

Effects of Free Education Policy on the Provision of Primary and Secondary Education in Zambia

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Abstract: The study sought to establish the effects of the Free Education Policy on learner enrollment, school infrastructure, financing and the quality of teaching and learning in community primary and secondary public schools in Zambia. The study participants included the District Education Board Secretaries, head teachers, class teachers, learners and parents from 10 provinces, selected using probability and non-probability sampling techniques. Quantitative data was collected from teachers through a structured questionnaire. In addition, qualitative data was collected from the District Education Board Secretaries, learners and parents through in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussion guides. Quantitative data was processed, cleaned and analyzed using the SPSS 23.0 to produce descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was transcribed, sorted and analyzed along with survey data to establish emergent trends. The study found that the implementation of the Free Education Policy had increased school enrollments and government funding. The increase in the number of learners in schools has put pressure on the already overstretched educational resources like teachers, desks, textbooks, toilets and laboratory facilities, indirectly affecting the quality of education. The study suggests that Zambia's Free Education Policy implementation can be strengthened by prioritizing desks, textbooks, sanitary facilities, teacher deployment, modern classroom construction, especially in rural areas, and enacting sustainable financing legislation. The study, within the lens of the Capability Approach, has practical implications on how the implementation of the Free Education Policy can be strengthened in Zambia.

Keywords: Free Education Policy, Implementation, Primary and Secondary Schools, Capability Approach, Zambia.

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Introduction

Zambia aspires to become a middle-income and prosperous nation by 2030 (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2006). This is to be achieved through investment in human capital in line with its education vision of promoting innovative and lifelong education and training for all by 2030. The Vision 2030 and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 have directed the government policy on education in Zambia. Through the Eighth National Development Plan (8NDP), the Zambian government pledges to improve education and skills development through expanded access to quality Early Childhood Education (ECE), Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Education (8NDP). The government has thus been putting policies in place to enhance access to quality, equitable and inclusive education. Such policies include the implementation of the Free Education Policy (FEP) to promote Education For All (EFA) from Early childhood to secondary education. In 2022, the United Party for National Development (UPND) government introduced Free Education from pre-school to Grade Twelve to fulfil its campaign promise. Free education elated many stakeholders in the education sector. This is because equitable access to quality and inclusive education is indispensable for Zambia to realise its vision 2030 of becoming a middle-income and prosperous country (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2006) by leveraging on the demographic dividends of the educated populace.

However, the implementation of the FEP is said to have come with many challenges. Through media reports, various education stakeholders such as NGOs lamented that although the FEP had led many children to enroll in schools, the policy implementation had put a lot of pressure on the existing educational resources, thereby affecting the quality of education (NAQEZ, 2022). Various stakeholders in education argued that the increased learner enrolments in schools had adversely beleaguered the already frail school system (NAQEZ, 2022; Muyanwa, 2022) due to high-teacher pupil ratio. While these claims may be valid, they were not backed by credible evidence on large-scale empirical data. Against this background, an empirical survey was instituted by the Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) to establish the effects of the Free Education Policy.

Theoretical Framing

The study was framed within the Capability Approach, a framework developed by Amartya Sen.

It focuses on individuals' capabilities to promote well-being (Saito, 2003). The study focused on four key features of the Capability Approach. These four features are the functionings and capability, means, conversion factors and individual agency that relate to the implementation of the Free Education Policy (Robeyns, 2005). Capabilities are opportunities that enable individuals to access means to enhance their well-being while functionings are things people aspire to do and be (Menashy, 2014). In this study, access to education is the means to enhance children's well-being. Conversion factors determine an individual's ability to convert resources into capabilities and functionings and can be personal, social or environmental (Mwelwa, et al., 2021). Kimhur (2020) noted that conversion factors in the Capability Approach are critical in considering the diversity of individuals in terms of abilities. Agency is another crucial feature of the approach, where every human being has a role in achieving their well-being from the things they value doing and being.

In line with this study, the Capability Approach thus emphasizes the development of an individual's capabilities through education rather than just the acquisition of knowledge or skills (Walker, 2006). The implementation of the Free Education Policy in Zambia aims to expand individuals' capabilities by providing access to education and removing financial barriers. However, the approach recognizes that access to education alone is not enough, considering that the quality of education is indispensable in converting educational resources into valuable capabilities (Robeyns, 2005). Education must, therefore, address the development needs and aspirations of individuals. The implications of the Capability Approach in the implementation of the Free Education Policy are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Literature Review

Many countries have been implementing free primary and secondary education. Research has documented some of the effects of free education policies on enrolments, infrastructure and quality of education in these countries. This section reviews studies on free primary and secondary education.

Global Initiatives for Free Education

Global initiatives have been launched to universalize access to education, with the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 reaffirming the need for free basic education. The Jomtien Conference on Education emphasised the need to mobilise

resources for free basic education. The Jomtien Conference on Education emphasized the need to mobilize resources for free basic education. The Millennium Development Goals of 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Africa Agenda 2063 continue to influence national policies to promote equitable access to education. The Global Campaign for Education 2023 aims to provide inclusive, equitable, quality education and lifelong learning opportunities by 2030 (Global Campaign for Education, 2023).

Free Education Provision in African Countries

Many children that do not attend school are in sub-Saharan Africa (Klappermans & Panchamia, 2023). According to estimates, 118.5 million girls and 125.5 million boys between the ages of 6 and 18 were not attending school worldwide in 2021 (UNESCO, 2020). In response, several African countries have adopted free education policies to boost enrollment to overcome this challenge, attract and retain out-of-school children in schools (Mays & Singh, 2020). These nations include Ghana, Lesotho and Kenya.

