

Unmasking Colonial Legacies in Zambian Education: A Philosophical and Historical Critique of the Secondary School Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical examination of the colonial legacies embedded within Zambia's national secondary education curriculum through historical and philosophical inquiry. Drawing on postcolonial theory and decolonial epistemologies, it interrogates the curriculum's origins, content, and pedagogical orientations that continue to reflect Eurocentric paradigms at the expense of indigenous knowledge systems. Historically, Zambian formal education was structured by missionary and colonial administrators whose curriculum objectives prioritized Western intellectual traditions, marginalizing local contexts and cultural relevance. Philosophically, the article engages thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o to challenge the epistemic violence of curricular structures that perpetuate dependency and cultural subjugation. Through critical analysis of policy documents and curriculum frameworks, the study reveals how education in Zambia remains tethered to colonial foundations that shape national identity, social stratification, and pedagogical practice. The paper advocates for a reimagined secondary curriculum that centers African philosophies, democratic participation, and cultural pluralism. By unmasking these colonial residues, this study contributes to the broader discourse on educational decolonization and offers strategic insights for curriculum transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Decolonization; Curriculum Reform; Postcolonial theory; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Zambian Education

INTRODUCTION

Education shapes not only individual trajectories but also collective identities and social futures. In Zambia, the secondary education curriculum remains deeply imprinted with colonial frameworks that privilege Western epistemologies at the expense of indigenous worldviews. This misalignment undermines the curriculum's relevance and reinforces patterns of cultural marginalization in a society striving for postcolonial renewal.

Historically, Zambia's formal schooling system was established under missionary and British colonial administration, with curricular models designed to serve imperial interests rather than local needs. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986:16) observed, "colonial education annihilated a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves". Such an education system produced subjects conditioned to accept external authority rather than critical, self-determined citizens.

Philosophically, the curriculum enacts what Frantz Fanon (1963) termed epistemic violence, whereby learners internalize a sense of inferiority through institutionalized knowledge hierarchies. Without deliberate efforts to

foreground African philosophies and indigenous knowledge systems, Zambia's secondary curriculum perpetuates symbolic domination and cultural alienation. This article seeks to unmask these colonial residues and advocate for a transformative reimagining grounded in local epistemologies and democratic participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Foundations of the Zambian Secondary Education Curriculum

Formal secondary schooling in Zambia was introduced by missionary societies in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These early curricula prioritized Christian doctrine, English literacy, and vocational skills deemed useful for colonial administration, sidelining indigenous knowledge systems and languages (Carnoy, 1974). Missionary textbooks and examinations were imported directly from Britain, reinforcing Eurocentric worldviews and creating a bifurcated education that separated "civilized" knowledge from local cultural practices (Chanda, 2010).

Following independence in 1964, Zambian policymakers sought to Africanize the curriculum through the 1968 Educational Reform Commission. Although the commission recommended incorporating local history and vernacular languages, implementation was hampered by limited resources, teacher training gaps, and lingering colonial structures within educational institutions (Banda, 2004). Subsequent curriculum reviews in the 1970s and 1980s continued to perpetuate Western epistemologies, even as official rhetoric embraced national identity and development goals (Mwansa, 2008).

Philosophical Foundations for Decolonizing Education

Postcolonial and critical pedagogy offer vital philosophical lenses for critiquing Zambia's secondary curriculum. Paulo Freire's concept of "conscientization" foregrounds education as a practice of freedom rather than domination, arguing that learners must critically engage with content to transform oppressive structures (Freire, 1970). Frantz Fanon extends this critique by describing how colonial education instills internalized inferiority, perpetuating psychological and cultural dependence on the colonizer (Fanon, 1963).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) further emphasizes language as a site of epistemic struggle, asserting that reclaiming indigenous languages and narratives is crucial for decolonial reawakening. His work challenges educators to question the very foundations of curricular content and to re-center knowledge production within local contexts.

