High-stakes examinations and curriculum narrowing: Examination pressure constraints of the competency-based education of grade nine business studies in Lusaka District in Zambia

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Recommended Reference: Kanswe, J., & Mulenga, I. M. (2026). High-stakes examinations and curriculum narrowing: Examination pressure constraints of the competency-based education of Grade Nine business studies in Lusaka District in Zambia. *African Quarterly Social Science Review, 3*(4), 1027–1038. https://doi.org/10.51867/AQSSR.3.4.82

ABSTRACT

This study was an examination of the extent and nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage and the institutional and instructional factors influencing content coverage in Grade Nine classes in selected secondary schools in Lusaka District, Zambia. The study was motivated by concerns that high-stakes examination pressure may encourage teachers to prioritise examination performance over comprehensive and competency-based curriculum implementation. Guided by the Humanistic Learning Theory, the study adopted an embedded mixed-methods research design. The target population comprised deputy headteachers, Heads of Department, Grade Nine Business Studies teachers and learners. Five schools were selected, comprising three public, one grant-aided and one private schools. Purposive and simple random sampling were used to select 90 participants: five headteachers, five HoDs, ten teachers and 60 learners. Data were collected using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and document analysis and analysed using frequencies, percentages and thematic analysis. Findings showed that syllabus coverage was uneven and selective, with teachers prioritising highly examinable topics, particularly Final Accounts, while topics such as Entrepreneurship received less attention. Past-paper drilling and examination preparation increasingly displaced regular syllabus teaching. Inadequate teaching time, syllabus overload, overcrowding, split sessions and examination-related teacher performance pressures further contributed to selective coverage of topics. Based on these findings it was concluded that examination pressure and institutional constraints interacted to produce uneven syllabus implementation and limited opportunities for meaningful, competency-oriented learning. The study findings and conclusions lead to the recommendations of protecting teaching time, monitoring balanced syllabus coverage, integrating examination preparation with competency-based learning, and broadening teacher appraisal beyond examination results.

Keywords: Business Studies; Curriculum Implementation; Competency-Based Learning, Examination Pressure; Syllabus Coverage; Teaching to the Test

I. INTRODUCTION

High-stakes examinations remain an important component of education systems globally and particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where they serve as mechanisms for certification of achievement, selection and placement of learners to higher grades. In Zambia, high-stakes examinations not only determine advancement to higher levels of education but also influence school rankings, institutional reputation and teacher appraisal and reward. As a result, examination performance has become a dominant indicator of educational success, shaping practices at national, regional, school and classroom levels.

The Zambian education system has undergone a shift from content-based curriculum to a competency-based curriculum that emphasises holistic education in which the acquision of competiencies is paramount (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023, Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). This transition aligns with global trends, which prioritise the development of 21st-century skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and others (Qadir et al., 2020; Yambwana, 2020). In Zambia, the Business Studies curriculum, in particular, is designed to equip learners with practical entrepreneurial and financial competencies necessary for effective participation in economic and social life (MoE, 2013).

Despite the curriculum shift towards holistic and competency-based learning, classroom practice in examination classes in Zambia seem to reflect a different reality. Studies have shown that high-stakes examinations continue to exert a strong influence on curriculum implementation, with teaching increasingly oriented towards examination preparation

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rather than comprehensive syllabus coverage and competency masterly (Tsiane & Motebang, 2023). This phenomenon is commonly referred to as "teaching to the test" (Herman & Golan, 1991). Most often, it encourages selective teaching practices, where teachers prioritise frequently examined topics at the expense of broader curriculum goals.

In the Zambian context, Changwe and Mwanza (2022) observed that a significant portion of teaching time in examination classes, particularly in the third term of the school calender, is devoted to examination preparation. This shift reduces opportunities for meaningful engagement with the full range of syllabus content. Similarly, Bertram (2016) cautioned that poorly managed assessment pressures can undermine effective curriculum implementation, leading to superficial coverage of content. Empirical studies further indicate that teachers tend to prioritise content aligned with summative assessments, often neglecting less examinable but equally important subject areas (Schmidt et al., 2018).

Examination-driven approach to teaching and learning raises critical concerns about the extent to which curriculum intentions are realised in practice. While the Business Studies syllabus emphasises practical, experiential and learner-centred learning, the dominance of examination performance may lead to surface-level engagement with content and reduced attention to skills-oriented areas such as entrepreneurship. Such practices are likely to widen the gap between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum, thereby undermining the goal of holistic learner development (Mundia & Care, 2014).