The Ghanaian government launched a free education program in 2017 covering primary and secondary levels. The program provides tuition, admission, textbooks, utilities and meals. As a result of the free education program, Primary school retention rates were reported to have increased by over 90%. Furthermore, over 1.6 million learners have benefited from accessing free education in the country (Ndeti & Walubengo, 2022). Free school feeding programs have been established to support learners in rural areas. However, challenges include a lack of funding for high-quality instruction and low community participation. Experts recommend increased financing and improved supervision of teaching and learning (Mantey, 2012).

Lesotho is another country that has been offering free primary education. According to UNICEF (2018), the Education Act of 2010 led to the implementation of the Free Education Policy in Lesotho and made attendance at primary school compulsory. With 82% of learners enrolled in schools, the nation has significantly improved access to education over the past 20 years (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2022). Over 70% of learners are retained in school. Although the government of Lesotho made basic education free, many children, particularly boys, were not found in schools, primarily because of a lack of community support (Lekhetho, 2013). Young

boys in rural Lesotho are expected to care for animals when they are not in school. Free education faces challenges such as insufficient funding for infrastructure, curriculum development, teacher training and instructional materials. Additionally, there is a weak monitoring and quality control system. Low attendance rates, especially among low-income households, limit the country's efforts to provide education for all children.

In Kenya, the government reintroduced Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003 and made secondary education free for all enrolled pupils in 2008 through the Basic Education Act of 2013 (Mulinya & Orodoh, 2015). Communities help schools by raising funds for building, improvements and learning resources (James et al., 2016). This led to an 80% increase in primary and secondary school enrollments (Bhalota et al., 2014). However, overcrowded facilities and a shortage of teachers posed challenges (Ekundayo, 2018). For instance, in 2017, the average teacher-to-pupil ratio in primary schools rose to 1:110 (Africa Check, 2017), thereby compromising education standards. The government introduced the Harambee program, but communities struggled to pay for teachers' salaries and other resources. Despite these obstacles, the government remained committed to improving education quality in public schools.

Evolution of the Free Education Policy Implementation in Zambia

Zambia has faced challenges in providing free education to all its eligible citizens. After achieving political independence in 1964, the United National Independence Party (UNIP) started offering free education from primary to university and passed the 1966 Education Act to establish free public schools and abolish the dual education system (Carmody, 2004). However, the global economic slump of the 1970s and low copper prices disrupted the provision of free education. The Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) struggled to provide free education after inheriting a failing economy and implemented user fees in the early 1990s (MOE, 1996). Learner enrollment increased after the MMD announced its Free Primary Education Policy in March 2002, but secondary education from grade 8 to 12 was not free due to the cost sharing policy (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Though the PF maintained free primary education and eliminated examination fees for grades 7 and 9, additional user costs in public schools made it

difficult for low-income families to send their children to school. The transition to secondary school remained difficult in Zambia because grades 8 and 10 required payment of tuition. Many less fortunate Zambians were unable to pay for secondary education and they had to quit school after completing grade 7. Proponents of universal education urged the Zambian government to eliminate user fees, which are perceived as the main obstacle to obtaining universal or free education.

In 2014, the World Bank reported that more than 75 million children in sub-Saharan Africa of school age did not attend school (Bhalota et al., 2014). Equally, in a recent Afrobarometer survey, 63% of the respondents affirmed that it was common to see school age children who were not in school (Chibwili, 2023). In response, the UPND New Dawn government promised to establish free or government-funded education from primary through secondary levels upon taking office in 2021 (United Party for National Development, 2021). The Free Education Policy of the UPND government was meant for all forms of user fees in schools. The government instructed school administrators not to turn away any prospective learners and abolished the unofficial practice of schools requiring learners and parents to purchase school uniforms. These initiatives were made in hopes of achieving the universal education.

Free Education Implementation: Current Situation

In late 2021, the Zambian government declared free primary and secondary education through the announcement of the 2022 national budget. The Minister of Finance announced the elimination of all school fees, including PTA and examination costs, and stated that learners in primary through secondary schools would not have to pay any fees beginning in 2022 (Minister of Finance and National Planning, 2021). The government proposed allocating K1.8 billion in school grants to assist schools in adopting free education in 2022. All government schools were directed not to charge learners for anything starting in 2022. Even community schools were included in the concept of free education (Zenda, 2022).

The implementation of the Free Education Policy in Zambia was meant to eliminate the financial barrier to accessing education by many children, leading to increased enrollments in schools (Muyanwa, 2022). However, concerns were raised about the quality of

the education that would be provided in schools amidst increased school attendance. For instance, a mini-survey by Phiri (2022) in Chongwe District reported teacher-pupil ratios higher than the national average of 1:35 (NAQEZ, 2022; Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, 2011). The exponential growth in learners due to rising enrollments was feared to put tremendous stress on teachers and other educational resources, further compromising the quality of education provision. Despite the above claims by several stakeholders in education, no empirical evidence was provided to justify the fears. More so, the government did not provide sufficient information on how the Free Education Policy would be implemented without jeopardizing quality. Therefore, the policy outcomes regarding the teacher-pupil ratio, book-pupil ratio, restroom-pupil ratio and other ratios needed to be empirically established. This culminated in a nationwide survey to establish the changes brought about by the implementation of the Free Education Policy, the results of which informed this study.

