

PEDAGOGICAL AND ASSESSMENT CHALLENGES IN THE TEACHING OF CIVIC COMPETENCIES IN ZAMBIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF UNIVERSITIES AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Exsaviour Sakala¹ Tshabalala Letsoaka Samson²

¹ Department of Civic Education, Kwame Nkrumah University, Kabwe, Zambia
savioursakala@gmail.com, <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2648-7010>

² Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, University of South Africa, South Africa
tshabsl@unisa.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1277-0187>

Correspondence: Exsaviour Sakala Email: savioursakala@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored the pedagogical and assessment challenges faced by teachers and lecturers in teaching civic competencies in selected secondary schools and universities in Zambia. The study adopted a qualitative approach and a phenomenological design within an interpretivist paradigm. The participants comprised 30 individuals: twelve lecturers from three universities, eighteen Civic Education teachers from three secondary schools. Purposive sampling was used. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations and analysed thematically. The findings indicated that teacher-centred approaches, particularly lectures, remained prominent, while group work, question-and-answer sessions, and presentations were used to a lesser extent. Assessment was dominated by tests, assignments, and examinations, with limited attention to the development of civic skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions. The study concludes that the continued emphasis on content coverage and examination performance constrained the development of practical civic competencies. It recommended the greater use of learner-centred and participatory pedagogies, authentic and reflective assessment, continuous professional development, and adequate institutional resources to support the implementation of competence-based Civic Education.

Keywords: Pedagogical approaches, civic competencies, Civic Education, assessment, civic engagement

Published online: 27 September 2026

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Civic Education is intended to develop the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions that enable learners and students to participate meaningfully in democratic and community life. In Zambia, the subject forms part of the school curriculum and is also offered in teacher education and university programmes. The introduction of the 2023 Competence-Based Curriculum (CBC) has further increased attention to practical competencies, learner participation, critical thinking, and the application of knowledge. However, concerns remain about whether prevailing pedagogical and assessment practices adequately support these aims. Existing studies by Magasu et al., (2020); Sakala & Magasu, (2024); Sakala & Tshabalala (2025) indicate that traditional teaching approaches continue to influence Civic Education classrooms and may limit opportunities for learners to develop practical civic competencies.

Pedagogical approaches are important because they shape the extent to which learners participate, reflect on experience, communicate ideas, solve problems, and apply civic knowledge. Research on Civic Education in Zambia has identified limited opportunities for reflective praxis and experiential learning, despite the importance of connecting classroom knowledge with social realities (Sakala, 2016; Sakala & Magasu, 2024). Burke (2020) emphasises reflection as a crucial component of learning, while Kolb and Kolb (2018) explain learning as a process through which knowledge is developed by transforming experience. These perspectives suggest that Civic Education requires opportunities for learners to engage with issues, reflect on experiences, and apply what they learn in practical contexts.

Civic competencies extend beyond factual knowledge. They include civic knowledge as well as skills such as critical thinking, communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and democratic participation (Fuentes-Moreno et al., 2020; Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2025). They also involve values and dispositions, including respect for human rights, tolerance, fairness, responsibility, and willingness to participate in civic life (Persson et al., 2020; Rafzan, 2024). Consequently, teaching approaches that concentrate primarily on the transmission and recall of information may not provide sufficient opportunities for the development and demonstration of the full range of civic competencies. Participatory strategies such as discussion, debate, role-play, presentations, group activities, and service learning can create opportunities for learners to practise civic skills and reflect on civic issues (Carretero et al., 2016; LeCompte et al., 2020).

Assessment is equally important because what is assessed often influences what teachers teach and what learners prioritise. When assessment is dominated by written tests and examinations, learners may concentrate on recalling information for assessment rather than applying knowledge to real-life civic situations. Studies of civic learning have not therefore emphasised the importance of assessment practices that capture practical skills and

participation in addition to knowledge (Magasu et al., 2020; Sakala & Magasu, 2024). In the Zambian context, the persistence of examination-oriented practices raises questions about the extent to which assessment supports the competence-based intentions of the curriculum.

