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The implications of the 2023 competence-based education curriculum for the teachers and learners of religious education in Zambia

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Abstract
The 2023 Competence Based Education Curriculum represents a major pedagogical shift in Zambia with specific consequences for Religious Education. This article examines how the new curriculum reconfigures intended competencies, teacher roles, classroom practices, assessment regimes, and learner experiences in Religious Education at primary and junior secondary levels. Drawing on document analysis of the 2023 curriculum framework and RE syllabus excerpts, semi-structured interviews with in-service RE teachers and curriculum officers, classroom observations across urban and rural schools, and a short teacher survey, the study maps policy intentions onto enactment realities. Findings show a tension between competency language that emphasises critical thinking, values articulation, and transversal skills, and entrenched pedagogies privileging rote knowledge and faith-formation. Teachers report uneven pre-service and in-service preparation for Competence Based Education Curriculum (CBC)-aligned RE, limited culturally responsive materials, assessment uncertainty, and contextual pressures from religious communities. Learner observations reveal variability in engagement, higher receptivity where participatory methods are used, and challenges in assessing attitudinal competencies. The article situates these empirical findings within curriculum implementation theory and decolonial critiques, arguing that CBC offers opportunities for democratising RE but requires targeted teacher development, assessment redesign, and materials that respect plural religious identities. Policy recommendations include a phased teacher training programme, RE-specific assessment rubrics, community-engaged resource development, and monitoring frameworks that balance values formation with critical competencies. The study contributes to debates on curriculum reform, religion in public education, and decolonial curriculum practice in Sub-Saharan Africa, and offers actionable guidance for Ministries, teacher educators, and schools implementing CBC in Religious Education.

Keywords: Competence-based education, religious education, assessment of dispositions, teacher enactment, decolonial curriculum

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and scope

This article examines the implications of Zambia's 2023 Competence-Based Education Curriculum (CBC) for the teaching and learning of Religious Education (RE) at primary and junior secondary levels. It asks how the new curriculum redefines intended RE competencies, how teachers interpret and enact those competencies in classrooms, how learners experience changes in pedagogy and assessment, and which systemic factors facilitate or hinder meaningful implementation. The study limits its empirical focus to state and mission schools operating within Zambia's formal basic education system and to RE as positioned within the 2023 curriculum framework (Ministry of Education, 2023).

1.2 Rationale: why this study matters

Nationwide curriculum reforms framed around competencies reorient aims, pedagogy, and assessment from content coverage toward demonstrable skills and dispositions, producing wide-ranging effects for subjects that combine cognitive, affective, and normative aims such as RE (Fullan, 2007 [11]; Biesta, 2010) [3]. RE occupies a sensitive space where questions of values, identity, and pluralism intersect with formal schooling; changes in how competencies are articulated and assessed therefore have consequences for civic formation, social cohesion, and religious literacy (Jackson, 1997 [14]; Freathy & Foulkes, 2016).

Despite growing literature on CBC internationally, subject-specific studies - especially on RE in Sub-Saharan Africa - remain sparse, leaving a gap in understanding of how competency rhetoric translates into classroom practice for faith-related subjects (Smith, 2012 [22]; Mignolo, 2011) [19]. Zambia's 2023 curriculum offers an urgent empirical site to examine these dynamics given its explicit competence statements and national scale (Ministry of Education, 2023).

1.3 Research questions

The study addresses four interlinked questions:

- How does the 2023 CBC frame intended competencies and assessment expectations for RE as expressed in policy texts? (document focus)
- How prepared and positioned are RE teachers to enact CBC-aligned pedagogies and assessments? (teacher focus)
- How do learners experience pedagogical and assessment changes in RE classrooms under CBC? (learner focus)
- What contextual constraints and enabling conditions shape variation in enactment across school types and locales? (systems focus)

1.4 Contribution and positioning

The article contributes empirically by mapping policy language onto teacher practice and learner experience in RE during an early phase of national CBC implementation, thereby addressing a documented policy-practice gap in reform literature (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001) [6]. Theoretically, it integrates implementation and competency theories with decolonial curriculum perspectives to interrogate how the CBC's competency language may reproduce, transform, or contest existing epistemic hierarchies in RE (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) [22]. Practically, the study offers evidence-based recommendations for teacher development, assessment redesign, and resource development tailored to the specific demands of RE within competence-oriented systems.

1.5 Structure of the article

The article proceeds as follows. First, it situates the study within relevant literatures on CBC, RE, curriculum implementation, and decolonial theory. Second, it outlines the theoretical framework and mixed-methods methodology used. Third, it presents findings from document analysis, teacher interviews, classroom observations, and a short teacher survey. Fourth, it discusses how the findings intersect with theoretical expectations and policy aims. Finally, it proposes policy and pedagogical implications and identifies priorities for further research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Competence-Based Education: principles and international debates

Competence-based education (CBE) reframes curricular goals around demonstrable abilities, blending knowledge, skills, and dispositions into assessable outcomes and prioritising learner performance over content coverage. Competence-based education scholarship emphasises clear competency statements, formative assessment, and pedagogies that foreground active, learner-centred approaches such as problem-based learning and performance tasks (Fullan, 2007) [11]. Critics argue that competency framings can narrow curriculum to measurable tasks, obscure deeper epistemic aims, and generate high implementation demands on teachers and systems unprepared for sustained pedagogical change (Biesta, 2010) [3]. Empirical work highlights recurrent tensions between the aspirational language of competency frameworks and on-the-ground capacities for enactment, particularly where assessment regimes remain summative or resource constraints limit pedagogical innovation (Fullan, 2007; Biesta, 2010) [11, 3].

