

# From Policy to Practice: Stakeholders' Perspectives on the Implementation of Zambia's 2023 Competency-Based Assessment Reforms

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## ABSTRACT

The 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework introduced a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) whose implementation commenced in 2025, accompanied by associated assessment reforms that emphasise learner-centred approaches and practical skills development. This study examines stakeholder perspectives on the implementation challenges and enablers of these competency-based assessment reforms. Drawing on qualitative document analysis, systematic literature synthesis, and primary fieldwork conducted in Mpika District of Muchinga Province, the study collected data from 84 participants: 40 teachers, 10 head teachers, 2 District Education Standards Officers, 2 Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) officers, and 30 learners drawn from 10 selected primary and secondary schools. Findings reveal that stakeholders view the reforms positively in principle recognising the CBC's potential to bridge theory and practice but report significant obstacles, including teacher preparedness gaps, resource shortages, and the complexity of competency-based evaluation. Teachers and head teachers express concern about increased workload and unclear assessment guidelines, while ECZ emphasises the need to align assessment systems with the CBC through intensive capacity building. The study concludes that Zambia's competency-based assessment reforms can succeed only if accompanied by coherent implementation strategies and sustained investment in human and material resources.

**Keywords:** Competency-based curriculum, assessment reform, stakeholder perspectives, education policy, Zambia.

## INTRODUCTION

Zambia's education system has embarked on a major transformation to meet 21st-century learning goals. In 2023, the Ministry of Education finalised a new curriculum framework that shifts from traditional content-based education toward a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) (MoE, 2023). The CBC, whose classroom rollout commenced in early 2025, emphasises learner-centred pedagogy, hands-on activities, and the development of higher-order skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving. The reform aligns with global trends in countries such as South Africa and Kenya, where education policy now explicitly integrates curriculum and assessment to focus on competences. Zambian education leaders argue that the CBC promotes higher-order thinking skills and aims to bridge the gap between education and workforce demands (Chisala, 2025; MoE, 2023).

However, the success of any curriculum overhaul depends on effective implementation. Stakeholder engagement, involving teachers, school leaders, examination boards, parents, and others, is crucial to the transition from policy to classroom practice. Early studies of Zambia's CBC rollout note potential benefits but also warn of significant implementation challenges: inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and resistance to change (Chisala, 2025; Phiri, 2026). In particular, shifting to competency-based assessment (CBA) requires forms of testing and evaluation that diverge markedly from conventional examinations. The Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) has restructured national examinations and begun intensive capacity-building programmes so that assessment systems align with the CBC (ECZ, 2025).

## Statement of the Problem

Although Zambia’s Ministry of Education officially launched a competency-based curriculum framework in 2023, with implementation commencing in 2025, relatively little empirical evidence exists on how the competency-based assessment reforms play out in schools, particularly in rural and under-resourced contexts. Globally and regionally, CBC initiatives often stumble not in policy design but in execution. For Zambia, the problem is acute: stakeholders indicate that teachers and other policy implementers have not been fully prepared for the shift. Many Zambian educators are accustomed to content-focused teaching and have received limited or no training in CBA methods (Daka, 2024; Ng’andu & Phiri, 2022). Meanwhile, basic resources such as textbooks, laboratories, and digital tools remain scarce in many schools, particularly in rural districts. Without sufficient orientation and materials, the new assessments, which emphasise practical skills and critical thinking, risk being inconsistently applied or superficially implemented. This study addresses the gap by examining how these reforms are understood and enacted by frontline educators and officials in Mpika District of Muchinga Province.

## Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this research was to examine how Zambia’s 2023 competency-based assessment reforms are being implemented at the school level, from the perspective of key stakeholders. Focusing on Mpika District, the study explored teachers’ and learners’ experiences with the new assessment system, identified implementation challenges, and gathered stakeholder suggestions for improvement. By combining document analysis, literature synthesis, and primary fieldwork, the study offers an empirical basis for understanding the reforms’ real-world effects and for strengthening alignment between national policy and classroom practice.

## Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it provides one of the first localised, evidence-based accounts of Zambia’s CBA reform rollout in a rural district. Policy-makers and education planners need concrete data on reform uptake in order to adjust strategies and allocate support where it is most needed. By highlighting the practical successes and shortcomings observed by teachers, head teachers, district officers, and examinations officials, the study informs key decisions — for example, whether to intensify teacher training or to revise assessment guidelines. Its findings have direct relevance to current national priorities, including the 8th National Development Plan and the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2022–2026, which both emphasise skills development and equity. Moreover, the study’s focus on a typical rural district (Mpika) sheds light on implementation in Zambia’s periphery, helping to ensure that reforms benefit all regions and not only well-resourced urban schools.

## Research Objective and Research Question

This article focuses on one specific objective:

**Table 1. Research Objective and Guiding Research Question**

| Objective                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Research Question                                                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| To identify the perceived challenges and enablers in the implementation of Zambia’s 2023 competency-based assessment reforms, from the perspectives of key stakeholders (teachers, school leaders, examinations officials, and policymakers). | What challenges and enablers do stakeholders identify when implementing Zambia’s 2023 competency-based assessment reforms, and how might these be addressed? |

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in Curriculum Implementation Theory (Fullan, 2007), which provides a lens through which to examine how educational reforms are translated from policy into classroom practice. The theory emphasises that successful implementation is not merely the direct execution of centrally developed policies,

but a dynamic and context-sensitive process influenced by the capacities, perceptions, and interactions of various stakeholders, including teachers, learners, administrators, and the community.

According to Fullan (2007), curriculum implementation is shaped by three interrelated elements: (1) the characteristics of the reform, including its clarity, complexity, and practicality; (2) the local context, encompassing resource availability, school culture, and leadership; and (3) the change agents, particularly teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes. These dimensions are critical in understanding how Zambia's 2023 assessment reforms are being navigated within Mpika District, a rural setting with distinctive socio-educational challenges.

Complementing this, the sense-making perspective of Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2002) highlights the active role of teachers as interpreters of policy. Educators do not passively receive reform directives; they actively make sense of and adapt them in light of their professional experiences, classroom realities, and local conditions. Together, these two theoretical lenses allow the study to investigate the interplay between national education policy and school-level practice, identifying the conditions that support or hinder effective assessment reform implementation.

Applying these frameworks to the findings: the data show that while Zambia's 2023 reform is clear in its overarching goals (competency development, learner-centred pedagogy), it is complex in its practical demands (new assessment design, continuous assessment records, grading rubrics). The local context in Mpika, characterised by resource deficits and limited professional development creates conditions that challenge effective implementation. And the change agents (teachers) exhibit divergent interpretations of the reforms, consistent with Spillane et al.'s (2002) sense-making model, producing uneven classroom practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, competency-based education and assessment reforms have become central to educational transformation efforts aimed at equipping learners with twenty-first-century competencies. UNESCO (2021) notes that competency-based approaches promote critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. Countries such as Finland, Singapore, Canada, and Australia have adopted competency-based assessment frameworks to ensure learners demonstrate practical application of knowledge rather than mere content recall. Research indicates that successful implementation depends on teacher preparedness, curriculum alignment, adequate resources, and continuous monitoring (OECD, 2019).

Across Africa, curriculum reforms have shifted toward competency development. Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Ghana have introduced competency-based curricula intended to improve learner outcomes and strengthen links between education and socio-economic development. However, studies consistently report implementation constraints: inadequate teacher training, limited instructional materials, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient stakeholder engagement (Komba & Kabaji, 2021; UNESCO, 2022). These factors often create a persistent gap between policy intentions and classroom practice, a pattern that Zambia's experience mirrors.

