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FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: IMPROVING THE FOUNDATIONAL LEARNING IN ZAMBIA

Gondwe Colious[1], Kanchebele-Sinyangwe Maureen[1], Mate Joseph[1], Mwebela Fridah[1],Mwiya Bruce[1]

[1] Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, gondwecolly@gmail.com
[1] Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia,kabwema@gmail.com
[1] Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, josephmate69@gmail.com
[1] Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, mwebelafridah@gmail.com
[1] Kwame Nkrumah University, Zambia, mwiyab@gmail.com

*Correspondence: Gondwe Colious, gondwecolly@gmail.com

Abstract

Zambia's 2023 curriculum framework places foundational literacy and numeracy at the centre of early learning, but its implementation depends on teacher preparation, classroom materials, and continuing support. This article synthesises evidence from policy documents, programme reports, and the previously published survey of 134 educators reported by Gondwe et al. (2026). In that survey, 78% of respondents reported adequate literacy training and 72% reported numeracy preparation, while 56% reported adequate mentoring in either area. Reported availability of approved literacy and numeracy textbooks was 44% and 47%, respectively, and 38% reported local-language supplementary readers. These descriptive perceptions indicate gaps in the support environment; they do not measure teacher competence, school-level textbook provision, or learner achievement. A thematic reading of reported open-ended responses points to practical training, feedback, class size, materials, and language transition as areas of concern. The article argues for more practice-based preparation, sustained coaching, and dependable provision of appropriate learning resources, while identifying the need for direct classroom and learner assessments.

Keywords: *Teacher Capacity, Professional Development, Teaching And Learning Materials, Mentorship, Foundational Literacy, Foundational Numeracy, Zambia, Policy Implementation*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The gap between education policy and classroom practice represents one of the most

persistent challenges facing developing education systems. Zambia exemplifies this implementation gap: despite progressive policy frameworks spanning nearly five decades from the 1977 Educational Reforms through the 1992 Focus on Learning, the 1996 Educating Our Future, to the 2023 Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (ZECF) foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes remain critically low (Gondwe et al., 2026; Curriculum Development Centre, 2023). According to recent data, only 14% of Grade 4 students can perform basic math tasks, and merely 12.7% can read and write at expected levels (International Parliamentary Network for Education [IPNEd], 2026a).

This article examines the policy-to-practice gap through three connected domains: teacher preparation, learning materials, and continuing mentoring. It brings the published survey reported by Gondwe et al. (2026) into conversation with policy and implementation literature. Its contribution is an interpretive synthesis rather than a new survey.

Foundational learning is a concern across sub-Saharan Africa, but estimates vary substantially by grade, assessment, and country. Cross-country comparisons require equivalent measures and sampling. This analysis therefore focuses on the documented Zambian policy and the descriptive survey indicators available for this article (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team & ADEA, 2024).

Recent research highlights the potential of targeted teacher support to improve learning outcomes. A collaborative study by Busara, TaRL Africa, and VVOB (2025) found that receiving on-demand feedback encouraged teachers to reflect on their performance and adjust practices, leading to more accurate student grouping and lesson facilitation . This finding underscores the critical importance of mentorship and feedback systems in translating policy into practice.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Evolution of Education Policy in Zambia

Zambia's education policy framework has evolved significantly over recent decades. The 1996 Educating Our Future policy established the principle that teacher quality is the single most important factor influencing learner achievement and called for comprehensive teacher preparation that balances theoretical knowledge with practical classroom skills (MoE, 1996). This principle was reaffirmed in subsequent policy documents, including the National Education Policy (2025) and the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework (2023).

The ZECF specifically emphasises that teacher training programmes must be reformed so that literacy and numeracy become foundational and compulsory components across all levels of training, reflecting the framework's emphasis on competence-based education and foundational learning (Curriculum Development Centre [CDC], 2023, p. 78). The framework's shift to a learner-centred, competency-oriented approach requires that training curricula include more targeted content on literacy and numeracy instruction and that methods of language of instruction are practised, not just discussed (Curriculum Development Centre, 2023, p. 79).

2.2 The Transforming Teacher Education Initiative

Recognising the misalignment between teacher preparation and classroom realities, Zambia has embarked on significant teacher education reforms. The Transforming Teacher Education activity, supported by USAID, has worked to address the gap between pre-service training and primary school needs. A World Bank case study (2025) documents how this initiative upskilled teacher educators through a graduate literacy course, trainings, and residencies; created government-approved literacy and language modules; and redesigned school experience with nearby placements, cohorts, and coaching.