Decolonial Curriculum Theory and Frameworks

Contemporary decolonial curriculum theorists propose frameworks that move beyond critique to practical transformation. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) calls for research and pedagogy that respect indigenous epistemologies, privileging relationality, community engagement, and culturally grounded methodologies. Marie Battiste (2002) argues for the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems into mainstream education, advocating for curricular pluralism that validates multiple ways of knowing. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) introduces culturally relevant pedagogy, emphasizing academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness as core aims of transformative education.

These models share an emphasis on disrupting monocultural knowledge hierarchies, designing curricula in genuine partnership with local communities, and fostering critical agency among students.

Empirical Research on Curriculum Decolonization in Zambia

Empirical studies examining curriculum reform in Zambia remain limited but instructive. Mwansa (2008) found that secondary teachers often lack the training or resources to incorporate local histories and languages, resulting in tokenistic inclusion of indigenous content. Samkange's (2013) survey of urban and rural schools revealed that students perceive the national curriculum as disconnected from their lived experiences, diminishing motivation and deep learning. More recent pilot projects in Eastern Province demonstrate that

community-developed modules on local ecology and oral traditions can enhance engagement and critical thinking (Phiri & Zulu, 2019).

Gaps in the Literature and Research Agenda

Despite these insights, significant gaps persist. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies assessing the impact of decolonial interventions on student outcomes and identity formation. Few analyses interrogate power dynamics within curriculum policymaking or examine how teacher education programs can systematically prepare educators for decolonial praxis. Moreover, existing literature often treats “indigenous knowledge” as a monolith, overlooking the diversity of ethnic groups and epistemic traditions across Zambia. Addressing these gaps will be essential for designing a truly transformative secondary curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, critical-document analysis to unmask colonial residues in Zambia’s secondary curriculum. By combining hermeneutic interpretation with Foucauldian discourse analysis, it interrogates how curricular texts reproduce or resist imperial epistemologies.

Research Design

- Qualitative critical-document analysis: allows in-depth examination of policy and curricular texts as historical artefacts and sites of knowledge production (Bowen, 2009).
- Hermeneutic approach: situates each document within its sociopolitical context, uncovering implicit meanings and power dynamics (Gadamer, 1975).
- Foucauldian discourse analysis: traces how language in the curriculum constructs “truths” that legitimize Western knowledge hierarchies (Foucault, 1972).

Data Sources

- a) National curriculum frameworks and syllabi (1968, 1982, 1993, 2013) obtained from the Ministry of Education.
- b) Colonial-era missionary school manuals and examination papers housed at the Zambia National Archives.
- c) Educational commission reports. For instance, the ‘1968 Educational Reform Commission’ and government white papers.
- d) Supplementary policy documents. For instance, the ‘2006 National Philosophy of Education’, to trace shifts in official discourse.

Analytical Procedures

- a) Document mapping: cataloguing each source by date, issuing body, and intended audience.
- b) Thematic coding: developing a codebook with both deductive codes (for example, “Eurocentric content,” “language policy”) and inductive codes emerging from the texts.
- c) Discourse analysis steps:
 - Identify key discursive formations (for instance, “civilizing mission,” “national identity”).
 - Analyze how these formations configure knowledge and legitimize certain pedagogies.
 - Examine silences—topics and perspectives excluded from the curriculum.
- d) Triangulation: cross-referencing findings across documents and theoretical lenses to enhance credibility.

Ethical Considerations & Limitations

- Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia Ethics Committee; although archival research poses minimal personal risk, respect for cultural sensitivities guided interpretation.

- Limitations include potential archival gaps - some missionary records are incomplete - and the absence of direct classroom observation, which constrains insights into enactment.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section of the paper lays out the empirical patterns and textual evidence uncovered in the curricular archives and missionary documents, organized by theme and historical period.

Overview of Curricular Shifts (1968–2013)

1968 Framework

- Emphasis on British imperial history and literature.
- Geography syllabus foregrounds UK and Commonwealth maps.

1982 Revision

- Introduction of “African Studies” module, yet still taught through Western paradigms (for example, comparative case studies with Europe).
- Science curricula retain Eurocentric landmarks (Newton, Darwin) without local contextualization.