Against this background, the objective of this study was to explore the pedagogical and assessment challenges faced by teachers and lecturers in the teaching of civic competencies in selected secondary schools and universities in Zambia. The study was guided by two questions: what pedagogical challenges do Civic Education educators face in teaching civic competencies in Zambian universities and secondary schools, and what assessment practices influence the development and demonstration of civic competencies among students and learners? The study is significant because evidence from the experiences of educators and learners can inform improvements in pedagogy, assessment, teacher education, curriculum implementation, and institutional support. The study was conducted in selected institutions in Kabwe and Lusaka, and its findings should therefore be interpreted within that contextual scope.

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study was guided by Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), particularly the work of Kolb and Kolb (2018). ELT views learning as a process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The learning process involves concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. This perspective is relevant to Civic Education because civic competencies are not developed only through the acquisition of information; they also require opportunities to participate, reflect, analyse experiences, and apply knowledge in new situations. The experiential perspective provides a basis for examining both pedagogy and assessment. Participatory approaches can provide concrete experiences through discussion, group work, presentations, role-play, community activities, and other forms of engagement. Reflection enables learners to examine what they have experienced and connect it with civic concepts. Assessment can either reinforce this learning cycle or constrain it. Where assessment focuses mainly on recall and examination performance, opportunities for reflection, application, and demonstration of civic skills may be reduced. ELT therefore provided the theoretical lens through which participants' experiences of teaching and assessment practices were interpreted.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research approach, and a phenomenological design. The interpretivist position was appropriate because the study sought to understand how educators and learners experienced and interpreted pedagogical and assessment practices in their own contexts. Phenomenology was used to explore the lived experiences of participants in relation to the teaching and assessment of civic competencies. Reflexivity and bracketing were employed throughout the research process to

reduce the influence of the researchers' prior assumptions and professional experiences on the interpretation of participants' accounts.

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools and universities in Kabwe and Lusaka. The population comprised Civic Education lecturers, Civic Education teachers, and learners and student teachers involved in Civic Education. Purposive sampling was used to select information-rich participants. The final sample comprised 30 participants: twelve lecturers from three universities, eighteen Civic Education teachers from three secondary schools.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. Interviews provided detailed accounts of educators' experiences of teaching and assessing civic competencies. Classroom observations were used to examine pedagogical practices in their natural setting and to complement the interview and focus group data.

The data were analysed thematically. The analysis involved familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of emerging themes, review and refinement of themes, definition and naming of themes, and interpretation of the final thematic patterns. The analysis was conducted manually from the interview and focus group data. The analysis was organised around the study's two questions and the themes emerging from participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Permission to conduct the research was sought from the relevant education authorities and participating institutions in Lusaka and Kabwe. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and participated voluntarily after providing informed consent. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential and that information provided would be used for research purposes only. Participant codes rather than institutional abbreviations were used in reporting the findings to protect anonymity and to ensure consistency.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented and discussed according to the two research questions. The first part examines the pedagogical approaches used in teaching civic competencies, while the second considers assessment practices and their implications for the development and demonstration of civic competencies.

3.1 Pedagogical Approaches in Teaching Civic Competencies

Participants reported using lectures, group work, question-and-answer sessions, and presentations. The findings indicate variation in the extent to which these approaches promoted active participation, reflection, and application of civic knowledge.

3.1.1 Lecture Method

The lecture method emerged as the most frequently used approach. Participants explained that lectures were often used because they enabled teachers and lecturers to cover content within limited time and because teaching and learning resources were sometimes inadequate. Participant 1, a lecturer, explained:

So, I would say 80% of the methods that I have been using is the lecture method which does not encourage active participation or civic engagement from the students.

Participant 2, also a lecturer, highlighted the time-saving advantage of the method:

I use mostly the lecture method to teach my students, it saves time as there are few interruptions.

A teacher described teacher exposition as being used after more participatory activities:

Teacher exposition is one of the teaching methods that I usually use; of course, comes after learners' engagement through question and answer or their presentation or their demonstration in a role play.

The findings suggest that lecture-based teaching can support content coverage but may provide fewer opportunities for critical reflection, discussion, and practical application when used as the dominant approach. Freire's (2020) critique of banking education is relevant to this finding because an instructional model centred on the transmission of information can position the teacher as the primary source of knowledge and learners as recipients. This is problematic for civic competencies because knowledge alone does not constitute the full range of civic knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions. The finding is also consistent with the experiential learning perspective, which emphasises participation and reflection as important elements of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2018).