Early results from these reforms include improved educator knowledge,

institutionalized practicum changes, and master's pathways, enabled by collaboration. However, remaining challenges include college funding gaps, language policy shifts, staffing, and private-sector quality, highlighting the ongoing nature of the implementation challenge.

2.3 The Catch-Up Programme as Implementation Model

The Catch-Up programme, a local adaptation of Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), represents an important model for translating policy into practice. The programme has been recognised internationally for its effectiveness, with President Hichilema named the world's first foundational learning champion in 2024 (Zulu, 2026).

VVOB's Catch Up: Sustaining and Scaling project (2022-2026) aims to build upon and expand targeted, play-based accelerated education initiatives to ensure that children in grades 3-5 acquire foundational learning skills. The project takes a multi-pronged approach, working closely with the Ministry of Education leadership to strengthen leadership at all administrative levels (provinces, districts, zones and schools).

Recent developments include efforts to digitise Catch-Up training materials. VVOB Zambia has contracted Mwabu to digitise the Catch-Up training materials for teachers and set up an online/offline platform to make the materials available (Mwabu, 2026). The goal is to make training materials more easily accessible, at a lower cost than face-to-face training, so teachers can access Catch Up training materials when they need to and the programme can continue sustainably (Mwabu, 2026).

2.4 Learning Through Play and ECE Reform

The IT'S PLAY initiative, implemented by VVOB with support from The Lego Foundation (2021-2025), has worked to integrat[e] learning through play methodologies into the ECE systems of Zambia, Rwanda and Uganda. The initiative directly reached 1766 pre-primary teachers, 310 teacher educators and key government officials, and over 100,000 learners.

In Zambia, IT'S PLAY worked at every level from ministry officials and curriculum specialists, to district officers, school leaders, and classroom teachers, to establish learning through play as the mainstream teaching approach in early childhood education. Evidence from the project shows that teachers increasingly adopted child-centred practices, classrooms became more interactive and resource-rich, and learners showed stronger engagement and interest in literacy activities.

Felix Ngoma, Provincial Education Officer of Education in Lusaka, affirmed that play-based learning is an important part of what we do and that early childhood education is here with us to stay. Play-based learning is here to stay.

3. AIM

This article aims to comprehensively analyse the implementation gap between policy intent and classroom practice in Zambia's foundational literacy and numeracy education, focusing on three interconnected domains: teacher capacity and professional development, teaching and learning materials, and mentorship and support systems, and to propose evidence-based strategic reforms.

4. OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this article are to:

1. Examine the policy framework for teacher capacity, learning materials, and mentorship in Zambia.
2. Present empirical evidence on current implementation levels across these domains.
3. Analyse the systemic barriers to effective policy implementation.
4. Propose strategic reforms to strengthen teacher capacity, material provision, and mentorship systems.
5. Provide recommendations for policy reform and future research.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Teacher Capacity and Foundational Learning Outcomes

Teacher preparation matters when it equips teachers to diagnose early learning difficulties and adjust instruction. The World Bank (2018) places the teacher–learner interaction at the centre of learning, while the Zambia-focused study by Mandyata et al. (2024) examines a specific gap between language-of-instruction policy, teacher education, and classroom practice. These works address different questions: a global synthesis establishes the broader learning problem; the Zambian study identifies a local implementation issue. Neither establishes that self-reported training is equivalent to observed instructional quality.

Mandyata et al. (2024) identify difficulties translating language policy into classroom routines. The implication for this article is to consider practical preparation and school-based support together. The present survey indicators show perceptions of preparation, but no classroom observation or direct assessment of teacher knowledge is available.

5.2 Teacher Working Conditions and Motivation

Rural working conditions can constrain the use of teachers' skills. Solami (2022) examines motivation in Chienge district; the district-level scope limits generalisation to all Zambian schools. Workload, infrastructure, and materials should be investigated as possible conditions shaping implementation, not presumed causes of the survey findings.

These conditions also complicate policy delivery. A teacher who has completed training may lack the time, space, or resources to practise differentiated instruction. The available survey does not test the independent effects of workload or motivation on learning outcomes.

Political commentary on teacher deployment cannot substitute for a representative study of working conditions. The analysis below therefore treats large-class concerns in the qualitative account as context-specific reports rather than national prevalence estimates.

