

The Innovative Transformation Embedded in the Design of the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework

Moses Chisala

MOE-HQ-Directorate of Curriculum Development, Zambia.

moschisala@gmail.com

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Abstract: *This study examined the innovative transformation embedded in the design of the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework implemented in Zambia. This systematic review examined the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (2023 ZECF) and interview with key stakeholder in the development of the Curriculum to explore the innovative transformation embedded in it. Key innovations transformation included the integration of cross-cutting themes, the education that focus on education for sustainability development, learner-centered pedagogy, integration of soft and technical skills, decentralized curriculum contextualization, digital and blended learning modalities, community and industry partnership inclusion, continuous, formative, and criterion-referenced assessment, inclusive and differentiated learning strategies, global citizenship education and categories of special education needs in the 2023 education curriculum. Through qualitative analysis of policy documents, stakeholder interviews, and classroom observations, the study identifies challenges in implementation including teacher preparedness, resource limitations, and community engagement and proposes strategic recommendations for effective curriculum delivery. The findings underscore the curriculum's potential to equip Zambian learners with critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills essential for national development and global competitiveness.*

Keywords: innovative, transformation, competence, curriculum, 21st-century

INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence in 1964, Zambia's curriculum development has undergone several transformations aimed at aligning education with national development goals and societal needs. Initially, the curriculum was heavily influenced by the colonial legacy, emphasizing academic content with limited relevance to local contexts. In the years that followed, reforms were introduced to make education more responsive to the socio-economic realities of the country. The 1977 Educational Reforms, for example, sought to integrate education with

production and promote humanism, while the 1996 Educating Our Future policy emphasized access, equity, and quality (Ministry of Education, 1996). Over time, there has been a progressive shift towards a more inclusive, skills-based approach, culminating in the 2013 and now the 2023 Competence-Based Curriculum. As noted by the Ministry of Education (2023), that the curriculum must continue to evolve in order to meet the aspirations of the people and the developmental needs of the country.

However, the Directorate Curriculum Development Centre (DCD) [Curriculum Development Centre (CDC)] under the Ministry of Education in Zambia, has rolled out the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) to guide education in Zambia, replacing the 2013 Zambia Education Curriculum framework which has guided the Zambian education system for the past ten years. The change to the Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Zambia was informed by the need to address the limitations of the 2013 curriculum, which failed to meet the nation's educational aspirations. According to the Ministry of Education (2023), noted that learners were leaving the school system without the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to make them self-reliant and socio-economically emancipated. Furthermore, the review was necessitated by the need to align the curriculum with Zambia's Vision 2030, the 8th National Development Plan, and emerging global trends in education (CDC, 2023). The 2023 ZECF has been designed to align education with practical, real-world demands, placing emphasis on problem-solving, critical thinking, creativity, and entrepreneurship. This transformation underscores Zambia's commitment to education reform that is adaptive, forward-looking, and grounded in the realities of 21st-century development challenges.

It further, ensures inclusivity, coherence across educational levels, and responsiveness to both individual learners needs and national aspirations. This is supported by Chisala (2025) who argued that the CBC framework adopts a liberal and inclusive approach, aligning educational outcomes with Zambia's socio-economic needs. It aims to bridge the skill gap and enhance career pathways to meet the diverse needs of learners. It was against that background the study explored the innovative transformation embedded in the design and implementation of Zambia's 2023 Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC). This research contributes to the discourse on curriculum reform in Sub-Saharan Africa and highlights Zambia's progressive step toward competence-based education.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a case study approach was adopted. Data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with curriculum developers and teachers across selected districts and document analysis was employed as a key methodological tool. This involved systematically reviewing and interpreting official curriculum documents, policy briefs, implementation guidelines, and strategic education plans released by the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre supplemented by interview data to validate emerged themes. The purpose was to identify the conceptual framework, pedagogical shifts, and intended outcomes embedded in the 2023 CBC. Through document analysis, the study was able to trace how these innovative elements were articulated in official texts and how they marked a departure from the traditional, exam-oriented system of the 2013 curriculum. bThe

methodological triangulation enhanced the credibility and reliability of the findings. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly observed throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the presentation of findings from desk review and interviews with its discussion of innovative transformation embedded in the design of the 2023 Education Curriculum Framework implemented in Zambia.