Furthermore, the emphasis on examination performance has implications for how teacher effectiveness is perceived and evaluated. Shavelson et al. (2010) and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] (2019) argued that examination results alone provide an incomplete measure of teacher performance and should be complemented by broader indicators of teaching quality. However, in many contexts, including Zambia, institutional pressures linked to examination outcomes continue to shape teaching practices, often encouraging compliance-driven approaches to curriculum implementation.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

High-stakes examinations have historically played an important role in the Zambian education system by assessing learners' achievement and influencing progression within the education system. At Grade 9 level, the Junior Secondary School Leaving Examination (JSSLE) provided a national assessment of learners at the end of junior secondary education. Within this examination system, Business Studies is intended to assess knowledge and skills in areas such as entrepreneurship, office organisation, bookkeeping and accounting. However, evidence from Zambia indicates that examination requirements can influence what teachers teach and how they allocate teaching time. Siamuzyulu (2022), for example, found that national examinations influenced curriculum implementation in selected secondary schools in Ndola, with teachers concentrating on topics they believed were likely to appear in examinations and, in some cases, skipping content considered less examinable. The study further found that examination preparation influenced classroom activities and encouraged the teaching of factual information at the expense of broader learning outcomes.

This situation is significant because Zambia has been moving towards a competency-based curriculum that emphasises the development of knowledgeable, skilled, innovative learners who can apply learning to real-life situations. The Ministry of Education explained that the transition from the 2013 curriculum to the 2023 Competency-Based Curriculum is intended to strengthen practical learning and the development of competencies relevant to learners' lives and the country's development (Ministry of Education, 2023). Consequently, Business Studies should not be implemented only as preparation for examination success; adequate syllabus coverage is necessary to provide learners with opportunities to develop and apply entrepreneurial, financial, problem-solving and other practical competencies.

Despite this policy direction, empirical evidence suggests that examination pressure can contribute to selective curriculum implementation. The Examinations Council of Zambia's 2023 Grade 9 examination report identified weaknesses in Business Studies performance and highlighted inadequate attention to some areas of the syllabus, recommending that teachers give adequate attention to all topics and ensure complete syllabus coverage (Examination Council of Zambia [ECZ], 2024). Similarly, research on examination-oriented teaching in Zambia has reported that examination preparation can encourage teacher-centred approaches and restrict opportunities for active and experiential learning (Machinyise & Muyangana, 2023). These findings provide empirical evidence that examination demands may influence curriculum delivery rather than merely measuring what learners have already learnt.

Nevertheless, a specific empirical gap remains concerning Grade 9 Business Studies in Lusaka district. Existing Zambian research has examined examination wash-back and general curriculum implementation, but there is insufficient subject-specific evidence establishing the extent and nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage in Grade 9 classes and the institutional and instructional factors influencing such coverage. For example, the Ndola study demonstrated examination effects on curriculum implementation but was not specifically concerned with Business Studies or Lusaka district (Siamuzyulu, 2022). Likewise, recent research in Lusaka examined examination-oriented teaching in Civic Education, indicating that examination preparation can encourage memorisation and constrain learner-centred

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approaches, but it did not establish whether similar patterns occured in Grade 9 Business Studies or how they affected syllabus coverage.

This gap is important because incomplete or selective syllabus coverage may create a disconnect between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum. Where teachers devote disproportionate attention to examination preparation or frequently tested topics, learners may receive limited exposure to other prescribed content and fewer opportunities to develop the competencies envisaged by the curriculum. Understanding the extent of this problem is therefore important for determining whether examination practices are compatible with the broader goals of competency-based education. Accordingly, this study sought to address the gap by determining the extent and nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage in Grade 9 classes in Lusaka district and examining the institutional and instructional factors that influenced such coverage. By generating empirical evidence from selected secondary schools in Lusaka, the study helped to clarify the relationship between examination pressure and syllabus implementation in Business Studies and contribute to discussions concerning the alignment of assessment practices with Zambia's competency-based curriculum objectives.

1.2 Research Objectives

i. To determine the extent and nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage in grade nine classes in Lusaka district.
ii. To examine institutional and instructional factors that influenced Business Studies syllabus coverage in grade nine classes in Lusaka district.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study was guided by the Humanistic Learning Theory, developed by Abraham Maslow (1943) and later extended by Carl Rogers (1969). The Humanistic Learning Theory focuses on the importance of learner-centred learning and the holistic development of individuals. In relation to this study therefore, this theory guides that effective curriculum implementation is not merely defined by syllabus content coverage, but by the extent to which learners meaningfully engage with the full breadth of the syllabus content through learner-centred experiences. From a humanistic perspective, curriculum coverage includes both the breadth of the syllabus, which refers to the range of syllabus topics, and the depth of the syallbus, representing the quality of learner engagement and understanding. (Yasar & Aslan, 2021). In situations where high-stakes national examinations dominate teaching priorities, the functions of summative assessment may conflict with humanistic learning principles. Teachers may respond to examination pressures by selectively covering examinable content and reducing opportunities for experiential and learner-centred approaches. This results in a shift from holistic curriculum implementation to performance-oriented teaching, thereby constraining both the scope and quality of curriculum coverage. Therefore, the theory is used in this study to interrogate whether the teaching of Business Studies in Grade Nine reflects humanistic ideals of comprehensive and meaningful curriculum engagement, or whether it is shaped by examination-driven practices that prioritise limited content coverage and measurable outcomes. The Humanistic Learning theory therefore served as an analytical framework for understanding why variations in curriculum coverage occured in grade nine examination classes for Business Studies in selected schools in Lusaka district.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Extent and Nature of Business Studies Syllabus Coverage

The shift towards competency-based education has increased emphasis on critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and the application of knowledge rather than memorisation for examination purposes (Qadir et al., 2020). In Zambia, the Business Studies curriculum similarly seeks to develop entrepreneurial, financial and practical competencies that learners can apply in real-life situations (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2013). Effective implementation therefore requires adequate coverage of the prescribed syllabus and meaningful opportunities for learners to engage with both theoretical and practical aspects of Business Studies.