2.2 Religious Education scholarship: aims, pedagogy, and assessment

Religious Education (RE) research maps a wide range of aims - from confessional faith formation to religious literacy and critical, dialogic engagement with belief systems (Hambulo, 2007) [13] - and links each aim to distinct pedagogical and assessment approaches (Jackson, 1997) [14]. Studies advocating religious literacy stress factual knowledge, hermeneutic skills, and reflexive understanding of religious diversity, while pluralist and democratic models emphasise dialogue, critical reasoning, and civic formation (Jackson, 1997) [14]. Assessment in RE is complex because affective and value-laden outcomes resist simple objective measurement; researchers recommend mixed assessment strategies including portfolios, reflective journals, and performance tasks to capture attitudes, ethical reasoning, and dialogic competencies (Jackson, 1997 [14]; Freathy & Foulkes, 2016). Context-sensitive scholarship from Africa underlines the role of RE in identity formation and community cohesion, cautioning against one-size-fits-all assessment models that ignore local religious ecologies.

2.3 Curriculum implementation studies: policy-practice gap and teacher agency

Implementation literature demonstrates that curricular texts are interpreted, adapted, and enacted through teacher sense making, local norms, and institutional constraints rather than being transferred intact from policy to classroom (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001) [6]. Key implementation concepts include fidelity, adaptation, enactment, and distributed agency; these explain why identical curricular mandates yield diverse classroom realities (Ball, 1994). Research shows that teachers' understandings of reform, access to professional learning, available resources, and existing assessment cultures are decisive in shaping enactment; without sustained capacity-building and material support, competency-oriented reforms risk superficial adoption or reversion to traditional pedagogies (Coburn, 2001 [6]; Fullan, 2007) [11].

2.4 Decolonial curriculum theory: knowledge, power, and curriculum reform

Decolonial perspectives interrogate how curricula reproduce epistemic hierarchies rooted in colonial knowledge orders and call for re-centering marginalized knowledges, languages, and pedagogical forms (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]. In curriculum reform debates, decolonial scholars emphasise curriculum content and process: in which knowledges are legitimised, whose competencies are valued, and how assessment regimes may privilege certain epistemologies over indigenous ways of knowing (Mignolo,

2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]. Applying decolonial lenses to CBE raises critical questions about the cultural provenance of competency constructs, the risk of exporting technicist assessment models, and the necessity of culturally grounded, plural-sensitive competency definitions.

2.5 Synthesis and gap identification

CBE and RE literatures intersect on the difficulty of operationalising affective and civic competencies, and implementation studies explain why aspirational reforms frequently encounter systemic friction (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Jackson, 1997 [14]; Coburn, 2001) [6]. Decolonial theory adds a normative dimension by foregrounding epistemic justice and contextual relevance (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]. Despite these intersecting insights, empirical studies that examine how national-scale CBC reforms reconfigure RE specifically - mapping policy competency language to teacher practice, assessment routines, and learner experiences in Sub-Saharan African settings - remain limited. This study addresses that gap by analysing the Zambian 2023 CBC's RE dispositions and tracing enactment patterns across diverse school contexts (Ministry of Education, 2023).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Policy enactment and curriculum implementation lenses

The study adopts a policy enactment perspective that treats curricular texts as starting points for locally situated processes of interpretation, negotiation, and adaptation rather than as prescriptive blueprints to be implemented intact (Ball, 1994). Enactment theory foregrounds teacher sensemaking, distributed agency across school actors, and the institutional filters through which national policy is translated into classroom practice (Coburn, 2001) [6]. This lens directs attention to three analytic foci used throughout the study: (a) the affordances and constraints embedded in the policy text; (b) teachers' interpretive frames and professional resources; and (c) school - and system-level mediators (administration, assessment culture, material resources) that shape enactment trajectories (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001) [6].

3.2 Competency theory and operationalising learning outcomes

Competence-based curriculum thinking conceptualises learning outcomes as integrated blends of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that learners must demonstrate in contextually meaningful ways (Fullan, 2007) [11]. Competency theory distinguishes between component knowledge (declarative facts), procedural or performance skills, and attitudinal or dispositional outcomes that are often affective and value-laden (Biesta, 2010) [3]. For Religious Education, this tripartite view foregrounds the difficulty of reliably assessing attitudinal competencies and ethical reasoning, and signals the need for multimodal assessment strategies (e.g., portfolios, performance tasks, reflective narratives) to capture complex RE aims (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Jackson, 1997) [14]. The framework therefore treats competency statements in the 2023 curriculum as policy intentions that require specification into measurable but culturally sensitive indicators for valid classroom assessment (Fullan, 2007) [11].