3.1.2 Group Work

Group work was also used by some participants. Participants indicated that it could promote teamwork and allow teachers and lecturers to gauge learners' levels of understanding, although large groups or limited opportunities for individual attention could reduce its effectiveness. Participant 4 explained:

If we group them into 5 and ask them to do a proposal that takes away the strengths and weaknesses of each individual. Of course, it helps in terms of creating a sense of teamwork such that they get to learn how to deal with other people; some people have weaknesses that require the attention of the lecturer. In the absence of individualized work, it becomes a problem.

Participant 5 stated:

In my case, I prefer using the group discussion method because that helps me to gauge the level at which my learners are.

Another lecturer observed:

Mainly it's the group discussion method. Since the classes are small, we do group discussions.

These responses indicate that group work can create opportunities for interaction and collaboration, but its contribution to civic competencies depends on how the activity is structured and facilitated. LeCompte et al. (2020) emphasise action-oriented opportunities for developing civic competence. Similarly, participatory learning can support communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving when learners are required to contribute meaningfully rather than simply work together on content-recall tasks.

3.1.3 Question-and-Answer Method

Question-and-answer sessions were another commonly reported strategy. One participant stated:

In my case, do use questioning to teach a topic.

Participant 8, a lecturer, explained:

But to just get back to your question it is mainly the question-and-answer sessions, and just allowing them to take the leading role in open discussions I ask them questions that will make them own the information in terms of them giving out what they think, has helped create a level of engagement to some degree.

A teacher added:

So, when I am in class, I have to raise a question, and they will be able to tell me one or two things because they have an idea.

Questioning can create opportunities for learners to express ideas and participate in discussion. Carretero et al. (2016) similarly identify interactive forms of civic education as important for developing civic understanding. However, the findings also suggest that questioning does not automatically become experiential learning; its contribution to civic competencies depends on whether questions require learners to analyse evidence, consider alternative viewpoints, reflect on experiences, and apply concepts to civic problems.

3.1.4 Presentations

Presentations were reported as another approach used by lecturers and teachers. Participants associated presentations with opportunities for discussion and critical analysis. Participant 10, a lecturer, stated:

As a university we mostly get students to do presentations. Presentations help them to discuss and critically analyse issues.

Participant 11 explained:

We also allow the students to do presentations so that I can see how they critically analyse certain issues and the Project method as I said, not so much.

Another lecturer stated:

Imagine I was teaching on human rights today and I gave each student a task to come and make a presentation on what they understand. We have to give them a chance to express themselves.

The findings indicate that presentations can provide opportunities for communication and analysis, but their contribution to civic competencies depends on the nature of the task and the criteria used to assess performance. If presentations primarily require learners to reproduce information, their potential for developing critical reflection and civic dispositions may remain limited. Sakala (2016) similarly found that traditional approaches to Civic Education can place strong emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge for examinations rather than on experiential learning.

3.2 Assessment Practices in Civic Education

Participants reported using tests, assignments, and examinations as major forms of assessment. The findings indicate that these practices largely emphasised students' and learners' understanding and recall of Civic Education content, with less explicit attention to the demonstration of civic skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions.

3.2.1 Tests and Assignments

Tests and assignments were widely used to assess understanding of Civic Education concepts. Participant 13 stated:

We give them tests and assignments, sometimes it is not our wish we use what is provided in the syllabus and the course outline. We have mid-term tests and end-of-topic tests and so on.

Participant 14 explained:

We use assignments and tests. Some tests are essays, mostly subjective and objective tests. This is what I mostly use to measure the student's understanding of concepts and topics taught.

Participant 15 added:

Sometimes I prepare assignments and tests every two weeks just to gauge how much learners have understood. This is used side by side with class exercises and homework.

The findings suggest that tests and assignments are useful for checking understanding of concepts, but they may provide limited evidence of learners' ability to demonstrate civic competencies in authentic situations. Civic knowledge is important, but civic competence also involves practical skills such as communication, problem-solving, decision-making, and democratic engagement (Fuentes-Moreno et al., 2020; Kawashima-Ginsberg et al., 2025). Magasu et al. (2020) similarly identified the limited use of practical assessment as a challenge in Civic Education. Assessment that includes projects, performance tasks, reflective activities, presentations, and community-based activities could provide additional evidence of the broader range of competencies.