However, literature indicates that high-stakes examinations can influence the extent and nature of curriculum coverage. Popham (2011) described *teaching to the test* as teaching that focuses heavily on preparing learners for examination items, while Herman and Golan (1991) found that high-stakes assessments can narrow the curriculum towards content that is likely to be tested. Schmidt et al. (2018) similarly observed that teachers tend to prioritise content aligned with summative assessment while giving less attention to less examinable areas. Consequently, examination-oriented teaching may result in some topics receiving extensive attention while others are superficially covered or omitted.

Evidence from Zambia and neighbouring contexts supports this concern. Tsiane and Motebang (2023) found that examination classes in South Africa were characterised by considerable time devoted to practising examination

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questions. In Zambia, Changwe and Mwanza (2022) reported that substantial teaching time in the third term was devoted to examination preparation, potentially reducing time available for comprehensive syllabus coverage. In Business Studies specifically, Simunthala (2019) found that discussion methods were commonly used in Petauke district, while field trips were used by only a small proportion of teachers, suggesting limited opportunities for practical and experiential learning. The Examinations Council of Zambia (ECZ, 2024) also identified weaknesses in Business Studies performance and recommended that teachers give adequate attention to all syllabus topics and ensure complete coverage.

Although these studies demonstrate that examination pressure can contribute to selective or incomplete curriculum coverage, they did not establish the actual extent and nature of Grade 9 Business Studies syllabus coverage in Lusaka district**.** Most studies have examined examination orientation generally, focused on other subjects or relied substantially on teachers' perceptions. There is therefore limited empirical evidence showing which Business Studies topics are fully, partially or minimally covered and the nature of learners' exposure to theoretical and practical content. This study addressed this gap by determining the extent and nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage in Grade 9 classes in Lusaka district.

2.2.2 Institutional and Instructional Factors Influencing Syllabus Coverage

The extent of curriculum coverage is also influenced by conditions within schools and classrooms. Van den Akker (2006) distinguishes between the intended curriculum and the implemented curriculum, noting that teachers' interpretations and contextual conditions can create differences between what is prescribed and what is actually taught. Examination pressure can widen this gap when teachers modify teaching priorities to meet assessment demands. Shavelson et al. (2010) and OECD (2019) further cautioned that strong emphasis on examination results as indicators of educational performance can encourage teachers and schools to prioritise measurable examination outcomes over broader learning objectives.

Time is an important institutional factor affecting syllabus implementation. Mulenga and Lubasi (2019) found that teachers lose teaching time through meetings, administrative responsibilities and co-curricular activities. Such constraints can become more significant when considerable time is allocated to examination preparation. Similarly, limited teaching and learning resources may restrict teachers' ability to implement practical and experiential aspects of Business Studies. Bekele et al. (2022) found that teachers relied heavily on textbooks despite recognising their limitations for experiential learning. Teacher-related teaching practices are also important because the choice of teaching methods, assessment practices and decisions about which topics to emphasise can determine the depth and breadth of syllabus coverage (Herman & Golan, 1991; Popham, 2011).

Evidence from Zambia nevertheless remains limited regarding how these institutional and teaching factors specifically influence Grade 9 Business Studies syllabus coverage. Existing studies tend to consider examination pressure, teaching time, resources and teaching methods separately or within general curriculum implementation contexts. They provide limited explanation of how school expectations, available teaching time, resources, teacher practices and examination preparation interact to shape the coverage of Business Studies content in Grade 9 classrooms in Lusaka district.The gap for the second objective, therefore, was the limited empirical evidence on the institutional and teaching factors that influenced Business Studies syllabus coverage at Grade 9 level in Lusaka district. This study addresses the gap by examining the factors influencing teachers' decisions concerning teaching time, topic prioritisation, teaching methods, practical activities and examination preparation. Taken together, the two objectives enabled the researchers to establish what was happening in relation to Business Studies syllabus coverage and why it was happening, thereby providing a context-specific understanding of examination pressure and curriculum implementation in Grade 9 Business Studies.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted an embedded mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The design was appropriate because it helped to determine the extent and nature of Grade 9 Business Studies syllabus coverage and to understand the institutional and instructional factors which influenced such coverage. Quantitative data provided measurable information on syllabus coverage and respondents' perceptions, while qualitative data provided detailed explanations of practices and contextual factors affecting curriculum implementation. In an embedded design, one form of data provides a supportive role to the dominant data set (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, qualitative data provided the main source of explanation, while quantitative data played a complementary role.

