

CONTRIBUTION OF THE FREE EDUCATION POLICY TO PUPILS WITH HEARING AND VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS' ACCESS TO PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract

Despite mixed views, Free Education Policy on primary education (grades 1-7) has made significant contribution on pupils with hearing and visual impairments' access to education in primary schools in Zambia. Notable areas cited by participants include: reduced absenteeism, increased gross intake levels, increased grade 7 completion rates and improved academic performance. Although there was no significant positive contribution on dropout rates, participant felt lack of sponsors, failure to qualify to grade 8, early marriages, pregnancy, too big to learn with young pupils, negative attitudes of both parents and pupils and failure by parents to pay boarding and other fees on behalf of their children to some extent contributed to pupils dropping out of school.

Introduction

Access to education may be described as the extent to which the general eligible population participate in education and the efficiency of the education system to retain learners who enter at a given education entrance level (Ministry of Education, 2010.) Participation includes gross enrolment, net enrolment and gross intake rates while completion, progression and dropout rates denote efficiency of the internal education system. In the Zambian education system, access is predominantly at four levels, at Grades 1, 8, 10 and at entrance into tertiary institutions. For purposes of this study, gross intake and dropout rates were used to determine access to education in primary schools. The Gross Intake Rate (GIR) shows the number of children newly admitted at the official school-entrance level regardless of age. In addition, the GIR indicates the general level of access to primary education as well as the capacity of the education system to provide access to grades 1, 8 or 10 for the official school-entrance age population. Dropout rate is the proportion of pupils who leave the system without completing a given grade in a given school year. Additionally, the rate shows the extent to which pupils abandon school for various reasons. High dropout rates imply high input/output ratios and lead to low internal efficiency.

Among the measures to ensure that children access education, the Ministry of Education introduced a number of policies such as: free basic education policy from grade 1-7 introduced in 2002, the re-entry policy introduced in 1997 to mandate schools to allow girls back into the school system who previously left school due to pregnancy. The bursary support to school leavers including orphans and vulnerable children was also introduced to promote access of education by children. The increase in the number of community schools also offered opportunities for more children to remain in school. These measures are commendable. However, the numerous complaints by parents about fees paid to schools on behalf of their children raised the question; how has the free education policy contributed to access of primary education by pupils with hearing and visual impairments?

Ministry of Education (2010) also surprisingly records that 2.29% of the 472,238 pupils who enter school in grade one dropout every year. As a percentage, this figure looks small and negligible but in terms of population it represents 108,142 of (472,238) the total new entrants at

grade one. As a result it cannot be ignored. There is need therefore, to find out causes of pupils dropping out of primary schools in Zambia. The question is, why should 108,142 pupils dropout of before reaching grade 7 when the government has said primary school education (grades 1 – 7) is free?

Statement of the problem

Complaints of parents about numerous fees they pay to primary schools on behalf of their children (both ordinary and those with disabilities) made the researchers wonder about the contribution of the policy on free education to access of education by their children.

Purpose

The study sought to determine contribution of policy on free primary education on pupils' access to primary education. The variables that were used to describe access include: participation with emphasis on gross intake rate (GIR) into grades 1, and efficiency with particular focus on progression to grade 7 and dropout rate between grades 1 and 7.

Objectives

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the contribution of free primary education policy on pupils' access to primary education.
2. To identify factors if any that contribute to pupils dropping out of primary school
3. To determine views of parents, teachers and pupils about the free primary education.

Study Questions

In order to address the study objectives, the following questions were used:

1. How has free primary education policy contributed to pupils' access to primary education?
2. What factors if any contribute to pupils dropping out of primary school?
3. How do parents, teachers and pupils view the policy of free primary education?

Literature Review

Zambia became independent in 1964. At the time of independence, the education sector in the country was so poor. UNESCO (2010) records that there were only about 0.5% of Zambians with primary school education. In addition, out of a total estimated population of 3 million only 107 were degree holders. The government resolved to prioritize education and use it as a driving force to industrialization, civilization and economic growth. For this reason, the government embarked on the construction of primary and secondary schools.

The construction of schools in each district gained momentum when the World Bank provided a loan to the nation (Kelly 1999). In order to encourage high enrolment levels, the government removed all user fees from primary school to tertiary education. According to the first national development plan (FNDP) (1966), the rationale for free education was to reduce on the impeding factor of parents paying tuition fees. In this case, the government took up the responsibility of meeting all the needs of school going children. The declaration of free education at that time

brought about high enrolment levels. Mwanakatwe (1974) reports that because of the free education policy, school enrolment levels doubled at primary school.

