Institutional Preparedness for the Implementation of the Competence-Based Curriculum Reforms in Zambia: The "Policy-Reality Gap" Through Staff Perceptions.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how secondary schools in Lusaka navigated curriculum rollout amid institutional pressures. Grounded in institutional theory, it adopted a qualitative case study approach across three secondary schools: private, mission, and public. The sample comprised three headteachers, three deputy headteachers, and eleven subject teachers. Data collection drew on headteachers', deputy headteachers', and teachers' perceptions triangulated with document analysis. Thematic analysis employed Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. The study found that mandates, audits, and standardised assessments ensured compliance, resulting in superficial adaptation across schools. Peer benchmarking provided coping strategies during periods of uncertainty but risked neglecting contextual needs in the private school. Subject associations and CPDs emerged as drivers of curriculum adoption, fostering alignment of teacher identity and professional solidarity, especially in the mission school. The study revealed emergent challenges of resource constraints and structural inertia that defined the gap between policy intent and classroom realities, particularly in the public school. Documentary analysis revealed lesson plans well written according to template requirements across all schools. These findings extend DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) institutional theory by demonstrating how resource constraints and structural inertia mediate the depth of compliance in an education system like Zambia. While coercive and mimetic pressures shape organisational responses, in this study normative pressures were most effective in embedding reforms in practice; for instance, the lesson plans guided by the templates provided remained underutilised. The study recommended mixed-methods approaches to quantify the impact of resource availability on compliance depth, among others. Overall, the Ministry of Education should target public schools and offer additional support to bridge resource gaps.

Keyterms: Coercive, Mimetic, normative pressures, structural inertia, and resource constraints

INTRODUCTION

Effective leadership is crucial for the success of any organisation, including educational institutions (Matandiko, 2025). Strong school leadership is essential in creating a supportive learning environment, establishing high standards, and encouraging a culture of continuous growth that enhances educational outcomes (Matandiko, 2025). Van Deventer & Kruger (2003) emphasized that the headteacher acts as a key internal agent of change, responsible for guiding ongoing curriculum reforms mandated by education authorities and managing their effective implementation. School headteachers are vital educational leaders tasked with translating policy into practice, overseeing resource allocation, and supporting teachers through reform processes. Therefore, their perceptions of school readiness for curriculum change are of significant importance.

It is worth noting that educational reforms are often accompanied by significant implementation challenges, particularly when they require shifts in pedagogy and institutional culture. Copying global trends concerning curriculum design that have created a shift from content-based curricula to competence-based curricula (Wesslink et al., 2010; Bergsmann et al., 2015).

The '2025 Competence-Based Curriculum' (CBC), introduced in the Zambian education system, represents a departure from traditional content-driven instruction toward learner-centred approaches that emphasize skills,

values, and practical application. This reform aims to equip learners with competencies relevant to national development and global competitiveness (Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). The Zambian government described the CBC as a "game changer" for its education system, emphasizing the potential to address developmental challenges through practical learning (Mambwe, Ministry of Education, 2025). However, questions remain about whether schools, through the administrators (headteachers), were adequately prepared to embrace this reform, and how they perceived the support provided during this transition.

This study sought to explore how school headteachers perceived the schools' preparedness for the implementation of the 'Competence-Based Curriculum' reforms in Zambia. By examining their views, the research aimed to uncover readiness levels, the support mechanisms required to strengthen curriculum implementation changes and insights that will inform future policy changes and renewals. The researchers meant to explore the levels of institutional preparedness for the CBC in different types of schools; to evaluate how schools leveraged each other during CBC reform; and to explore how low-resourced schools navigated CBC reform as perceived by the policy implementers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical framework

This study was grounded in Dimaggio and Powell (1983)'s Institutional Theory (Isomorphism) as it focused on institutional preparedness in the formal structure. It explained why schools often end up looking and acting the same when faced with government mandates like the CBC.