3.3 Decolonial critique of competency constructs

A decolonial lens interrogates the epistemic provenance of competency constructs and asks whose knowledges, languages, and forms of reasoning are privileged when competencies are specified and assessed (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]. This perspective highlights three analytic questions integrated into the study: (a) Do competency formulations reproduce colonial epistemic hierarchies by centering Western rationalist criteria for evidence and assessment? (b) Are indigenous religious knowledges and local pedagogical practices recognised as legitimate forms of competence? (c) How might assessment regimes be redesigned to respect plural epistemologies without sacrificing rigour (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]? Applying this critique to CBC in RE cautions against unreflective importation of technicist measurement logics and invites giving attention to culturally grounded indicators of religious literacy and ethical reasoning.

3.4 Integrative model for analysis

The study synthesises the above lenses into an integrative analytical model with three interacting domains: (1) Policy Texts and Intended Competencies (policy intent); (2) Teacher Sensemaking and Classroom Enactment (mediating practice); and (3) Assessment and Institutional Conditions (measures and constraints). The model treats enactment as bi-directional: teachers interpret policy but are also constrained and enabled by assessment regimes and institutional resources, while decolonial considerations operate as an evaluative overlay that questions the legitimacy and cultural fit of competency specifications (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001 [6]; Mignolo, 2011) [19].

3.5 Analytical propositions and expectations

From these theoretical commitments the study derives four working propositions that guide data collection and analysis:

1. Policy language alone will be insufficient to ensure fidelity of CBC principles in RE classrooms; teachers' prior pedagogies and local institutional pressures will mediate enactment (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001) [6].
2. Attainment of RE-specific attitudinal competencies will be uneven where assessment remains dominated by summative, content-based tools, requiring alternative assessments for validity (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Jackson, 1997) [14].
3. Where teacher professional learning explicitly bridges competency language and culturally grounded pedagogies, classroom enactment will more closely approximate policy intentions (Fullan, 2007) [11].
4. Competency constructs that ignore indigenous epistemologies risk marginalising local religious knowledges and producing misleading indicators of learner competence; decolonial re-specification will therefore be necessary to achieve epistemic justice in RE assessment (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22].

These propositions shape coding schemes for document analysis, interview prompts for teacher sense making, observation protocols for classroom enactment, and criteria for evaluating assessment practices, ensuring that empirical findings speak directly to policy, pedagogical, and decolonial concerns.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study used a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design which began with document analysis of the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) and RE syllabus extracts, and proceeded to qualitative fieldwork (semi-structured interviews and classroom observations), and was complemented by a short cross-sectional teacher survey to provide breadth and triangulation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) [8]. The sequential logic prioritised deep, contextualised interpretation of policy and practice while using survey data to identify patterns and strengthen transferability (Creswell, 2014) [8].

4.2 Research context

The study was located within Zambia's basic education system, focusing on primary and junior secondary levels where RE is specified within the 2023 CBC. Fieldwork sites were purposively selected to represent variation across urban and rural districts and across state, mission, and community schools to capture differing institutional histories, resource endowments, and faith-community relations that shape RE enactment (Fullan, 2007) [11].

4.3 Sampling and participants

- **Document corpus:** the ZECF 2023 curriculum framework, national RE syllabi for targeted grades, assessment guidance documents, and teacher professional development (TPD) materials produced since 2023.
- **Schools:** purposive stratified sampling of 12 schools was done (4 urban state, 4 rural state, 4 mission/community) to ensure contextual diversity and manageable field logistics (Patton, 2015) [21].
- **Teachers:** 24 in-service RE teachers (two per school) were selected to reflect gender, years of experience, and pre-/in-service training backgrounds.
- **Officials:** 6 curriculum officers and teacher educators were purposively sampled for institutional perspectives.
- **Learners:** in each school, one class was observed (upper primary or junior secondary RE class) and two focus groups of 6-8 learners each for experiential data.

4.4 Instruments and protocols

- **Document analysis protocol:** coding scheme to extract competency statements, assessment descriptors, expected performance levels, and language referencing values or dispositions (Bowen, 2009) [4].
- **Semi-structured interview guides:** parallel guides for teachers and officials including prompts on understanding of CBC competency language, professional learning experiences, classroom strategies, assessment practices, and community interactions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) [15].
- **Observation schedule:** structured template capturing lesson objectives, pedagogical approaches (teacher talk, learner activity, use of materials), assessment moments, and classroom participation patterns; short vignettes recorded after each lesson (Angrosino, 2007) [1].
- **Teacher survey:** 18-item instrument with Likert items on preparedness, frequency of learner-centred strategies, assessment practices, and resource availability plus demographic and training history items; piloted for clarity and internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha target ≥.70) (DeVellis, 2016) [9].

4.5 Data collection procedures

- Document collection and preliminary coding was conducted first to inform interview probes and observation focus.
- Fieldwork was carried out over six weeks with site visits scheduled to observe one RE lesson per school, conduct teacher interviews, run learner focus groups, and administer the teacher survey onsite or electronically where preferred.
- Interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim; observation notes expanded into analytic memos within 24 hours to preserve context (Maxwell, 2013) [17].
- Survey responses were collected either on paper or via an online form; response windows kept short to maximise completion.