Methodology

This section explains the research design and population and sampling methods used. It also explains among other things, the data collection instruments employed and how the issues of validity and reliability were ensured.

Design

The study adopted the survey design and used a mixed methods approach. In this regard, both the qualitative and quantitative approaches were utilized. A survey was adopted as it allows the sample of the population to be studied as opposed to study the entire population which could be impossible or costly (Cresswell, 2014). Within the survey design, a mixed methods approach was adopted to ensure that quantitative and qualitative data were effectively collected to measure the effect of the implementation of the Free Education Policy on the provision of education in the community and public primary and secondary schools accurately in Zambia.

Population and Sampling

A sample of 349 schools was drawn from the population of 9352 schools in Zambia. Non probability and probability sampling techniques were used to draw districts, schools and respondents into the study sample. In this regard, 20 districts were purposively selected based on

being provincial capitals or rural districts, whereas 30 districts were randomly selected. Schools from the sampled district were purposively selected based on being rural, urban and accessible. A total of 349 head teachers and 50 District Educational Board Secretaries (DEBS) were purposively selected for the study. In addition 1,271 teachers participated in the study based on their availability. Further, 157 parents and 1,112 pupils participated in the study based on their availability at the time of the study. The majority of the school head teachers (59.0%) were male, while females (62.9%) constituted most of the class teachers in the study. Further, more primary schools (43.9%) participated in the study compared to the number of community and secondary schools.

Data Collection and Analysis of Data

Quantitative data was collected from head teachers and teachers using a questionnaire. Further, a checklist was used to obtain quantitative data on observable things such as desks and classroom sizes. Qualitative data was collected from District Education Board Secretaries' offices through a key informant interview guide. In-depth Interview Guides were used to conduct 157 interviews with parents and 139 Focus Group Discussions were conducted with pupils. The ODK-programmed tablets and digital recorders were used to collect Quantitative and Qualitative data. Quantitative data was processed, cleaned and analyzed using the SPSS 23.0 to produce descriptive statistics. Qualitative data from recorded interviews was transcribed, sorted and analyzed along with survey data to establish emergent trends.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings, data collection instruments were peer-reviewed and piloted in some selected schools that were not officially part of the study. The outcomes of the pilot provided authors an opportunity to revise and define the data collection instruments. Further, procedures were developed for storing the collected digital data to ensure its integrity was not compromised. In addition, quantitative data was uploaded onto the tablets using the ODK platform and was checked by the data quality manager for completeness and authenticity.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in the selected community and public primary and secondary schools with the Ministry of Education's approval and participants' informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study and discusses them based on the research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the Influence of the Free Education Policy on Enrolments in Schools?

An overwhelming majority of head teachers (98%) reported that free education had increased the learners' enrolments in schools. Similarly, a high proportion of teachers (96%) reported that free education had increased the number of learners in classes. The enrolments had increased tremendously in all schools, in different percentages as observed by the Head teachers and teachers in Figure 1.

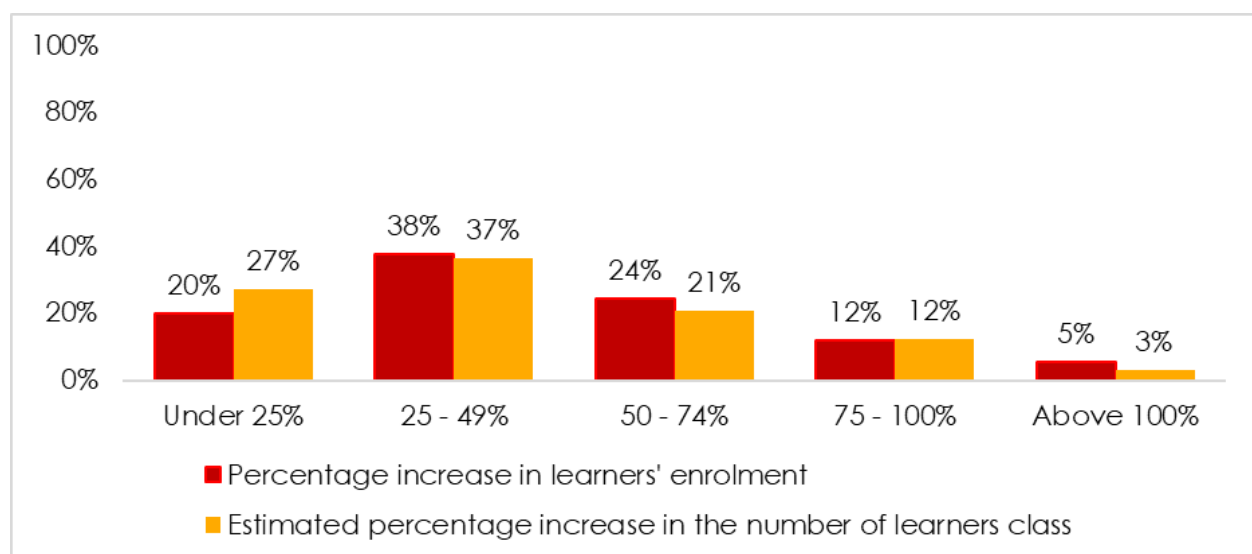


Figure 1: Percentage Increase in Learners' Enrolments

As captured in Figure 1, many schools and classes witnessed an increase in the percentages of learners' enrolment. For instance, about 38% of the schools surveyed had experienced between 25 percent and 49 percent increase in learner enrolments, while 12% had learners' enrolment numbers increase above 75% in the 2022 academic year. There was also a corresponding increase in the number of learners in classes. The findings were supported by the District Education Board Secretaries, who indicated that introducing the Free Education Policy had led to increased access to education by learners. There was also a marked increase in the number of learners enrolled in all the districts. For instance one DEBS official submitted that:

The free education has led to an increase in the out of school children going back to school. Because of the free education policy, the district has witnessed overcrowding and high pupil-teacher ratio. [DEBS, Eastern Province].