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3.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in Lusaka district of Zambia. Lusaka district was selected because it contains diverse types of secondary schools, including public, grant-aided and private schools. This diversity provided an appropriate setting for examining variations in Business Studies syllabus coverage and the institutional conditions under which the subject was implemented. The location was also considered practical in terms of accessibility and the availability of schools offering Business Studies at Grade 9 level.

3.3 Target Population

The target population comprised headteachers, Heads of Department (HoDs), Grade 9 Business Studies teachers and Grade 9 learners in secondary schools in Lusaka district where Business Studies was offered. Headteachers and HoDs were included because of their supervisory and curriculum-management responsibilities, while teachers were included because they were directly responsible for implementing the Business Studies curriculum. Grade 9 learners were included because they were the direct beneficiaries of the curriculum and could provide information concerning their exposure to syllabus content and classroom learning practices.

3.4 Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

The study employed both non probability and probability sampling techniques. Schools were selected to provide representation of the major school categories in Lusaka district. The sampling frame for schools was divided into three categories: public, grant-aided and private secondary schools, from which five schools were sampled using simple random sampling from each category. Thus, three public schools, one grant-aided school and one private school were sampled. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with relevant knowledge of curriculum implementation. One headteacher and one Business Studies HoD were selected from each participating school, while two Grade 9 Business Studies teachers were purposively selected from each school. Grade 9 learners were selected using simple random sampling, with 12 learners selected from each school. Thus, the study involved 90 respondents, comprising five headteachers, five HoDs, ten Business Studies teachers and 60 Grade 9 learners.

3.5 Data Collection and Instruments

Data were collected using interview guides, questionnaires and a document-analysis guide. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with headteachers, HoDs and Business Studies teachers to obtain detailed information about institutional and instructional factors that affected syllabus coverage. Questionnaires containing closed- and open-ended items were administered to Grade 9 learners to obtain information about their experiences and perceptions of Business Studies syllabus coverage. Document analysis was used to establish the extent and nature of syllabus coverage by examining the Business Studies syllabus, schemes of work and teachers' records of work**.** These documents enabled the researchers to compare the prescribed content with the content planned and reportedly taught. Using interviews, questionnaires and documentary evidence also enabled triangulation of findings. To enhance the quality of the data, the instruments were reviewed by experts and piloted before the main data collection. Interview recordings were done with participants' permission, and comparison of information from different sources were used to enhance credibility and confirmability.

3.6 Data Analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative data-analysis procedures were employed. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, particularly frequencies and percentages, and presented using tables. Microsoft Excel and Stata were used to organise and analyse the quantitative data. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and documentary evidence were analysed thematically. The researcher familiarised themselves with the data, identified significant statements, coded responses, grouped related codes into categories and developed themes corresponding to the study objectives. Findings from interviews, questionnaires and document analysis were compared to identify areas of convergence and divergence. This process enabled the researcher to establish both the extent of syllabus coverage and the institutional and instructional factors influencing its implementation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the study. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Zambia humanities and social sciences ethics committee, while permission to conduct the study was sought from the relevant education authorities and headteachers of the participating schools. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation and their right to withdraw without penalty.

Informed consent was obtained from participants before data collection. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by excluding participants' names from questionnaires and by using information only for academic purposes. Interview data and other research information were securely handled and reported without identifying individual

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participants or schools. Since the study involved Grade 9 learners, appropriate permission and consent procedures were followed through the relevant school authorities and participants' guardians where required. No monetary or material incentives were provided to participants in order to minimise the possibility of undue influence.

3.8 Methodological alignment with the objectives

Objectives	Main data source	Main instrument	Analysis
1. Determine the extent and nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage in Grade 9 classes	Syllabus, schemes of work, records of work, learners and teachers	Document-analysis guide, questionnaire and interview guide	Frequencies/percentages and thematic analysis
2. Examine institutional and instructional factors influencing syllabus coverage	Headteachers, HoDs, teachers and learners	Interview guides and questionnaires	Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Extent and Nature of Business Studies Syllabus Coverage in Grade Nine Classes in Lusaka district

The findings under objective one demonstrated that syllabus coverage was not uniform across the sampled schools. Rather, coverage was characterised by selective prioritisation of topics, uneven attention to syllabus content, and increased concentration on examinable content and examination preparation**.** The following themes emerged**:** *prioritisation of topics* and *focus on examination preparedness through past-paper drilling.*

4.1.1 Priortitisation of Topics

The findings across the five sampled schools showed that teachers prioritised topics perceived to carry higher marks and those that frequently appeared in national examinations. Final Accounts emerged as the most emphasised topic, while topics perceived to have lower examination value received comparatively less attention. For instanceTeacher 1 at School 1 explained that:

> *"The topic 'Final Accounts' is a critical topic, and we ensure that it is covered first, mostly in term one. We usually emphasise that topics like wages and salaries are pushed to the end, or we can just give learners notes to read about them."* 22/April 2024

Similarly, Teacher 2 explained that Final Accounts received greater attention because of its perceived contribution to examination marks:

> *"Final Accounts is given priority because out of 100 marks, it has about 22 marks."* 22/April 2024

The findings further showed that Trial Balance and Books of Original Entry were also prioritised because teachers perceived them as having a higher probability of appearing in examinations. Conversely, topics such as Entrepreneurship, Wages and Salaries, Communication and Office-related topics were sometimes condensed, postponed or assigned for independent reading. Teacher 2 at School 3 stated that:

> *"Entrepreneurship is lengthy, but exams may only ask one or two questions from it despite the time spent teaching it. If I don't have enough time to cover all the topics, I'd rather cover what will be in the exam."* 22/April 2024

The HoDs corroborated this finding. For example HoD 5 reported that:

> "*Teachers prioritise topics that frequently come in the exam, especially given that they don't have time to cover everything."* 23/April 2024

HoD 1 similarly indicated that:

> *"Skipping happens when there is limited time, especially when approaching Term 3, a teacher may skip topics like wages and salaries or communication, prepare notes and ask learners to copy them."* 14/April 2024

Deputy Head Teachers also confirmed that teachers tended to concentrate on bookkeeping and accounting-related topics because of their perceived examination weight. Thus, the qualitative evidence indicated that the nature of syllabus coverage was selective rather than comprehensive. The quantitative findings support this interpretation. As indicated in Table 1 out of 60 learners, 38 (63.33%) reported that teachers always spent more time on topics that were likely to appear in examinations, while 14 (23.33%) reported that teachers did so often. Therefore, 52 learners, representing 86.66%**,** indicated that teachers always or often prioritised examinable topics.

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Table 1
Learner's perceptions of the extent of topic priotisation (n=60)

Response Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Always	38	63.33
Often	14	23.33
Sometimes	7	11.67
Never	1	1.67
Total	**60**	**100**

Learners were also asked to identify topics that teachers emphasised most and those that received less emphasis. As indicated in Table 2, Final Accounts was identified as the most emphasised topic by 49 learners (82%), while Entrepreneurship was identified as the least emphasised by 26 learners (43%).

Table 2
Learner's perceptions of topics mostly and least emphasised

More Emphasised Topics			Less Emphasised Topics		
Topic	**Frequency (F)**	**%**	**Topic**	**Frequency (F)**	**%**
Final Accounts	49	82	Entrepreneurship	26	43
Source Documents	16	27	The Office	25	42
Books of Original Entry	10	17	Wages and Salaries	4	7
Ledgers	8	13	Office Equipment	3	5
Filing	7	12	Petty Cash Book	3	5

The findings suggested that syllabus coverage was characterised by differential emphasis, with teachers allocating greater instructional attention to content perceived to have greater examination value. This finding is consistent with Herman and Golan (1991), who found that standardised testing can influence teachers to concentrate teaching attention on content that is assessed. Similarly, Popham (2011) explained that teaching to the test occurs when teaching activities become excessively oriented towards anticipated examination requirements.

The finding was also consistent with Changwe and Mwanza (2022), who observed in Zambia that curriculum implementation can develop a gap between the intended curriculum and the curriculum actually achieved in classrooms. In the present study, this gap was reflected in the differential treatment of syllabus topics: while the official curriculum prescribes a broad range of Business Studies content, teachers' actual classroom decisions resulted in some topics receiving more extensive treatment than others. The finding further resonates with Tsiane and Motebang (2023), who reported that teachers' perceptions of examination requirements can influence their interpretation and implementation of the prescribed syllabus. Similarly, Siamuzyulu (2022) found that national examinations can exert wash-back effects on curriculum implementation in Zambian secondary schools.

However, the finding should not necessarily be interpreted to mean that topic prioritisation is entirely inappropriate. Teachers may legitimately allocate more teaching time to difficult concepts or topics requiring extensive practice. The concern arises when prioritisation is primarily determined by perceived examination value and results in the systematic reduction, postponement or omission of other prescribed content. From the perspective of the competency-based curriculum, this is significant because Zambia's curriculum framework emphasises the development of knowledge, skills, values and competencies rather than examination performance alone (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2023). Mulenga and Kabombwe (2019) similarly argued that competency-based education requires learning experiences that go beyond memorisation and examination preparation.

The findings therefore indicate that the nature of syllabus coverage in the sampled Grade Nine Business Studies classes was uneven and examination-sensitive. Although important examinable topics received considerable attention, other areas of the syllabus were sometimes compressed or delegated to learners for independent study. This suggests that syllabus coverage should not be assessed only in terms of whether teachers reached a particular topic, but also in terms of how much instructional attention, depth and learning opportunity each topic received. Bertram (2016) makes a related distinction between curriculum coverage and the quality of learning, suggesting that teachers can cover prescribed content without necessarily providing sufficient opportunities for meaningful learning.