4.6 Data analysis

- Document analysis: deductive and inductive coding to map competency taxonomies and assessment language; results summarised in matrices that align intended competencies with suggested assessment forms (Bowen, 2009) [4].
- Qualitative data: thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) [5] six-phase approach - familiarisation, initial coding, theme development, review, definition, and write-up - implemented using qualitative software for auditability. Coding combines theory-driven nodes (policy enactment, decolonial indicators, assessment practices) with data-driven codes emergent from transcripts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019) [18].
- Quantitative survey data: descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) were done to profile teacher preparedness and reported practices; cross-tabulations by school type and teacher training background; nonparametric tests used where sample sizes preclude parametric inference.
- Triangulation: convergence and divergence across documents, interviews, observations, and survey results were systematically compared using convergence coding matrices to strengthen validity and to explain inconsistencies (Patton, 2015) [21].

4.7 Trustworthiness and validity

- Credibility was established through triangulation, respondent validation (member-checking of key interview summaries with participating teachers and officials), and thick description of contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [16].
- Dependability was ensured via an audit trail of documents, coding manuals, and analytic memos; confirmability supported by reflective researcher notes and reflexivity statements about positionality and prior assumptions (Maxwell, 2013) [17].
- Transferability was aided by purposive sampling across varied school contexts and by reporting sufficient contextual detail for readers to assess applicability.

4.8 Ethical considerations

- Ethical clearance was sought from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee and relevant district education offices.
- Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants; parental consent and learner assent secured for focus groups and observations involving minors.
- Anonymisation procedures was applied to all transcripts and reports; sensitive findings aggregated to prevent identification of individuals or schools.
- The research avoided proselytising or evaluative judgements about particular faiths, maintaining neutral, evidence-based inquiry in line with ethical research on religion in education (Greene, 2014) [12].

4.9 Limitations of the methodology

- The purposive sample and case-based approach limited statistical generalisability; findings aim for analytic generalisability and theory refinement rather than population inference (Yin, 2018) [23].
- Short fieldwork duration constrains longitudinal insights into enactment trajectories; recommended follow-up longitudinal studies to track implementation over multiple academic cycles.
- Self-report bias in teacher surveys and interviews were mitigated through triangulation with observations and documents but cannot be fully eliminated.

5. Findings

5.1 Policy text analysis: intended competencies and assessment guidance

Document analysis of the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF 2023) and the RE syllabus extracts revealed competency formulations that foreground three interrelated domains: cognitive knowledge (religious facts, texts, traditions), procedural skills (interpretation, comparison, ethical reasoning), and dispositional outcomes (values, empathy, civic-mindedness) (Ministry of Education, 2023). Policy language emphasises learner-centred pedagogy, formative assessment, and transversal skills such as critical thinking and interpersonal communication (Ministry of Education, 2023). However, assessment guidance for RE is uneven: while cognitive and procedural competencies are linked to suggested assessment tasks (short answer, comparative essays, text analysis), dispositional competencies are often stated as aims without concrete rubrics or exemplar performance descriptors, leaving interpretive space for local actors (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Jackson, 1997) [14]. This pattern reproduces a common policy tension in competency reforms where attitudinal outcomes are valued rhetorically but under-specified in measurable terms (Fullan, 2007) [11].

5.2 Key analytic observations from the texts

- Competency statements often combine domain language (knowledge/skills/values) in single performance expectations, creating complex, multi-dimensional targets for teachers to translate into lessons (Ministry of Education, 2023).
- Assessment annexes privilege summative formats and national examination alignment in other subjects, with only high-level prompts for RE performance tasks, suggesting limited institutional clarity about how to validate attitudinal competencies (Ministry of Education, 2023; Biesta, 2010) [3].
- Language about culturally responsive content and pluralism is present but framed mainly as a content imperative rather than as assessment criteria, signaling potential misalignment between stated decolonial or plural-sensitive aims and the assessment system (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22].

5.3 Teacher preparedness and enacted understanding

Survey results and interviews with RE teachers showed a heterogeneous pattern of readiness. Quantitatively, a majority reported awareness of CBC principles but only a minority felt confident in operationalising dispositional competencies in assessment and daily practice. Qualitatively, three dominant sensemaking patterns appeared:

1. **Translational practitioners:** teachers who attempted to translate competency language into classroom activities by designing group tasks, role-plays, and reflective journals. These teachers reported drawing on in-service CPD where available and experimenting with formative rubrics (Fullan, 2007) [11].
2. **Procedural adapters:** teachers who focused on the identifiable skills within competencies (text interpretation, comparison) and repackaged existing content lessons with added "skills" prompts but retained teacher-centred delivery due to class sizes or exam pressures (Coburn, 2001) [6].
3. **Conservative reproducers:** teachers who interpreted CBC as an overlay but continued largely confessional or content-driven RE practices, citing insufficient training, lack of resources, and community expectations for faith instruction (Ball, 1994).