In Zambia, the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) institutionalised a competency-based curriculum designed to produce innovative, productive, and adaptable learners. Existing studies indicate that stakeholders generally support the reform because of its potential to improve the relevance of education and enhance practical skills acquisition (Chisala, 2025; Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). However, concerns persist regarding teacher readiness, assessment standardisation, resource availability, and infrastructure constraints, particularly in rural districts (Daka, 2024; Ng'andu & Phiri, 2022; Phiri, 2026). The success of the reforms will therefore depend on sustained investment in teacher capacity building, assessment tools, learning resources, and meaningful stakeholder collaboration.

### Comparative Perspectives on Competency-Based Curriculum Implementation

Experiences from other countries implementing competency-based curricula provide valuable lessons for Zambia. In Kenya, the Competency-Based Curriculum introduced in 2017 encountered challenges similar to

those identified in this study, including inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient learning materials, stakeholder uncertainty, and difficulties in assessment implementation. Subsequent reforms emphasised continuous professional development and phased implementation strategies to strengthen teacher competence and stakeholder confidence.

Similarly, Rwanda's competency-based curriculum reforms revealed that teacher capacity building, instructional support, and regular monitoring were critical determinants of successful implementation. South Africa's outcomes-based and competency-oriented reforms highlighted the importance of clear assessment guidelines, curriculum support structures, and sustained investment in teacher development. In Ghana, standards-based curriculum reforms demonstrated that meaningful parental engagement and community sensitisation are essential for securing stakeholder support and ensuring successful implementation.

Across these countries, a common lesson emerges: curriculum reform success depends not only on policy quality but also on systematic implementation support, adequate financing, continuous teacher professional development, effective monitoring systems, and stakeholder participation. These international experiences provide useful benchmarks for strengthening Zambia's competency-based assessment reforms.

## METHODS

### Research Design and Methodological Approach

This article draws on a mixed-methods study whose methodology comprised three distinct phases. Phase 1 involved document analysis of key policy texts, including the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework, ECZ examination guidelines, and relevant government strategic plans, to map the policy intent of the CBC reforms. Phase 2 comprised a systematic thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed articles, NGO/donor reports, and grey literature published after 2018, to capture broader stakeholder perspectives on CBC implementation in Zambia and comparable African contexts. Phase 3 constituted original primary fieldwork conducted by the first author in Mpika District, Muchinga Province, Zambia, as part of a dissertation study at Mulungushi University. The primary fieldwork data underpin the Mpika-specific findings reported in the Results section. Findings from Phases 1 and 2 are clearly identified as literature-derived throughout; findings from Phase 3 are presented as primary data.

Qualitative data from Phase 3 were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to teachers and learners. The combination of approaches enabled triangulation across data sources, strengthening the validity of findings (Patton, 2002).

### Study Area

The study was conducted in Mpika District, Muchinga Province, Zambia, a predominantly rural district characterised by resource limitations, dispersed school populations, and infrastructural constraints representative of many rural Zambian districts.

### Sample and Participants

Using stratified random sampling, ten schools (five primary, five secondary) were selected from five education zones within the district to ensure representative geographic coverage. Purposive sampling was used to select key informants based on their direct roles in assessment implementation. The total sample comprised 84 participants:

- ✓ 40 subject teachers (survey questionnaire)
- ✓ 30 learners, Grade 1 and Form 1 cohorts of 2025 (focus group discussions)
- ✓ 10 head teachers (semi-structured interviews)

- ✓ 2 District Education Standards Officers / Education Standards Officer – General Inspection
- ✓ 2 Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ) officials

Regarding gender: of the 40 teachers, 22 (55%) were male and 18 (45%) female. The distribution of experience ranged from 1–3 years (20%), 4–6 years (35%), 7–10 years (25%), to 10+ years (20%), indicating a predominantly experienced workforce.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Structured questionnaires with both Likert-scale and open-ended items were administered to teachers and learners. Semi-structured interview guides were used with head teachers, district officers, and ECZ officials to allow in-depth exploration of contextual factors. Focus group discussion guides were used with learners to facilitate shared reflection. All instruments were pre-tested with a small group outside the main sample.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), generating descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores from Likert-scale items. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analysed using thematic analysis approach, following the procedures described by Patton (2002). The analysis followed six stages. First, all interview and focus group discussion transcripts were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. Second, open coding was undertaken whereby meaningful statements, phrases, and experiences related to competency-based assessment implementation were identified and assigned descriptive codes. Third, similar codes were grouped into broader categories such as teacher preparedness, learner experiences, resource availability, assessment challenges, institutional support, and stakeholder perceptions. Fourth, categories were systematically compared and refined to generate overarching themes that captured recurring patterns across stakeholder groups. Fifth, the emerging themes were reviewed against the original data to ensure credibility, consistency, and representativeness. Finally, themes were interpreted in relation to Curriculum Implementation Theory and the broader literature on competency-based education and assessment reforms.