Learners and parents confirmed the increase in enrolments in schools and praised the Free Education Policy introduced by the government. For example, a learner in the central province said:

I know someone who is now in grade 10. His parents died when he was in grade nine. He had to stop because he couldn't manage to raise the fees on his own, and he had to start taking care of his young ones. After the introduction of free education, he was able to come back to school.

One parent commended the government for the Free Education Policy by saying, "Many of the children were staying home in the compounds, but now they will have no excuse to say we pay for school, which the government has refused. So, we appreciate what the government has done."

The findings imply that the Free Education Policy positively influenced the enrolments in schools by breaking the financial barrier that limited the transition of many from primary to secondary schools. The increase in learner enrolment was also recorded so in countries such as Ghana, Lesotho and Kenya where free education was introduced (Ndeti & Walubengo, 2022; UNICEF, 2018; Bhalota et al., 2014). For example, in Ghana, free education saw a sharp increase in enrolment among learners by over 90%. This was attributed to the provision of free

education, the provision of free textbooks and the discontinuation of other users' fees. This seems to be the case in Zambia, where the phasing out of all user fees has made it possible for even learners from disadvantaged communities and homes to return to school as they were expected to pay nothing besides buying their books and uniforms. This clearly shows that user fees in Zambia significantly hindered many learners' access to education (Mwelwa, 2014). In the context of the Capability Approach, by putting in place the Free Education Policy, the government removed the financial barrier that made primary and secondary education, the means of promoting wellbeing by the young ones, accessible to the majority of the children in the country. Access to education improved exponentially, especially at the secondary school level for which access to grade eight was a challenge to many children considering the tuition fees they had to pay by then.

Research Question 2: What is the Effect of Free Education on the Teacher-Pupil Ratios?

The study revealed that introducing the Free Education Policy had created pressure on the school resources and facilities due to high teacher-pupil ratios. Over 97% of head teachers and teachers agreed that the Free Education Policy had increased the number of learners enrolled in 2022, putting pressure on school facilities and resources. The teacher-pupil ratio increased in all schools, with many having ratios of 1:50-80. Furthermore, some schools (17%), particularly urban ones, had higher ratios (1:80) as shown in Figure 2.

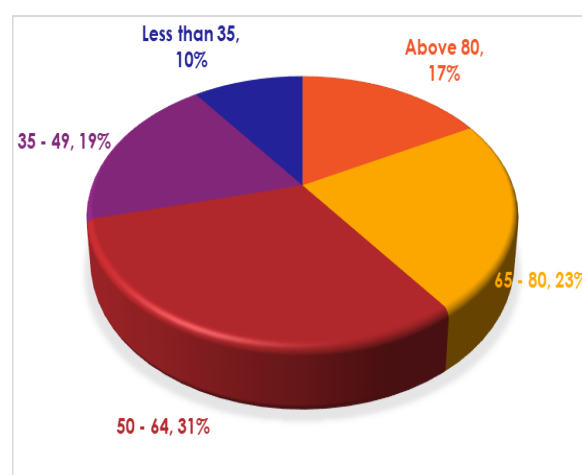


Figure 2: Teacher – Pupil ratio

The study further revealed that only 10% of the schools had less than 35 learners per teacher, while 19% had 35 learners and over in each class. In some schools, it was found that one teacher was handling more than 80 learners (Figure 2). Some parents with children in community schools complained about too few teachers being deployed there. Most schools had 1 or 2 teachers teaching between 60 and 120 learners in a typical rural setting. For instance, one parent at a community school submitted: "We want the government to bring more teachers because there are many children from grade 1 to grade 6, and there are only two teachers. We want the government to bring more teachers to the school."

One of the DEBS also submitted the following with respect to class sizes due to free education: "The normal class size is 40-45. But we have situations where there are 110–120 pupils per class. Facilities are not matching with enrolment" [District Education Board Secretary, Northern Province].

It is therefore evident that the Free Education Policy had increased the teacher-pupil ratio to unprecedented levels (Figure 2). This is also supported by the parliamentary report on the implementation of the Free Education Policy (Government of the Republic of Zambia, 2023). In some schools, the ratios were as high as 1:100. These findings are similar to what was obtained in Kenya where the teacher-pupil ratio was reported to be at 1:111 after the introduction of free education (Africa Check, 2017) and what Bwalya (2023) found when he investigated the teaching of

computer studies in public secondary schools in Lusaka City where the teacher-pupil ratio was as high as 1:100 in some schools.

The heightened teacher-pupil ratio goes against the Government of Zambia's aspiration to reduce the ratios to 1:40 in primary and 1:35 in secondary schools (Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality, 2011). In 2022, the Ministry of Education recruited over 30,000 teachers to cushion the shortage of teachers in schools. On average, each district in Zambia received 200 new teachers. Unfortunately, this was not adequate to resolve the problem of high teacher-pupil ratio in schools. Considering the increased enrolment rates, most primary schools still had fewer than required teachers.