Interview excerpts (paraphrased) illustrated these patterns: some teachers described introducing small-group debates and ethical dilemma tasks to foster critical reasoning, while others said that parents and faith leaders expected lessons that reinforced faith traditions, constraining pedagogical experimentation. Teachers frequently invoked assessment uncertainty as a barrier: "We don't have clear rubrics for values; how do we grade empathy?" (teacher interview data). These findings align with literature showing that teachers' prior pedagogies and local pressures mediate reform enactment (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001) [6].

5.4 Classroom enactment: pedagogies and participation

Observations across 12 schools found variation in pedagogical practice correlated with teacher sense-making types and contextual resources. Common patterns included:

- Active, student-centred episodes in approximately one third of observed lessons where teachers used case studies, role-plays, and reflective writing; these episodes tended to produce higher student participation and visible reasoning processes (Jackson, 1997) [14].
- Predominantly didactic lessons where teachers lectured on religious content with limited opportunities for learner articulation; these lessons often framed RE as knowledge transmission rather than competency development.
- Mixed-mode lessons where teachers combined short teacher exposition with guided group tasks; implementation quality depended on class size,

availability of teaching aids, and teacher confidence with facilitation.

Vignette: In an urban mission school, a teacher introduced a moral dilemma case and organised groups to prepare short presentations on possible responses, followed by peer feedback and a reflective journal entry. Students engaged actively, demonstrating argumentation and perspective-taking; the teacher used a simple checklist to note participation and evidence of ethical reasoning. In a rural state school, a lesson on sacred texts consisted mainly of teacher exposition and recall questions; learners were attentive but showed minimal dialogic engagement.
Observers noted that access to materials (story prompts, readings, small-group space) and smaller class sizes enabled more authentic competency work; where resources were scarce, teachers reverted to predictable talk-and-chalk modes (Fullan, 2007) [11].

5.5 Assessment practices and challenges assessing dispositions

Assessment practices reported and observed clustered into three forms: traditional tests and quizzes focused on factual recall; performance tasks and projects used sporadically; and informal formative checks (questioning, observation notes) used unevenly. Crucial challenges emerged:

- Weak specification of performance standards for dispositional outcomes produced inconsistency: some teachers used ad-hoc checklists or participation counts, others relied on teacher judgment without documented criteria, reducing inter-rater reliability (Biesta, 2010) [3].
- Institutional accountability favored measurable cognitive indicators due to national examination culture; RE, not being centrally high-stakes in the same way, received less formal assessment support and guidance (Fullan, 2007) [11].
- Teachers reported limited training in designing rubrics, moderating judgments, and implementing portfolios or reflective assessment formats that could capture attitudinal development (Jackson, 1997 [14]; Freathy & Foulkes, 2016).

Consequently, attitudinal competencies were often assessed indirectly (e.g., participation, behaviour) rather than through validated performance evidence, raising questions about validity and fairness.

5.6 Learner experiences and responses

Learner focus groups and classroom interactions revealed nuanced responses to CBC-styled RE lessons. Where participatory methods were used, students reported greater enjoyment, perceived relevance, and an ability to articulate multiple perspectives. Learners described valuing discussion formats that allowed them to compare beliefs, consider ethical dilemmas, and relate lessons to everyday life. Conversely, in lecture-dominated classrooms learners reported that RE remained about memorising facts and pleasing teachers or community expectations.

5.7 Notable learner dynamics

- **Improved dialogic competence:** learners in active classrooms displayed emerging competencies in perspective-taking and reasoned argumentation, suggesting that pedagogy significantly shapes disposition development (Jackson, 1997) [14].
- **Tensions with home/community expectations:** some learners reported being reprimanded by parents or religious leaders for classroom activities perceived as critical or non-confessional, indicating sociocultural constraints on enactment.
- **Variation in self-efficacy:** learners in schools where teachers used feedback and reflective tasks showed higher reported confidence in discussing religious issues critically.

5.8 Variation by context: urban/rural and school-type differences

Contextual variation strongly mediated implementation:

- Urban mission schools tended to have better access to CPD, smaller class sizes, and more learning materials; teachers there were more likely to trial student-centred approaches and document formative assessment.
- Rural state schools faced acute resource shortages, large classes, and limited in-service support; teachers reported higher workload pressures and greater reversion to didactic methods.
- Mission/community schools navigated interesting tensions: some balanced denominational expectations with CBC aims by framing participatory pedagogy as character formation consistent with faith values; others faced pushback from conservative communities.

These contextual patterns affirm implementation literature that positions institutional capacity, resource distribution, and community ecology as decisive moderators of reform outcomes (Coburn, 2001 [6]; Fullan, 2007) [11].

5.9 Summary of principal empirical findings

- The ZECF and RE syllabi articulate multi-dimensional competencies but under-specify assessment criteria for dispositional outcomes, creating an implementation gap (Ministry of Education, 2023; Biesta, 2010) [3].
- Teacher sensemaking is heterogeneous; where teachers access meaningful CPD and resources they translate CBC language into active pedagogies, otherwise they adapt superficially or revert to traditional practices (Ball, 1994; Fullan, 2007) [11].
- Classroom enactment and learner experiences vary markedly by context; active pedagogies produce stronger evidence of competency development but are contingent on resources, training, and community support.
- Assessment of attitudinal competencies is inconsistent and often indirect, undermining the validity of claims about learners' dispositional attainment (Jackson, 1997 [14]; Freathy & Foulkes, 2016).
- These findings set the stage for the subsequent discussion, which interprets empirical patterns against the theoretical framework and formulates targeted policy and pedagogical recommendations.