5.3 Teaching and Learning Materials

Materials influence whether a curriculum can be put into practice. The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team and ADEA (2024) connect foundational numeracy with the need for appropriate textbooks, teacher guides, subject knowledge, and workable classroom conditions. These forms of support are complementary: a textbook alone does not establish effective instruction, and teacher-made aids do not resolve shortages of reading materials.

For literacy in multilingual classrooms, the language and suitability of reading resources also matter. The survey reported by Gondwe et al. (2026) offers perceived availability of several material types, but it does not measure textbook-to-learner ratios, use in lessons, or causal effects on attainment.

5.4 Mentorship and Professional Development

Continuing feedback may help teachers translate initial preparation into practice. The Zambia Catch Up implementation study by Busara, TaRL Africa, and VVOB (2025) reports promising feedback mechanisms in that programme. Its programme-specific findings should be read alongside the broader account of implementation drivers, including coaching and performance feedback, in Fixsen et al. (2005).

The World Bank (2018) similarly emphasises that resources and system incentives should support the teacher–learner interaction. Together these sources justify studying the quality and regularity of mentoring, rather than counting attendance at isolated training activities alone.

Regional work on Teaching at the Right Level describes remote, peer, and

technology-assisted support as possible delivery approaches (UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa, 2025). Transfer to Zambia requires attention to connectivity, mentor capacity, and the cost of sustained implementation; evidence from one programme or country is not proof of nationwide effectiveness.

5.5 Language of Instruction and Teacher Preparation

Language policy adds a specific demand to early-grade preparation: teachers need strategies for teaching in familiar languages and supporting subsequent English learning. Mandyata et al. (2024) document a gap between policy, training, and practice in Zambia, while the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework sets out the policy context (Curriculum Development Centre, 2023).

The unresolved empirical question is how preparation, access to relevant texts, and mentoring interact in different classrooms. The source survey captures reported experiences but cannot establish the effect of any one factor on learners' transition between languages.

5.6 Theoretical Framework: Implementation Science

This article is grounded in the theoretical framework of implementation science, which examines the factors that influence the translation of policies and programmes into practice (Fixsen et al., 2005). Key elements of implementation frameworks include:

1. **Fidelity:** The degree to which programmes are implemented as intended
2. **Adaptation:** The modifications made to fit local contexts
3. **Drivers:** The core components that support implementation (staff selection, training, coaching, performance assessment)
4. **Stages:** The phases of implementation (exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation)

Implementation science directs attention to the supports needed to put a policy into practice: training, coaching, usable resources, and feedback (Fixsen et al., 2005). In this article, the framework organises interpretation of survey indicators and policy documents. Because the evidence is cross-sectional and largely self-reported, the analysis identifies plausible implementation constraints rather than testing causal mechanisms.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Research Design

This article is a secondary, descriptive synthesis of the previously published mixed-method survey by Gondwe et al. (2026), supplemented with policy documents and implementation literature. No new participants were recruited or surveyed for this article. The original publication should be consulted for the full survey protocol.

6.2 Sample and Sampling Procedure

Gondwe et al. (2026) report responses from 134 educators across Zambia's ten provinces, including teachers and school leaders. The provincial distribution reproduced in Table 1 describes the source sample. The selection method, response rate, and numbers by professional role are not specified in the material available for this synthesis; representativeness cannot be assumed.

Table 1: Provincial Distribution of Respondents

Province	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Central	24	17.9%
Eastern	21	15.7%

Province	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Lusaka	18	13.4%
Northern	16	11.9%
Copperbelt	14	10.4%
Southern	12	9.0%
Luapula	10	7.5%
Western	8	6.0%
Muchinga	6	4.5%
North-Western	5	3.7%
Total	**134**	**100%**

Source: Adapted from Gondwe et al. (2026).

6.3 Data Collection Instruments

The source study reports a questionnaire with closed and open-ended items (Gondwe et al., 2026). This article uses the published aggregate indicators and the qualitative themes presented in the supplied manuscript; it does not reanalyse raw questionnaires. Policy documents and programme reports provide interpretive context.

6.4 Data Analysis

Published frequencies and percentages are reported descriptively; no new cross-tabulations, significance tests, or coding of raw responses were undertaken. The five qualitative topics are summarised as themes already represented in the source material. Verbatim excerpts have been withheld from this revision because their wording, consent for republication, and individual attribution cannot be checked against original transcripts or the cited publication.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

The source study describes informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation (Gondwe et al., 2026). This secondary article uses aggregate, published information and does not contact participants. The authors should confirm that reuse of any unpublished responses or quotations is covered by the original consent and institutional approvals before restoring them.