Given the above results, the high teacher-pupil ratios made teaching, classroom management and assessment increasingly difficult. The increase in the teacher-pupil ratio has made it difficult for teachers to manage classrooms and the inability to use learner-centered approaches in teaching and give personalized attention to the learners. The increased teacher-pupil ratio has resulted in teachers' burnout, leading to high levels of stress, and reduced motivation. More so, teachers were failing to effectively assess the learners. Learners were too many and thus, marking classwork was also becoming a big challenge for many teachers (NAQEZ, 2022), thereby affecting the quality of teaching and learning in schools.

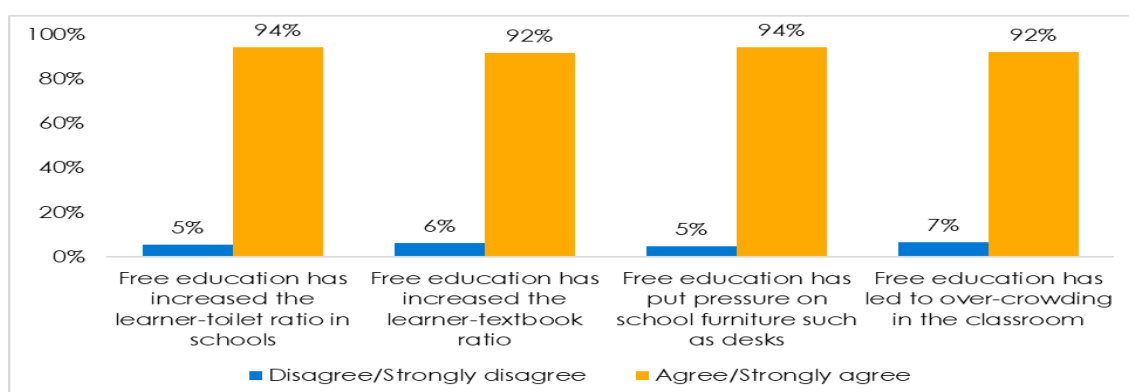


Figure 3: Free Education has Caused Pressure on Education Facilities

Research Question 3: What has been the Effect of Free Education on School Facilities and Materials?

The Free Education Policy led to increased pressure on the school infrastructure and furniture such as classrooms, desks, toilets, computer labs, libraries,

science laboratories, kitchens (for home economics), and boarding facilities due to overcrowding. As shown in Figure 3, over 90% of the teachers interviewed "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that implementing the Free Education Policy had led to an increase in the ratios of learners using school

toilets, textbooks and desks and that there was overcrowding in most classrooms. The teachers' responses corroborated with the views of the DEBS, learners and community members, who affirmed that the increase in the number of learners getting back to school, had exerted pressure on the learning facilities and the teaching and learning materials. The findings were echoed by the DEBS officials in different districts. For instance, one of the DEBS submitted that:

Yes, the introduction of the Free Education Policy has caused pressure on the school facilities, like classroom space, desks, laboratories, toilets, bed space in boarding schools, etcetera. Apart from increased enrolment at ECE, Grade 1, 8, and 12 levels, many out-of-school pupils had to enroll themselves back into the education system" [DEBS, Central Province].

The learners complained of overcrowding and inadequate desks. For instance, some learners interviewed had the following to say at one school: "Because many pupils are attending class now compared to before, there is now a shortage of desks". At another school, a pupil mentioned that: "Desks and classrooms are not enough because of the increase in the number of learners, leading to some learners coming in the afternoon."

Most of the schools visited had an acute shortage of desks (Figure 4). Therefore, in some schools, learners of different ages and grades sat on the floor or stones. In some schools, sitting at a desk depended on when a learner reached school. There

was a scramble for desks, and only learners who arrived early in school would sit at a desk. A learner had the following to say regarding the shortage of desks in school by saying:

...And again, because it is full, we do not have enough desks. Others even sit on the floor. Maybe in your class, you are 81, and others will sit on the floor because the desks are few. We used to be sitting just fine, but now there are many pupils, so we sit down" (Learner, FGD, Lusaka Province).

This aligns with the observations made by NAQEZ (2022) and Phiri (2022) that the introduction of free education in Zambia resulted in overcrowding, thus creating a shortage of desks. Overcrowding and shortage of desks can compromise the quality of education.

Similarly, the computer laboratories, Science laboratories and library facilities in those schools with these facilities were under pressure due to over-enrolment. Worse still, some specialized facilities had been turned into classrooms or office spaces in some schools to accommodate the increased number of learners enrolling. The absence of such facilities compromises the quality of education and the learning outputs. The inadequacy of such facilities was confirmed by one of the learners during the interview, who said: The laboratory is still being used as office space for the teachers. I suggest they build the teachers' staff room so we can start using the lab. [Secondary School Learner, FGD].