To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was undertaken across interviews, focus group discussions, questionnaires, document analysis, and observations. Member checking was conducted with selected participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations, while peer review of coding decisions enhanced dependability. Representative participant quotations were retained to support thematic interpretations and preserve participants' voices. Quantitative and qualitative findings were then triangulated with document analysis and literature synthesis to produce an integrated picture of reform implementation across multiple levels.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics approval for the primary fieldwork was obtained from the Mulungushi University School of Social Sciences and from the Mpika District Education Board Secretary (DEBS). Written informed consent was obtained from all adult participants prior to data collection. For learner participants, written parental or guardian consent was obtained alongside learner assent. Participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. All data were anonymised in reporting, and information was used solely for academic purposes. The dignity, rights, and welfare of all participants were respected throughout.

## **RESULTS**

### **Policy Document Summary**

Table 2 summarises the key policy documents shaping the CBC assessment reform landscape. The 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) provides the overall blueprint, calling for competences as intended learning outcomes and envisioning school-based formative assessment complementing national

examinations. The ECZ Act No. 3 of 2023 updated the legislative mandate for examinations, aligning the assessment system to the CBC through new accreditation and standardisation procedures. The Education Sector Strategic Plan 2022–2026 and 8th National Development Plan both endorse competency-based approaches and commit to teacher training and equity in resource provision. ECZ has rapidly revised examination guidelines in 2025–2026 to fit CBC goals. Across all documents, the policy direction is clear; however, most documents lack detailed operational guidance for teachers and schools.

**Table 2. Key Policy Documents (post-2018)**

| Document                                     | Type / Date               | Assessment-Relevant Content                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) | MoE, 2023                 | Introduces CBC for all levels (rollout from 2025); emphasises learner competencies; calls for school-based formative assessment linked to new competences. |
| National Education Policy 2025               | MoE/Govt, 2024 (launched) | Outlines national education goals; launched concurrently with new CBC assessment tools. Signals major reform commitment.                                   |
| Examinations Council Act No. 3 of 2023       | Zambia Statute, 2023      | Replaced outdated examinations law; gives ECZ mandate to accredit centres and prescribe assessment standards aligned to CBC.                               |
| Education Sector Strategic Plan 2022–2026    | MoE, 2022                 | Five-year plan; sets targets for CBC rollout, teacher training, and new assessment models. Emphasises M&E but limited curriculum detail.                   |
| 8th National Development Plan 2022–2026      | GRZ, 2022                 | Frames education as priority; endorses competency-based approaches for skills development; stresses equity and resource provision.                         |
| ECZ Assessment & Examination Guidelines      | ECZ, 2025–2026            | Outlines exam components and competency-aligned grading for O-level under CBC. Rapidly revised in 2025–2026 to fit CBC goals.                              |

Sources: MoE (2022, 2023, 2024); ECZ (2023, 2025); GRZ (2022).

## Mpika District: Primary Fieldwork Findings

This section reports findings from the primary fieldwork conducted in Mpika District (Phase 3). Results are organised by stakeholder group and research objective.