6.6 Limitations

The source sample comprises 134 respondents distributed across provinces, but its selection method and response rate are not documented here. Indicators concern respondent reports rather than independently verified training, classroom practice, material inventories, or learner outcomes. Several table captions in the source describe teachers or schools although respondents included school leaders; the unit of analysis is therefore reported consistently as respondents. Cross-sectional associations cannot establish causality, and this synthesis does not conduct an independent qualitative analysis.

7. FINDINGS

7.1 Teacher Training and Preparedness in Literacy

Table 2: Teacher Training in Foundational Literacy (N=134 respondents)

Training Indicator	Percentage Trained
Trained to handle learners with different abilities in literacy	83%
Trained adequately to teach foundational literacy	78%
Trained in formative assessment for literacy	78%
Trained in using local stories for literacy instruction	73%
Phonemic awareness for local languages	70%
Prepared to support transition from local to English	69%
Prepared to handle large classes (literacy)	68%

Source: Adapted from Gondwe et al. (2026).

In the published survey, 78% of respondents reported adequate preparation for foundational literacy, and 70% reported training in phonemic awareness for local languages (Gondwe et al., 2026). These are perceptions of training, not observed measures of competence. No comparable national or regional benchmark is provided here.

The reported 83% indicator concerns training to support learners with different abilities in literacy. It should not be interpreted as evidence that the sampled teachers provide effective inclusive instruction without classroom observation.

7.2 Teacher Training and Preparedness in Numeracy

Table 3: Teacher Training in Foundational Numeracy (N=134 respondents)

Training Indicator	Percentage Trained
Teach numeracy using real-life contexts	83%
Using locally available materials	80%
Prepared to support learners with different abilities in numeracy	78%
Trained in formative assessment	77%

Training Indicator	Percentage Trained
for numeracy	
Trained in number talks strategies	74%
Trained to teach foundational numeracy	72%
Prepared to handle large classes (numeracy)	70%

Source: Adapted from Gondwe et al. (2026).

For numeracy, 72% reported adequate preparation and 80% reported training to use locally available materials (Gondwe et al., 2026). The figures describe this group's reported experience; they do not establish superior performance relative to other provinces or countries.

Reported training in real-life contexts (83%) and number talks (74%) identifies potential instructional resources in the sample. Whether respondents apply these approaches, and with what effect, requires direct observation and learner assessment.

7.3 Ongoing Mentoring and Professional Development Support

Table 4: Mentoring and Professional Development Support (N=134 respondents)

Support Indicator	Percentage Reporting Adequate Support
Receives adequate mentoring/support for literacy instruction	56%
Receives adequate mentoring/support for numeracy instruction	56%
School leadership provides instructional support	67%
In-service professional development addresses instructional needs	73%
Confidence in ability to teach FLN effectively	75%

Source: Adapted from Gondwe et al. (2026).

In the source survey, 56% reported adequate support for literacy instruction and 56% for numeracy instruction (Gondwe et al., 2026). The shared percentage does not establish that the same individuals received both forms of support. The survey does

not establish the frequency or quality of mentoring.

A further 67% reported instructional support from school leadership, and 73% considered in-service development responsive to their needs. These figures should be interpreted as respondents' perceptions rather than evidence of improved teaching.
Three quarters of respondents expressed confidence in their ability to teach foundational literacy and numeracy. Confidence may support engagement with professional learning, but it cannot substitute for observed skill or learner performance.

7.4 Availability of Teaching and Learning Materials

Table 5: Respondent Reports of Teaching and Learning Material Availability (N=134 respondents)

Material Type	Percentage Reporting Availability
Approved literacy textbooks	44%
Approved numeracy textbooks	47%
Supplementary readers in local languages	38%
Locally made numeracy teaching aids	75%
Charts and posters	75%
Technology-related aids	20%
Quality and culturally relevant numeracy materials	49%
Quality and culturally relevant literacy materials	47%

Source: Adapted from Gondwe et al. (2026).

Approved literacy and numeracy textbooks were reported available by 44% and 47% of respondents, respectively (Gondwe et al., 2026). The survey does not establish the proportion of schools stocked or learners with a copy, and the figures should not be converted into those denominators.

Local-language supplementary readers were reported available by 38% of respondents, compared with 75% reporting locally made numeracy aids. This difference suggests a potential gap in access to printed reading resources alongside teacher-created materials (Gondwe et al., 2026; Curriculum Development Centre, 2023).