6. Discussion

6.1 Synthesis of empirical findings with theoretical expectations

The empirical findings confirm that policy texts function as starting points rather than determinative blueprints for classroom practice, illustrating enactment processes described in policy enactment literature (Ball, 1994 [2]; Coburn, 2001) [6]. The ZECF's multidimensional

competency language produces interpretive work for teachers who translate, adapt, or reproduce policy in ways that reflect their prior pedagogies, institutional constraints, and community expectations (Ball, 1994 [2]; Coburn, 2001) [6]. The uneven specification of dispositional competencies observed in policy and practice aligns with critiques that competence frameworks frequently valorise measurable skills while leaving attitudinal aims rhetorically prominent but methodologically under-specified (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Fullan, 2007) [11].

The variation in teacher sense making - translational practitioners, procedural adapters, and conservative reproducers - maps onto implementation propositions predicting that access to professional learning and institutional supports mediates fidelity to CBC principles (Fullan, 2007) [11]. Where teachers had relevant CPD, smaller classes, and materials, enactment approximated intended competencies; where capacity constraints prevailed, teacher adaptations tended toward surface alignment or continuity with traditional practices (Coburn, 2001 [6]; Fullan, 2007) [11]. Observed learner gains in perspective-taking and ethical reasoning in active classrooms empirically substantiate claims that pedagogy, not policy text alone, is decisive for disposition development in RE (Jackson, 1997) [14].

Decolonial concerns intersect with these patterns. The predominance of assessment logics that privilege cognitive, easily measurable indicators reproduces technicist assessment regimes and risks marginalising indigenous epistemologies and locally valued expressions of religiosity unless competency constructs and assessment rubrics explicitly accommodate plural knowledge forms (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]. The policy's content references to pluralism and culturally responsive material, unaccompanied by assessment criteria, create a credibility gap between decolonial rhetoric and everyday evaluative practice.

6.2 Interpretation of core tensions

Three core tensions structure the interpretive account. First, a tension between competency rhetoric and assessment infrastructure: CBC's dispositional aims require multimodal, formative assessment systems that the current institutional architecture does not yet supply (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Freathy & Foulkes, 2016) [10]. Second, a tension between teacher agency and structural constraints: teachers demonstrate creativity when afforded training and resources, but heavy workloads, large classes, and accountability pressures reorient practice toward traditional transmission (Ball, 1994 [2]; Fullan, 2007) [11]. Third, a normative tension between pluralist curricular intentions and community expectations: RE's identity for some stakeholders remains confessional, producing social friction when classrooms adopt critical, comparative approaches (Jackson, 1997) [14].

These tensions explain why policy uptake is uneven and why superficial compliance (e.g., adding "skills" language without pedagogical change) coexists with pockets of substantive innovation. The decolonial lens clarifies that without deliberate re-specification of competencies to include indigenous cognitive and affective markers, assessment systems will asymmetrically privilege Western epistemic norms and thereby constrain epistemic justice in RE (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22].

6.3 Implications for assessment validity and teacher professional learning

Assessment validity in RE depends on alignment among competency statements, observable performance criteria, and moderation practices. Current reliance on indirect indicators (participation, behaviour) and ad-hoc teacher judgement undermines construct validity and inter-rater reliability, threatening fairness and the legitimacy of claims about dispositional attainment (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Jackson, 1997) [14]. Valid assessment of RE dispositions requires exemplar-based rubrics, moderated scoring, and artifacts of learning (portfolios, recorded performances, reflective narratives) accompanied by teacher training in assessment literacy (Freathy & Foulkes, 2016) [10].

Teacher professional learning must therefore move beyond awareness-raising toward practice-centred, sustained CPD that models and coaches formative assessment, facilitates rubric co-construction, and supports contextually appropriate adaptations of competency language. Short workshops alone are insufficient; iterative, school-based mentoring and communities of practice are necessary to translate policy intentions into robust classroom routines (Fullan, 2007) [11].

6.4 Broader implications for RE, civic formation, and decolonial aims

If implemented with attention to assessment design and teacher capacity, CBC can advance democratic, dialogic aims in RE by prioritising critical reasoning, perspective-taking, and civic dispositions. However, absent epistemic sensitivity, the reform risks instrumentalising RE in ways that marginalise local religious knowledges and reproduce epistemic hierarchies. Decolonial re-specification of competencies demands participatory processes that involve teachers, local religious actors, and learners in defining culturally valid indicators of competence and in co-producing resources and assessment exemplars (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22].

6.5 Limitations that qualify interpretation

Interpretation is bounded by the study's purposive sampling, short fieldwork window, and the limited scale of survey data; these limits constrain claims about national prevalence but do not undermine theoretical and practical inferences about implementation dynamics. The cross-sectional snapshot captures early enactment patterns that may evolve with sustained policy rollout and expanded CPD investments.

