

Implementing Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography Framework at One High School in Zimbabwe During The Covid 19 Era

Shonhiwa Tawanda* & Chikuvadze Pinias

Bindura University of Science Education, Zimbabwe

Corresponding author: shonhiwatawanda@gmail.com chikuvadzepinias@gmail.com,

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Abstract

This paper sought to gain insight into the implementation of the new Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during COVID-19 era. The methodological lens comprised of the interpretivist paradigm and qualitative approach guided the data sourcing and analysis. The sample was made up of thirty Advanced Level Geography students and six teachers selected through snowballing. Data sourced through the literature method and personal interview were analyzed according to emerging themes. Findings acknowledged the existence of policies enabled the creation of safe learning environments during the COVID-19 era. The implementation of the new framework during the COVID-19 era was grounded in student-centred approach augmented by e-learning platforms. However, during this era some challenges were encountered in the implementation of the new framework. In conclusion through the implementation of the new framework during the COVID-19 era learning activities shifted from the traditional face-to-face to online student-centered interactions. It's recommended that through partnerships schools can invest heavily in ICTs for smooth operations amidst disasters.

Keywords: Advanced Level Human Geography, Competence-Based framework, COVID-19, high school, implementing

1. Introduction

In the year 2020 the World Health Organization acknowledged the COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). This led to the Government of Zimbabwe proclaiming Covid 19 a national catastrophe (OCHA, 2020) and educational institutions were closed. However, the prolonged closure of schools seen as having a negative impact on progression in education. It is against this background that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education invoked some

considerable transformations in teaching and learning activities (Ozadowicz, 2020). This one way or the other presented both challenges and opportunities for basic education in general and Advanced Level Geography learning activities in particular. All this was happening against the background that a new curriculum framework (2015-2022) that placed much emphasis on a hands-on approach to teaching and learning activities had been introduced. This new approach to teaching and learning in schools placed more emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes by the students through their engaged in given tasks. It is through these given teaching and learning activities that the students are systematically assessed with the view to gauge their competence levels. In this context, students are expected to perform, demonstrate their knowledge and proficiency in different learning areas (Juet et al., 2021). In this new approach to students' assessment comprised of 30% from the coursework and 70% from the written examination (Firomumwe, 2022).

This new Competence-Based Advanced Level Geography framework saw a shift from summative assessment to one that incorporates formative assessment. However, this new thrust was expected be implemented in an environment that riddled with various policies were introduced to minimize the spread of COVID-9. Some of the policies that were put in place led to the closure of schools and this disrupted the traditional face-to-face teaching and learning activities. It is against this background that most educational institutions adopted new approaches to teaching and learning (Jaka, 2021). Therefore, this created the need for the researchers to interrogate the pedagogical practices that can be used so as to effectively implement this new Advanced Level Geography framework during the COVID-19 era. In the context of this article, the researchers based their argument on the principle of disruptive transformation and sought to gain insight into how the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework was being implemented during the COVID-19 era.

2. Literature Review

This study was viewed through a lens comprised of the Keep Learning on Track theory centred on facilitating effective learning (Dobish, Griffiths & Meyeret, 2017). Thus, it promotes the convergence of teachers and students' ideas thereby establishing a learning community geared towards the acquisition of competences (Black & William, 1998). This enables students construct their knowledge rather than just passively taking in information (Bavistar, Hartle & Whitney (2009). In this case students experience the world and reflect upon those experiences, and thereafter build their representations and incorporate new information into pre-existing knowledge. In learning activities, students are involved in activities that involve them in in interactions which enable them to engage in real-world challenges, acquire communication and collaboration skills. Hence, these promote students' acquisition of social skills, feelings, intellect, artistic skills, practical skills, among others (Sridharan, 2020). Therefore, this new curriculum framework (2015-2022) is affixed on a clear policy sequence that ensures the return on investment in education (Gondo, et al., 2019). It is against this background that the new curriculum framework (2014-2015) alluded that Advanced Level Geography learning activities

should focus on students' holistic development. In this regard, the learning activities should encompass issues to do with seeking and valuing students' point of view, posing of problems of relevance, building lessons around big ideas and assessing learning in the context of daily demands of life (Chinhenga, 2017). Therefore, the unique features of this theoretical framework made it more appropriate in interrogating how COVID-19 influences Advanced Level Human Geography learning activities.