1993 Update

- National Philosophy of Education (1986) officially adopted, but primary-level manuals continue using missionary-authored examples.
- History syllabus adds Zambia’s independence but frames it as a footnote to British colonial narratives.

2013 Curriculum

- Stronger rhetoric of “Zambian identity,” yet subject guides still reproduce Western pedagogical models (for instance, project-based learning templates borrowed from UK inspectorates).

Persistence of Eurocentric Content

- History textbooks consistently designate European explorers (Livingstone, Stanley) as primary agents of “discovery,” while indigenous figures appear in sidebar anecdotes.
- Literature anthologies prioritize British Romantic poets; Zambian oral poetry is referenced only as cultural “supplement.”
- Missionary manuals (pre-1968) provide templates for essay questions that persisted verbatim into post-independence examinations.

Marginalization of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

- Science syllabi omit indigenous agricultural practices (for example agricultural practices like: zai pits, intercropping and others) despite their prominence in local farming manuals.
- Healing and herbal medicine appear as “traditional folklore” in Social Studies, disconnected from formal health sciences.
- Missionary archival papers classify local cosmologies under “superstition,” a categorization carried forward into early postcolonial curricula.

Language Policy and Cultural Hegemony

- English remained the sole medium for curricular texts; vernacular languages relegated to “optional” status in only a handful of subject guides.
- Grammar exercises in English textbooks use European contexts (British boarding schools, Oxford settings), alienating rural Zambian learners.

- Policy white papers (2006) call for mother-tongue support, but no corresponding textbook revisions were issued by 2013.

Construction of National Identity

- Flagship civics units frame “nation-building” around Western democratic ideals (parliamentary debates in Westminster mode), sidelining indigenous governance systems (chiefdom councils).
- Geography projects ask learners to compare Lusaka’s layout with London’s Boroughs, reinforcing metropolitan benchmarks.
- Missionary examination rubrics introduced meritocratic ranking systems, which remain the basis for national secondary school assessments.

These findings reveal deep-seated continuities in how Western epistemologies structure knowledge in Zambia’s secondary curriculum.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This section of the paper interprets how the patterns identified in the previous section (4. Presentation of Findings) reproduce colonial power dynamics and shape learner subjectivities. Drawing on the Foucauldian discourse theory and decolonial scholarship, the section examines the mechanisms through which the Zambian secondary curriculum both sustains and (rarely) resists imperial epistemologies.

Discursive Construction of Knowledge and Power

Curricular texts function as sites where certain knowledges are authorized and others delegitimized. According to Foucauldian discourse analysis, these texts constitute “regimes of truth” that normalize Western perspectives and marginalize alternative worldviews (Foucault, 1972).

- Eurocentric narratives position European explorers and philosophers as primary producers of knowledge, reinforcing hierarchical binaries of “civilized” versus “primitive.”
- Missionary-derived question templates and exam rubrics perpetuate discursive formations that valorize British pedagogical norms.
- Silences around local epistemologies indicate a strategic exclusion: what is unspoken often exerts greater power than what is articulated.

Silencing of Indigenous Epistemologies

The curriculum’s treatment of indigenous knowledge as “supplementary” or “folklore” enacts what decolonial thinkers call the coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo, 2011). By relegating local agricultural and healing practices to the margins, the curriculum does the following:

- Denies learners access to culturally relevant science and technology models such as: zai pits, herbal medicine and others too numerous to mention here.
- Reinforces a singular, universal subjectivity wherein Western scientific methods constitute the only valid approach to understanding nature.
- Undercuts possibilities for epistemic plurality and critical engagement with local knowledges.

Linguistic Hegemony and Learner Subjectivation

Language policy in curricular materials exemplifies Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic capital: mastery of English becomes a gatekeeper for academic success (Bourdieu, 1991). This dynamic constructs rural and vernacular-language speakers as deficient subjects.

- Grammar exercises set in British contexts estrange learners from their everyday experiences.
- Lack of genuine integration of mother-tongue resources sustains a monolingual bias, privileging urban, English-medium schools.

- The curriculum naturalizes English as neutral, obscuring its role in maintaining colonial hierarchies.