Education for Sustainability Development

Education for Sustainability has been explicitly integrated into 2023 ZECF as a key cross-cutting theme aimed at equipping learners with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to promote sustainable development. The curriculum emphasizes environmental stewardship, responsible resource use, climate change awareness, and community resilience. According to the Ministry of Education (2023), Education for Sustainable Development is integrated as a cross-cutting issue in all learning areas to promote environmental awareness, climate change mitigation, and sustainable use of natural resources.” This integration ensures that learners develop the competencies to make informed decisions and take responsible actions for environmental integrity and economic and social well-being. This resonates with Chisala (2025) who highlighted who indicated critical competencies such as digital literacy, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving. These skills are essential for learners to navigate global challenges and opportunities effectively. The 2023 ZECF has not treated education for sustainability development as a stand-alone subject but is mainstreamed in the curriculum to develop learners who are critical thinkers, problem-solvers, and environmentally conscious citizens, in line with Zambia’s Vision 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals CDC, 2023). Further, it allows seamless progression of competences from Early Childhood Education to secondary levels to ensure continuity and coherence in learning. The ZECF outlines core competences that are introduced at early childhood level and developed progressively through primary and secondary education. This is to the fact that competence acquisition is cumulative and builds from one level to another, enabling learners to develop foundational skills that support higher-level thinking and application.

Progressive Career Pathways from early grades

The 2023 ZECF has seen the introduction of clear and progressive career pathways from early education stages allows students to identify and nurture their interests, aligning education with real-world opportunities. The 2023 ZECF implemented in Zambia places a strong emphasis on Career Pathways as a central innovation aimed at aligning education with learners’ interests, abilities, and the socio-economic demands of the country. As articulated in the curriculum framework. Chisala (2025) further explains that the 2023 ZECF provides learners with progressive career routes, enabling them to make informed choices and acquire relevant competencies for the labour market and further education. Career Pathways have been introduced to provide learners with opportunities to explore and prepare for future careers based on their interests, abilities, and aspirations” (Ministry of Education, 2023). This initiative is designed to promote a diversified curriculum structure that incorporates academic,

vocational, and entrepreneurial tracks, allowing learners to specialize as early as junior secondary school. This transformation is intended to reduce the mismatch between education and employment, enhance self-reliance, and support lifelong learning through flexible progression opportunities.

Global Citizenship Education

The 2023 ZECF thoughtfully prepared learners for participation in a connected and interdependent world. The curriculum promotes values such as respect for human rights, cultural diversity, peace, and social justice. Learner exit profile at each level gives assurance for learners to exhibit elements of the competence. It had advocated for a learner who are aware of the wider world, respect diversity, and are able to act within social justice and sustainable development. This approach encourages learners to think globally while acting locally, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for global issues such as inequality, conflict, and climate change. The 2023 ZECF seeks to nurture learners who can contribute positively to their communities and the world by promoting inclusiveness, intercultural understanding, and civic engagement (CCDC, 2023). Through such integration, the 2023 ZECF aims to cultivate active, informed, and responsible citizens ready to contribute meaningfully to both national development and global progress.

Integration of Soft and Technical Skills

The ultimate aim of the curriculum is to link the tasks therein to the industry so that the curriculum graduates serve in various sectors of the economy. Identifying the 8 pathways in 2023 ZECF creates a democratic space for learners to make a choice that fits their ability and interest (Muzata, 2025). UNESCO (2024) advocates for future-focused hybrid learning models that combine cognitive, interpersonal, and entrepreneurial skill sets. The curriculum incorporates both life skills (e.g., communication, collaboration) and vocational skills to prepare students for the job market. One participant had this to say “It’s no longer just theory. learners are being taught things they would actually use in life. We are teaching children how to think, communicate, and even manage small businesses.” This integration is aligned with UNESCO (2024), which advocates for “hybrid competence models” that prepare learners for diverse futures. By equipping learners with both soft and hard skills enhances their adaptability and employment readiness (Kunda et al., 2024). Also, Chisala (2025), who highlighted that by incorporating technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial skills alongside traditional academics, the 2023 ZECF prepares students for various professions, enhancing employability and addressing skills gaps in the labor market.