Institutional theory helped to explain whether administrators were prepared because they were following a mandate (coercive) or because they truly believed in the professional shift (normative), and how the ministry authority, through coercive pressure, creates a 'legitimacy' requirement. Using the core concept of 'decoupling' to explain institutional preparedness, which occurs when an organization adopts new formal policy to gain legitimacy and appease external stakeholders but keeps these policies separate from their daily operations to avoid disrupting established routines. There lies a possibility of the "Window Dressing" Effect, in which the schools, in this case, create the appearance of CBC compliance, the "front stage" to satisfy Ministry inspectors, and the Technical Core behind the scenes, the "back stage", where teachers may continue using old "lifelong" teaching methods because they find them more practical or because they lack the materials for the new curriculum.

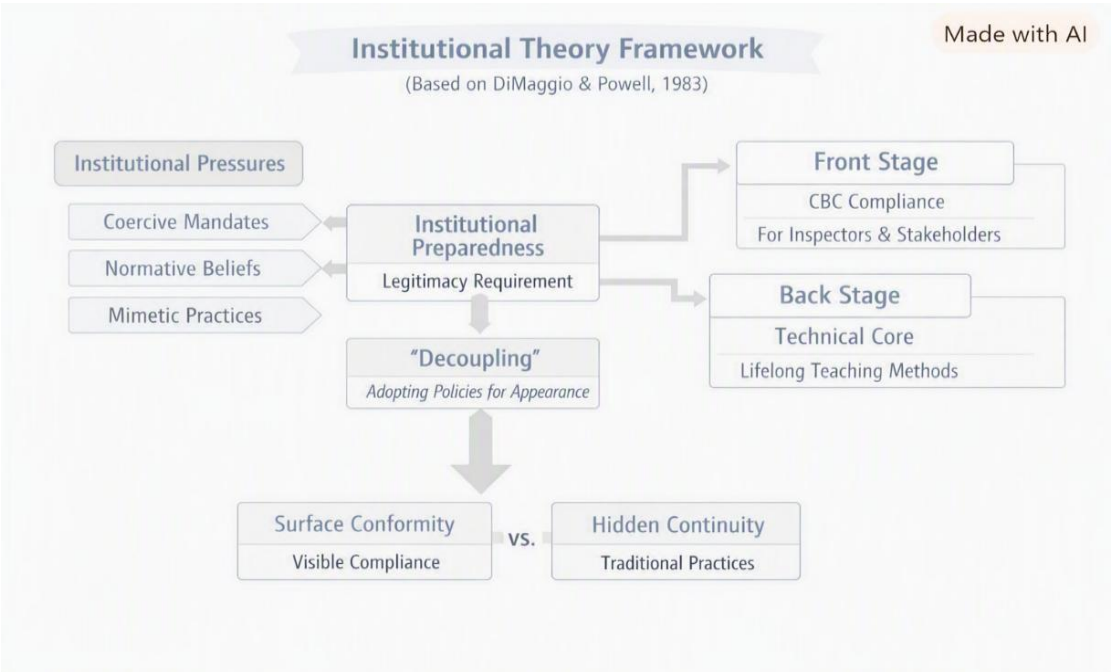


Fig 1: A visual representation of the theoretical framework from DiMaggio & Powell's 1983 institutional Theory of isomorphism.

2.1.1 Theoretical Framework Integration

DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concepts of institutional theory serve as the lens for data collection and analysis. In this context, Coercive Isomorphism helped to evaluate how secondary schools respond to top-down mandates, regulations, and standardised assessment criteria imposed by the Ministry of Education. Mimetic Isomorphism helped assess how secondary schools model their implementation strategies through timetable changes based on peer schools perceived as more successful and innovative during the period of uncertainty. Normative Isomorphism assessed how professional networks like subject associations, CPD and in-house training drive curriculum adoption across secondary schools.

2.2 The Curriculum Change

Lovet & Smith (2003) defined curriculum change as a division of educational change that involves making the curriculum different in a certain way to give it a completely new direction. The process of curriculum change, therefore, involves complex, interactive relationships among several social and political factors (Sahlberg, 2005), none of which must be ignored. This means that as authorities and bureaucrats attempt to introduce curriculum changes into schools, they must engage the school administrators who guide implementation for the change to be well understood (Tubandule, 2014). The failure to close this engagement gap could lead to disastrous oversights that would affect curriculum implementation in the schools.