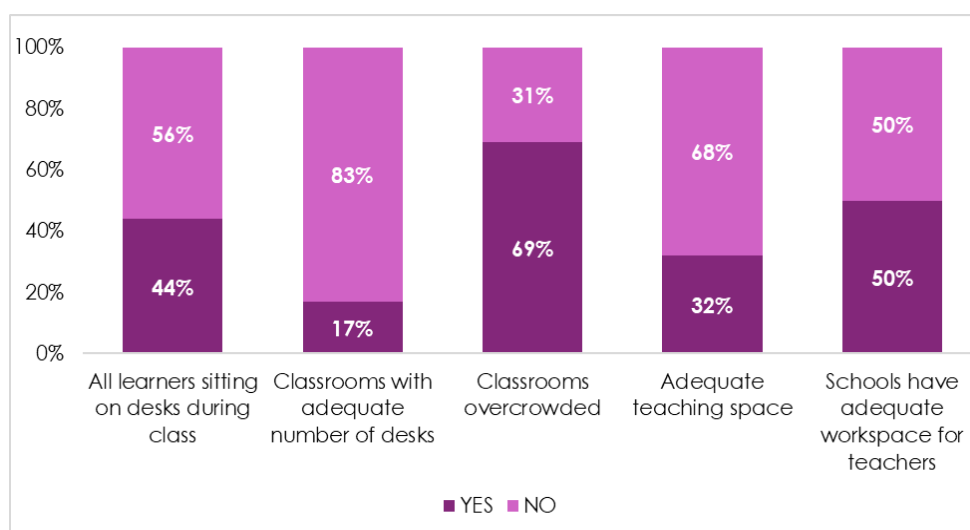


Figure 4: Physical Observation of Classrooms

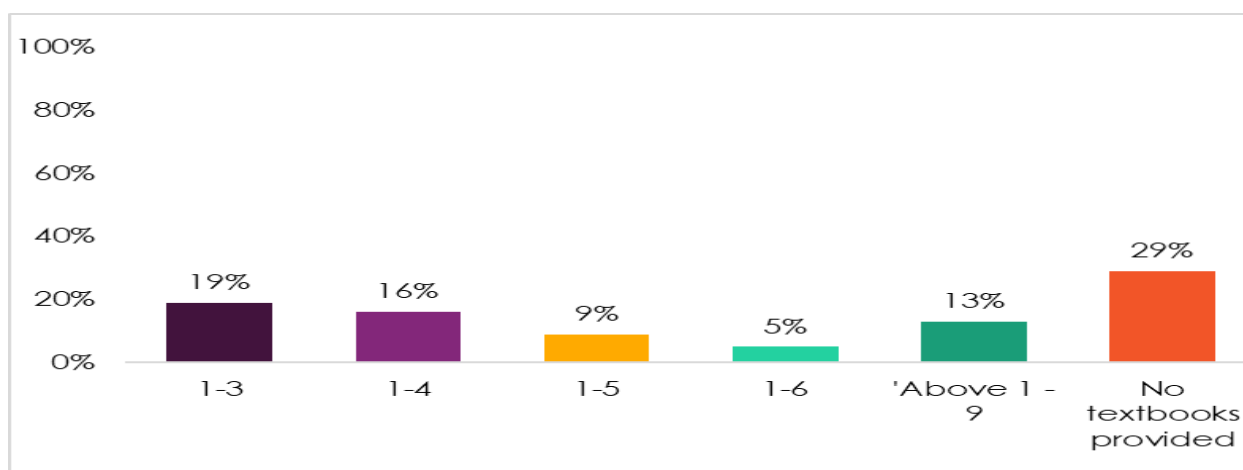


Figure 5: Textbook-Pupil Ratio

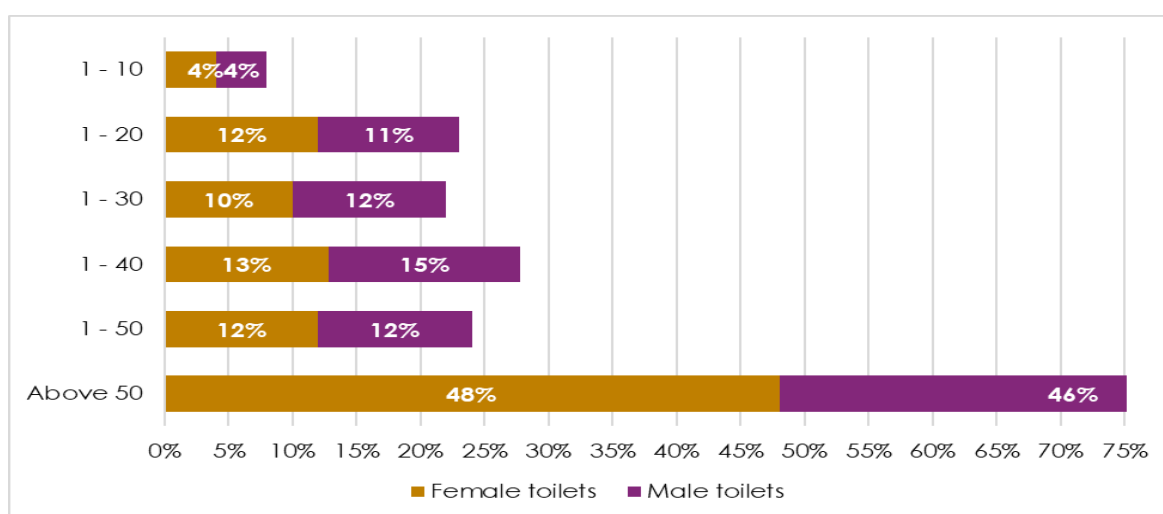


Figure 6: Toilet-pupil ratios

Schools across all 10 provinces had overcrowded classrooms and not enough desks for all learners as confirmed through physical observations and a checklist, with the issue present in both urban and rural schools (see Figure 4).

