate systemic support.

This finding aligns with literature suggesting that policy borrowing is insufficient without comprehensive support structures to facilitate contextual adaptation (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). The lack of ongoing professional development and monitoring exacerbates the gap between policy design and classroom practice.

5.7. Implications for Curriculum Reform

The discussion highlights several important implications:

- **Context Matters:** CBC cannot be implemented effectively in rural Zambia without accounting for resource constraints, socio-economic realities, and teacher capacity.
- **Teacher Development is Critical:** Training programs must move beyond short workshops to comprehensive professional development that equips teachers with practical strategies for learner-centered instruction.
- **Policy Adaptation is Essential:** Borrowed policies must be localized to fit the realities of rural schools, ensuring both pedagogical and operational feasibility.
- **Integration of Constructivist Principles:** Constructivist learning approaches should be adapted to resource-constrained contexts, perhaps using low-cost, contextually relevant teaching aids and participatory strategies.

Conclusion of Discussion

The findings confirm that the Competency-Based Curriculum, while theoretically aligned with global education standards, faces significant implementation challenges in rural Zambian primary schools. By linking the findings to Policy Borrowing Theory, Contextualization Theory and Constructivist Learning Theory, it becomes clear that CBC functions as a “global template misfit” when applied without sufficient contextual adaptation.

Ultimately, this study highlights the need for context-sensitive curriculum reform, adequate teacher preparation, and institutional support to bridge the gap between policy aspirations and rural classroom realities.

6. Conclusion

CBC represents a theoretically sound, globally-aligned curriculum, yet it faces significant challenges in rural Zambia. Teacher preparedness, resource shortages, high pupil-teacher ratios, socio-economic barriers and weak institutional support limit effective implementation. Without local adaptation, CBC risks becoming a “global template misfit” in rural contexts.

Recommendations

- **Teacher Development:** Comprehensive training, mentoring, and support in learner-centered pedagogy.
- **Resource Provision:** Adequate textbooks, teaching aids, and low-cost activity materials.
- **Curriculum Adaptation:** Align CBC content with rural socio-economic realities.
- **Institutional Support:** Strengthen monitoring, supervision, and professional development.
- **Community Engagement:** Encourage parental and community participation in supporting learning.

- Policy Implications: Conduct feasibility studies before adopting global education reforms; ensure continuous research informs curriculum adaptation.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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