


## Implementation of the competency based curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools: A case of a primary school in Chitungwiza



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### ABSTRACT

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The purpose of the study was to explore the challenges faced in the implementation of the competence-based curriculum in Chitungwiza district primary schools. One school was used to conduct the study. Purposive sampling was utilised to select 23 research respondents, namely: 14 teachers, 6 parents, and 3 administrators. The study was guided by the constructivism perspective. Case study design was exploited. The questionnaire, interview guide and focus group discussion were used to collect data. Qualitative data asked for were analysed using the thematic data analysis methodology. The study exposed that the successful implementation of the competence-based curriculum (CBC) was hindered by lack of both material and human resources. Low teacher morale was cited as a recurrent barrier to effective curriculum implementation. It was established that most teachers lacked the basal CBC implementation skills, competencies, and knowledge, as most of them were trained well before the introduction of the new curriculum. Overarching recommendations were that proper planning should be done before the implementation of any transformative curriculum programme. The central government and its partners should avail the requisite financial, material, infrastructural and human resources prior to the envisaged curriculum implementation. Teachers, on one hand, should be positively incentivised as paramount CBC actors. Their seamless morale boost should never be overemphasised if desired curricula goals are to be achieved.

**Contribution/ Originality:** The Zimbabwean Ministry of Primary of and Secondary Education new curriculum (2015-2022) embraced participatory pedagogies and recognised that learners bring into the classroom a wealth of experiential attitudes, skills, and knowledge that must be nurtured. Despite the blueprint being a commendable educational recipe, its implementation was shrouded in a plethora of inadequacies, hence this case study. The study checked on colonial education vestiges that hinder that continually manifest themselves in the 'new curriculum'.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The shift of the Zimbabwean curriculum from a content based to the competence-based curriculum has brought up some challenges in its implementation. As is the norm, new things are bound to face rejection and resistance. Components within the new curriculum such as Continuous Assessment Learning Activities (CALA) and the introduction of new learning areas such as Science and Technology, and Information Communication Technology have caused disruptions in the implementation of the Competence Based Curriculum (Hwande & Mpfu, 2017a). This study seeks to explore the implementation of the Competence Based Curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools and to proffer workable solutions to the challenges faced in the implementation.

The Zimbabwean education curriculum has undergone several alterations since the attainment of independence in 1980. This is so because the Black people have always felt that colonial education influences the current curriculum. Education in the colonial era was not suitable for Black people and had a lot of shortcomings since it was influenced by the dual citizenship philosophy which was aimed at keeping the gap between Black people and whites. No black was allowed to want the life of the whites and vice versa. After reaching independence in 1980, Zimbabwe inherited heirlooms of discrimination which was engraved along racial lines. Although the nation tried to overcome other legacies of discrimination, some still had a residual effect on the education sector. The Zimbabwean government's quest to change from the old curriculum to the competence-based curriculum was aimed at matching with the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Later policies were developed to keep abreast with the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands (Chikwiri & Musiyiwa, 2017).

The alterations have come to redress the shortcomings in the old curriculum as well as redress the inequalities brought about by colonial education. The education in Zimbabwe has been accused of not solving the societal problems such as poverty and unemployment which have reduced the youths into destitutes and has produced idle people who end up indulging in inappropriate behaviour. The former president of Zimbabwe, the late comrade R.G Mugabe assigned the Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (CIET) to investigate the relevance of the education system on offer. The Nziramasanga Commission of 1998 and the Competence Based Curriculum of 2017 were introduced to alleviate problems brought by the old curriculum which had a lot of inadequacies. The changes made to the education system reflect desires, visions, and concerns of the public on the curriculum although some stakeholders still claim that they were not consulted. The education policies such as CALA, profiling, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and ICT, among others place emphasis on deliberately developing specific competences to enable learners to be self-sustainable (Liu, Miller, & Jahng, 2016). The curricular changes were meant to correct educational anomalies but the introduction of the competence-based curriculum in schools brought about unprecedented outcries from the key stakeholders across the country. They have been a plethora of obstacles in the implementation of the Competence Based Curriculum. The change in basic assumptions has, however, caused challenges to the various stakeholders in the education sector. Poor teacher capacitation, and availability of necessary resources are some contributing factors that negatively affect the successful implementation of the new curriculum. It is because of the above context that the researchers were triggered to investigate the limitations to the successful implementation of CBC in primary schools to contrive ways of addressing the anomalies.