According to the Kunda et al. (2024) add that Zambia's 2023 ZECF now bridges the gap between education and employment by embedding skills like financial literacy and teamwork. It promotes the development of soft skills such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence alongside technical and vocational skills. This dual emphasis ensures that learners are not only technically competent but also adaptable and socially responsible. Through this approach, the 2023 ZECF fosters a comprehensive educational experience that aligns with Zambia’s socio-economic goals and the demands of the 21st-century labor market. The education system will produce graduates who are work-ready, innovative, and capable of contributing to national development.

Decentralized Curriculum Contextualization

Schools and teachers have increased autonomy to adapt content to local contexts and learner needs. Localized curriculum adaptation promotes relevance and cultural resonance in learning experiences. This was expressed by one participant that “We can now include examples and lessons from our culture, language, and environment.” Decentralized curriculum design ensures inclusivity and addresses contextual disparities in education. (Zulu & Banda, 2025). This reform enables rural and urban teachers alike to localize content meaningfully. The 2023 ZECF has ensured that education is relevant and meaningful to learners by connecting academic content to their immediate environments and everyday lives. Teachers are empowered to select and use locally available resources and examples that resonate with learners’ experiences and community practices (CDC, 2023). Through such contextualization, the curriculum promotes inclusiveness, relevance, and learner engagement, while also supporting national unity through appreciation of Zambia’s cultural diversity.

Digital and Blended Learning Modalities

The digital and blended learning modalities have been prominently addressed in 2023 ZECF to modernize education delivery and enhance access to quality learning experiences. The 2023 ZECF introduces digital literacy and encourages the use of ICT tools, in all schools. Blended learning has gained traction post-COVID-19, with improved access to educational resources via tech. Technology integration in CBC is not just a response to disruption but a future-forward strategy (Kalaluka, 2023). Kalaluka (2023) explains that the 2023 ZECF integration of digital tools is a strategic modernization of Zambia’s education landscape post-pandemic, aimed at digital literacy and equitable access.

The 2023 ZECF integrates digital and blended learning approaches to promote the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in teaching, learning, and assessment. This integration supports the development of digital literacy among learners and enables teachers to adopt innovative instructional strategies that combine face-to-face and online learning environments. Moreover, the CDC (2023) states that teachers are encouraged to utilize digital platforms and resources to supplement classroom instruction, facilitate independent learning, and accommodate diverse learning needs. Through these provisions, the CBC aims to prepare learners for the demands of the digital era and contribute to the creation of a technologically competent and globally competitive workforce.

Community and Industry Partnership Inclusion

The CBC promotes collaboration with industries and communities to align learning with real-world practices. Partnerships support experiential learning and ensure curriculum relevance. Tembo & Phiri (2023) noted that 2023 ZECF fosters collaborative ecosystems where schools, communities, and industries co-design learning experiences that are authentic and career-aligned. Involving the community brings education closer to economic realities. This innovation promotes work-readiness and life-long skills. The 2023 ZECF to bridge the gap between education and the world of work. This encourages partnerships with industry and the community to provide learners with opportunities for hands-on learning, mentorship, and exposure to real-life work environments (MOE, 2023). This develops competencies in learners that are directly applicable to the labor market and societal needs. These partnerships are

essential for fostering entrepreneurship, employability, and innovation among learners, thus supporting Zambia's national development agenda and global competitiveness.