3.2.2 Examinations

Examinations emerged as a major assessment practice and were associated with strong pressure to demonstrate examination performance. One participant stated:

From grade 1 to tertiary, we put a lot of emphasis on exams. If a subject is not examinable then it's useless even if it trains people to have skills. One thing I have noticed is that most of these students like to be active when it's time for continuous assessment or an exam.

Another lecturer commented:

We need to have a new form of learning. The issue of writing the national examination is a mess in itself because it is what is making us fail to bring in these other ways of practical teaching.

A teacher described the pressure to prepare learners for examination success:

So, I give them the right skills on how to handle examination questions and also cover the right content for the exam. It makes me proud when after the results are out my subject scores are the highest in terms of the grading system. When a person has been producing 100% results, they get promoted to HOD, Deputy Headteacher, or Headteacher.

A lecturer also described concerns about retention after examinations:

We have had experiences where the students write an exam on a particular issue and hours later the information, they had all gone, they can't recall anything. That's because they memorized the

information with the view to go and offload in an examination once they do that, they become empty buckets per se.

The findings suggest that examination-oriented assessment can encourage learners to prioritise the recall of information and examination techniques. This finding resonates with Freire's (2020) critique of education that treats learners as repositories of information. It also supports the concerns raised by Sakala and Magasu (2024) that examination preparation can constrain opportunities for approaches intended to promote democratic citizenship. From an experiential learning perspective, assessment should provide opportunities for learners to demonstrate how they interpret experiences, apply knowledge, reflect on civic issues, and participate in problem-solving (Kolb & Kolb, 2018).

Taken together, the findings show a tension between the competence-oriented intentions of Civic Education and the pedagogical and assessment practices reported by participants. Lectures, tests, and examinations remain prominent because they support content coverage, perceived efficiency, and preparation for formal examinations. At the same time, group work, questioning, and presentations create some opportunities for participation and interaction. The challenge is therefore not simply the presence of traditional methods, but the extent to which they are combined with pedagogies and assessments that enable learners to experience, reflect, apply, and demonstrate civic competencies. The findings are consistent with research emphasising the importance of participatory and action-oriented civic learning (Carretero et al., 2016; LeCompte et al., 2020; Persson et al., 2020).

The findings also show that assessment practices influence the pedagogical choices made by educators. When success is strongly associated with examinations, educators may feel pressure to prioritise examinable content and efficient coverage. This can reduce the time available for experiential activities and authentic assessment. The implication is that implementation of competency-based Civic Education requires alignment between curriculum intentions, classroom pedagogy, assessment practices, teacher preparation, and institutional resources. Such alignment is consistent with the experiential learning perspective, in which learning is strengthened when experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and application are connected (Kolb & Kolb, 2018).

4.0 CONCLUSION

The study explored the pedagogical and assessment challenges experienced in the teaching of civic competencies in selected Zambian secondary schools and universities. The findings indicated that lectures remain a dominant pedagogical approach, while group work, questioning, and presentations are used to varying degrees. Although the latter approaches provide opportunities for participation, their effectiveness in developing civic competencies depends on the extent to which learners are required to analyse issues, reflect on experiences, apply knowledge, and engage with authentic civic problems. Assessment is dominated

by tests, assignments, and examinations, which provide evidence of knowledge but do not always capture the broader range of civic skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions.

The findings therefore suggest that the implementation of competence-based Civic Education requires closer alignment between teaching and assessment. Educators should combine content instruction with learner-centred and participatory approaches that provide opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, inquiry, reflection, and practical application. Assessment should similarly include authentic and reflective tasks alongside conventional forms of assessment so that learners can demonstrate both knowledge and the practical competencies required for responsible civic participation.

4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings imply that Civic Education teachers and lecturers need to broaden their pedagogical repertoires by integrating participatory, experiential, and learner-centred methods alongside practical instructions. Teacher education and continuing professional development programmes should strengthen educators' capacity to design learning experiences that develop civic knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and dispositions. Institutions and curriculum development centre should also provide clear guidance and adequate teaching and learning resources to support competence-based pedagogy.

Assessment practices should be diversified so that examinations and tests are complemented by projects, presentations, portfolios, reflective tasks, case studies, and other performance-based activities capable of demonstrating practical civic competencies. Curriculum developers and education authorities should strengthen the alignment between curriculum outcomes, teaching methods, and assessment criteria. Further research could examine how authentic assessment and experiential pedagogies are implemented over time in different Zambian educational contexts.