Schools across all 10 provinces had overcrowded classrooms and not enough desks for all learners as confirmed through physical observations and a checklist, with the issue present in both urban and rural schools (see Figure 4).

There was also an increase in the textbook-pupil ratio. It was revealed that in 62% of schools (6 in 10 schools) surveyed, one textbook was used by more than one learner at a time, and in 13 per cent of the schools, over 9 learners had to use one textbook. About 3 in 10 (29%) schools' textbooks were not provided as shown in Figure 5.

At one school, a pupil submitted that:

We have insufficient learning materials such as textbooks with a ratio of 1 textbook to 6 learners." A parent also added to this, saying: ...there should be an extension in the provision of learning materials such as textbooks. With the introduction of free education, the learner-book ratio has gone up. The current ratio is 1:10.

From the findings, educational resources had not matched the increased number of learners. The pupils, teachers and head teachers reported a shortage of learning materials, which had put a strain on the limited materials. The findings of the study show high textbook-pupil ratios as high as 1:9 (Figure 6). Further, some schools had no textbooks for the learners to use. Inadequate supply and lack

of textbooks can compromise the quality of education being provided.

In many schools surveyed, the available toilets were also inadequate for learners. As shown in Figure 6, over 48% of the surveyed schools had toilets that over 50 learners used. This exceeded the minimum standards for toilet use in schools of 1:25 for boys and 1:20 for girls (Ministry of General Education, 2020).

At one school, a pupil had the following to say regarding the condition of the toilet facilities:

We do not have enough toilets because the number of learners has increased. There are only 3 toilets at this school, two for pupils and one for teachers. Girls only use the two for pupils, and the boys go to the bush.

Another learner lamented that:

Our toilets are old; if you check the number of people we have here, it is more than 1000, and we only have six toilets. So, it is like we have a shortage of toilets, so we are asking the government to build more toilets.

In most of the surveyed schools, the number of toilets being shared by the learners was far less than the minimum set standards of 1:25 for boys and 1:20 for girls by the Ministry of Education in Zambia (Ministry of General Education, 2023). Over 48% of the surveyed schools had a toilet-pupil ratio of 1:50 and above (Figure 6). The inadequate provision of toilet facilities and lack of access to clean and safe drinking water in most schools posed serious health

threats to the lives of learners and teachers in case of an outbreak of waterborne diseases.

The study established that while the Free Education Policy was put in place by the UPND government in 2022 to promote access to primary and secondary schools as a fulfilment of the political promise (United Party for National Development, 2021), it was established without putting in place a legal framework to enforce its implementation. The physical school infrastructure, such as classrooms, laboratory spaces, specialized rooms, and sanitation facilities, was also inadequate to accommodate more learners. The absence of these environmental conversion factors, as espoused by the Capability Approach (Kimhur, 2020), may likely affect the quality of learning experiences. For instance, the unavailability of clean and safe toilets or ablution blocks in some schools made it difficult for girls to participate in school when it was time for menstrual hygiene management (GRZ, 2017).

Furthermore, while access to education for learners with disabilities is essential for inclusivity, inadequate facilities and services may often hinder their participation and success in school (Chitiyo & Muwana, 2018). Although education may be free of charge, it may not be so in an absolute sense. This implies that the children's ability to profit from education may be affected by some *social and environmental* conversion factors such as inadequate available learning space (classrooms and laboratories), inadequate boarding facilities, the poor state of water and sanitation facilities in some schools and the long distances some may have to cover to get to school.

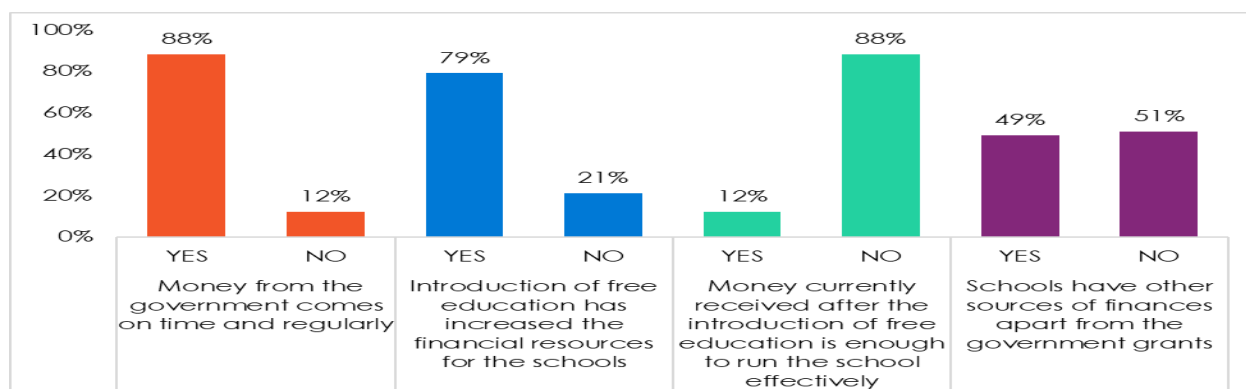


Figure 7: Funding to Schools during FEP

Research Question 4: What has been the Effect of Free Education Policy on School Financing?