National Identity and Normative Models

“Nation-building” units draw heavily on Western democratic templates, framing Zambian citizenship through a Eurocentric lens. This produces what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (1986) terms an “alienated self,” disconnected from indigenous governance traditions.

- Civics projects benchmark local councils against Westminster norms, implying that legitimate governance must mirror former colonial powers.
- Geography comparisons to London-based metrics instill a sense of inferiority regarding Zambian urban forms.
- Meritocratic ranking systems, inherited from missionary exams, valorize competition over communal values.

Implications for Decolonizing the Curriculum

The analysis reveals that moments of curricular “Africanization” often serve as rhetorical devices rather than genuine shifts in epistemic authority. To move toward a decolonized curriculum, stakeholders must:

- Reconfigure syllabi to center indigenous knowledge systems as co-equal, not ancillary, sources of understanding.
- Co-develop learning materials with community elders and local experts to ensure cultural resonance and epistemic justice.
- Reform language policies to incorporate bilingual or multilingual pedagogies that valorize Zambian languages alongside English.
- Critically revise assessment frameworks to reward collaborative, context-grounded inquiry rather than rote mastery of foreign templates.

These interventions require both policy commitment and sustained teacher-development initiatives aimed at unsettling entrenched colonial legacies in the classroom.

Recommendations and Action Plan for Decolonizing Zambia’s Secondary Curriculum

In this section, the paper outlines strategic interventions to transform entrenched colonial legacies into an inclusive, pluralistic curriculum. Grounded in decolonial theory and participatory pedagogies, the recommendations are organized across policy, curriculum design, teacher development, community partnerships, assessment, and evaluation. At this juncture, it is important to note that each subsection provides concrete steps, responsible actors, and suggested timelines.

a) Policy-Level Reforms

A comprehensive policy overhaul is critical to signal political will and provide scaffolding for downstream initiatives. Reform must embed epistemic justice at the heart of curricular mandates.

1. Ministry of Education (MoE) to revise the National Philosophy of Education, explicitly naming indigenous knowledge systems as co-equal pillars alongside Western paradigms.
2. Legislate mandatory inclusion of at least three local language resources per subject guide, with a two-year compliance window.
3. Allocate ring-fenced budget lines for curriculum decolonization, including stipends for community experts and funds for multilingual publishing.
4. Mandate a biennial National Curriculum Audit Board - comprising policymakers, academics, teachers, and traditional leaders from all the ten (10) provinces of Zambia to review and sanction curricular materials.

Timeline: Policy drafting (6 months), stakeholder consultations (3 months), parliamentary approval and gazetting (6 months), implementation start (Year 2 Q1).

b) Curriculum Co-Design and Content Development

Collaborative content creation ensures cultural resonance and epistemic plurality. Co-design affirms local ownership and bridges theory with lived experience.

1. Establish Regional Curriculum Hubs in each province, co-chaired by the University of Zambia scholars and scholars from other key national universities and representatives from the office of the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS).
2. Convene workshops with elders, indigenous knowledge holders, and subject-matter experts to identify core local concepts (e.g., Zambian cosmologies in Social Studies, agroecological practices in science).
3. Draft bilingual modules where English is integrated with vernacular texts - using reconciled editorial teams of teachers and community scribes.
4. Pilot new modules in 10 schools (urban, peri-urban, rural) for a full academic year, collecting learner feedback and teacher reflections for iterative refinement.

Timeline: Hub formation (3 months), content workshops (6 months), drafting (4 months), pilot phase (12 months), revision (4 months).

c) Teacher Professional Development

Unlearning colonial pedagogies requires sustained, scaffolded capacity building. Focused training empowers educators to facilitate pluralistic classrooms.

1. Design a blended learning course on “Decolonial Pedagogy and Local Epistemologies” for in-service teachers, co-facilitated by the University of Zambia, School of Education.
2. Implement school-based communities of practice, meeting monthly for lesson co-planning, reflective peer observation, and knowledge-sharing across language contexts.
3. Offer micro-credentials (badges) in bilingual curriculum delivery and community-engaged teaching, linked to career advancement incentives.

