



The Impact of Free Education Policy on Quality of Education in Zambian Schools: A Case Study of Lunte District

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Abstract- Purpose: This study examined the impact of Zambia's free education policy on educational quality in selected government secondary schools in Lunte District, Northern Province. Methodology: A mixed-methods descriptive design was used with 50 respondents (teachers, pupils, head teachers, parents, officials) from five schools. Data were collected via questionnaires, interviews, observations, and focus groups. Results: Enrolment increased from 1-2% annually pre-policy to 7.2% post-implementation. Overcrowding affected 89.2% of classrooms, with pupil-teacher ratios exceeding the government standard of 35-40:1. Infrastructure was inadequate (87% of the head teachers). Learning materials were insufficient (pupil-textbook ratio 1:4 to 1:5). Quality of education was rated as average (64%), low (10%), and high (26%). Major challenges included absenteeism (95%), large classes (87.5%), illiterate grade progression (77.5%), and delayed government funding (70%). Conclusion: Free education successfully expanded access but compromised quality due to insufficient infrastructure, human resources, learning materials, and delayed funding. Recommendations: Increase education budget, employ more teachers, ensure timely fund disbursement, construct adequate infrastructure, and clearly communicate policy expectations.

Keywords: Keywords for this study include Zambia free education policy, educational quality, government secondary schools, Lunte District, school enrolment, overcrowded classrooms, pupil-teacher ratio, inadequate infrastructure, learning materials shortage, textbook ratio, absenteeism, large class sizes, grade progression, delayed funding, access to education, teacher recruitment, education budget, policy implementation, academic performance, and sustainable education development.

I. Introduction

1.1 Background

Education is fundamental to development and human rights (UN, 1948). Zambia's education policy has evolved significantly. After independence in 1964, a Free Education Policy was introduced in 1965 via the Education Act (No. 28 of 1966), eliminating tuition fees. However, economic decline in the 1980s led to cost-sharing and fee re-introduction. Following global Education for All (EFA) goals, Zambia re-introduced Free Primary Education in 2002 and extended it to secondary schools in 2021.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The free education policy has caused a drastic enrolment surge, leading to teacher shortages, classroom shortages, lack of admission guidelines, and inadequate learning materials. Upgrading primary schools to secondary status without new facilities has worsened these challenges. This study assessed the policy's influence on educational quality in Lunte District.



1.3 Research Objectives

The study aimed to determine enrolment trends; factors for successful implementation; effects on pupil performance; implementation challenges; influence on teachers' ability to offer quality education; and impact on learning resources.

1.4 Research Questions

What are enrolment trends? What factors lead to successful implementation? What are the effects on performance? What challenges are faced with? What is the influence on quality? What is the impact on learning materials?

II. Literature Review

2.1 Global & African Context

Free Primary Education (FPE) across sub-Saharan Africa has consistently led to large enrolment increases (Eldah et al., 2005). In Kenya (2003), fee abolition brought 1.2 million new students but caused insufficient infrastructure and high pupil-teacher ratios (Akech & Simatwa, 2010). In Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, and Tanzania, increased access was accompanied by compromised quality and resource shortages (UNESCO, 2004b). Key obstacles to EFA include economic constraints, weak managerial capacity, and system inertia (UNESCO, 2015)

2.2 Zambian Perspective

Zambia's 2002 FPE reduced out-of-school children from 570,000 (30%) to 340,000 (16.6%) by 2009 (Mulenga & Mambwe, 2010). However, the pupil-teacher ratio worsened from 49:1 to 57:1; average class size reached 77; and literacy pass rates were only 33% (Actionaid-Zambia, 2004). Budget allocation to education dropped from 20% (2001) to about 6% (2011), far below needs (GRZ, 2011). The World Bank (2015) identified delayed fund disbursement, inadequate materials, and limited infrastructure as persistent challenges. Secondary enrolment remained low (21.5%), and government funding is often inadequate, irregular, and delayed (Mobela, 2015).

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design & Area

A descriptive, mixed-methods design was used in Lunte District, Northern Province, Zambia.

3.2 Sample

Target population: 140. Final sample: 50 respondents, including 15 teachers, 15 pupils, 12 class teachers, 3 guidance teachers, 3 head teachers, 2 civil society officials, and 12 parents from five schools (Chitoshi, Mukupa Kaoma, Kafubu, Pecha, Muyembe).

3.3 Sampling & Data Collection

Simple random sampling was used for schools; purposive sampling for key informants. Data were collected via self-administered questionnaires, unstructured interviews, observation checklists, and focus group discussions.



3.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data underwent a thematic analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies). Ethical approval was obtained, and confidentiality was guaranteed.