This well intended policy was consequently overtaken by circumstances. Kelly (1991) explained that in the 1970s, Zambia suffered terrible economic downturn. The price of copper on the world market came down and yet the price of oil sky rocketed to more than 50%. The Zambian government lost its grip on the economy because of the economic crisis of the time. The quality of education in schools became heavily compromised. For instance, government could not provide adequate teaching and learning materials, school diet became poor and teachers became demotivated because their salaries were so low. This situation worsened in the 1980s.

As a result, the report on Educational Implementation Plan (1986) urged government to reverse the free education policy. The report proposed that there was need for user fees to be reintroduced in schools. UNICEF (1999) indicated that by 1991, over one million children were out of school. The advent of the structural adjustment program stifled the education sector further. One recommendation from the structural adjustment program was that government ought to withdraw all subsidies from the social sectors that included education and health. Coupled with losses of jobs by parents, high school fees and other opportunistic challenges, the Ministry of Education had the poorest enrolment levels in 1995 and 1996 (Kelly, 1999).

Despite all these challenges, the government of Zambia had an obligation to allow every child access primary education. International community and non-governmental organizations within the country implored government to adhere to the international agreements. For instance, the government needed to implement the 1990 education for all and the 1989 rights for children charter. In response to the requests and with good will, former president Mr. Levy Patrick Mwanawasa issued a decree for free education in 2002. In the year 2003, the Ministry of Education announced increased enrolment levels of about 79%.

This good news of high enrolment levels was short lived because as soon as most of the pupils started learning. A number of them began dropping-out of school. The drop-out rates worried every concerned Zambian. The question that bothered most of the minds was and still is; why should pupils drop out of school when education is free? A recent study conducted by the revealed that about 56% of basic schools still charge user fees which they have given different names. The study also revealed that about 67% of the drop-out pupils attributed their inability to continue with school to user fees. Another study by ZOCS (2012) indicated that there were higher numbers of girl pupils at lower primary schools. However, the numbers of girl pupils reduced as they got to upper primary and secondary school.

Considering all the factors discussed above, it is expected that in schools where they have introduced subtle user fees, the drop-out rates may be high. However, it is imperative to conduct further research to establish the variables that contribute to high drop-out rates.

Methodology

Since the researchers sought to have an in-depth understanding of the contribution of the policy on free education on pupils with hearing and visual impairments' access to primary school education, a case study design was used. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Focus group discussions were conducted to yield qualitative data while quantitative methodology made use of questionnaires.

Four hundred and eight (408) head teachers, teachers, parents and their children (pupils) participated in the study. This number consisted of 15 head teachers, 67 teachers, 186 pupils with hearing and visual impairments and 140 parents. Gender of participants was also taken into consideration. See table 1 for the distribution of the sample by province and school.

Table 1: Distribution of sample by provinces and schools (N=408)

#	Province	School	Head teachers	Teachers	Pupils	Parents	Total
1	Lusaka	Desai (HI)	1	4	20	7	32
		Lusaka Girls (HI)	1	3	10	7	21
		UTH Special (HI)	1	5	7	10	23
2	Central	Lukanda Basic (HI)	1	5	10	10	26
		Broadway basic (HI)	1	5	10	10	26
3	Copperbelt	Ndola Lions (VI)	1	5	20	10	36
		Mano Basic (HI)	1	5	10	20	36
4	Southern	St Mulumba (VI)	1	4	19	10	34
		Holy Cross (VI)	1	5	10	10	26
		Mazabuka Basic (VI)	1	4	10	10	25
5	NorthWestern	Solwezi Basic (HI)	1	5	20	10	36
		Kanyihampa (HI)	1	4	10	7	22
		Kyamwina (HI)	1	3	10	4	18
6	Eastern	Magwero (HI)	1	5	10	5	21
7	Western	Sefula Basic (VI)	1	5	10	10	26
	Total		15	67	186	140	408

In order to provide each pupil and teacher in the population an equal chance to be selected and included in the study sample, simple random sampling procedure was used. As a result, 186 pupils and 67 teachers participated in the study. Purposive sampling technique was used to select head teachers and parents of the children with hearing and visual impairments. This procedure enabled the researchers to select head teachers and parents of children in the sample. Questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to collect data from the respondents in the sample.

The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to obtain frequencies and percentages. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data.

Regarding issues of ethical nature, consideration was made to keep the names of respondents anonymous. Consent was also obtained from the respondents before allowing them to participate in the study.

Some limitations were however, encountered by the researchers. The researchers intended to include net enrolment rate under participation while under efficiency include completion and progression rate but due to scanty records of this information in schools, it was not included in this study. Notwithstanding these limitations, there is enough literature to support the findings of this study and guarantee generalisation.

