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Reimagining Assessment and Learning for National Development: The Role of School-Based Assessment and Project-Based Learning in Zambia's Competency Based Education

¹ Ireen Bwembya, ² Harrison Daka, ³ Benny Mukonde, ⁴ Kwalayela Kwalayela, ⁵ Beatrice Machaka, ⁶ Ebby Mubanga, ⁷ Likando M Kenneth

^{1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7} Education Administrator, Evaluation, Assessment and Curriculum Specialist-Science, Ministry of Education, Lusaka, Zambia

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Corresponding Author: Ireen Bwembya

Abstract

As Zambia embraces Competency-Based Education (CBE), the role of School-Based Assessments (SBAs) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) becomes increasingly central to aligning education with national development priorities. This article examines SBA and PBL as transformative assessment and pedagogical strategies, drawing from the newly written textbook 21st-Century Teacher Education: A Competency-Based Education Approach. These strategies

move beyond examination-driven learning to promote creativity, innovation, and community engagement-skills crucial for realising Zambia's Vision 2030 and beyond. Through authentic, contextually relevant learning and assessments, SBA and PBL have the potential to transform classroom activities into catalysts of national development, gender equity, entrepreneurship, and sustainable livelihoods.

Keywords: Competency-Based Education, School-Based Assessment, Project-Based Assessment, Textbook Implementation

1. Introduction

Zambia's education reform agenda is driven by a vision of producing self-reliant, skilled, responsible citizens who can contribute meaningfully to the nation's social and economic transformation. Competency-Based Education (CBE), now embedded in the national curriculum, promotes skills development, learner agency, and lifelong learning - all essential for national progress in the face of a fast-changing global economy (Mulenga and Kabombwe, 2019). Assessments in CBE are always aligned with clearly defined competencies, ensuring that learners are evaluated on what they are expected to know and do.

Two of the most practical and transformance tools in this new paradigm are School-Based Assessment (SBA) and Project-Based Learning (PBL) (Ameyaw & Antwi, 2020) ^[1]. As emphasised in 21st Century Teacher Education: A Competency-Based Education Approach (Bwembya. *et al*, 2025) ^[3], these approaches offer learner-centred strategies that support both individual growth and national goals, including entrepreneurship, innovation, environmental sustainability, and inclusive education.

2. School-Based Assessment: Supporting Lifelong Learning and Local Development

School-based assessment (SBA) is a continuous process way of assessing learners where various methods and tasks of methods are used to gauge their understanding and skills. Daka (2019) adds that this type of assessment also improves the quality of teaching and learning by providing opportunities for adjustments to enhance student performance. School-Based Assessment allows teachers to evaluate learners in real life or practical contexts over time using tools such as projects, portfolios, checklists, reflections, and peer reviews. In contrast to one-time national examinations, SBA emphasises formative and continuous assessment, providing regular feedback that helps learners develop resilience, metacognition, and self-improvement strategies (Trilling & Fadel, 2009) ^[6].

Workforce readiness: SBA tracks the development of soft skills by learners continuously enabling them to develop-critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills progressively, alongside technical knowledge, aligning with labour market demands.

Local relevance: SBA tasks can be contextualised to local challenges, encouraging learners to engage with agriculture, poverty alleviation projects, health, climate, or entrepreneurship issues relevant to their local communities. Inclusive education: SBA recognises diverse learning styles and needs, contributing to equity, especially for girls and learners with special needs.

These outcomes directly align with Zambia's Visions 2030 and agenda 2063 goals of building a productive, inclusive, and adaptive workforce. (UNESCO, 2017; Anderson, 2019) [7, 2]. Bwembya *et al.* (2025) [3] comprehensively addresses all the issues outlined above.

3. Project-Based Learning: Education as a Driver of Innovation and Community Impact

Project-Based Learning (PBL) immerses learners in long-term, interdisciplinary tasks where they solve real-life problems through investigation, problem-solving, collaboration, and creative action. According to Bwembya *et al.* (2025) [3], PBL fosters entrepreneurial thinking, civic responsibility, and sustainable problem-solving-critical competencies for Zambia's development.

PBL contributes to national development by:

- a) Stimulating innovation: Learners design and prototype solutions to local challenges (e.g., school garden projects), fostering a culture of innovation from early schooling.
- b) Enhancing civic engagement: Projects rooted in community service or local research strengthen citizenship and social cohesion-core elements of democratic participation and nation-building.
- c) Building entrepreneurial skills: Projects involving budgeting, marketing, or product development prepare learners to contribute to Zambia's informal and formal economies.

Furthermore, gender-responsive PBL supports the national goal of empowering girls and young women, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

4. Integrating SBA and PBL in Zambian Classrooms: From Policy to Practice

The integration of SBA and PBL within the Zambian education system is explicitly supported by the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, which advocates for the development of employment-ready skills in learners such as creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.

21st Century Teacher Education: A Competency-Based Education Approach offers practical frameworks for achieving this goal including sample projects which integrate project-based learning with school-based assessments, project design strategies and guidelines for aligning school-based projects with principles of sustainable development. These resources will help teachers move from policy mandates to classroom-level transformation.

5. Overcoming Implementation Barriers

Despite the policy momentum, challenges persist in actualizing SBA and PBL across all schools (Chenge, 2019) [4]. These include:

1. Limited financial resources,
2. Limited teacher capacity in facilitating formative assessment and PBL,
3. Inadequate learning materials and infrastructure,

4. Assessment culture that still emphasizes high-stakes exams over continuous learning.

This new methods book addresses these gaps by offering:

- a) Suggestions of Low-resource projects adaptable for both rural and urban schools,
- b) Professional development activities for teachers,
- c) Strategies for engaging community members and local leaders in education.

6. Conclusion: A Pathway to Competent Citizenship and National Development

SBA and PBL are not isolated educational innovations; they are transformative strategies that can empower learners to contribute actively to Zambia's economic, environmental, and social development. By assessing what learners can do with what they have learnt, and giving them real-world opportunities to do it-education becomes a driver of national progress.

As highlighted in Teacher Education, A Competency-Based Approach (Bwembya *et al.*, 2025) [3], these strategies are essential to achieving Zambia's Visions 2030 and Agenda 2063 Goals of becoming a prosperous, middle-income nation. Empowered with relevant skills, critical thinking, and civic responsibility, today's learners can become the architects of tomorrow's Zambia.

7. References

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