7. Policy and Pedagogical Implications

7.1 Teacher professional development and support

- **Priority:** Establish a sustained, practice-centred CPD programme that moves beyond one-off workshops to iterative coaching, lesson study, and in-school mentoring focused specifically on RE competencies and assessment literacy (Fullan, 2007) [11].
- **Core components:** modelling student-centred RE lessons; co-designing assessment rubrics for dispositional outcomes; classroom coaching cycles with video reflection; and peer moderation sessions to build inter-rater reliability (Freathy & Foulkes, 2016) [10].
- **Delivery model:** blended delivery with district-level master trainers, school-based teacher-learning clusters, and an online repository of exemplar lesson plans and

rubrics to support scale and sustainability (Fullan, 2007) [11].

- **Short-term actions:** pilot CPD in a representative cluster of schools; create a facilitator guide for RE competency work; schedule quarterly moderation meetings.
- **Indicators of success:** number of teachers participating in coaching cycles; quality improvement in lesson observations against competency-aligned rubrics; teacher self-efficacy gains measured pre/post intervention.

7.2 Assessment redesign for dispositional competencies

- **Priority:** Re-specify RE assessment to include multimodal evidence of dispositional learning - portfolios, performance tasks, reflective narratives, and structured observations - aligned to explicit performance descriptors (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Jackson, 1997) [14].
- **Rubric design:** develop exemplar-based rubrics with observable indicators for each dispositional competency (e.g., perspective-taking, ethical reasoning, empathy) at developmental levels (emerging, competent, advanced) and provide annotated examples for moderation (Freathy & Foulkes, 2016) [10].
- **Moderation and quality assurance:** institutionalise school-level and district-level moderation cycles, sample artifacts for external moderation, and train moderators in culturally responsive assessment to protect against epistemic bias (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Mignolo, 2011) [19].
- **Integration with reporting:** adapt school reporting templates to include qualitative descriptors and evidence references for dispositional outcomes rather than sole reliance on numeric scores.
- **Short-term actions:** co-create pilot rubrics with teachers; trial portfolios in selected classes; run moderation workshops and refine rubrics through iterative feedback.

7.3 Curriculum materials and instructional resources

- **Priority:** Produce RE teaching and learning materials that operationalise CBC competencies while respecting local religious ecologies and indigenous knowledges (Smith, 2012) [22].
- **Principles for materials:** Plural sensitivity; contextual relevance; multimodal tasks (drama, community inquiry, case studies); scaffolded prompts for ethical reflection; and exemplar assessment artifacts.
- **Co-production model:** involve teachers, local faith leaders, community representatives, and learners in resource development to ensure legitimacy and cultural fit (Mignolo, 2011) [19].
- **Digital and low-tech options:** create printable activity banks and low-bandwidth digital repositories to accommodate rural contexts with limited connectivity.
- **Short-term actions:** convene resource-design workshops in each province; produce a national starter pack of RE competency lessons and assessment exemplars.

7.4 Community and stakeholder engagement

- **Priority:** Launch structured dialogue with parents, faith communities, and school boards to clarify the aims of CBC-aligned RE and to build local support for dialogic, competency-oriented pedagogy (Jackson, 1997) [14].
- **Engagement strategies:** community forums showcasing exemplar lessons; parent-teacher briefings explaining assessment methods for dispositions; participatory workshops where stakeholders help define culturally valid indicators of competence.
- **Managing tensions:** use mediated dialogues and locally respected intermediaries to navigate conflicts between confessional expectations and pluralist classroom practices, emphasising shared goals of character formation and civic cohesion.
- **Short-term actions:** Pilot community briefing sessions in schools with mixed reactions to CBC RE; document stakeholder concerns and adapt communication materials accordingly.

7.5 Monitoring, evaluation, and policy sequencing

- **Priority:** Design a staged rollout with embedded monitoring that tracks implementation fidelity, teacher practice change, and learner outcomes for competencies across time.
- **Monitoring framework:** combine quantitative indicators (CPD participation rates, rubric adoption, portfolio submission rates) with qualitative evidence (lesson observation reports, teacher narratives, learner reflections) to triangulate progress (Coburn, 2001) [6].
- **Policy sequencing:** Prioritise teacher capacity and assessment tools before high-stakes accountability; implement formative assessment infrastructure and moderation before integrating dispositional measures into formal reporting.
- **Short-term actions:** develop a national M&E dashboard for CBC RE indicators; commission an independent midline implementation review after two academic terms to inform scale-up decisions.

7.6 Resourcing and systemic supports

- **Priority:** Align budgetary allocations to CPD, materials production, moderation, and monitoring to avoid unfunded mandates.
- **Cost-effective strategies:** leverage existing teacher education structures, partner with mission schools and NGOs for resource co-production, and use open educational resources to reduce costs.
- **Equity focus:** prioritise additional support (targeted CPD, teaching aids, reduced class sizes where feasible) for rural and under-resourced schools to prevent deepening implementation disparities (Fullan, 2007) [11].
- **Short-term actions:** create a resourcing plan linked to district budgets; identify donor or partner funding for initial piloting and capacity building.