The Zambian government, through the Ministry of Education (MoE), approved the Zambia Education Curriculum in 2023 for implementation in a phased manner and promised that, within a period of four years, the cycle would be completed (MoE, 2024). The key change in the curriculum was the education system from 4-7-5-4 to 3-6-6-3. This meant that early childhood education was reduced from 4 to 3 years, and primary education was reduced from 7 to 6 years. The secondary education duration was increased from 5 to 6 years by introducing an Advanced Level (A-levels) education. It also reduced degree courses from 4 to 3 years. In the new curriculum, the language of instruction changed to English for all educational levels and encouraged code-switching in foundational learning. The new curriculum replaced 'grades' with 'forms' at the secondary school level, while automatic progression at grade 7 was henceforth abolished (MoE, 2024).

However, the author assumes that processes and the need for curriculum change in the Zambian education system were narrowly supported by existing structures in schools, sufficient resources, and in-service training or Continuing Professional Development, making the new curriculum fall short of meeting the needs of the schools and, eventually, the learners.

2.3 School Preparedness for the Curriculum Change

Preparing schools for curriculum change requires a phased, stakeholder-inclusive approach that prioritises teacher training, resource allocation and gradual implementation to minimise resistance. Successful adoption entails creating a shared vision, updating instructional methods to align with new standards, and utilising pilot programmes to identify best practices before full implementation. Recent empirical studies highlight persistent gaps between progressive central policies and the actual preparedness of schools and head educators to implement them (Moyo,2024). A primary gap concerns the alignment between teachers' conceptual readiness and the CBC; while headteachers generally view learner-centred curricula positively, many teachers struggle with practical classroom application (Mumba, 2020). In addition, recurring critiques indicate that the ministry-led orientation workshops for teachers were brief and superficial, largely reliant on cascade training models that diluted content by the time it reached the intended audience (Kamangala, 2021). Severe deficits have been documented in essential learning resources that include lack of core materials, language policy complexities, and overcrowded classrooms (Moyo, 2024; Pezo, 2021).

2.4 School Support Towards Curriculum Implementation

In an effort to prepare educators for the CBC implementation, Zambia hosted the Knowledge Co-creation Programme (KCCP) with educators from nineteen (19) African countries, enabling cross-border collaboration and exposure to best practices in CBC implementation. From a teacher workforce of 158,504 teachers who would

handle the CBC, only eighty (80) Zambian educators participated, benefiting from international expertise and experiential learning strategies (Mambwe, Ministry of Education, 2025). In addition, teacher training workshops were conducted at the National Science Centre in Lusaka, focusing on equipping educators with both technical expertise and the inspiration to drive change**,** targeting teachers in ECE, Grade 1, and Form 1, ensuring they were prepared to implement the CBC from the first term of 2025.

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) was emphasised, with calls to scale up training nationwide to maintain teacher proficiency. Despite this, empirical feedback indicates that these workshops were brief and superficial. Chisala (2025) & Daka (2024) noted that the compressed timelines of the workshops left teachers with significant gaps regarding how to design complex competency-based lesson plans. While guidelines were distributed, a review on the ground revealed complex evaluation gaps. Headteachers expressed immense anxiety over heavily increased administrative workload. (Mwansa & Muyuni, 2026).

Scholars noted that while external partner support was highly effective in selected cohorts, it exposed severe resource inequality. Rural schools reported receiving 'the theoretical training texts', while they lacked the underlying infrastructure like ICT tools, science labs, and baseline textbooks necessary to make support actionable (Mwansa & Muyuni, 2026).

These gaps in the implementation process prompted this researcher to explore the voices of the school gatekeepers who are the key internal agents of change, responsible for guiding the continuous renewal of the curriculum reforms mandated by education authorities.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a Qualitative Case Study Design (CSD). The CSD allowed for an in-depth, contextual examination of how different secondary schools navigate institutional pressures (coercive, mimetic and normative) during curriculum rollout.