Categories of Special Education Needs in the 2023 Education Curriculum

The 2023 Education Curriculum has provided a broader view of the categories of disabilities. The categories of disabilities in the 2023 Education Curriculum are Autism Spectrum Disorder, Behavioral and Emotional Disorders, Deafblindness, Giftedness, Hearing impairments, Health impairments, Intellectual and Developmental Disability, Multiple disability, Orthopedic and Physical impairments, Specific Learning Difficulties, Speech and Language impairments, Traumatic brain injury and Visual impairments (MOE, 2023). This shows an improvement in the construction of disability so that everyone is included in education. This inclusion means teachers should be prepared to meet their learning needs in various categories. It means strengthening teacher competencies in teacher education institutions and revising curricula to provide for the different categories of disabilities. Although, Muzata (2025) noted that the named categories in the 2023 Education Curriculum are equally not exhaustive. There is a need for a flexible approach to meeting the needs of categories of disabilities that may not have been named in the curriculum.

Learner-Centered Pedagogy

Learner-centered pedagogy is a foundational element of 2023 ZECF, focusing on the active involvement of learners in the learning process to enhance their understanding, creativity, and independence. The CBC framework shifts the focus from teacher-led instruction to learner-centered methodologies that promote inquiry, collaboration, and problem-solving. One participant indicated that: "I feel like my learners now own their learning process. As a teacher I just guide them, they explore on their own". Another participant noted that: "The teacher no longer just talks. Now, learners do group work, projects, and discover things themselves". The 2023 ZECF encourages teaching methods that prioritize learners' needs, interests, and experiences while promoting critical thinking and problem-solving. This is supported Mwansa & Chanda (2023) revealed that learner-centered instruction cultivates autonomy and aligns well with 21st-century education goals. This aligns with constructivist theory and is confirmed by Mwansa & Chanda (2023), who observed that learner-centered models within the CBC empower students to construct knowledge through exploration and collaboration. According to the Ministry of Education (2023), the 2023 ZECF adopts a learner-centred approach where learners take an active role in the learning process, and teachers serve as facilitators rather than transmitters of knowledge. Furthermore, 2023 ZECF affirmed the need to use participatory and inclusive strategies that recognize individual learner differences and encourage engagement in meaningful learning experiences. By embracing learner-centered pedagogy, the 2023 ZECF would produce competent, reflective, and self-motivated learners prepared to meet both local and global challenges.

Inclusive and Differentiated Learning Strategies

Further, formative assessments support differentiated instruction and timely interventions. *Children with disabilities will have learning materials designed for them. They use visuals, Braille, and simplified texts.* Simfukwe & Tembo (2025) praise the 2023 ZECF's inclusive framework, because through *differentiated instruction within 2023 ZECF is a cornerstone of*

equitable education in Zambia, ensuring no learner is left behind. The curriculum framework advocates for teaching methods that recognize learner diversity and promote individualized support. This approach allows teachers to adapt content delivery to suit learners' unique abilities, learning styles, and paces. CDC (2023) encouraged teachers to use flexible teaching strategies, such as multi-level teaching, peer tutoring, and the use of teaching aids, to meet the varied learning needs in their classrooms. These provisions underscore the 2023 ZECF commitment to inclusive education and the creation of learner-friendly environments that foster participation, engagement, and achievement for all.

Continuous, Formative, and Criterion-Referenced Assessment

Under 2023 ZECF assessment is now continuous and focuses on mastery rather than summative, one-time exams. Mulenga (2024) observed the shift to criterion-referenced assessment fosters inclusive feedback and allows for early academic intervention. The curriculum shifts away from an overreliance on summative examinations and instead emphasizes assessment as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. According to the MOE (2023), support continuous, formative and criterion-referenced, aimed at supporting learning and helping learners improve their performance based on clearly defined learning outcomes.” This form of assessment enables teachers to monitor learners’ progress regularly, provide timely feedback, and adjust instruction to address individual learning needs. Furthermore, the CDC (2023) explains that learners are assessed against set performance standards rather than against each other, making the assessment process fair, inclusive, and supportive of individual growth. By focusing on what learners know and can do, the 2023 ZECF promotes a more learner-centered and competency-based approach to assessment.