4.1.2 Focus on Examination Preparedness and Past-Paper Drilling

A second finding under Objective One concerned the increasing focus on examination preparedness, particularly through the use of past examination papers. Teachers and learners reported that teaching practices changed considerably

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as examinations approached. By Term three, lesson time was increasingly devoted to revision and working through past examination question papers rather than introducing or developing new syllabus content.

A teacher at School 2 explained:

> *"Most of the time, we cover the topics by Term Two; if we go to Term Three, it is just revision and past papers."* 24/April 2024

Similarly, a teacher at School 3 stated:

> *"Anything that I know is not coming in the exam is not an emergency for me. There's more time spent on past papers than on teaching."* 25/April 2024

HoD 3 also confirmed that teaching increasingly focused on examination performance:

> *"We teach with an emphasis on ensuring pupils pass, so there is a focus on examination preparation."* 17/April 2024

The quantitative findings provide further evidence of this pattern. The learners reported varying levels of agreement concerning teachers' focus on examination preparation and the use of past papers during lessons.

Table 3

Learner Perceptions on Teachers' Focus on Examination Past Papers Drilling and Preparation

Teacher Focus on Examination Preparation		**Use of Past Papers During Lessons**	
Response Category	**Frequency (F)**	**Response Category**	**Frequency (F)**
Strongly Agree	12	Strongly Agree	24
Agree	19	Agree	13
Neutral	10	Neutral	16
Disagree	19	Disagree	6
Strongly Disagree	1	Strongly Disagree	1
Total	**60**	**Total**	**60**

The results in Table 3 indicate that 31 out of 60 learners (51.67%) agreed and strongly agreed that teachers focused more on examination preparation than on full syllabus coverage. In relation to past-paper use, 37 learners reported that they agreed and strongly agreed that past papers were used during lessons. Furthermore, 37 out of 60 learners indicated that past-paper practice was more helpful for passing examinations than regular learning. These findings suggest that the nature of syllabus coverage changed as the examination period approached. Past papers appeared to move from being a supplementary assessment and revision resource to becoming a major teaching activity**.** This is important because repeated examination practice can support familiarity with question formats and help learners identify areas requiring further study. However, when it replaces the teaching of outstanding syllabus content, it may contribute to incomplete or superficial syllabus coverage.

The finding is consistent with Herman and Golan (1991), who argued that high-stakes testing can influence teachers' allocation of teaching time towards assessed content. Popham (2011) similarly identified excessive test-oriented teaching as a potential consequence when teachers focus heavily on preparing learners for the format and content of examinations. The finding is also supported by Machinyise and Muyangana (2023), whose study in Zambia found that examination-oriented tuition can shift educational attention towards examination performance. Nevertheless, past-paper drilling should not automatically be regarded as ineffective. It can be useful for assessment literacy, consolidation of concepts and identification of learner misconceptions. The critical issue emerging from the present study is the extent to which it displaced actual curriculum teaching. Where past papers dominate lessons before all prescribed content has been adequately taught, examination preparation effectively becomes a competing use of curriculum time.

From a competency-based curriculum perspective, this is problematic because meaningful learning requires learners to apply knowledge, solve problems and develop transferable competencies (Ministry of Education, 2013; Mulenga & Kabombwe, 2019). Rogers (1969) and Maslow (1943) similarly emphasized learning environments that support meaningful engagement and learner development. Excessive examination drilling can reduce opportunities for such engagement when learners are primarily trained to reproduce expected examination responses. Overall, the findings under objective one demonstrated that Business Studies syllabus coverage was uneven, selective and increasingly examination-oriented**.** The extent of coverage was therefore influenced not only by whether content was taught, but also by the amount of time and depth devoted to different topics. The next section addresses the institutional and instructional conditions that contributed to this pattern of teaching.

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4.2 Institutional and Instructional Factors Influencing Business Studies Syllabus Coverage

The second objective was an examination of the factors that influenced the extent and nature of syllabus coverage. Two major themes emerged: insufficient teaching time and syllabus overload, and examination results-based teacher reward systems and performance pressure. These factors operated at both institutional and instructional levels and helped to explain the selective coverage identified under objective ne.

4.2.1 Insufficient Teaching Time and Syllabus Overload

Findings from all five sampled schools indicated that inadequate teaching time and the perceived bulkiness of the Business Studies syllabus were major institutional factors affecting syllabus coverage. HoDs consistently reported that the volume of content was disproportionate to the time available. HoD 1 explained:

> *"Time is not enough; there is too much content for the two years. The topics are wide, and the work is bulky; more periods need to be allocated."* 14/April 2024

HoD 5 similarly identified inadequate period allocation as a major challenge and noted that incomplete coverage could leave learners exposed to examination content that they had not adequately studied.