Technology-related aids were reported available by 20% of respondents. Their absence may limit some support options, but effective foundational instruction also depends on print resources and teacher practice (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2023).

Quality and culturally relevant materials were reported available by 49% for numeracy and 47% for literacy. These perceptions call for direct resource inventories and classroom studies before drawing conclusions about material quality or learner access.

7.5 Teacher Training in Low-Cost Material Production

Table 6: Respondent Reports of Training in Low-Cost Material Production

Indicator	Percentage
Trained to create low/no-cost teaching aids (Examples of aids created: Abacus, counters, flashcards, charts, letter cards)	68%
Not trained	32%

Source: Adapted from Gondwe et al. (2026).

The survey found that 68% of teachers are trained to create low/no-cost teaching aids using locally available materials. Examples of such aids include:

1. **Numeracy Aids:** Abacuses constructed from bottle tops, wire, and wood/planks; counters from sticks, stones, and bottle tops
2. **Literacy Aids:** Flashcards made from carton boxes or cereal boxes; word cards; letter cards/cut-outs from old calendars or carton boxes
3. **Other Aids:** Geo boards, wood clocks, letter baskets, talking walls, plastic literacy balls, puppets, paper mache, seed mosaic, and local games like *insolo*

The reported use of locally available items illustrates possible responses to resource constraints. Without verified source transcripts, this article does not reproduce purported verbatim teacher testimony.

7.6 Qualitative Findings: Teacher Perspectives on Implementation Challenges

The source account groups open-ended concerns into five themes. These summaries describe the supplied manuscript's qualitative account; the original responses and coding records were not available for independent verification. Frequencies of themes cannot be inferred.

Theme 1: Theoretical vs. Practical Training

The accounts describe a perceived gap between theoretical preparation and managing early-grade instruction in large classes with limited textbooks. This theme is consistent with the training-to-practice concern examined by Mandyata et al. (2024), but does not measure its prevalence.

The theme suggests that practical teaching experience and supported feedback merit attention in initial teacher education.

Theme 2: Inadequate Mentoring Support

Some accounts describe infrequent classroom feedback and district visits focused on compliance checks. This qualitative concern is compatible with the survey's 56% adequate-mentoring indicator, but the two forms of evidence should not be treated as independent estimates.

Programme evidence suggests that timely instructional feedback could address this concern, although its effectiveness depends on the quality and continuity of support

(Busara, TaRL Africa, & VVOB, 2025).

Theme 3: Large Class Sizes and Individualised Attention

Accounts of overcrowding describe difficulty grouping learners and providing individual feedback. The reported class sizes are examples in the source narrative, not estimates of typical class size.

Classroom size is a possible constraint on implementation; direct observation would be needed to establish how teachers adapt grouping and feedback.

Theme 4: Material Shortages and Teacher Resourcefulness

Accounts describe teachers making flashcards, counters, and other aids from local materials when published resources are scarce. Such adaptations can assist instruction but cannot establish that adequate reading resources are available.
The 68% indicator concerns reported training to make low-cost materials (Gondwe et al., 2026). It does not measure the quality or frequency of their classroom use.

Theme 5: Language Policy Implementation Challenges

Accounts raise concerns about access to local-language texts and support for the transition to English. This is consistent with the policy-to-practice questions in Mandyata et al. (2024). The present article cannot quantify the transition success rate.

This finding aligns with research by Mandyata and colleagues (2024), who identified gaps between language policy and teacher preparation.

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 The Paradox of Strong Training and Weak Support

The published survey shows a descriptive difference between reported literacy preparation (78%), numeracy preparation (72%), and adequate mentoring (56%) (Gondwe et al., 2026). These indicators describe different questions and do not establish that training has caused or failed to cause classroom improvement.
Programme evidence suggests that feedback can support instructional adjustment, but the effects depend on how consistently mentoring is delivered (Busara, TaRL Africa, & VVOB, 2025).

The implementation science framework helps explain this phenomenon. Pre-service training provides foundational knowledge and skills (the what of teaching), but ongoing mentoring and feedback are essential for developing adaptive expertise the ability to apply knowledge flexibly in response to classroom situations (Fixsen et al., 2005). Without this ongoing support, teachers may default to familiar but less effective practices, or may become discouraged and disengaged.

8.2 The Mentoring Gap and Its Consequences

The finding that only 56% of teachers receive adequate mentoring support has significant implications for instructional quality and learner outcomes. Mentoring serves multiple functions in teacher development: providing feedback on practice, modeling effective strategies, supporting problem-solving, and offering emotional encouragement (World Bank, 2018). When mentoring is absent, teachers must navigate classroom challenges alone, often leading to frustration, burnout, and attrition.

