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Teaching for a Competent Future: Zambia's Transition to Competency Based Education-Empowering Learners for a Changing World

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Abstract

Zambia's ongoing transition to a Competency-Based Education (CBE) model marks a strategic shift toward aligning its education system with 21st-century skills and national development priorities. This article examines the conceptual foundations of CBE, its policy context within Zambia, and the practical strategies necessary for its successful implementation. Drawing from the newly written

methods textbook, 21st-Century Teacher Education: A Competency Based Education Approach, it offers guidance for translating policy into classroom practice. The article concludes actionable recommendations to ensure the sustainable rollout of CBE across Zambia's education system.

Keywords: Competency-Based Education, Curriculum Reform, Assessment, STEM Education, Textbook Implementation

Introduction

In the face of rapid technological advancement and the ever evolving labour market demands, education systems must develop learners' competencies beyond theoretical knowledge. Zambia's adoption of Competency-Based Education (CBE) in 2023 aligns with global reforms that prioritise adaptive, transferable, and practical skills (UNESCO, 2017) ^[14]. The country's shift, informed by the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) and embed in Zambia's Visions 2030 and Agenda 2063, (Ministry of Education [MoE, 2023]; Republic of Zambia, 2006 ^[13]) signifies a broader national commitment to inclusive and skills-oriented education.

To support this transition, Bwembya *et al.* (2025) ^[3] authored 21st-Century Teacher Education: A Competency Based Education Approach, a comprehensive textbook designed for teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum specialists, and policy makers. The publication bridges policy and practice, offering practical tools and strategies for implementing CBE in the Zambian context.

Conceptual and Policy Foundation

Competency-Based Education (CBE) builds on the principles of Outcome-Based Education (OBE), emphasising the demonstration of skills, values, and attitudes over the mere recall of content in examinations (Bell, 2010) ^[2]. In CBE, learning outcomes are context-specific and aligned with real-world application. For example, rather than assessing learners solely through written tests on agriculture or biology, a CBE approach might practically assess and involve students in a project designing and cultivating a school garden. As part of the project, learners engage with the local community to demonstrate how scientific principles can be applied to improve agricultural productivity, thereby contributing to food security, environmental sustainability, and poverty reduction. Such a task allows direct assessment of learners' problem-solving abilities, collaboration skills, environmental awareness, and capacity to apply classroom knowledge to meaningful, real-life challenges-core competencies that CBE aims to develop.

The 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) implements Competency Based Education (CBE) through a 3-6-4-2 structure, covering early childhood to secondary education. This structure aligns competency development with national goals for employment and productivity. The new textbook expands on this framework by providing curriculum mapping tools that support the transformation of Curriculum 2023 into practical schemes of work, lesson plans, and

assessment tools.

Curriculum and Pedagogical Reform

Central to the new reforms is a revised curriculum that emphasizes innovation, entrepreneurship, STEM education, and critical thinking (Anderson, 2019) ^[1]. In education, a curriculum refers to the planned sequence of learning experiences. Mwamba, Musonda and Daka (2021) ^[12] added that the curriculum encompasses the content, activities, and assessments that learners engage with to acquire knowledge, skills, and values or attitudes. Furthermore, Changwe, Mwanza, Daka and Ng'onomo (2023) ^[5] referred to curriculum as a roadmap for what learners should learn and how they should learn it. The associated pedagogical shift champions learner agency, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness and further meets the needs of learners and contributes to the development of the country Zambia.

21st-Century Teacher Education: A Competency Based Education Approach, supports these reforms by offering model lesson plans, thematic units, and inclusive instructional strategies. It emphasises differentiated instruction, integration of local knowledge, and cross-cutting themes such as climate change, civic responsibility, and gender equity. These features position the textbook as a key resource for teachers navigating pedagogical change.

Assessment and Authentic Learning

Assessment practices under CBE move away from traditional norm-referenced testing toward performance-based and formative assessment approaches. These include capstone projects, rubrics, portfolios, peer evaluation-diagnostic tools that prioritize competency development and track learner progress (Chamberlain, Gonzalez, Dobiesz, & Edson, 2020) ^[4]. Daka, Minjale, Kakupa, Kaani, Tembo, Mulenga and Musonda (2023) ^[7] added that assessment in CBE focuses on demonstrating mastery of specific skills and knowledge. Musonda, Trinity, Mulenga and Daka (2023) ^[11] also acknowledges that assessment in CBE prioritises demonstrating real-world skills and focuses on application of what has been learnt.

The textbook dedicates an entire chapter to assessment reform, equipping teachers with practical tools for authentic evaluation. Sample rubrics, project-based learning activities, and real-time diagnostic strategies are included to help educators assess competencies effectively. Despite the availability of these resources, studies show that many teachers still rely on traditional tests, underscoring the need for targeted training (Kabombwe & Mulenga, 2019) ^[8].

Teacher Preparedness and Implementation Challenges

Effective implementation of CBE hinges on teacher preparedness. However, many teachers lack adequate exposure to CBE principles and pedagogical methodologies (Momanyi & Rop, 2019) ^[10]. Challenges include limited infrastructure, especially in rural schools, and inadequate access to continuous professional development (Makanday, 2025) ^[9].

21st-Century Teacher Education: A Competency Based Education Approach, serves as both a training manual for CPD activities, and as a day-to-day teaching guide for pre-service and in-service teachers. It includes CPD activities, structured schemes of work and lesson plans, and strategies for building professional learning communities within schools. These resources aim to foster collaborative practice

and ongoing pedagogical improvement.

Equity and Gender Inclusion in STEM

The revised curriculum also prioritises gender equity and inclusive education, especially in STEM subjects such as physics and mathematics, where girls have been historically under represented (MoE, 2023). Ensuring that all learners-regardless of gender or ability-can access quality education is fundamental to the success of CBE.

Bwembya *et al* (2025) ^[3] embedded inclusive education strategies throughout the textbook. Using frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Chita-Tegmark *et al*, 2012), the authors offer action practices to support learners with disabilities and promote gender-responsive pedagogy.

Recommendations

Drawing on both policy analysis and classroom-based insights 21st-Century Teacher Education: A Competency Based Education Approach, recommendations are:

1. Strengthen Teacher Professional Development
Leverage the textbook as a national training tool to build educator capacity in CBE pedagogy, planning, and assessment.
2. Strengthen School-Based Assessment
Strengthen school-based formative assessment practices, especially by increasing use of capstone projects-using examples provided in the textbook.
3. Promote Inclusive Curriculum Leadership
Empower teachers as curriculum innovators and equity champions through peer networks and CPD programs.

Conclusion

Zambia's shift toward Competency-Based Education represents a bold and necessary reimagining of its education system. While policy frameworks provide direction, the success of this transformation depends on tools that translate these ideals into actionable practice. 21st-21st Century Teacher Education: A Competency Based Education Approach, addresses this critical need, offering educators a practical, context-sensitive guide for implementing CBE. As Zambia charts a path toward inclusive and skill-driven learning, sustained support for teacher development, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive pedagogical practices will be essential to nurturing a future-ready generation.

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