The problem was compounded by large enrolments and limited classroom space. HoDs 3 and 4 reported that the officially allocated five periods could sometimes be reduced to four because of overcrowding and split sessions. For instance a teacher at School 1 explained:

> *"Yes, we have experienced incomplete coverage. One major cause is reduced learning contact time because we are running split sessions. The allocation of only four periods per week is not sufficient for a teacher to cover all the topics."* 22/April 2024

A Deputy Head Teacher reinforced this view:

> *"The main issue currently is the split session, which is the biggest factor affecting contact time."* 17/April 2024

Similarly, Teacher 2 at School 3 stated:

> *"The allocation of only four periods per week for Business Studies is not sufficient for a teacher to cover all topics, and this directly affects how we cover the syllabus."* 22/April 2024

The findings indicate that time loss did not simply reduce the quantity of content taught; it also affected the quality and depth of instructional engagement. Teachers had fewer opportunities to revisit difficult concepts, provide feedback, conduct remedial lessons and employ differentiated or experiential approaches. This finding is strongly supported by Mulenga and Lubasi (2019), who documented the erosion of learning time in Zambian secondary schools through teacher absence from classrooms and other non-teaching activities. Lubasi (2019) similarly found that utilisation of instructional time was an important issue in curriculum implementation in Mongu district. Although these studies were conducted in different geographical settings, they provide useful evidence that instructional time is a significant curriculum implementation resource within the Zambian context.

The finding also corresponds with Bertram et al. (2021), who identified a tension between curriculum coverage and quality learning among South African teachers. Their work illustrates how pressure to cover extensive curriculum content within limited time can encourage teachers to move rapidly through material, potentially compromising depth of learning. Bertram (2016) similarly demonstrated that curriculum coverage should be considered alongside the quality of learning opportunities provided to learners. The institutional nature of the problem is particularly evident in the effects of overcrowding and split sessions. These conditions are not directly controlled by individual teachers and therefore cannot be explained simply as teacher-related shortcomings. Van der Berg et al. (2016) identified inadequate educational resources and institutional constraints as important barriers to effective educational provision. In the present study, inadequate classroom space and large enrolments reduced the amount of time available for Business Studies teaching.

The findings can also be interpreted through the Humanistic Learning perspective. Rogers (1969) views meaningful learning as dependent on learner involvement and supportive learning environments, while Maslow's (1943) theory emphasises the importance of conditions that support learners' development. Where teachers have insufficient time and overcrowded classrooms, opportunities for individual attention, interaction, practical activities and feedback become constrained. Consequently, insufficient teaching time and syllabus overload constituted significant institutional factors influencing syllabus coverage. They created conditions under which teachers had to make choices about what to teach extensively, what to compress and what to postpone. This provides part of an important explanation for the selective syllabus coverage reported under objective one.

4.2.2 Examination Results Based Teacher Reward Systems and Perfomance Pressure

Another important institutional factor was the relationship between teacher recognition and learner examination performance. Findings indicated that some schools used mock, end-of-term and final examination results as part of teacher recognition and reward practices. While administrators indicated that such practices could motivate teachers,

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they also acknowledged that they could create pressure to prioritise examination outcomes. One Deputy Head Teacher explained:

> *"We use final and mock examinations, and end-of-term exams to recognise teachers. This sometimes motivates teachers to put in extra effort to achieve awards tied to results, particularly for mocks and final exams. Also, this can create pressure to prioritise exam performance over proper teaching."* 18/April 2024

Another Deputy Head Teacher reported:

> *"Yes, we do award teachers based on learner performance; we count the number of distinction grades that learners have obtained and use these during events like the annual ball or Teachers' Day to give awards to teachers. This can create anxiety and encourage; however teachers tend to guess what will appear in exams and possibly omit other topics. That practice negatively affects syllabus coverage."* 23/April 2024

The findings suggest that institutional accountability mechanisms influenced teachers' instructional decisions. Where examination performance was associated with recognition, teachers had an institutional incentive to concentrate on content that could improve examination results. This finding helps explain the topic prioritisation and past-paper drilling reported under objective one. Shavelson et al. (2010) cautioned against relying heavily on student test scores when evaluating teachers because examination outcomes can be affected by factors beyond individual teachers' control. Similarly, OECD (2019) noted that teacher evaluation and accountability systems can shape teachers' professional practices. The present findings therefore suggest that performance-oriented accountability can have unintended effects when examination results become an important basis for judging teacher effectiveness.

Herman and Golan (1991) provided further support for this interpretation, showing that high-stakes assessment can influence what teachers teach and the amount of time allocated to different curriculum areas. Popham (2011) likewise discussed the relationship between assessment demands and teaching practices, particularly where teachers feel compelled to prepare learners for expected test content. The findings are also consistent with Siamuzyulu's (2022) examination wash-back perspective in Zambia. The pressure associated with national examinations can influence curriculum implementation by encouraging teachers to align classroom practices with anticipated examination requirements. However, the findings should be interpreted critically. Teacher recognition based on learner performance is not necessarily problematic in itself. Recognition may motivate teachers and encourage commitment to learner achievement. The issue identified in this study is the possibility that examination-based recognition, when combined with limited instructional time, encourages teachers to narrow the curriculum towards examinable content. Thus, the effect depends partly on how accountability mechanisms are designed and balanced with broader curriculum expectations.