In Zimbabwe there has been an enhanced revolution in the field of education because of knowledge driven economies (Mataka, Matee & Hokonya, 2022). Thus, the education system gives much emphasis to learning that translates theory into practice (Maphalala, 2016). It is against this background that the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education introduced Competence-Based education framework (2015-2022), which was seen as a progressive process, whose aim was to produce students with lifesaving skills (Newsday, October, 9, 2021). It provides direction for the teacher so that the appropriate "teaching, learning and assessment strategies" are implemented for "maximum progress" (Reddy et al., 2016:19). Hence the formulation of policies and procedures guiding the learning activities was expected to be in line with the demands of the Sustainable Development Goals (Muchanga, et al., 2020).

Of interest to this study was SDG 4 that advocates for the crafting of educational goals, which promote lifelong teaching and learning opportunities for the learner (UNESCO, 2020), and the effects of the COVID 19 where various policies were introduced to protect the populace from the advent of the pandemic. Policies like the Statutory Instrument 76 Civil Protection (Declaration of State of Disaster: Rural and Urban Areas of Zimbabwe) (COVID-19) Notice, 2020, Statutory Instrument 77 of 2020, Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment) (National Lockdown) (No 2) (Amendment) Order, Statutory Instrument 83, Public Health (COVID 19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment) (National Lockdown) Order, 2020 and Statutory Instrument 119 of 2021, Public Health (COVID-19 Prevention, Containment, and Treatment) (National Lockdown) (No. 2) (Amendment) Order, 2021 (No. 21) (Ministry of Health and Child Care, 2021; 2020). It is against this background that education was declared a basic right through the promulgation of the Education Act 1987 which was amended in 1996, 2006; 2016, and 2020) (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 1987; 1996; 2006; 2016; 2020). In this regard, the components of Advanced Level Geography namely: Human and Physical Geography were reviewed with the idea to help students marry theory to practice through their involvement in different learning activities (Castronova, 2011). Through these Advanced Level Geography curriculum components, students were expected to acquire the relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes that make them meet the expectations of the society as well as participate in the industrialization of Zimbabwe (Ministry of Primary and Secondary, 2020). This clearly articulated the significance of education in moulding responsible citizens with relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for the advancement of society.

However, the success of this new curriculum framework (2015-2022) was based on the adoption of various approaches to learning geared towards engaging students in dynamic, and challenging activities. Thus, the new curriculum framework stresses the need to focus on teaching and learning that revolves around the students as they engage in the search and discovery of new knowledge (Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2016). In this regard the Advanced

Level Geography curriculum targets fostering the following: learning designed to focus on lower to higher levels of cognition; research-driven.; participatory; collaborative work among learners in class and with others beyond the school; and integrated and interdisciplinary teaching and learning (Gao, 2019). There is consensus in the literature that student-centered pedagogy, together with such methods as teaching for critical thinking, inquiry learning, and problem-solving are part of the same genre of instructional techniques grounded in a constructivist framework (Grabinger & Dunlap, 2016). Thus, the student-centered abandons the perspective that the teacher is the dispenser of knowledge to being a facilitator and enabler, facilitator of knowledge construction through interactive methods, interest in having students learn how to learn and building (Kim, 2005). This creates an opportunity for the educators to share ideas and areas of attention with students. In this context the evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, or students, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better (Black & William, 1998). Hence, the need to interrogate the implementation of the new curriculum framework (2015-2022) in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 era.

3. Research Methods

In this study, an interpretive paradigm and qualitative approach formed the methodological design, which gave the researchers more scope to probe the issue under investigation. Thus, this design provided the researchers with the platform to interrogate the participants' views or opinions both expressively and rationally through an in-depth look at the settings (Silumba & Chibango, 2020). To provide answers to questions under investigation personal interviews and literature methods were used to generate data. This allowed the researchers to derive subjective meanings from the participants' experiences (Cole, 2006; Merriam, 2009), in the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography teaching and learning framework during the Covid-19 era. Therefore, in this study, the role of the researchers is to comprehend, give details, and clarify social reality through the eyes of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). It is against this background that 30 Advanced Level Geography students and 6 Geography educators were selected using the snowballing procedure. Thus, the researchers utilized pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the participants (Khoza, 2020), e.g., Geography educators were identified as Teacher A, B, C, D, E, and F, whereas selected 30 students were divided into 2 focus group discussion groups, with each group comprised of 15 participants, who were given identification codes 1 - 30. With this sampling practice, data generation was done in adherence to the lockdown procedures i.e., social distancing.