### Teachers' Understanding of the Reforms

Of the 40 teachers surveyed, 67.5% (n=27) reported having received some form of training on the 2023 assessment reforms; 32.5% (n=13) had received none. However, training quality was inconsistent: many described sessions as brief and generic, with insufficient attention to the operational details of school-based assessment, grading rubrics, or continuous assessment record-keeping. Confidence in applying the new assessment methods was almost evenly divided: 37.5% disagreed they were confident, 25% partially agreed, and 37.5% agreed. This pattern suggests that training exposure alone does not translate into implementation confidence.

Qualitative data from teacher interviews revealed recurring themes. One teacher in a secondary school stated: “We were told about the reforms in a one-day workshop, but there were no practical examples of how to design a competency task for a class of 60 learners. We are still guessing.” Another noted: “The continuous assessment records require me to track each learner individually every week. With large classes, this is impossible to do properly.” These responses are consistent with the literature findings (Chisala, 2025; Daka, 2024) but are grounded in the specific conditions of Mpika District.

Among the head teachers, 50% partially agreed they had a clear understanding of the reforms, 30% agreed, and 20% disagreed. One head teacher commented: “My understanding of the 2023 assessment reform is not yet up to the standard expected. We need more structured orientation.”

### **Learners’ Experiences with the New Assessment Methods**

Of the 30 learners who participated in focus group discussions, 83.3% (n=25) reported noticing changes in how their teachers assess their work. Learners responded positively to practical tasks and group work, associating these methods with better understanding: “When we do practical work, I understand the lesson more. It is not just writing in a book.” However, learners also reported challenges. Several noted stress associated with complex tasks and the expectation to conduct research-based assignments at home, where parental support and internet access are limited. One learner observed: “Sometimes the teacher gives us a project, but at home there is no one to help and no internet. We come to school the next day without completing it.”

On Likert-scale items, 33.3% of learners agreed and 40% partially agreed that the new methods help them understand lessons better; 26.7% disagreed. The mean rating across learner perception items was approximately 3.3 out of 5.0, indicating moderately positive but mixed experiences. Only 10% agreed outright that the new methods were difficult, while 50% partially agreed and 40% disagreed, suggesting that difficulty was a moderate rather than acute concern.

Beyond the quantitative findings, learner narratives revealed important insights into how competency-based assessment reforms are experienced in practice. Many learners appreciated practical activities, projects, demonstrations, and collaborative learning tasks because these approaches enabled them to participate actively in the learning process rather than merely memorising information. Group work was reported to strengthen communication and teamwork skills, while practical activities enhanced motivation and understanding of concepts.

However, learner experiences also highlighted contextual inequalities that affect implementation. Learners frequently reported difficulties completing research-based assignments because of limited access to textbooks, internet connectivity, and parental academic support. Several participants explained that project-based tasks often assumed the availability of resources that were not accessible in many rural households. Consequently, some learners experienced anxiety and frustration when attempting to complete competency-based tasks outside school.

Furthermore, learners reported variations in assessment practices among teachers. While some educators provided clear guidance and feedback, others appeared uncertain about assessment expectations, resulting in inconsistent learner experiences. These findings suggest that successful implementation of competency-based assessment requires not only teacher preparation but also learner support mechanisms and equitable access to learning resources. The evidence demonstrates that learners are active participants in curriculum reform whose experiences significantly influence implementation outcomes.

### **Implementation Challenges**

Across all stakeholder groups, multi-level implementation challenges were consistently identified. Table 3 presents these challenges by stakeholder group.

ECZ officials acknowledged: the absence or delayed dissemination of school-based assessment (SBA) guidelines; variations in SBA scoring across schools; and the fact that full reform rollout was not yet complete at the time of data collection. District Education Standards Officers rated the effectiveness of monitoring and supervision systems at a mean of 2.0 out of 5.0, the lowest score in the study, and reported inconsistent implementation across schools. Head teachers and teachers cited lack of ICT infrastructure, limited laboratory access, heavy workload, large class sizes (some exceeding 70 learners), language barriers, and misalignment between syllabus content and assessment topics as key challenges.