Insightful on Challenges Identified in implementation of 2023 ZECF

Despite this innovation transformation of 2023 ZECF if not supported it is likely to encountered several challenges, as highlighted by participants. One significant issue is the lack of preparedness among teachers. From the interview’s teacher are still concepturising to understand the gist behind competency-based curriculum, indicating a substantial gap in teacher training and understanding of the new curriculum's methodologies. One participant narrated that the school materials were supposed to be prepared, but the process was rushed because it needed more time to ensure all materials, including textbooks, were ready, highlighting the hasty rollout and its impact on resource availability. In support, Chisala (2025) notes potential implementation challenges, such as inadequate resources, insufficient teacher training, and resistance to change, which could hinder the effectiveness of the 2023 ZECF. These challenges underscore the need for comprehensive teacher training programs and adequate resource allocation to ensure the effective implementation of the CBC across Zambia. This was also emphasized by Chisala (2025), who recommended investing in capacity building, infrastructure development, and continuous stakeholder engagement. With all things being equal and in place the study underscores the transformative potential of the 2023 ZECF which is based on competence in producing skilled, adaptable, and responsible citizens. It calls for strategic investments and stakeholder collaboration to ensure the successful implementation of the curriculum.

Chisala's Innovative Transformation Curriculum Framework

This section is the extension of the findings and discussions, emergent framework dubbed Chisala's Innovative Transformation Curriculum Framework derived from the study. This framework integrates the key innovations identified in the 2023 curriculum, reflecting a progressive shift towards inclusivity, relevance, and 21st-century skills development.

Vision

To cultivate empowered, inclusive, and future-ready learners through a dynamic, innovative, and context-responsive curriculum that promotes sustainable development, lifelong learning, and global citizenship.

Guiding Principles

- Equity and inclusion
- Relevance and contextualization
- Learner empowerment and participation
- Innovation and creativity
- Partnership and collaboration
- Sustainability and global responsibility

Core Pillars of Innovative Transformation

Pillar	Strategic Focus	Key Features/Actions
Integration of Cross-Cutting Themes	Embedding key societal concerns into curriculum content	Gender, HIV/AIDS, climate change, peace, values, and human rights education integrated into subjects
Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)	Promoting sustainability mindsets and actions	Curriculum infused with environmental stewardship, responsible consumption, civic engagement, and ecological literacy
Learner-Centered Pedagogy	Shifting from teacher-led to learner-driven approaches	Use of participatory, inquiry-based, experiential, and collaborative learning methodologies
Integration of Soft and Technical Skills	Bridging academic learning with life and workplace skills	Curriculum includes critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, entrepreneurship, and technical/vocational subjects
Decentralized Curriculum Contextualization	Allowing local relevance and flexibility	Schools and local authorities empowered to adapt curriculum to local language, culture, and socio-economic realities
Digital and Blended Learning Modalities	Promoting technology-enhanced teaching and learning	Adoption of ICT tools, online platforms, and hybrid (face-to-face and digital) teaching strategies
Community and Industry Partnership Inclusion	Strengthening stakeholder	Partnerships with local industries, parents, NGOs, and traditional

	engagement in education	leaders for curriculum delivery and work-based learning
Continuous, Formative, and Criterion-Referenced Assessment	Enhancing learner progress monitoring and accountability	Use of ongoing assessments aligned with specific learning outcomes and criteria instead of norm-referenced exams only
Inclusive and Differentiated Learning Strategies	Catering for diversity in learner abilities and needs	Tailored strategies for gifted learners, learners with disabilities, and those with language or learning difficulties
Global Citizenship Education (GCE)	Promoting responsible, aware, and culturally-sensitive learners	Topics on global interdependence, peace, tolerance, human rights, and intercultural dialogue
Special Education Needs (SEN) Considerations	Designing for accessibility and support across learner categories	Clear curriculum adaptations and support systems for learners with sensory, cognitive, physical, and multiple disabilities