Findings and Discussion

The presentation begins with whether the policy of free education had contributed to pupils' access to primary school education. It was found that all the participants responded in the affirmative. Their responses ranged as follows; 55.2% of 67 teachers, 71.4% of 140 parents, 73.1% of the 186 pupils and 12 of the 15 head teachers said the policy had contributed to pupils' access to primary school education. Areas where impact or contribution was felt to have been made included; reduced absenteeism, increased enrolment, increased grade 7 completion rate and improved academic performance.

Concerning gross intake (GIR) and their progression rates, there was significant contribution. It was found that 123 pupils with hearing and visual impairments were admitted to grade 1 in fifteen primary schools in 2006 and 66% of these progressed to grade 7 in 2012. On the basis that one pupil with disability is equivalent to 10 ordinary pupils (MSTVT, 2007), 123 is a significant number of pupils admitted to grade one. Table 2 shows the gross intake of pupils in grade 1 in 2006 and their progression to grade 7 in 2012.

Table 2: Gross Intake of Pupils into Grade 1 and their Progression to Grade 7

#	School	GIR in Grade 1 in 2006			Progression to Grade 7, 2012		
		Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
1	Kyamwina	10	15	25	-	-	-
2	Ndola Lions	4	7	11	4	7	11
3	Lukanda	3	2	5	1	0	1
4	Mano	6	6	12	6	6	12
5	Sefula	3	5	8	3	5	8
6	Desai	6	3	9	6	3	9
7	UTH Special	2	2	4	-	-	-
8	Lusaka Girls	1	5	6	1	5	6
9	Kanyihampa	-	-	-	-	-	-
10	Holy Cross	3	2	5	2	1	3
11	St Mulumba	8	10	18	8	10	18
12	Solwezi	2	1	3	2	1	3
13	Mazabuka	4	3	7	4	2	6
14	Broadway	6	4	10	3	2	5*
15	Magwero Deaf	-	-	-	-	-	-
	TOTAL	58	65	123	40	42	82

*Pupils at Broadway were in grade 6. There were no pupils at grade 7. Kanyihampa and Magwero schools did not provide numbers of pupils enrolled in grade 1 and their progression to grade 7.

To further determine the contribution of free education policy to pupils' access to education in primary schools, participants were asked whether their schools offer free education. Their views were as follows;

Head teachers

In response to the question on whether schools offered free education from grades 1-7, twelve of the fifteen head teachers, said yes to the question while three of them said due to some fees paid by parents, education was partially free. These responses are interesting in that if head teachers who are supposed to interpret and implement government policy of free education have mixed views, then full implementation of free education policy remains doubtful.

Teachers

In response to whether their schools offered free education, 37 (55.2%) of the 67 teachers, responded in the affirmative. See details of their responses in table 3 below.

Table 3: Whether schools offer free education (N=67)

Responses	PROVINCES							Total
	Lusaka	Central	Copperbelt	Southern	North – Western	Eastern	Western	
Yes	8	9	6	6	6	0	2	37
No	2	0	0	0	4	4	0	10
Partially	2	1	4	7	2	1	3	20
Total	12	10	10	13	12	5	5	67

Although the results in table 3 show that the majority 55.2% of the teachers indicated that their schools offered free education, the responses of those ten teachers who said there is no free education and the twenty who indicated that their schools offered partial free education should not be ignored. The no and partial free education responses indicate that education offered in primary schools is not free contrary to the government policy of free education.

Parents

Parents also had mixed views about whether their schools offered free education. For instance out of 140 parents, 71.4% said yes, 22.8% said no, and 5.7% said was partially free. The parents who said school did not offer free education and those who felt education was partially free based their argument on the fact that schools still required them to pay some fees as shown in table 4.

Pupils

Similar mixed views were expressed by pupils. Out of 186 pupils who participated in the study, 73% said that their schools offer free education. However, 27% of them had contrary views and argued: 'if it is free education why do teachers send us to call our parents to come and pay money to school?'

These views show that schools request parents to pay some fees. Table 4 below shows type of fees paid by parents on behalf of their children in primary school.

Type of Fees Paid by Pupils in Primary Schools by Province

Province	Type of Fees Paid by Pupils
Lusaka	PTA, general purpose fund, civilian day, uniforms, building fund and school bus.
Central	Uniforms, civilian day, cobra, 2Kg packet of sugar, tablet of soap and toilet tissue
Copper belt	PTA, uniforms, building fund, civilian day, medical and maintenance.
Southern	PTA, boarding fees, building, uniforms, sports and civilian day,
North-Western	PTA, uniforms, civilian day, boarding, medical fees, general purpose fund, cobra and building fund.
Western	General purpose fund, building fund, uniforms and boarding fee
Eastern	PTA, general purpose fund, building fund and boarding

Note: Due to ethical issues, fees paid have not been aggregated according to schools.