7.7 Ethical and decolonial safeguards

- **Priority:** Ensure that re-specification of competencies and assessment practices actively protects and incorporates indigenous religious knowledges and local epistemologies.
- **Safeguards:** Participatory validation of rubrics with indigenous knowledge holders; culturally responsive moderation protocols; and explicit documentation of how assessment criteria accommodate local forms of competence (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22].

- **Short-term actions:** form a decolonial advisory panel comprising scholars, community elders, and faith representatives to review rubrics and materials before national dissemination.

These policy and pedagogical implications translate the study's empirical findings into actionable measures that balance technical assessment needs, teacher capacity building, cultural legitimacy, and equitable rollout. Implemented sequentially and with adequate resourcing, they make the CBC's aspirational RE competencies more measurable, teachable, and culturally defensible.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of key findings

The Zambia 2023 Competence-Based Education Curriculum articulates multi-dimensional RE competencies spanning knowledge, skills, and dispositions, but assessment guidance for dispositional outcomes remains under-specified (Ministry of Education, 2023; Biesta, 2010) [3]. Teacher enactment clustered into translational practitioners, procedural adapters, and conservative reproducers, with meaningful enactment occurring where sustained professional learning, materials, and manageable class sizes were present (Ball, 1994 [2]; Fullan, 2007) [11]. Classroom evidence showed that student-centred pedagogies produced stronger indicators of perspective-taking and ethical reasoning, while resource constraints and community expectations often curtailed such practices (Jackson, 1997 [14]; Coburn, 2001) [6]. Assessment practices for dispositions were inconsistent and frequently indirect, undermining construct validity and comparability (Freathy & Foulkes, 2016 [10]; Biesta, 2010) [3]. Contextual variation - urban/rural and school type - systematically mediated implementation quality (Fullan, 2007) [11].

8.2 Principal contributions

The study empirically maps CBC policy wording to classroom enactment in RE, elucidating the mechanisms by which competency rhetoric translates unevenly into practice and assessment (Ball, 1994 [2]; Coburn, 2001) [6]. The study integrates competency theory with a decolonial evaluative overlay, demonstrating that technicist assessment logics risk marginalising indigenous epistemologies unless competencies and rubrics are co-produced with local stakeholders (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22]. The findings provide actionable pathways for aligning teacher development, assessment design, and community engagement to realise CBC aims in RE (Fullan, 2007) [11].

8.3 Prioritised recommendations

Short term (0-12 months)

- Pilot co-created RE rubrics and portfolios in purposive school clusters and run moderation workshops to establish exemplar artifacts and inter-rater procedures (Freathy & Foulkes, 2016) [10].
- Launch cluster-based coaching cycles and lesson-study teams focused on modelling and practising competency-aligned RE lessons (Fullan, 2007) [11].

Medium term (1-3 years)

- Institutionalise district moderation systems and integrate qualitative descriptors for dispositional outcomes into school reporting templates (Biesta, 2010) [3].
- Produce and distribute culturally responsive RE resource packs co-authored by teachers, community elders, and faith representatives (Smith, 2012) [22].

Long term (3+ years)

- Embed competency assessment literacy into pre-service teacher education curricula; integrated gender-sensitive pedagogy and leadership training, (Ziwa, *et al*, 2025) [25] and scale a national CPD infrastructure that supports iterative mentoring and digital repositories of exemplars (Fullan, 2007) [11].
- Establish a decolonial advisory panel to review national assessment policy and ensure epistemic plurality in competence definitions (Mignolo, 2011) [19].

8.4 Implications for policy and practice

Policy sequencing must prioritise teacher capacity and assessment infrastructure before introducing high-stakes accountability for dispositional competencies, to avoid perfunctory compliance and measurement distortions (Biesta, 2010 [3]; Coburn, 2001) [6]. Investment in moderation, exemplar development, and contextually adapted materials is essential to prevent inequitable implementation across rural and urban contexts (Fullan, 2007) [11]. Structured community engagement is necessary to reconcile pluralist classroom aims with local faith expectations and to legitimise non-confessional, dialogic RE pedagogies (Jackson, 1997) [14]. Further, project applied pedagogies to serve as a mitigation measure in schools where resources are not readily available or are insufficient, enabling learners to decide what action to take, enter into dialogue with other people and prepare them for future careers (Ziwa, 2007) [24]. Admittedly, modern technologically inclined pedagogies help learners to work less independent of RE and other teachers, acquire practical and technical skills empowering them to counter challenging contexts locally and globally (Ziwa, 2007) [24].

8.5 Directions for future research

Conduct longitudinal cohort studies tracking learner dispositional development and the stability of teacher practice over multiple academic cycles to assess sustainability of enactment. Pilot comparative studies across Southern African systems adopting CBC to identify transferable moderation and CPD models. Investigate culturally grounded assessment metrics co-developed with indigenous knowledge holders to validate alternative evidence forms for dispositional competence (Mignolo, 2011 [19]; Smith, 2012) [22].

8.6 Closing statement

Realising the democratic and decolonial promise of competence-oriented Religious Education in Zambia requires coordinated investment in teacher learning, assessment design, resource co-production, and community partnerships; without these systemic supports, competency rhetoric will continue to outpace classroom realities (Ministry of Education, 2023; Biesta, 2010) [3].

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