## **2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The Zimbabwean curriculum has undergone reviews and the reviews have influenced changes in the syllabi resulting in the Competence Based Curriculum. The Competence Based Curriculum has unraveled the traditional pedagogical systems in schools. The study areas have been removed based on some existing realms of knowledge and competencies. Although the crafted policies seem to be good on paper, their execution has brought about various challenges to the implementers of the curriculum. It is normal that whenever there is change, there is inertia whereby people try to resist change. It is against this background that the researchers through this study aimed at finding the factors limiting the smooth implementation of the competence-based curriculum in primary schools in Chitungwiza District and to further find how best the hindrances could be solved.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- a) What are the major causes of the challenges being faced by the curriculum implementation in primary schools in Zimbabwe?
- b) What obstacles hinder the successful implementation of the competence-based curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools.

- c) What workable solutions may be proffered to challenges faced in implementing the competence-based curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools?

#### 4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research was guided by the Constructivism theory and this part entails showing the major tenets of the theory.

##### 4.1. Constructivism Theory

This study explored ways that can be used in addressing various challenges of competence-based curriculum implementation in primary schools. The researchers decided to employ the constructivism theory as the theory fosters the learners' competencies such as problem solving, critical thinking and development of skills complies to these hence it matched with the goals of this study.

The constructivist ideas guided the foundation of this study. Constructivism is the view that learners can construct their own understanding of the world they live in by reflecting on their experiences (Brown & Clarke, 2006). The constructivist theory can be defined as construction of new knowledge based on what the learner has experienced. Pioneers of the constructivist theory are Vygotsky, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget (Warrick, 2001). The father of this theory, Piaget provided a framework for understanding how knowledge could be taught and he insisted on the creation of an environment where learners could be naturally exposed to important ideas and concepts. Constructivist theories emphasize that learning occurs when individuals are actively involved in learning and can integrate new knowledge with the existing knowledge. Subsequently, learning could be considered as an active process of constructing knowledge and not a process of receiving knowledge and teaching is a process of supporting learners so that they are able to construct ideas and not to deliver information. Teacher is just a guide by the side lines and not the main actor on the stage (Biggie & Shermis, 2004). Constructivism is a theory based on scientific study and seeing how people learn. It articulates that people construct their own knowledge and understanding of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on the experiences. In the classroom, constructivism means encouraging learners to use active methods such as experiments, real world problem solving to create more knowledge and to reflect on and talk about what they are doing and how their understanding is changing. Furthermore, constructivism helps learners to embrace collaborative learning in a way that instructors encourage them to work in groups as they create good relations towards embracing collaborative learning among them.

The constructivist theory entails that learners should take part fully in learning and should not be spoon fed by teachers, who are only supposed to be facilitators. In this regard, constructivism is linked to CBC which is an educational reform that advocates for the full involvement of learners in meaningful learning, as it fosters learners' multiple intellectual competences. Learners are expected to construct knowledge in their own minds (Gillies, 2007). Teachers are only there to ease the process using instructional methods that help in making the information relevant and meaningful to the learners, to give them the opportunity to discover and apply ideas on their own. This study adopted the constructivist theory because it supports the learners in constructing ideas rather than delivering knowledge. Learners bring to the learning space valuable experiential attitudes, skills, and knowledge. The theory is related to the study as cherishes the active participation of the learners and allows them to take part more in their learning and construction of own knowledge. For this reason, constructivism and CBC make learners more active in learning as CBC entails a learner centered approach through students' participation and involvement towards stimulating effective classroom interaction (Cherotich, 2023). The theory guided the researchers to explore the challenges met in the implementation of CBC in primary schools.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative case study of a primary school in Chitungwiza district in the Harare metropolitan province. The study was grounded on live stories told by the participants: teachers, school administrators and parents. Stories were ideal as this study was focused on real experiences and feelings of the participants on the new curriculum in Zimbabwean primary schools. In this study, the Interpretivist paradigm was employed. The interpretivism research philosophy assumes that people interpret and make their own meaning of events and the interpretation is subjective hence multiple perspectives are made on a single event (Mack, 2010). The researchers chose interpretivism because of the research questions in the study which sought to measure the beliefs which are subjective and have various realities.