These findings about fees in table 4 are consistent with those of the Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) (2012) who found that about 56% of basic schools in Zambia still charge user fees which they had given different names.

A question was asked to the participants whether fees paid in schools contributed to pupils dropping out of schools. It was found that nine (9) of the fifteen (15) head teachers did not think fees contributed to pupils dropping out of school. They argued that pupils were only reminded to pay. They were not chased from school instead, they were allowed to continue learning in class. To the contrary, six (6) of the head teachers said failure to pay fees contributed to pupils dropping out of school. They argued that some pupils did not like to be frequently reminded to call their parents to come and pay for them. As a result, they went home and never returned to school.

Similarly, parents and pupils also alluded to the fact that some pupils dropped out of school because their parents could not afford to pay fees. The mixed views of participants are a sign of education not being convincingly free or participants not knowing what constitutes free education.

In seeking to understand the consequence of failing to pay these fees, a question about “what does the school do to pupils who fail to pay fees?” was asked to the participants. It was found that eight (8) of the fifteen(15) head teachers interviewed, said pupils were allowed to continue learning, three (3) said they call their parents to school to discuss how they will pay for their children, two(2) linked them to sponsors and two (2) kept reminding them to pay. One of the schools in Lusaka province and other in Southern province linked the vulnerable children to sponsors such as church organisations. At Lusaka Girls basic school the head teachers said, pupils do not pay anything. As a result, the question of what does the school do to pupils who fail to pay user fees did not apply to them.

In triangulating these views with those of parents, it was found that parents alluded to the fact they were called to school to discuss how they could pay fees while others said this question did not apply to them because they were not paying any fees at school. Further triangulation of views of head teachers and parents with those of pupils, it was found that similar sentiments were given. Some of the pupils said they were sent home to collect money but remained in school, others said they were sent to call parents to school, while those at Lusaka Girls basic school said they were not paying any fees at school. These findings clearly show that in one way or another due to demand for fees, head teachers appeal to pupils to make payments. As a result, some pupils drop out. Similarly, ZOCS, (2012) found that harsh economic situation parents found themselves in coupled with school fees, Ministry of Education experience high dropout rate. It would be commendable to have zero rate of dropout from school due to non-payment of fees.

The study further sought to determine benefits experienced as a result of free education. To this effect, participants (head teachers, teachers, parents and pupils) were asked whether there were benefits they could attribute to the policy on free education. It was found that they had mixed views. Head teachers and teachers said there was reduced absenteeism, increased enrolment, increased grade seven completion rate, parents were able to send their children to schools and improved academic performance. Most parents also alluded to the fact that they experienced some benefits as a result of free education. One parent said, “we can send our children to school even if we do not have money for their school requirements.”

Another parent said, “my children at Ndola Lions School for the Blind are sometimes provided with learning materials such as books and pens. As a result, I can say there is free education. ”

Despite the overwhelming affirmative responses to the fact that free education brought a lot of benefits, some parents argued to the contrary. For instance, one parent said: “I do not see any benefit because I still pay money for cobra, building, general purpose fund, PTA, medical and other school requirements”.

Pupils also had mixed views about the benefits of the policy on free education. Some felt education was free while others said it was not. Those who felt education was free based their response on their increase in class. One of them said:

We are now many in class because of free education. In addition, absenteeism among pupils has reduced. All this is because of free education.

Despite mixed views, the findings show overwhelming evidence that participants experienced benefits of the policy on free education. Similar findings were reported by Kelly, (1999). He found that when the government reintroduced the free policy on education, Ministry of Education had 79% increase in terms of enrolment to grade one.

As regards whether there were other factors apart from fees that contributed to pupils dropping out of school, all the participants responded in the affirmative. Among the factors cited include: lack of sponsors, failure to qualify to grade 8, early marriages, pregnancy, too big to learn with young pupils, negative attitudes of both parents and pupils and failure by parents to pay boarding and other fees on behalf of their children.

Due to these factors, out of 123 pupils enrolled in grade 1, 41 (18 males and 23 females) representing 33%, dropped out of school before they reached grade 7. In terms of proportion, this rate implies that one out of three pupils dropped out of school before reaching grade 7. Similarly, The Zambia Agency for People with Disabilities Report (2009) indicated that out every 100 pupils with disabilities enrolled in grade 1, 40% dropped out of school before they reached grade 7. There is need therefore, to get concerned about such a dropout rate if children with disabilities who are already disadvantaged by virtue of having a disability are to progress in education.