Timeline: Course development (4 months), rollout (Year 1 Q3), continuous CoP meetings (ongoing), badge assessments (biannual).

d) Community Engagement and Knowledge Partnerships

Deep partnerships with local communities legitimize indigenous perspectives and foster mutual accountability.

1. Formalize Memoranda of Understanding between MoE and traditional leadership structures, outlining roles in content validation and cultural safeguarding.
2. Launch a “Knowledge Ambassadors” program, recruiting senior secondary pupils to document oral histories, agricultural wisdom, and healing practices for inclusion in curricula.
3. Host annual “Curriculum Decolonization Forums” where community members, researchers, and policymakers review progress and co-create next steps.

Timeline: MoU negotiations (3 months), Ambassador program kickoff (Year 1 Q2), first Forum (Year 1 Q4).

e) Assessment Reform

Redesigning assessments disrupts inherited meritocratic hierarchies and values communal, context-rich inquiry.

1. Shift from predominantly essay-based exams to mixed-modal assessments: portfolios, community-based projects, oral presentations in mother tongue.

2. Revise national examination rubrics to include criteria for cultural relevance, collaborative learning, and critical engagement with local knowledge.
3. Train examiners and inspectors on intercultural assessment literacy to ensure fair, context-sensitive grading.

Timeline: Rubric drafting (6 months), examiner workshops (3 months), pilot assessments (Year 2 exam cycle), full roll-out (Year 3).

f) Monitoring, Evaluation, and Iterative Improvement

A robust M&E framework guarantees accountability and supports continuous learning.

Component	Indicator	Data Source	Frequency
Policy implementation	Number of subject guides revised with indigenous content	MoGE annual report	Annually
Teacher capacity	Percentage of teachers with decolonial pedagogy badges	University of Zambia certification records	Biannually
Curriculum relevance	Student and community satisfaction ratings	Surveys, focus groups	Each term
Assessment diversity	Proportion of alternative assessment items in exams	Examination Council statistics	Annually
Community engagement	Number of active Knowledge Ambassadors	Program databases	Quarterly

- Commission independent evaluators at Year 2 and Year 4 to assess impact on learner outcomes and cultural equity.
- Use findings to refine policy directives, resource allocations, and professional development offerings.

The recommendations highlighted above together chart a roadmap toward an emancipatory, contextually grounded curriculum in Zambia.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Education is a powerful site of both domination and liberation. This study has traced how Zambia’s national secondary curriculum, from its missionary origins to contemporary revisions, remains imbued with colonial epistemologies that privilege Western knowledge systems and marginalize indigenous worldviews. By unmasking the discursive formations, silences, and linguistic hegemonies embedded in curricular texts, the analysis reveals the persistence of symbolic violence and cultural alienation within policy, content, and assessment frameworks.

The proposed recommendations in the paper chart a multifaceted pathway toward curriculum emancipation: policy reforms that enshrine epistemic justice, collaborative content co-design with local communities, decolonial teacher development, multilingual pedagogies, and diversified assessment practices. Central to this transformation is the principled re-centering of indigenous knowledge as co-equal with Western paradigms, thereby restoring education’s potential as a tool for critical consciousness and democratic participation.

While this paper has focused on textual archives and policy documents, future research must deepen our understanding of how decolonial curricula are enacted and experienced in classrooms. Key avenues include:

- Longitudinal case studies assessing the impact of redesigned modules on students’ cultural identity, critical thinking, and academic achievement.
- Ethnographic investigations of teacher and learner engagements with bilingual and community-developed materials to surface enactment challenges and successes.
- Policy analyses exploring power dynamics in curriculum decision-making bodies, with attention to how traditional leadership and youth representatives can be more inclusively integrated.
- Comparative studies across Sub-Saharan contexts to identify best practices and common barriers in decolonizing secondary education.

By pursuing the research trajectories indicated above, scholars and practitioners can build on this foundational critique to advance a genuinely pluralistic and liberatory secondary curriculum in Zambia and beyond.

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