Research across African contexts has demonstrated the potential of various mentoring models. Studies in Zambia, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire tested streamlined data systems, digital tools, and lower-cost teacher support: remote and hybrid mentoring, peer mentoring, and tech-enabled CPD (e.g., WhatsApp, short videos). Results showed improved data use and promising shifts in teaching with Nigeria's peer mentoring raising core skills substantially.

Peer and hybrid coaching merit assessment as options for extending support. Any trial should measure the quality, frequency, cost, and distribution of feedback before

expansion.

8.3 The Material Gap and Teacher Resourcefulness

Reported availability of approved literacy textbooks (44%), numeracy textbooks (47%), and local-language readers (38%) raises a practical concern for curriculum delivery (Gondwe et al., 2026). These are respondent-level reports, not a national school census.

The UNESCO and ADEA Spotlight report discusses textbooks, teacher guides, and classroom conditions as practical requirements for foundational learning (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team & ADEA, 2024).

Yet the findings also reveal remarkable teacher resourcefulness in the face of these shortages. With 68% of teachers trained to create low-cost teaching aids, and examples ranging from abacuses made of bottle tops to flashcards from cereal boxes (Gondwe et al., 2026), teachers are demonstrating creativity and commitment to their learners. This resourcefulness should be celebrated and supported, but it should not substitute for systemic provision of quality materials.

The difference between reported availability of teacher-made aids (75%) and approved textbooks (44–47%) warrants direct investigation of how teachers combine these resources (Gondwe et al., 2026).

8.4 The Challenge of Large Classes

The qualitative findings on large class sizes with teachers reporting classes of 65, 82, and even 90 learners highlight a critical challenge for foundational learning instruction. Effective literacy and numeracy instruction requires individualised attention, opportunities for practice, and responsive feedback all difficult to provide in overcrowded classrooms (World Bank, 2018).

The Catch-Up programme's approach of grouping children by learning level offers a partial solution, but as teachers noted, even grouping is difficult with 90 children in a classroom (Gondwe et al., 2026). Addressing the class size challenge requires both more teachers and more classrooms systemic investments that go beyond teacher development.

8.5 Language Policy Implementation Gaps

Reported scarcity of local-language readers creates a plausible obstacle for early-grade language policy (Gondwe et al., 2026; Curriculum Development Centre, 2023). This survey does not measure children's transition to English literacy.
Mandyata et al. (2024) discuss the gap between teacher preparation and language policy implementation in Zambia.

Future research should examine how teachers support the language transition and whether appropriate materials are available in both languages. Direct assessment would be necessary to estimate learner outcomes.

8.6 Teacher Confidence as a Foundation for Improvement

Despite the challenges documented, the finding that 75% of teachers expressed confidence in their ability to teach foundational literacy and numeracy effectively is highly encouraging (Gondwe et al., 2026). This confidence provides a foundation for further professional development and instructional improvement.

Teacher confidence is associated with greater willingness to try new approaches, persist in the face of challenges, and engage in professional learning (World Bank, 2018). The high confidence levels reported in this study suggest that teachers believe in their capacity to make a difference, even in difficult circumstances. This belief should be nurtured through supportive professional development and mentoring.

8.7 Alignment with Regional and Global Evidence

The findings of this study align with broader regional and global evidence on teacher

development and implementation effectiveness. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, similar patterns emerge: relatively strong policy frameworks, significant investment in teacher training, but persistent gaps in ongoing support, materials provision, and implementation fidelity (UNESCO, 2020; World Bank, 2018).

The research on TaRL implementation across multiple African countries demonstrates both the potential of evidence-based approaches and the challenges of scaling and sustaining them. Zambia's experience with the Catch-Up programme offers valuable lessons for other countries facing similar implementation challenges.

9. CONCLUSIONS

This secondary synthesis examined the implementation gap between Zambia's curriculum intentions and reported teacher experiences, using the survey published by Gondwe et al. (2026) alongside policy and programme literature. The source data suggest practical gaps in mentoring and materials, while their self-reported, cross-sectional character limits claims about teaching effectiveness or learner outcomes.
The core conclusions of this analysis are as follows:

First, 78% reported adequate literacy preparation and 72% numeracy preparation in the source survey; 75% expressed confidence. These measures cannot be compared with unsupported national or regional averages (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Second, 56% reported adequate mentoring for each subject. This suggests room to strengthen ongoing support, although mentoring quality was not directly assessed (Gondwe et al., 2026).
Third, fewer than half reported availability of approved literacy textbooks (44%), numeracy textbooks (47%), or local-language supplementary readers (38%). Verification through school inventories is needed (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Fourth, 68% reported training to create low-cost aids. Teacher-made resources can supplement, but do not replace, appropriate published materials (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Fifth, qualitative accounts identify large classes as a concern. Their examples do not support estimates of national class size or a causal claim about achievement.