As to the views of teachers, parents and pupils about free education, it was found that they had mixed views.

Head teachers felt that the government did a good thing to declare education in primary school free. As a result, many parents could manage to send their children to school. However, others had the view that education was not free. To this effect one of them said:

Pupils in grades one up to seven should not pay anything towards their education. But since they pay some fees such as medical, boarding, building and maintenance, education is not really free.

Teachers had the view that many parents were able to send their children to school. However, they felt that parents did not fully understand what free education is. They cited the refusal of some parents to contribute cobra for cleaning classrooms, buying exercise books and pens for their children as signs that they did not fully understand the policy of free primary school education.

The general view of parents was that they did not fully understand what constitute free education because they still paid fees such as PTA, general purpose fund, transport, building, boarding, medical and maintenance. It was not clear what was free in the policy of free education. Was it books and pens which children receive at school that made education free? For instance, one of the parents completely refused that there was free education. She said,

[H]ow can I say the education my child is receiving is free if I have to constantly struggle to find money to pay for boarding, uniforms as well as groceries. When the church used to sponsor my child, there was free education because at the beginning of the term children were provided with transport, an allowance and all other school expenses were

paid. But when the church stopped sponsoring my child, I feel education is not free. As I speak, I owe the school over KR 1000 for fees and I am not even sure if my child will sit for the grade 7 examinations. How then can I say education is free?

While some parents doubted whether education was free or not, others were very happy that government offers free education to their children. To this effect, one of the parents from Lusaka said,

free education has brought many benefits such as not much emphasis by head teachers on school uniforms as a result parents send their children to school even if they have not yet bought uniforms. In addition, as parents we do not have to buy books and other learning materials for our children because schools provide them.

In addition, another parent from Kapirimposhi in Central province said:

Yes, there is free education from grade one to seven. Those in grade eight pay school fund. My child is in grade 6 and I do not pay anything. As a retrenched parent, my child is able to acquire education which could not be the case if I was asked to pay for his education.

The majority of pupils said education was free. They based their response on the fact that they were not paying school fees, received free exercise books and other stationery. Additionally, boarding fees could be paid in instalments, they were admitted to school even without paying any fees and head teachers did not emphasize on buying school uniforms.

Despite the majority of pupils saying education was free, others felt it was partially free. They argued that because they were forced to buy their own learning materials, pay medical and boarding fees, education was not free. For instance, at one of the schools in the Copperbelt province they pay KR300.00 for medical and maintenance fees. Similarly, in Central province some pupils felt education was not free and cited demand by the school for 2kg packet of sugar, a tablet of soap and toilet tissues from each pupil as an expense to make them doubt about free education in primary school. While those in boarding schools in North-Western, Eastern, Southern and Western provinces lamented about paying boarding fees to the point of doubting the policy on free education. The issue of paying fees has caused participants to doubt the free education policy. To mitigate this demand for fees from parents by schools, there is need to offer scholarship schemes to support the vulnerable children. This view is consistent with that of the Government of the Republic of Zambia in the 2011 Education Act, article 120 (2) which states:

[T]he Minister may establish a bursary and scholarship scheme to assist orphans and vulnerable learners at any public, aided or community educational institution.

Further mitigation of the demand for fees from parents by schools can be done by government providing adequate financial resources to schools. This view is also consistent with that of the Patriot Front (PF) Party Manifesto (party in government) which states that the PF government shall re-introduce free and compulsory education for all (that is from grade one to grade twelve), taking care to control the “unofficial” fee collections that have proliferated the current free

education version. In addition, provide adequate budgetary allocation on education to make free education a reality.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the study concluded that the policy on free education has positively contributed to pupils' access to primary school education. For instance, there is significant gross intake of pupils in grade 1, their progression rate to grade 7 was equally high at 66% compared to national acceptable rate of 59.9% and most participants felt they experienced the benefits of free education. However, the dropout rate of 33% is still high compared to 2.1% the national acceptable rate. This was attributed to various fees which parents were required to pay to schools. Apart from the fees, lack of sponsorship, failure to qualify to grade 8, early marriages, pregnancy, and negative attitudes of parents and pupils towards school contributed to pupils dropping out of school. Such high dropout rate continued to threaten the internal efficiency of the education system.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following is recommended;

1. There is need for the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Early Education to sensitise head teachers and parents on what constitute free education in schools.
2. Standard Education officers (inspectors of schools) should monitor the fees charged by schools on parents to ensure that the policy on free education is adhered to.
3. The government needs to provide adequate budgetary allocation on education to make free education a reality.

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