4. Implementation Structure

Level	Role/Responsibility
National	Policy formulation, curriculum standards, and innovation monitoring
Provincial/District	Curriculum support, teacher training, resource distribution
School/Community	Curriculum contextualization, partnership mobilization, inclusive implementation
Teacher	Curriculum adaptation, inclusive pedagogy, continuous assessment
Learner	Active participant, peer collaborator, community actor

Monitoring & Evaluation Dimensions

- Innovation adoption rates
- Learner performance on competencies and skills
- Inclusion indicators for marginalized groups
- Community and industry engagement indices
- Sustainability literacy and behavior change evidence
- Digital learning access and effectiveness

Framework Outcomes

- Competent, innovative, and values-driven graduates
- Inclusive learning environments responsive to learner diversity
- Education system aligned with local and global development goals
- Lifelong learners equipped for 21st-century challenges and opportunities

The Chisala's Innovative Transformation Curriculum Framework integrates local context, promotes critical thinking, and advocates for the empowerment of both learners and educators

through continuous professional development. The framework emphasizes learner-centered, inclusive, and competence-based approaches tailored to diverse educational needs in Zambia and bridge policy-practice gaps by fostering innovation, collaboration, and adaptability in curriculum implementation.

CONCLUSION

The 2023 Zambia Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) Framework reveals a progressive shift from traditional content-heavy education to a learner-centered, skills-oriented model aimed at producing competent, adaptable, and entrepreneurial citizens. The 2023 ZECF is rooted in transformative pedagogies that prioritize critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy, aligning educational outcomes with national development goals and global demands. It introduces a holistic approach to learning by integrating academic and practical skills, inclusive education, and continuous assessment strategies that reflect learners' real competencies rather than rote memorization. Furthermore, the framework fosters localized learning through community-based projects and contextually relevant content, thereby bridging the gap between school and society. Despite implementation challenges such as teacher preparedness, resource constraints, and systemic inertia, the 2023 ZECF represents a bold and necessary step towards reshaping Zambia's education system to be more responsive to 21st-century challenges and opportunities.

Recommendations

- i. The Ministry of Education need to enhance resource allocation and infrastructure development. The successful implementation of the 2023 ZECF depends on adequate teaching and learning materials, ICT infrastructure, and well-equipped classrooms. The Ministry of Education should prioritize resource mobilization and equitable distribution to ensure schools, particularly in rural areas, are adequately supported.
- ii. The Ministry of Education need to foster stakeholder engagement and collaboration. Effective curriculum implementation requires the active involvement of all stakeholders, including parents, communities, the private sector, and civil society. Awareness campaigns and inclusive dialogue platforms should be established to promote shared ownership and understanding of the 2023 ZECF goals.
- iii. The Ministry of Education and schools need to establish robust monitoring, evaluation, and feedback mechanisms. To ensure that the 2023 ZECF is meeting its intended objectives, the government should implement a comprehensive system for monitoring curriculum implementation, evaluating learner outcomes, and integrating feedback for continuous curriculum improvement. This should be data-driven and responsive to the diverse educational contexts across the country.
- iv. The Ministry of Education and schools need to strengthen Teacher Capacity and Continuous Professional Development (CPD), this calls for consistent and targeted training programs to equip teachers with the pedagogical skills, assessment techniques, and technological competencies required to effectively implement the 2023 ZECF. This includes integrating CBC principles into teacher education institutions and providing ongoing support at school level.

Consent for participants

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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About the Authors

Dr. Moses Chisala is a Consultant, Researcher, Reviewer and Curriculum Specialist in Special/Inclusive Education. Found in Directorate of Curriculum Development at the Ministry of Education-HQ as Senior Curriculum Special-Special Education. He holds a PhD in Education-Special Education, Master of Education Degree in Special education, Bachelor of Education in Special Education with Civic Education from the University of Zambia, in addition, a Certificate in Primary Education. His research interests include: Education (Special/Inclusive), Child Protection, Curriculum for LSEND and ICT in Special/Inclusive Education