Concerning funding, the study revealed that introducing free education had increased financial resources in schools to procure teaching and learning materials. The funds were being received on time and regularly as shown in figure 7. In addition, several Head Teachers (88%) indicated that although funding had increased, it was still inadequate to meet all the school requirements. It was also established that the introduction of the Free Education Policy affected other sources of financing in schools. For instance, some schools (51%) indicated not having other sources of income apart from the government grants that were introduced. It was also found that capital projects such as the construction of classroom blocks and other facilities were not to be done using the free education grants schools received.

The study further revealed that schools experienced a boost in funding following the implementation of the Free Education Policy in 2022 (Figure 7). However, the study's qualitative data revealed that the funding was primarily allocated towards operational expenses, such as purchasing books, rather than capital projects like improving facilities or renovating classrooms. This limitation hindered schools' ability to enhance their infrastructure for the benefit of their learners. The issues of the inadequacy of the finances came out from the officials who were interviewed as below:

As much as funding is regular and quarterly, meeting all the budget requirements is inadequate. The schools lack many needs, from teaching and learning materials to infrastructure needs. Funding needs to be increased significantly in infrastructure development as most of the school infrastructure needs rehabilitation [DEBS, Western Province].

Another one indicated: "Yes. The grant is adequate, but it cannot meet all the school requirements, such as infrastructure and desks, to meet the demands of free education" [DEBS, Southern Province]

While schools appreciated the increased funding, some expressed concerns that it was insufficient to cover their needs, especially with rising enrollments. The new policy also discouraged cost-sharing with the community. By making education accessible, all user fees paid by parents and guardians to schools

were discontinued. It is arguable that while total reliance on government funding of public education was acceptable, it could harm schools' financial sustainability during periods of inconsistent funding. In other jurisdictions, such as Kenya and Ghana, where the free education policy had been implemented, meeting the learning needs of children in schools continue to be a shared responsibility between the government and the members of communities (Aryeh-Adjei, 2021).

Research Question 5: Has the Free Education Policy expanded the school feeding program?

Further, the availability of the school feeding program emerged as an important factor in curbing learner absenteeism in most schools. Many parents believed that the schools needed to have feeding programs for learners to benefit fully from free education. The feeding program, however, was found in only a few rural communities and schools supported by private sector organizations. Most of the schools had no school feeding program. For instance, learners from selected primary schools had this to say regarding the school feeding program in schools:

There is no feeding program at this school because the community members do not come to cook" (Primary School Learner, Lavushimanda). Only one school had a feeding program for learners, out of all the schools visited and one parent said: "The government should finance the feeding program, especially in the primary schools because it encourages the pupils to go to school.

Many children, especially in rural and peri-urban areas come from low-income households and may lack many basic needs and possibly attend school without eating anything. To help such learners benefit fully from accessing education, the government, working with local communities, must support school feeding programs in schools to feed the most vulnerable learners (Drake *et al*, 2016). We argue that implementing a school feeding program will likely retain learners in school, end classroom hunger, a personal conversation factor, and enhance learning outcomes (Walker, 2006). This, however, was not the case in most schools. The feeding program was either lacking or if it existed, was supported by other non-governmental organizations that did not guarantee the sustainability of such programs at the end of their project cycles. Therefore, the successful implementation of the 2022 Free Education Policy

can be positively influenced by the presence of feeding programs in the community and some primary schools (Wang & Fawzi, 2020). In the context of the Capability Approach, learners must be empowered to ensure that they access and benefit from education to enhance their present and future well-being.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusion

In line with the study's objectives, it can be concluded that implementing the free education policy has led to several developments in providing free community, primary and secondary education in Zambia. First, the free education policy increased learner enrollment. The increased enrolments led to high teacher-pupil ratios and overcrowded classrooms. This likely put a lot of pressure on teachers to effectively teach and manage and assess learners in overcrowded classes. Such overcrowded classes can compromise the quality of education, affecting schools' teaching and learning experiences and outcomes. Secondly, the policy implementation increased pressure on schools' existing teaching and learning facilities. It was clear that the higher enrolment rates in schools resulted in inadequate classroom space, textbooks, desks, laboratory, boarding and sanitation facilities necessary for effective teaching and learning. The implementation of the Free Education Policy in 2022 led to enhanced and regularized public primary and secondary school funding. Lastly, the study has demonstrated that while the school feeding program was available in some schools, its sustainability was questionable without the support of the government and other stakeholders. As such, the successful implementation of the Free Education Policy will require interventions targeted at removing the various conversion factors that may hinder children's access and participation in education while creating conducive teaching and learning environments for their success in schools and beyond.

Recommendations

Having highlighted the effects of the implementation of the Free Education Policy on the provision of education in community, primary and secondary schools since the year 2022, the following recommendations are suggested for implementation by the Government of Zambia and its Cooperating partners to improve the quality and

sustainability of free education delivery in the country:

To begin with, the government should expedite the procurement of desks to overcome the acute shortage in community, primary and secondary schools to accommodate more learners. The government should also continue budgeting for annual teacher recruitment exercises to address the teacher shortage and reduce school pupil-teacher ratios.

The government and its cooperating partners should mobilize internal and external financial resources to ensure the renovation, expansion or construction of school facilities like libraries, home economics kitchens, computer and science laboratories, and access to safe water and sanitation facilities.

Through parliament, the government should further develop the legislative framework to support and guarantee the sustainable financing and implementation of the free education policy in community, primary and secondary schools. Lastly, the government and its cooperating partners should expand the School Feeding Program in all community and rural public primary schools to end learner classroom hunger and improve school attendance and participation.

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