The findings also revealed that remedial lessons and extra classes were increasingly directed towards examination preparation. Rather than being used exclusively to address individual learning difficulties, these sessions were frequently organised to increase learners' readiness for examinations. This further demonstrates how institutional expectations can influence the use of available instructional time. From the standpoint of Zambia's competency-based curriculum, the findings reveal a tension between accountability for examination performance and broader curriculum objectives. The Zambia Education Curriculum Framework emphasises competencies, application of knowledge, skills and values (Ministry of Education, 2013, 2023). Qadir et al. (2020) similarly describe competency-oriented education as requiring emphasis on the application of knowledge and development of broader competencies rather than simple reproduction of information. Where teachers experience strong pressure to maximise examination scores, instructional decisions may instead favour highly examinable content.

The findings demonstrate that Business Studies syllabus coverage was influenced by the interaction between institutional constraints and teachers' instructional responses. Limited teaching time, syllabus overload, overcrowded classrooms and split sessions reduced opportunities for comprehensive teaching, while examination-related accountability and teacher recognition increased pressure to improve examination performance. Consequently, teachers prioritised highly examinable topics and devoted substantial time to past-paper practice. These findings suggest that selective syllabus coverage cannot be attributed solely to individual teacher decisions because teaching practices were shaped by the institutional conditions in which teachers operated. This supports Van den Akker et al. (2006), who distinguished between the intended and implemented curriculum, noting that contextual conditions influence how curriculum prescriptions are enacted. Similarly, Bertram et al. (2021) highlighted the tension between curriculum coverage and quality learning. Overall, institutional constraints and examination pressures interacted with instructional responses to produce uneven syllabus coverage in Grade Nine Business Studies classes.

4.3 Discussion Summary

The findings reveal a clear relationship between what syllabus coverage looked like as noted in objective one findings, namely selective, uneven and increasingly examination-oriented coverage and why this pattern occurred as revealed under the findings of objective two, identifying limited instructional time, syllabus overload, overcrowding, split sessions and examination-related performance pressure as important influencing factors. The evidence therefore

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suggests that the observed nature of Business Studies syllabus coverage was produced through the interaction of structural institutional conditions and teachers' instructional responses.

This interpretation is consistent with the literature on curriculum implementation, which recognises that the enacted curriculum may differ from the intended curriculum because teachers interpret and adapt curriculum requirements within particular institutional contexts (Changwe & Mwanza, 2022; Van den Akker et al., 2006). The findings also demonstrate that achieving curriculum coverage should not be understood simply as completing a list of topics. The depth, balance and quality of exposure given to different areas of the syllabus are equally important (Bertram, 2016; Bertram et al., 2021). Thus, the study's findings point to a distinction between nominal coverage, where topics may technically be reached, and meaningful coverage, where learners are provided adequate time and opportunities to understand and apply the knowledge and skills contained in the Business Studies curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Based on the findings and the intepretations it can be concluded that Business Studies syllabus coverage in Grade Nine was uneven and selective**,** with teachers giving greater attention to highly examinable topics while some topics received limited or delayed coverage. Consequently, coverage was not only a matter of reaching topics but also the depth and learning opportunities provided. It can further be concluded that examination pressure strongly influenced classroom practice. Increased use of past papers and examination-focused revision sometimes displaced comprehensive teaching, limiting opportunities for deeper understanding and competency development.

Additionally, it can also be concluded that institutional constraints significantly affected syllabus coverage**.** Inadequate teaching time, syllabus overload, overcrowding, limited classroom space and split sessions reduced opportunities for teachers to complete the syllabus and provide adequate learner support. Finally, teacher performance pressures reinforced examination-oriented teaching**.** When teacher recognition was linked to examination results, teachers were encouraged to focus on examinable content, demonstrating that syllabus coverage was shaped by the interaction between institutional conditions and instructional responses.

5.2 Recommendations

Schools and the Ministry of Education authorities should increase and protect teaching time for Business Studies, particularly in schools affected by overcrowding and split sessions, to enable more comprehensive syllabus coverage. Teachers and Heads of Department should monitor balanced syllabus coverage and ensure that less examinable topics are not consistently omitted, while using past papers mainly as a revision tool rather than a substitute for teaching. Schools should also balance examination preparation with competency-based learning by incorporating practical activities, problem-solving, learner-centred approaches and opportunities for deeper understanding. Finally, teacher appraisal and recognition systems should consider broader indicators of teaching effectiveness, including balanced syllabus coverage, learner progress and competency development, rather than relying predominantly on examination results.

Declaration of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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