IV. Results

4.1 Demographic & Enrolment Trends

Teacher qualifications: 62.5% Diploma, 28% Bachelor's, 10% Master's. Enrolment increased from 1-2% annually pre-2002 to 7.2% post-2002, with another significant surge following the 2021 secondary school extension.

4.2 Class Size & Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR)

Overcrowding was reported by 89.2% of teachers. Pupil distribution per class: 30-40 (5.2%), 41-60 (39.2%), 61-80 (36.5%), 81-100 (19.1%). PTR distribution: $\leq 25:1$ (35% of schools), 25-35:1 (40%), $\geq 60:1$ (25%). The government standard is 35-40:1, indicating widespread non-compliance.

4.3 Infrastructure & Learning Materials

Inadequate classrooms: 87% (head teachers). Infrastructure condition: very old (50%), dilapidated (37%), good (13%). All schools (100%) operate on triple or four shifts. Pupil-textbook ratio: 1:4 (75% of schools), 1:5 (25%). Teachers reporting inadequate materials: 87%.

4.4 Quality of Education & Performance

Teacher assessment of quality: High (26%), Average (64%), Low (10%). Educator-observed pupil performance: Excellent (11.1%), Good (18.2%), Average (33.3%), Bad (37.3%).

4.5 Major Challenges

Key implementation challenges included: absenteeism (95%), large/overcrowded classes (87.5%), pupils promoted while illiterate (77.5%), inadequate teaching staff (75.8%), inadequate toilets (75.8%), over-aged pupils (70%), and high dropout rate (64.7%). Administrative challenges included: delayed government grants (70%), inadequate funding (70%), limited classroom space (65%), and irregular supply of materials (41%).

4.6 Impact on Education Delivery

Reported impacts included: no quality delivery (15.8%), low literacy levels (13.2%), teachers unable to teach effectively (13.2%), poor performance (13.2%), poor environments causing absenteeism (9.2%), reduced learning time (7.8%), and teachers overworked (2.6%).

V. Discussion

The findings confirm that free education successfully expanded access, consistent with Mulenga and Mambwe (2010). However, this success severely compromised quality. Pupil-teacher ratios exceeding government standards align with Actionaid-Zambia



(2004), which documented national ratios of 57:1. Overcrowding (89.2%) and having 4-5 pupils per desk (75% of schools) directly reduce teacher-pupil interaction.

Inadequate infrastructure (87% of head teachers) and the use of triple/four shifts (100% of schools) reduce actual learning time, as confirmed by respondent reports. The pupil-textbook ratio of 1:4 to 1:5 makes effective teaching extremely difficult, reflecting UNESCO's (2005) documentation of persistent resource shortages.

The finding that 77.5% of pupils progress while illiterate indicates systemic failure in foundational learning, exacerbated by automatic promotion policies. Parental misunderstanding of the policy (e.g., reluctance to contribute to any costs) and the persistence of unofficial fees ("cobra fees") contradicts the policy's intent.

Delayed and inadequate government funding (70%) supports Mobela (2015). These challenges mirror those in Kenya, Malawi, and Uganda (UNESCO, 2004b; Akech & Simatwa, 2010), suggesting that rapid fee abolition without commensurate investment predictably compromises quality across sub-Saharan Africa.

VI. Conclusion & Recommendations

Conclusion: The free education policy in Lunte District successfully expanded access to previously excluded populations, dramatically increasing enrolment. However, this achievement has come at a considerable cost to educational quality due to overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and delayed funding. Without urgent intervention, the trade-off between access and quality will continue to disadvantage the very populations the policy was designed to serve.

Recommendations:

To Government:

1. Increase education budget to at least 20% of national budget.
2. Employ sufficient teachers to achieve a 40:1 pupil-teacher ratio.
3. Construct additional classrooms, desks, and sanitation facilities.
4. Ensure timely and adequate disbursement of school grants.
5. Provide learning materials at least three times annually.
6. Clearly define "free education" and specify expected parental contributions.
7. Re-examine the automatic promotion policy to ensure literacy before progression.

To Parents:

1. Contribute to the construction of additional classrooms, desks, and toilets.
2. Purchase supplementary learning materials as needed.
3. Participate actively in PTAs and children's education.

To Schools:

1. Initiate income-generating projects to supplement government funding.
2. Promote strong school community partnerships.
3. Implement targeted remedial programs for struggling learners.



Limitations: The study was limited to 50 respondents from five schools in one district; findings may not be generalizable. Poor road conditions have limited access to remote schools.

How to cite: Sakuwaha, S., & Mkandawire, P. E. (2025). The Impact of Free Education Policy on Quality of Education in Zambian Schools. *Journal of Educational Management and Administration*, 2(1), 1-6.

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