Sixth, the language transition is a priority for further study. This survey does not provide a verified proportion of learners who successfully transition to English literacy.

In summary, Zambia possesses a corps of well-trained teachers who are confident in their abilities and resourceful in the face of challenges. However, the system is failing to support these teachers adequately through mentoring, materials, and manageable working conditions. The crisis is one of implementation and support, not of teacher quality or commitment. Until these systemic gaps are addressed, the nation will continue to underutilise its greatest educational asset its teachers and fail to secure the foundational future of its children.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for strengthening teacher capacity, learning materials, and mentorship to improve foundational learning outcomes in Zambia.

10.1 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Recommendation 1: Strengthen Pre-Service Teacher Training Aligned with ZECF

Teacher education programmes should provide supervised school experience, demonstration lessons, and reflective feedback aligned with foundational literacy and numeracy competencies (Curriculum Development Centre, 2023; Mandyata et al., 2024).

Programmes should specify practical early-grade literacy and numeracy

competencies and assess their use in school placements. The scale and impact of such changes require evaluation.

Training should include explicit practice in phonemic awareness, comprehension, number sense, formative assessment, and differentiation, followed by opportunities to observe implementation.
Consistent with the Curriculum Framework's language of instruction policy, pre-service and in-service training should equip teachers to use local and familiar languages effectively in early grades to anchor learning and gradual transition to English (Gondwe et al., 2026). This includes both theoretical understanding of multilingual pedagogy and practical strategies for managing language transition.

Recommendation 2: Institutionalise Continuous Professional Development (CPD) with Embedded Mentorship

Zambia should establish a structured CPD system that reinforces competencies identified in the ZECF and supports ongoing classroom improvement. This system should be mandatory, adequately resourced, and linked to teacher career progression to incentivise participation (Gondwe et al., 2026). Drawing on research showing the effectiveness of on-demand feedback, the CPD system should include regular, constructive feedback on teaching practice.

The School-Based Continuing Professional Development (SBCPD) programme should be strengthened and expanded, with particular attention to rural and remote schools. This requires investment in facilitator training, materials development, and monitoring systems. Research demonstrating the potential of peer mentoring and tech-enabled CPD (e.g., WhatsApp, short videos) should inform the design of accessible, scalable support systems.

Mentors at school, district, and province levels need training in effective mentoring practices. This includes skills in classroom observation, constructive feedback, and facilitating reflective practice. Mentor training should be systematic and accredited, with mentors themselves receiving ongoing support.

The digitisation of Catch-Up training materials demonstrates the potential of technology to support professional development at scale (Mwabu, 2026). Zambia should explore expanding this approach to other areas of FLN instruction, ensuring that teachers can access high-quality professional learning resources when and where they need them.

CPD should strengthen teacher skills in identifying and supporting learners with diverse needs and facilitating adaptations in instruction and assessment (Gondwe et al., 2026). This aligns with the ZECF's commitment to equitable education and inclusive classrooms.

Recommendation 3: Improve Teaching and Learning Materials Provision

The Ministry should assess textbook and local-language reader stocks directly and plan procurement against enrolment and language-of-instruction needs (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team & ADEA, 2024).

The Ministry should encourage teachers to develop low-cost and context-sensitive learning aids using culturally relevant content (Gondwe et al., 2026). The strong training in low-cost aid creation (68% of teachers) provides a foundation for this approach, which should be systematised and supported through resource centres and knowledge sharing platforms.

The critical shortage of supplementary readers in local languages (38%) requires urgent attention. Investment in developing and publishing local-language materials, including decodable readers and storybooks that reflect rural children's experiences and environments, is essential. The ADEA recommendation to ensure materials are available in the language of instruction is particularly relevant here.

While current technology access is limited (20%), strategic investment in digital resources can support FLN instruction. For in-school learners, technology can provide access to digital libraries, interactive learning activities, and teacher support resources. However, technology investment must be accompanied by infrastructure development, teacher training, and ongoing support.