3.2 Study population, Sampling and Sample size

The study population were the secondary schools in Lusaka, and the target participating schools were one private, one mission and one public, from which key stakeholders directly involved in the curriculum implementation were sampled. These included the headteachers and their deputy headteachers; they were key in examining structural compliance with policy mandates (coercive) and peer benchmarking (mimetic). The Heads of Departments were critical in assessing curriculum alignment, assessment structures and pedagogical monitoring. In addition, subject teachers were able to gauge professional adaptation, peer-to-peer norming (Normative), and operational constraints. Three schools were used as the cases, from which were drawn the three headteachers, three vice-headteachers, three heads of departments and eleven classroom teachers. This allowed for four teachers from school 1, three teachers from school 2, and five teachers from school 3 upon reaching data saturation. The teachers from each school formed the FGD panels. The researcher also conducted documentary analysis to evaluate the Ministry of Education policies, mandates, and lesson plan templates.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To achieve data richness and ensure triangulation, the following methods were used: semi-structured interviews. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the headteachers and their deputy headteachers with a focus on Ministry of Education mandates, compliance pressures and professional alignments. Focus group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with subject teachers. These focused on shared challenges, resistance factors, and collaborative problem-solving. The researcher also conducted Documentary analysis to trace school-level implementation plans, continuous Professional Development (CPD) schedules, and institutional compliance and limitations.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic Data Analysis used Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Using deductive coding on the management framework themes of coercive: Ministry mandates, audit controls, national exam alignment, budget conditions. Mimetic: benchmarking peer schools, adoption of external best practices and Normative: subject association standards, professional training norms, teacher identity alignment. Inductive coding helped to generate emerging sub-themes from participant responses regarding ground-level curriculum implementation realities, which included structural inertia, resource shortfalls, superficial and deep compliance. This study used NVivo, a data analysis software, to map code matrices across different secondary school types.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Credibility was achieved through triangulation across data sources and across cases (private, mission, and public schools' contexts). Transferability was achieved through the use of thick descriptions of school administrative structures and demographic contexts. Dependability and confirmability were maintained through an audit trail detailing how transcripts mapped the three isomorphic categories.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

Written participant consent was obtained, and anonymity and confidentiality were achieved through the use of pseudonyms for participants, staff and schools to prevent professional repercussions. Institutional permission was obtained from the school owners.

FINDINGS

4.1 Coercive Isomorphism – Compliance Pressures

Theme: Coercive pressures ensured structural compliance but often led to surface-level adaptation rather than big andragogical change.

The study found, across all three schools, that Ministry mandates and audits shaped curriculum rollout, as attested by Ministry Circular (2025). From the document analysed, the study found a mandatory use of uniform lesson plan templates across all schools.

At the Private School labelled School 1, the Headteacher emphasised strict adherence to lesson plan templates, noting that "Compliance was non-negotiable, even when resources were limited." The deputy Headteacher said, *"We had to adjust our lesson plans to meet Ministry audit requirements. The budget allocations were tight, but compliance was non-negotiable."*

At the Mission School labelled School 2, the deputy headteacher reported frustration: *"We were compelled to adopt standardised assessment criteria that didn't fully fit our context."*

At the public-school labelled School 3, Teachers described compliance as *"*superficial*";* templates were filled out, but classroom practice remained unchanged. According to the Headteacher's submission, "*We were able to 'tick box' the requirement of the lesson plan template, although our situation couldn't allow us to use the prepared lesson plans",* and the Deputy Headteacher said: "*We have continued to teach using old methods from the outcome-based curriculum because we can't afford teaching tools for the CBC".*

4.2 Mimetic Isomorphism – Peer Benchmarking

Theme: Mimetic strategies provided short-term solutions but risked reinforcing uniformity without addressing local constraints. Schools turned to perceived "successful" peers during uncertainty:

School 1 replicated School 2's timetable restructuring to manage curriculum load. Deputy headteacher 1: *"We benchmarked against School 2's timetable changes. Their model seemed efficient, so we replicated it."* School 2 Implementation Plan: Adopted peer benchmarking strategy from School 3's timetable restructuring as revealed

by the document analysis. Teacher 2 (FGD): "We copied School 1's continuous assessment schedule because it seemed to work better." School 3 adopted continuous assessment schedules modelled on Private School practices. Teachers admitted, in the FGD, that: *"We copied what seemed to work elsewhere, even if it wasn't tailored to our realities."*

4.3 Normative Isomorphism – Professional Networks

Theme: Normative pressures fostered professional solidarity and deeper curriculum adoption compared to coercive or mimetic forces. Professional associations and CPD sessions were critical drivers.