**Table 3. Stakeholder Groups, Data Sources, and Primary Perspectives on Assessment Reforms**

| Stakeholder Group                 | Data Sources                                                     | Key Perspectives and Concerns                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Teachers (n=40)                   | Primary fieldwork surveys and interviews (Mpika District, 2025)  | Welcome CBC goals but cite insufficient training and heavy workload. Report unclear assessment criteria, time demands, and continued reliance on traditional tests. Desire practical guidance and exemplar tasks. |
| Head Teachers (n=10)              | Primary fieldwork interviews (Mpika District, 2025)              | Concerned about logistics and support for teachers. Highlight need for resources (labs, materials) and mentoring. Partial understanding of reform framework; note increased administrative burden.                |
| Learners (n=30)                   | Primary fieldwork focus group discussions (Mpika District, 2025) | Majority (83.3%) noticed changes in assessment. Positive responses to practical tasks and group work; concerns about stress, complex tasks, and limited home support for research assignments.                    |
| ECZ Officials (n=2)               | Primary interviews + ECZ (2025) newsletter and policy documents  | Focused on aligning national examinations with CBC. Conducting item-writer training. Acknowledge delayed dissemination of SBA guidelines and standardisation challenges.                                          |
| District Education Officers (n=2) | Primary interviews (Mpika, 2025) + MoE strategic documents       | Moderate confidence in teacher preparedness. Rate monitoring/supervision effectiveness at 2.0/5.0. Report inconsistent implementation and limited feedback mechanisms between schools and district office.        |

Note: All data in this table are drawn from primary fieldwork conducted by the authors in Mpika District, 2025, supplemented by official ECZ and MoE documents where indicated.

### Strategies to Enhance Assessment Practices

Across all five stakeholder groups, recommendations for strengthening implementation were consistently convergent:

- ✓ Continuous and practical teacher training on CBA design, marking procedures, and SBA record-keeping
- ✓ Timely dissemination of clear assessment guidelines and exemplar tasks to all schools
- ✓ Strengthened district-level monitoring through regular school visits and structured feedback systems
- ✓ Provision of adequate teaching and learning materials, ICT infrastructure, and appropriate class sizes
- ✓ Increased stakeholder engagement, including community outreach to demystify the new assessment system for parents

## DISCUSSION

The synthesis of primary fieldwork, document analysis, and literature highlights both alignment and tension between Zambia's policy goals and classroom realities. On one hand, policymakers and curriculum experts stress the imperative of CBA, echoing global evidence that moving beyond rote examinations can foster critical thinking and practical skills (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2019). Stakeholders across all levels generally acknowledge the rationale: bridging school and workplace demands. On the other hand, consistent misalignment characterises implementation at the school and district levels.

Applying Fullan's (2007) framework: the reform's characteristics present a mixed picture. The policy goals are clear and well-articulated at national level; however, the practical demands of the reform, designing competency tasks, running continuous assessment, maintaining grading rubrics across diverse subjects, are complex and poorly supported by operational guidance. The local context in Mpika, characterised by resource deficits, large class sizes, and weak monitoring systems (rated at 2.0/5.0 by district officers), does not yet provide the enabling conditions for successful implementation. And the change agents, teachers, exhibit the divergent sense-making that Spillane et al. (2002) would predict: in the absence of sustained, practical guidance, educators revert to familiar testing methods, producing a policy–practice gap.

The primary data from Mpika District align closely with, and extend, findings reported in the literature. Chisala (2025) and Phiri (2026) document similar patterns of stakeholder support in principle alongside implementation strain in practice. The present study adds context-specific depth: teachers' narratives from Mpika illuminate the micro-level lived experience of the reform the one-day workshops, the 70-learner classrooms, the absence of internet for home-based research tasks, that aggregate survey data alone cannot capture. In this sense the study extends rather than replicates existing work.

A particularly important finding is the policy practice gap between ECZ's institutional confidence and ground-level realities. ECZ officials rated framework suitability for rural schools at 5.0/5.0 and monitoring effectiveness at 4.0/5.0; district officers rated monitoring at 2.0/5.0. This discrepancy reflects the "policy optimism bias" described by Spillane et al. (2002): without strong upward feedback loops from schools to the policy centre, signals of implementation strain are not adequately registered.