A research approach is the organizational structure of a study. For Cabrera and Trochim (2006) the research approach binds together all the major components of the research process. This study made use of the qualitative research approach dictated by an inductive approach which entails moving from the particular to the general (Liu, 2016). This approach was chosen because of the small sample size and the nature of the study that was limited to a case study. An inductive study entails reasoning from narrow to broad, as no theory is developed, hypothesized, or evaluated (Saunders, Sim, Waterfield, & Kingstone, 2018).

To generate insights on the implementation of the competency-based curriculum, primary school teachers and administrators and parents were asked, and they were allowed to give their responses on the questions without being interrupted. In this study the sample was purposely selected. The participants were assured that their identity would remain anonymous and the school where this study took place was given a pseudonym as a precaution to ensure that participants were not exposed.

### 5.1. Data Collection

To collect data, the researchers got permission from the University of Zimbabwe's Faculty of Education. Permission to conduct the research was then granted by the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education. The researchers conducted interviews and distributed questionnaires to the participants. A focus group discussion with the identified parents was conducted by the researchers. The interviewers explained to participants why they were conducting the research prior to the interviews. The researchers asked for permission from the participants to record the interviews and discussions, and as permission was granted, the researchers used a smart transcriber pen to record the proceedings.

According to Boyce and Neale (2006) in depth interviews are used to unravel detailed information from respondents on a particular phenomenon. The researchers used face to face interviews because they allowed face to face interface with the participants, to get first-hand information which was quite dependable. The interviews allowed the researchers to give clarity on grey areas and this ensured that participants responded to questions they understood and due to this their responses could be relatively exact. The interviews were conducted in-person to gain deeper insight to specific themes by probing for quality responses as this offered an advantage over self-completion methods. Resultantly, the participants gave their full attention, and the interviewers deduced the quality of each response.

### 5.2. Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of examining, tabulating, categorizing, or restructuring the evidence to address the needs of the study. In this study the researchers used the thematic data analysis method and verbal quotation to present data. According to Brown and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data that entails searching across a data set to identify, analyse and report repeated patterns. Joffe (2011) suggests that thematic analysis is suitable to constructivism because through the process of analysing wide range of data, it can

illustrate how a certain social construct develops. Verbatim quotation of submissions made by research participants, on one hand has the merit.

### 5.3. Ethical Considerations

According to Shamoo and Resnik (2009) it is vital to adhere to ethical norms in research. Ethics promote research aims such as knowledge, truth and avoiding errors through fabrications, falsifying and misrepresenting data. The researchers made sure that the research was ethically accountable as it conformed to the norms and values of research. Of importance in this research was the ethical principle of confidentiality. Participants of this research were assured that the discussions in this study would not be said to other people, in a way that would make them identifiable.

## 6. DATA PRESENTATION

Through thematic analysis, the data from the participants was organised and presented as shown below.