School 1 CPD Schedule showed monthly peer-led workshops on curriculum alignment. In the Mission School (2), CPD workshops boosted teacher confidence and identity alignment. According to the Headteacher, *"Our CPD sessions emphasised aligning teacher identity with curriculum reforms. Teachers felt more confident after peer-led workshops."* Public School 3: Subject associations guided integration of new topics, described as *"our lifeline during curriculum changes."* Teachers valued peer-to-peer norming: *"Without CPD, we'd have struggled to adapt."* Teacher 3 noted and said, *"Our subject association guided us on integrating new topics. Without that network, we'd have struggled."*

4.4 Emergent Themes

Beyond the three isomorphic categories, inductive coding revealed the following emergent themes: Structural inertia: Schools resisted change due to entrenched routines. According to Teacher 1; "*We lacked resources, so compliance was superficial. We filled in templates but didn't change classroom practice."* This revealed the effects of resource constraints, and this lack of teaching materials undermined compliance.

And Superficial vs. deep compliance: Some schools performed "tick-box" adaptation, while others embedded reforms meaningfully.

4.4. Documentary Analysis

Thematic Coding (NVivo Output Matrix)

Theme Type	Identified Codes	Verbatim
Coercive	mandates, audits, exam alignment	"We had to comply with ministry audits."
Mimetic	benchmarking, peer adoption	"We copied school 2's timetable."
Normative	CPD, associations, teacher identity	"Our CPD sessions helped us adapt."
Emergent	resource shortfalls, superficial compliance	"We filled in templates but didn't change practice."

DISCUSSION

5.1 Coercive Isomorphism Compliance Pressures

The findings highlight that coercive isomorphism ensured compliance but often produced surface-level adaptation. This aligns with Mumba's (2020) concerns about the alignment between teachers' conceptual readiness and the CBC. While private and mission schools adhered to Ministry templates and audits, Headteachers in public schools described compliance as "tick-box." This reflects DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) argument that coercive pressures drive uniformity but may not guarantee substantive change. This study found that policy mandates alone could not secure deep curriculum transformation without adequate resources and contextual flexibility.

5.2 Mimetic Pressures and Peer Benchmarking

Mimetic isomorphism was evident in schools replicating peer strategies, such as timetable restructuring and assessment schedules. While this reduced uncertainty, it risked reinforcing uniformity without addressing local

needs. DiMaggio & Powell (1983) note that organisations imitate perceived successful peers during ambiguity; this study found that schools mirrored each other to cope with curriculum rollout. This concern was expressed by previous scholars (Mwansa & Muyuni, 2026) who noted that some schools lacked the underlying infrastructure like ICT tools, science labs, and baseline textbooks necessary to make support actionable; these are most likely to mimic schools viewed as 'successful'. Hence, the findings in this study suggest that mimetic adaptation may perpetuate inefficiencies if the "model" school itself struggles with resource constraints and when the mimicking school possess a different context.

5.3 Normative Pressures and Professional Networks

Normative isomorphism emerged as the most effective driver of meaningful curriculum adoption. CPD sessions, subject associations, and peer-to-peer training fostered teacher identity alignment and confidence. This supports institutional theory's claim that professional norms and networks shape organisational behaviour. Here, normative pressures provided a bottom-up mechanism for embedding reforms, contrasting with top-down coercive mandates. This indicates that strengthening professional bodies may be more impactful than rigid compliance structures. This is supported largely by what Mambwe (2025) refers to as an effort by the Ministry of Education to prepare educators for the CBC implementation.

Inductive coding revealed three Emergent themes: structural inertia, resource shortfalls, and superficial compliance. These themes underscore the gap between policy intent and classroom realities. Even when schools complied formally, resource shortages undermined deep implementation. This resonates with broader critiques of education reform in resource-constrained contexts, where policy uniformity masks uneven practice (Chisala 2025; Daka 2024; Mwansa & Muyuni 2026).