The findings also resonate strongly with experiences reported in Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, and Ghana. Similar to Zambia, these countries encountered initial implementation difficulties despite widespread support for competency-based education. International evidence suggests that sustained teacher professional development, detailed assessment exemplars, strong monitoring systems, and continuous stakeholder engagement significantly improve reform outcomes. Zambia's experience therefore reflects broader patterns observed across developing education systems, suggesting that implementation challenges are not unique to the country but can be mitigated through lessons learned from comparable reforms elsewhere.

These findings have several policy implications. First, teacher training must shift from one-time orientation workshops to sustained, practical, school-embedded professional development. Second, the Ministry and ECZ must develop and disseminate classroom-level assessment guidelines and exemplar tasks before or concurrent with rollout, not after. Third, monitoring systems must be strengthened at district level, with structured feedback channels that allow implementation challenges to surface and be addressed. Fourth, resource provision, teaching materials, laboratories, reduced class sizes, must accompany curriculum change. Finally, stakeholder engagement at community level is needed to build parental understanding and buy-in for the new assessment system.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the researcher's recommendations:

- i. The Ministry of Education and the Examinations Council of Zambia should institutionalise continuous professional development programmes focused specifically on competency-based assessment design, implementation, and moderation.
- ii. Comprehensive school-based assessment guidelines, exemplars, and scoring rubrics should be disseminated to all schools before further reform expansion.
- iii. Government should increase investment in ICT infrastructure, laboratories, libraries, and teaching-learning materials, particularly in rural schools.
- iv. District Education Boards should strengthen monitoring and support mechanisms through regular school visits and structured feedback systems.

- v. Parents and communities should be sensitised on competency-based assessment reforms to improve learner support beyond the classroom.
- vi. Lessons from Kenya, Rwanda, Ghana, and South Africa should be systematically incorporated into Zambia's reform implementation framework.
- vii. Future reforms should include targeted interventions addressing learner access to research resources, internet connectivity, and home-based learning support.

## Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting findings. First, the primary fieldwork is geographically confined to Mpika District, a single rural district in Muchinga Province, which limits the generalisability of findings to other regions of Zambia with different socio-economic, infrastructural, and educational contexts. Second, data collection was conducted during the early phase of reform implementation (2025), meaning the findings capture initial challenges and responses rather than long-term systemic outcomes. Third, qualitative responses are subject to social desirability bias, as participants may have moderated their criticisms of official policy. Fourth, the small number of ECZ and district officer informants (n=2 each) limits the representativeness of findings at those levels. Fifth, this article focuses on a single research objective from a broader multi-objective study; other dimensions of the reforms are not addressed here.

## CONCLUSION

This study has examined stakeholder perspectives on Zambia's 2023 competency-based assessment reforms, producing a nuanced picture of promise and challenge. Stakeholders across all levels welcome the CBC's aim to improve education quality and relevance. The ECZ and Ministry have taken meaningful steps to institutionalise the reforms through legislative change and capacity-building programmes. Yet teachers and head teachers in Mpika District, the frontline implementers, report that without sustained practical training, clear operational guidelines, and adequate materials, the intended shift in assessment practice is stalling.

The study's application of Fullan's (2007) Curriculum Implementation Theory confirms that reform success depends not only on the strength of the policy itself but on the enabling conditions surrounding implementation: reform clarity at the operational level, a supportive local context, and adequately prepared change agents. All three conditions require strengthening in Mpika. The study's most important contribution is to demonstrate the specific, lived nature of the policy–practice gap in a rural Zambian context, evidence that national planners need in order to calibrate support and resource allocation effectively.

Future research should include: longitudinal studies tracking reform implementation over multiple academic years; comparative studies across urban and rural districts; focused investigation of the impact of CBA on specific learner sub-groups, including those with special educational needs; and studies evaluating the effectiveness of different professional development models in supporting school-based assessment in resource-constrained settings.

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