### 6.1. Obstacles towards the Implementation of CBC

#### 6.1.1. Teachers' Paucity of the Desired Content Knowledge

Teachers and administrators complained that there was no training, for example, seminars on CBC and this made them unable to understand CBC and its requirements. Most teachers in this study seemed to lack good pedagogical knowledge and skills towards CBC. This was revealed in the interviews and questionnaires used in this study. Teacher K wrote in the questionnaire:

*Teachers are willing to teach CBC, but this cannot be possible without training in the necessary skills. Most teachers were not trained on the implementation of CBC. Programs were attended by only a few teachers hence most teachers are not capable of implementing CBC due to lack of the pedagogical skills needed.*

Teacher E had this to say:

*I do not understand this new curriculum because I have not attended any workshop on it, so I do not have a clear understanding of it hence I continue to use traditional methods of teaching such as the lecture method.*

#### 6.2. Overcrowded Classes

Teachers mentioned that overcrowded classes impeded the successful implementation of the CBC.

The Deputy Head had this to say in the interview:

*Most teachers face challenges in teaching big classes where learners are congested in a single small classroom. These do not allow for individual attention and make it difficult to have teacher/pupil interaction. Sometimes the teacher pupil ratio is 1:60 and this hinders a teacher from effectively implementing CBC hence resorting to lecture method.*

Teacher D: The main obstacle in the implementation of the competency-based curriculum is insufficient time to cover all learning areas due to hot seating owing to lack of infrastructure. If teachers involve learners at every learning stage, it will be difficult to cover the syllabus within the stipulated time.

#### 6.3. Inadequacy of Material and Financial Resources

The key set back to the successful implementation of the CBC in schools is insufficient resources. All the respondents in the study claimed that there was a high shortage of textbooks, ICT gadgets and other resources and these became an obstacle to the implementation of CBC. Hwande and Mpofo (2017b) consensus with Manokore and Chiyiye (2021) postulate that a curriculum is bound to suffer a still birth if there are insufficient resources to implement it. There is congruency between their contention and the findings of this study which show how shortage of learning materials contributes to the failure to implement the new curriculum.

Teacher E:

*The lack of both human and material resources is an obstacle to the successful implementation of the CBC. Textbooks were not reviewed to suit the CBC and the school lacks ICT gadgets and proper infrastructure.*

Teacher F, had this to say about lack of resources:

*It is difficult to implement CBC because the school does not have a library with suitable books. Teachers do not have textbooks which relate to the CBC, especially new learning areas like arts PE and ICT. There is a poor textbook student ratio due to increased students' enrolment in the school. The ratio sometimes ranges to 1:7 -10.*

Teacher C submitted that:

*The issue of textbooks and reference books is a challenge as they are a mismatch because some textbooks do not reflect the CBC which encourages the development of competencies to learners, some books reflect traditional methods of teaching hence the mismatch gives challenges in the effective implementation of the CBC.*

#### 6.4. Students Not Ready to Accept the Learner Centered Approach

The school head had this to say:

*Most learners are not ready to change from teacher centered methods to learner centered approaches as they were used to spoon feeding in the old curriculum. It becomes hard to effectively implement CBC when students passively take part during lessons.*

The Teacher-in-Charge said the following:

*Students are exam oriented as they study for exam purposes hence, they are not bothered with skills and competencies, so this becomes a challenge to teachers as students are not willing to accept the needs of the CBC. Most teachers have a negative attitude towards the CBC and resources are not adequate for the implementation. Teachers were not staff developed on the CBC hence they do not know how to go about the CBC.*

Deputy Head:

*The CBC needs a lot of resources, and they are expensive e.g., electrification, computers, and internet facilities hence lack of funds hinders the implementation. Human capital is also a challenge as a few teachers are trained enough to impart skills in areas such as Visual Performing Arts, Physical Education, and ICT.*

Parent 1:

*Lack of funds to buy files, typing and researching for information on the internet hinders the implementation of the CBC.*

Parent 2:

*Time was not enough for learners to balance between studying preparing for examinations and conducting CALA.*

#### 6.5. Paucity of Teacher Motivation

Teacher motivation is incredibly low as they earn a meagre salary and there are no incentives for their hard work. The findings of this study revealed this as most teachers cited teacher motivation as a challenge to the successful implementation of the CBC. Teacher A said:

*The government places a lot of demands to the teachers but does not consider incentives and this hinders teachers' morale to the extent that they lack commitment toward their work. Even at school level teachers' efforts are not appreciated and this demotivates teachers towards effective implementation of the CBC.*

#### 6.6. Non-Involvement of Teachers during Curriculum Change

The issue of involvement of teachers and other relevant stake holders was presented by most respondents whereby teachers claimed not to have been consulted in curriculum review, yet they are the main implementers of the curriculum. In an interview the head of school narrated the following:

*Teachers who are the key implementers of the curriculum are not involved but are only given directives to perform without being part of the change and innovation process, so it is difficult for them to apply CBC during the teaching and learning process since they are not familiar with it.*

### *6.7. Absence of Parents' Cooperation*

Teachers in this study narrated how they faced challenges of parents not cooperating in the implementation of CBC. Teachers explained that most parents lacked understanding of the CBC hence they were not supportive in its implementation. Another teacher cited that most parents were disengaged in the CBC implementation because of its demand for cash, for example in the CALA. He added that the notion parents have is that primary education should be cheap therefore any demands for extra cash apart from levies made them react. Teachers are therefore disturbed by the ignorance and lack of parents' cooperation. This finding agrees with [Ngwenya \(2019\)](#) study which revealed that the lack of parental involvement in school activities hinders efforts to actualize the new curriculum. Other findings by [Mwarari, Githui, and Mwenje \(2020\)](#) revealed that the lack of training for parents on CBC challenged the implementation. This means that engaging parents in learning is required by CBC as it may not succeed if parents are not sensitized to its importance and on the importance of playing their role.

### *6.8. Inadequate Planning*

Respondents in this study showed that the CBC was a rush thing which was introduced without adequate and proper planning. It was done without considering the adequacy of resources such as textbooks and ICT equipment. All the three interviewees claimed that the government's introduction of new learning areas without putting requisite resources in place first shows that there was no proper planning prior to the implementation. The effect of lack of planning is the failure of learners to appreciate the new areas and the jargon they were going to meet in the exam for the first time hence not reaching the desired results. Proper planning could have set up the need for necessary resources before the execution and the proper attainment of desired goals.

### *6.9. Lack of Consultation*

Teachers in the study claimed that the stakeholders were not consulted to give their input in the CBC. The stakeholders are teachers, parents, and learners thus the curriculum lacked support from these stakeholders who are resisting as they claim that they were not consulted and most claim that the curriculum was imposed on them.

### *6.10. Poverty*

Parents in the FDG mentioned that the curriculum demands did not suit their standards of living as they claimed to be poverty stricken. They mentioned the demands of CALA as the most problematic area to them. The administrators also agreed to this in the interviews as they mentioned that the parents could not afford laptops, printers, textbooks, and data to surf the internet for research purposes and therefore poverty stood as a great cause to the challenges of implementing CBC.

### *6.11. Lack of Continual Professional Development Initiatives*

The respondents showed that no training was done to familiarize or equip teachers with the content for the new learning areas such as Family, Religion and Moral Education (FAREME), Heritage, Physical Education (PE) Visual and Performing Arts (VPA) and Science and Technology. This clearly shows how teachers were deprived of competencies expected for them to successfully implement the CBC. [Ngwenya \(2019\)](#) asserts that individual attributes such as stakeholder competencies regulate curriculum reform success.

## **7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The study explored the challenges in the implementation of the new curriculum and found several factors that hinder the successful implementation of CBC in primary schools in Chitungwiza district. It was found that lack of resources was a major deterrent to the successful implementation of CBC. The study also set up that most primary school teachers did not train on how to teach CBC therefore they lacked content and knowledge of the new learning

areas. The study revealed that only a few teachers attended workshops on CBC yet all of them were expected to implement hence they were not teaching effectively.

The study also revealed that stakeholders were not consulted prior to the introduction of CBC hence most of them did not have a sense of ownership towards it and this led to negative attitude and resistance towards CBC. It is usually difficult to convince people who have not been consulted to implement programs and it is normal that when there is change there is inertia. Non-consultation of stakeholders like parents also lead to them not cooperating with the school for the benefit of school programs hence the failure of successful implementation.