REFERENCES

- Burke, D. (2020). Experiential learning theory. In *How doctors think and learn* (pp. 29–37).
- Carretero, M., Haste, H., & Bermudez, A. (2016). Civic education. In *Handbook of educational psychology* (3rd ed., pp. 295–308).
- Chola, K. D. (2016). *Assessment of service learning in the teaching of Civic Education in selected secondary schools in Lusaka Province, Zambia* [Unpublished master's dissertation, University of Zambia].
- Claes, E., Schrooten, M., McLaughlin, H., & Csoba, J. (2022). Community service learning in complex urban settings: Challenges and opportunities for social work education. *Social Work Education*, 41(6), 1272–1290.

- Freire, P. (2020). Pedagogy of the oppressed. In *Toward a sociology of education* (pp. 374–386). Routledge.
- Fuentes-Moreno, C., Sabariego-Puig, M., & Ambros-Pallarés, A. (2020). Developing social and civic competence in secondary education through the implementation and evaluation of teaching units and educational environments. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7(1), 39.
- Gurudeo, A. T., & Patrick, M. (2018). Traditional vs. non-traditional teaching and learning strategies: The case of e-learning. *International Journal for Mathematics Teaching and Learning*, 19(1), 129–158.
- Kawashima-Ginsberg, K., Siegel-Stechler, K., & Faraci, N. (2025). Understanding and promoting civic skills: Toward an integrated conception of civic competencies. In *Research handbook on education and democracy* (pp. 102–124). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Knowles, R. T. (2018). Teaching who you are: Connecting teachers' civic education ideology to instructional strategies. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 46(1), 68–109.
- Kolb, A., & Kolb, D. (2018). Eight important things to know about the experiential learning cycle. *Australian Educational Leader*, 40(3), 8–14.
- Komara, E. (2017). Curriculum and civic education teaching in Indonesia. *EDUCARE*, 10(1), 115–121.
- LeCompte, K., Blevins, B., & Riggers-Piehl, T. (2020). Developing civic competence through action civics: A longitudinal look at the data. *The Journal of Social Studies Research*, 44(1), 127–137.
- Magasu, O., Muleya, G., & Mweemba, L. (2020). Pedagogical challenges in teaching Civic Education in secondary schools in Zambia. *International Journal of Science and Research*, 9(3), 1483–1488.
- Magasu, O., Sakala, E., & Trinity, C. (2025). The 2023 Competence-Based Education Curriculum in Zambia: What does it mean to a Civic Education teacher? *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(9), 87–92.
- Mainde, D., Mtonga, D. E., Sakala, E., Chola, D. K., Magasu, O., Chileshe, K. S., & Mpolomoka, D. L. (2022). Adapting Fadel's four-dimensional education model in teaching and learning Civic Education in 21st-century Zambia. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 13(33), 140–147.
- Nanggala, A., & Suryadi, K. (2022). Realizing the philanthropy movement through citizenship education learning at independent campuses. In *Annual Civic Education Conference (ACEC 2021)* (pp. 1–5). Atlantis Press.

- Persson, M., Andersson, K., Zetterberg, P., Ekman, J., & Lundin, S. (2020). Does deliberative education increase civic competence? Results from a field experiment. *Journal of Experimental Political Science*, 7(3), 199–208.
- Rafzan, R. (2024). Implications of Project-Citizen-based Civic Education learning: The key to obtaining civic competence? *Abdimas Galuh*, 6(2), 1769–1781.
- Sakala, E. (2016). *The responsiveness of Civic Education teacher training curriculum towards democratic citizenship in Zambia* [Master's dissertation, University of Zambia].
- Sakala, E. (2024). *Civic Education teacher programme towards promoting democratic citizenship in Zambian secondary schools, with special reference to service learning* [Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa].
- Sakala, E., & Magasu, O. (2024). Contextualising service learning model in Civic Education teacher programmes in Zambia. *Kwame Nkrumah University Multi-Disciplinary Journal-Zambia*, 1(2), 75–82.
- Sakala, E., & Tshabalala, S. (2025). The teaching of controversial issues in Civic Education in secondary schools in Kabwe, Zambia: The teachers' voices. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(4), 2682–2690.
- Shapiro, S., & Brown, C. (2018). A look at civics education in the United States. *American Educator*, 42(2), 10–16.