It's important to note the participants' personal experiences on how the imposed lockdown regulations impacted the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework. In this way the researchers aimed at extending the sociological understanding of how the COVID-19 outbreak and the imposed regulations affected the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework. Content analysis was employed to sieve most relevant data from the sources. In the same

process, common patterns and trends were identified and these were used as themes (Tarisayi & Munyaradzi, 2021). In addition, it's worth mentioning that that data analysis was done concurrently with data sourcing. Since the researchers were targeting a comprehensive interrogation of the issue under discussion, it became prudent to canvass data from multiple sources i.e., participants and documentary evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

4. Results and discussion

This study was grounded in a framework comprised of the constructivist and humanist perspectives. This framework focuses on how students construct knowledge during interactions in teaching and learning activities either in the classroom or outside (Theorell & Svensson, 2013). Hence, this framework acknowledges that student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction or student-environment interaction help them to acquire the relevant competencies (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; 1979). Through the interrogation of these interactions the researchers are able to gain insight into the impact of policies that were imposed with the view to reduce the prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework. This called for the researchers to analyse the sourced data under the following themes: (1) Policies that guided the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Geography framework during the COVID-19 era (2) Methods used in facilitating the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during the Covid 19 era and (3) Challenges faced in the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during the COVID-19 era. Each of these themes and the evidence for them is presented below.

4.1 Policies that guided the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Geography framework during the COVID-19 era

In this section it is significant to acknowledge that the various measures were introduced to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, in this section focus is on some of the measures that guided the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during the COVID-19 era. In line with this issue under discussion one of the participants noted that:

Though this lockdown was meant minimize the spread of this dreaded COVID-19, but it has repercussions on our education especially those sitting for their final examinations at the end of the year (Student 3)

In the same vein another participant highlighted that:

In line with the requirements of the WHO [World Health Organisation] and other key stakeholders are expected put in place standard operations procedures to be followed by schools (Teacher A)

In addition, one of the participants indicated that:

I thought that policies introduced by the WHO and Ministry of Health [and Child Care] were going to work hand-in-hand the requirements of the new curriculum framework 2015-2022. However, the lockdown impacted negatively on teaching and learning activities (Teacher C)

Further those opinions mentioned previously another participant revealed that:

In line with the CALA [Continuous Assessment Learning Activities] requirements as students doing Advanced Level Human Geography were expected to carry out tasks that will assessed upon the submission of the write-up the (Student 29)

In support another participant highlighted that:

Even though we are in the COVID-19 era, the Human Geography component of the Advanced Level Geography syllabus dictates that students should visit areas such as mines, industries, settlements, among others (Student 3)

Another participant elaborated the above point:

It's clear that the syllabus expects students to visit places such mines, farms, industries, etc. But for me to organise a visit to these areas during the lockdown period it has been a nightmare since it's difficult to obtain stamped letters [from the nearby police station or a commissioner of oath] (Student 11)

From the above opinions the researchers noted that during the COVID-19 era various control measures i.e., lockdowns were put in place with the view to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic in educational institutions. It was further noted that though restrictive measures were put in place to combat the Covid 19 pandemic, from curriculum perspective students were expected to carry out tasks as per CALA specifications. This concurs with Fiomumwe (2019) who indicated that Advanced Level Human Geography teaching and learning activities are entirely based on fieldwork. This enhances students' acquisition of knowledge and skills to enable them to interact with the environment sustainably. Therefore, the Human Geography component of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Geography Syllabus is designed to produce a self-reliant and productive, graduate with a clear understanding of the socio-economic problems facing the country and beyond (Gondo et al., 2017). This called for the opening of school for teaching and learning guided by policy guidelines that focused on safety, hygiene and sanitation. In this is context the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education did not turn a blind eye on the implications of Covid 19 outbreak in schools (Silumba & Chibango, 2020). However, it was noted that there was limited corporation from other stakeholders such as the police who at times were not willing to assist students especially students seeking permission to visit certain place as per the requirements of their school curriculum.

4.2 Methods used in the facilitating the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during the COVID-19 era

In this section the researchers focus on methods in facilitating the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography activities. It is paramount to highlight that the new curriculum targets

at enabling students to think innovatively during their interaction with the environment. Hence the need to expose students to diversified forms of acquiring knowledge and skills whilst interacting with the environment. In this case one of the participants highlighted that:

The new approach to teaching and learning centres on engaging students in hand-on activities as they search and discovery of new knowledge (Teacher B)

Another participant acknowledged that:

In our lessons with the view to improve students' power of imagination and reason we employ methods such as discussion, question and answer, project method and fieldwork (Teacher C)

The above sentiments concur with Mavhura, et al (2008) who postulated that the real value of human geography lies in that it helps students place themselves in the world to learn their true position and duties. In support a participant indicated that:

In the case of Advanced Level Geography, I think learning in this new curriculum should be research-driven so as to nurture thinking, reflection and problem-solving among the students. In addition, assessment is now an integral part of this inquiry-based learning (Teacher E)

The participants' responses revealed that the new curriculum framework advocates for inquiry-based approach in teaching and learning activities. Thus, this form of teaching and learning activities students through their experiences are able to construct their knowledge. This concurs with Kim (2005); who postulated that in the modern-day teaching and learning activities should be grounded in critical thinking, inquiry learning and problem solving. This call for the teachers to abandon the role of an authoritarian dispenser of knowledge to being a facilitator and enabler, facilitator of knowledge construction. Thus, this learner-centred pedagogy creates a rich environment for active learning through collaborative learning activities (Grabinger & Dunlap, 2016). Therefore, this new approach to focuses on developing students' capacity to apply facts, abilities and attitudes in an independent, creative, hands-on and responsible way (Madondo, 2020).

However, this learner-centred approach was supposed to be used at a time when the government had put in place lockdown measures to curb the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is against this background that most schools in Zimbabwe embraced the use of online learning as a way of mitigating against the shortfalls that had arisen from the unexpected closure of schools and the delay in physical re-opening of teaching and learning activities. In this regard one of the participants articulated that:

The school adopted some platforms [Google classroom, Google Meet, Skype, Zoom] for the e-Learning programme (Teacher D)

In support of the above opinion a participant indicated that:

We were staff developed so as to enthusiastically embrace the new paradigm in facilitating the Competence-Based Advanced Level Geography framework through the use of the e-learning platforms (Teacher F)

In the same vein a participant indicated that:

Through the e-Learning platform we could interface with our Advanced Level Geography teacher. However, not all students had access to this platform as some couldn't afford to purchase data bundle data (Student 1)

One of the participants highlighted that:

Due to COVID-19 pandemic it has been challenging to go out and collect information for our tasks [Continuous Assessment Learning Activities]. Luckily the e-learning platforms came to my rescue as I can easily access the much-needed information (Student 18)

In addition, one the participants revealed that:

Due limited financial resources we requested Advanced Level Geography teacher to use less platforms such as WhatsApp. As you know platforms like the google classroom or Moodle are expensive in terms of data bundles consumption (Student 15)

In support of the above view a participant indicated that:

Here at our most of the Advanced Level students have cellphones [android]. Hence can easily interact with their teachers via WhatsApp. It's against background that I created a very active and interactive WhatsApp platform. But this needed support from parents/guardians [purchasing data bundles] (Teacher B)

From the participants' responses the researchers deduced the need to consult parents/guardians for their input. This is so because parents/guardians are the once responsible for providing the student(s) with the gadgets and data bundles to enable him/her to access the platform. This concurs with (Ralph, 2014) findings who revealed that collaboration among the parents and school can influence students' approaches and behaviour towards the given tasks, and this has a bearing on their achievement. Researchers also noted that e-learning platforms can ensure the continued implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography education during the COVID-19 era. This concurs with Mandikiana (2020) who postulated that e-learning platforms if properly managed are equally competent as they can churn out competent students, since they accord the opportunity for teacher-student or student-student interactions which ultimately address the holistic needs of the students.

4.3 Challenges faced in the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during the COVID-19 era

This section provides feedback from the participants pertaining to challenges encountered in implementing the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework during the COVID-19 era. One of the participants underlined that:

As a mitigatory measure schools are encouraged to resort to online during the COVID-19 era. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that most of schools are located in areas that have poor network coverage. Hence, this can limit the variety of online platforms that can be used for teacher-student [student-student] interactions (Student 24)

From the above response it can be acknowledged that though there are challenges hindering schools' transformation from the traditional face-to-face to online interactions. However, this called for all those involved in teaching and learning to broaden their spectrum with the view to take on board new approaches. This concurs with Silumba and Chibango (2020) who highlighted the need for new solutions for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 that bring about the much-needed transformation. In addition, the government created a platform on radio, which accorded teachers the chance to deliver lessons live and real time to students (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). However, due to the view raised by the participant above, it can be noted that this had an impact on the quality of instruction to the students. This concurs with Jaka (2021) who highlighted that to a certain extent the shift to these online platforms was not a smooth one. In other words, there were instances where teaching and learning activities were supposed to be blended. Hence, this new way of teaching and learning was met with some resistances by different stakeholders. In support of this notion one of the participants highlighted that:

On the issue of online lessons, the charges for data bundles are exorbitant. This is against the background that most parents [and guardians] are low-income earners (Student 15)

One participant highlighted that:

When schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic most schools introduced online teaching and learning where one was supposed to have electronic gadgets and on top of that data for accessing the internet. All this requires a lot of money hence most of us can't manage to have these results in us not being able to access the lessons. Thus, lagging in our studies (Student 20)

In addition, a participant revealed that:

Our parents [or guardians] are caught in between the rock and hard surface, since they have to hard decisions on buy data bundles for an Advanced Level student or food for the upkeep of the whole family during COVID-19 period (Student 11)

To buttress the above opinion one of the participants revealed that:

I did not get enough help from the online teaching and learning activities that were introduced because most of the time I could not afford to purchase network data. It was expensive and my parents could not have the money to spare on data (Student 19)

From the participants' perspective it can be acknowledged that to the ordinary student at the school under investigation the use of online learning is an illusion. Researchers also noted that though there were students with access to the internet facilities, but the prohibitive charges for data bundles was a challenge. In other words, these Advanced Level Geography students were

left with no option expect to wait until the face-to-face interactions are established. This concurs with the OECD (2020) who highlighted that most of the education systems the world over were not prepared to unleash new teaching and learning approaches such the online interactions to the Advanced Level Geography students during the COVID-19 era. This concurs with Silumba and Chibanga (2020) who highlighted that the parents or guardians were trapped in a difficult socio-economic situation such they can hardly afford to technological gadgets for those students doing Advanced Level. From the teachers' perspective it was noted that they were not staff developed to manage online teaching and learning activities. In this regard one of the participants revealed that:

Most teachers are not prepared for the transition from the face-to-face approach to the online approach. They are shy to take on board the new approach to teaching and learning, since most of them are not fully knowledgeable (Teacher F)

In addition, another participant highlighted that:

Some of us who are teaching Advanced Level subjects lack the relevant competences to manage the proposed online learning platforms [Zoom, Google Meet, Google classroom, Skype, etc.]. As a mitigatory measure I resort to uploading lesson notes on our vibrant WhatsApp group (Teacher A)

From the responses it can be noted that teachers are ill-prepared for transition from the traditional to the new ways of facilitating Advanced Level Geography teaching and learning activities. This scenario can to a larger extent affect the quality-of-service delivery during the Advanced Level Geography teaching and learning activities during the COVID-19 era and even beyond. This concurs with Chenge et al (2017); Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2020) who argued that teachers need to be staff developed through seminars, conferences, or workshops with the view to equip with the contemporary competencies that make them to be functional during the COVID-19 era.

The Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework requires students to interact with their environment through conducting educational tours to mines, different types of settlements, industries, etc. In this way students take charge of learning with minimum monitoring from their teachers. However, during the lockdown period it has been difficult to provide Advanced Level Geography students with teaching and learning opportunities framed around the student-centred perspective. One of the participants revealed that:

During the lockdown period it was difficult for students to visit areas such as industries or settlements that were situated far away from their residents. Since they had to be armed with letters authorizing them to be given access to travel (Teacher F)

In support a participant highlighted that:

I tried to visit a shanty town that was about 10 km away from my home, with the view to collect data for the task that we were given at school. However, officers manning a roadblock that was some few metres from our home could not allow me to proceed with my journey. This was due to the fact that I had no letter justifying the motive of my visit (Student 23)

From the participants' responses it can be noted that during the lockdown periods students though they had valid reasons to travel to various they encountered challenges due to movement restrictions that were imposed and were being enforced by the security forces. This limited the Advanced level Geography students' chances of interacting with the environment with the aim to create new knowledge in line with the dictates of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework. This tends to contradict with Jose, Berry and Andrews (2019); Olusegun (2015) who postulated that students should be accorded the opportunity to interact with their environment through the use of learning styles such as independent in order for them to actively construct new knowledge.

5. Conclusion

From the findings, it was noted that various policies were formulated by different stakeholders (i.e., WHO, Ministry of Health, and Child Welfare, among others) with the view to safe teaching and learning environment during the COVID-19 era. It was noted that the COVID-19 pandemic offered school with a prospect to transform and become accustomed to the novel approaches to teaching and learning. It is against this background that the researcher concluded that to a larger extent the implementation of the Competence-Based Advanced Level Human Geography framework at the school under investigation during the pandemic era drifted from the traditional mode of teaching and learning to virtual platforms. Therefore, the researchers recommend that the school under investigation should with the help of partners finance the installation of ICTs in order to prepare for the eventualities i.e., misadventures.

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