The study further unveiled that overcrowded classes was a hindrance to the successful implementation of the CBC. Teacher: pupil ratio was unrealistic and limited the understanding of learners who needed individual attention since they had individual differences and different learning styles. The CBC needs learner centered methods but the teacher pupil ratio in primary schools does not allow the use of these hence most teachers resorted to the use of teacher centered methods such as the traditional lecture method which is not recommended in CBC.

### *7.1. Causes of the Obstacles*

The finding of the study revealed that obstacles in the implementation were caused by varied reasons. Overcrowded classes were a result of lack of infrastructure such as classrooms in schools which resulted in hot seating in large classes in a single classroom. This is also a result of government policy which stipulates that no child must be denied a place at a school nearby yet there is an increase in population and no new schools have been built. The study also revealed that poverty in Zimbabwe is a contributing factor to the causes of failure to implement the CBC effectively. Due to poverty and the economic situation in Zimbabwe, schools have not been able to provide adequate resources for the successful implementation. ICT gadgets, apparatus and textbooks are expensive, and schools and parents do not afford to provide these resources therefore it is difficult to implement without resources.

### *7.2. Intervention Strategies for the Successful Implementation of CBC*

The study revealed that to successfully implement the CBC, teachers must attend service training workshops on CBC. Those who were trained must also give proper feedback to those teachers who did not receive any form of training. Specialist teachers must be trained and deployed in schools, for example those who teach new learning areas such as ICT, VPA and other new areas. It was also revealed that the implementation of CBC or other innovative programs must not be rushed but proper planning must be done before the implementation phase. The study also unveiled that the government should provide funding for resources and supporting infrastructure such as electrification, computers relevant textbooks and to build more schools to ease on overcrowded classes and a recommended teacher pupil ratio. Curriculum planners also need to consult all stakeholders so that they give their input before implementing. Failure to consult stakeholders leads to resistance, hence abortion of programmes. For a successful implementation of CBC all stakeholders need to put their hands together and ensure that the curriculum goals are achieved.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that lack of resources for implementing CBC contributed to the challenges met in the proper and successful implementation of the curriculum reform. It was also concluded that the lack of specialised teachers in newly introduced learning areas contributed to the deterrents in its implementation. Lack of sound incentives demotivated most teachers to diligently execute their instructional roles. The demands of the CBC were difficult to fulfil without proper planning and the involvement of all key stakeholders. The school, community and the government all need to work together to ensure the successful implementation of the CBC.



## 9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Making inferences based on the research findings, the researchers make the following recommendations:

- a) Comprehensive planning must be done prior to embarking on any transformative curriculum implementation, in earnest.
- b) Significant stakeholders should be deliberately consulted prior to any curriculum implementation to ensure that the majority have the requisite buy-in. Teachers, learners, the corporate world, and parents must be consulted, and their views intelligently taken on board.
- c) Schools should be adequately equipped with human, material resources and infrastructure and funded for the effective implementation of the competency-based curriculum in Zimbabwean schools. Relevant textbooks must be availed to schools. There should not be a mismatch between textbooks and what is to be taught.
- d) Teachers as key curriculum implementers should be continuously staff developed to meet the demands of the competency-based curriculum.
- e) The government should avail funds for the continual professional development of teachers prior to implementation of the competency-based curriculum to enhance their professional competencies.
- f) Learners are also key stakeholders; therefore, they should be oriented on the adoption of the learner centered approach as advocated by the CBC. Learners are used to spoon feeding and memorising from the earlier exam-oriented curriculum hence orientation is essential so that they are taught to cope with the learner centered approach which requires self-learning, also a major tenet of CBC.

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**Transparency:** The authors state that the manuscript is honest, truthful, and transparent, that no key aspects of the investigation have been omitted, and that any differences from the study as planned have been clarified. This study followed all writing ethics.

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