Cross-case insights showed strong compliance by the private schools but resource-managed adaptation, while in mission schools, normative pressures using CPD and other networks drove meaningful change. Mimetic and coercive pressures in public schools led to superficial compliance, as supported by scholars such as Chisala (2025) & Daka (2024).

CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study examined how secondary schools in Lusaka navigated curriculum rollout under institutional pressures through the voices of the headteachers, deputy headteachers and teachers. Compliance was ensured through mandates, audits and standardised assessments, but the study found that this led to superficial adaptation. Peer benchmarking provided coping strategies during uncertainty but risked addressing contextual needs. Subject associations and CPDs emerged as drivers of curriculum adoption and fostered teacher identity alignment and professional solidarity. However, the study revealed emergent challenges of resource constraints and structural inertia that defined the gap between policy intent and classroom realities.

Ultimately, curriculum reform in Zambia's secondary schools was shaped not only by mandates and peer imitation but by the strength of professional communities. For reforms to move beyond "tick-box" compliance, policy needs to empower headteachers as agents of change through initial policy planning engagement and equitable resource allocation that supports the reform change.

6.2 Theoretical Contribution

The findings extend DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) institutional theory by demonstrating how resource constraints and structural inertia mediate the depth of compliance in the education system in Zambia. While coercive and mimetic pressures shape organisational responses, normative pressures proved most effective in embedding reforms in practice in this study.