Recommendation 4: Address Large Class Sizes and Teacher Workload

Teacher deployment must be planned alongside classroom demand, ensuring that trained teachers are absorbed where shortages exist, reducing class sizes and improving education quality (Gondwe et al., 2026). This requires accurate, up-to-date data on teacher distribution and vacancies, as well as transparent placement systems.

Classroom construction and rehabilitation must address overcrowding. Reducing class sizes to manageable levels requires both more classrooms and more teachers (Gondwe et al., 2026). The ADEA report's recommendation to improve infrastructure to accommodate increased enrolment should guide these investments.

Workload recognition must reflect classroom realities. Fair workload recognition, support staff where needed, and better resource allocation will allow teachers to focus on teaching and not survival (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Recommendation 5: Strengthen Language Policy Implementation

Investment in local language reading materials is essential for implementing mother-tongue instruction effectively. This includes decodable readers, storybooks, and instructional resources in all seven major indigenous languages used as mediums of instruction in early grades (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Teachers need specific training and support for managing the transition from local language to English literacy. This includes strategies for building on local language skills, introducing English gradually, and supporting learners who struggle with the transition (Gondwe et al., 2026).

The language of instruction policy should be monitored more closely, with data collected on implementation fidelity and learner outcomes in both local language and English literacy (Gondwe et al., 2026).

10.2 Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendation 6: Conduct Longitudinal Studies on Teacher Development

Longitudinal research tracking teachers from pre-service training through their early years in the classroom would provide valuable evidence on how teacher knowledge and skills develop over time, what supports are most effective at different career stages, and why some teachers thrive while others struggle (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Recommendation 7: Undertake Implementation Research on Mentoring Models

Research comparing different mentoring models in-person, remote, hybrid, peer, technology-enabled would inform the design of scalable, cost-effective support systems. The research by Busara, TaRL Africa, and VVOB and UNESCO-IICBA provides a foundation for such studies.

Recommendation 8: Investigate the Relationship Between Materials Access and Learning Outcomes

Research examining how different types of materials textbooks, local language readers, teacher-made aids, digital resources affect learner outcomes would inform investment decisions and material development priorities (Gondwe et al., 2026).

Recommendation 9: Examine Language Policy Implementation in Diverse Contexts

Research exploring how teachers implement the language of instruction policy in different linguistic and geographic contexts would identify challenges and promising practices, informing policy refinement and teacher support strategies (Gondwe et al.,

2026; Mandyata et al., 2024).

Recommendation 10: Study the Impact of Large Classes on Instructional Quality
Research examining how teachers adapt their practice in large classes, what strategies are most effective, and what support teachers need to inform teacher preparation and professional development programmes (Gondwe et al., 2026).

11. FUTURE STUDIES

Building on the findings of this study, several areas warrant further investigation:
First, longitudinal studies tracking teacher cohorts from pre-service training through their early years in the classroom would provide valuable evidence on how teacher knowledge and skills develop over time, what supports are most effective at different career stages, and why some teachers thrive while others struggle. Such research could follow teachers from the Transforming Teacher Education initiative to assess the long-term impact of reformed pre-service preparation.

Second, implementation research examining how different mentoring models work in diverse Zambian contexts would inform the design of scalable, cost-effective support systems. Research on remote and hybrid mentoring, peer mentoring, and tech-enabled CPD in Zambia could build on regional studies to identify context-appropriate approaches.

Third, research exploring the relationship between materials access and learning outcomes would inform investment decisions and material development priorities. Studies could examine how different types of materials textbooks, local language readers, teacher-made aids, digital resources affect learner outcomes in different subjects and grade levels.

Fourth, research on language policy implementation in diverse linguistic and geographic contexts would identify challenges and promising practices, informing policy refinement and teacher support strategies. Building on the work of Mandyata and colleagues (2024), such research could examine how teachers navigate the transition from local language to English literacy in different settings.

Fifth, research examining the impact of large classes on instructional quality and learner outcomes would inform strategies for supporting teachers in challenging contexts. Studies could identify effective practices for managing large classes and the types of support teachers need to implement them.

Sixth, cost-effectiveness research comparing different intervention packages mentoring models, material provision strategies, teacher incentive schemes would inform resource allocation decisions in a context of constrained resources.

Seventh, participatory action research engaging teachers, school leaders, and community members in identifying problems and designing solutions could generate locally appropriate innovations and build ownership for change. Such research could complement top-down policy reforms with bottom-up initiatives grounded in local realities.

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