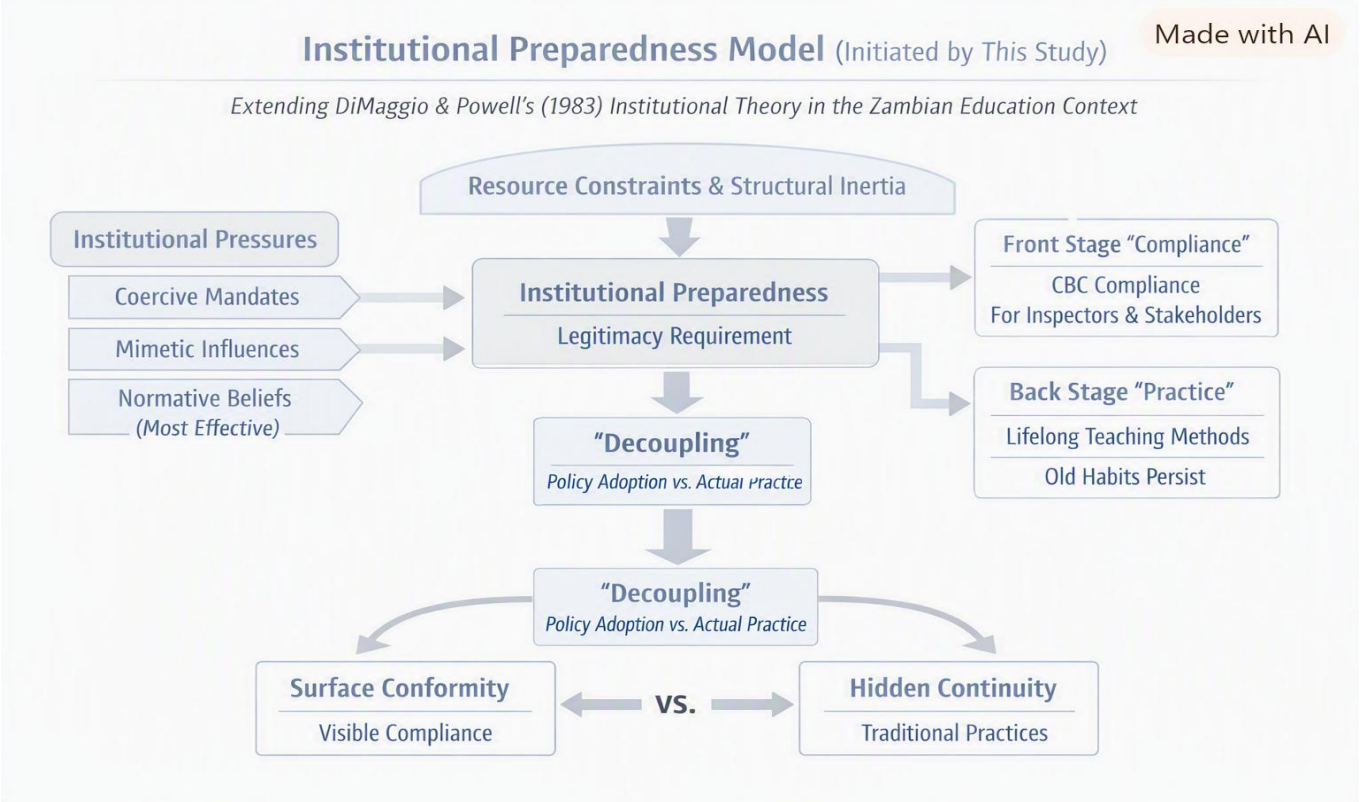


Fig. 2: Proposed extension of DeMaggio & Powell's 1983 Institutional Theory, applied to Zambia's Education System, 2026.

6.3 Implications and recommendations

Policymakers could accompany mandates with resource support to avoid superficial compliance; School Leaders could encourage evidence-based peer learning rather than blind imitation, and Professional Associations may strengthen CPD and teacher networks as sustainable drivers of reform. Overall, the Ministry of Education should target public schools and offer additional support to bridge resource gaps.

This study recommended comparative studies across provinces to explore regional variations in institutional pressures. It also recommended longitudinal research to assess whether normative pressures sustain curriculum adoption over time. In addition, mixed-methods approaches to quantify the impact of resource allocation on the depth of compliance are recommended.

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The author further declares AI use for visual representations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Interview Guide for Administrators

1. As the school head, how would you explain the school's preparedness for the '2025 CBC' change?
2. "How do school administrators navigate the tension between Ministry compliance and the practical realities of classroom implementation?"

3. Does this "front stage" vs. "back stage" dynamic resonate with what you've observed in the schools you're studying?
4. What has been the experience of implementing two curricula at the same time?
5. As a Headteacher in your school, what is your comment on
   -Policy Documentation versus Reality *"To what extent is your school's current CBC strategy driven by Ministry compliance versus pedagogical belief?"*
   -Ritual compliance among your staff
   -Symbolic Preparedness of the school

Appendix 2 (Focus Group Discussion guide)

How to Identify Decoupling in Research

Look for these "red flags":

Indicator	Evidence of Decoupling
Documentation vs. Reality	Lesson plans are perfectly aligned with CBC, but classroom observation shows traditional rote learning.
"Ritual" Compliance	Teachers attend workshops (to tick a box for the Ministry) but do not implement the strategies in class.
Symbolic Preparedness	The school displays CBC posters and "Competency" charts on the walls, yet the assessment methods remain old-school exams.

This directly tests the **Coercive vs. Normative** pressures of Institutional Theory.

Does the idea of "compliance for legitimacy" match the type of feedback you are seeing from administrators so far?

In the context of Institutional Theory, decoupling is a brilliant concept because it addresses the gap between what an institution *says* it is doing and what it *actually* does.

When the Ministry exerts intense pressure to implement the CBC, school administrators often face a dilemma: they may lack the resources or training to implement it fully, but they cannot risk being seen as non-compliant.

The Three Pillars of Isomorphism in CBC Implementation

When exploring the perceptions of administrators regarding Ministry pressure in this study, the participants' responses shall be categorized into these three "pressures":

Type of Pressure	Source	Perception of Preparedness
Coercive	**The Ministry of Education**	Administrators feel they "must" be prepared because of legal mandates, policies, and the threat of sanctions or loss of funding.
Mimetic	**Peer Schools**	In the face of uncertainty about CBC, administrators look at what "successful" schools are doing and try to copy their preparedness strategies.
Normative	**Professional Bodies**	Preparedness is driven by the professional standards of teachers and educational associations who believe the CBC is the "right" way to teach.