



# **The Importance of Balancing Access and Quality: Evaluating the Impact of Zambia's Free Education Policy on both Primary and Secondary Schools in Mporokoso District.**

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**Abstract-** The introduction of the free education policy in Zambia aimed at increasing access to primary and secondary education has raised questions about its effects on the quality of education. This study focuses on the effects of the free education policy on the quality of education in six selected primary and secondary schools in Mporokoso district, located in the Northern Province of Zambia. The primary objectives of the study are to assess the effects of the policy on the overall quality of teaching and learning, explore the challenges schools face in delivering quality education, and propose recommendations for improving the policy's effectiveness. Using a mixed methods approach, the study collected data from 251 respondents, including Head teachers, teachers, students, and parents. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for in-depth insights into the experiences of the stakeholders. The findings reveal that, while the free education policy has improved access to education, it has led to overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of learning resources, and strained teacher-student ratios, all of which negatively affect the quality of teaching and learning. However, the policy also presents opportunities, such as increased student enrolment and government efforts to provide free textbooks. The study concludes with recommendations for enhancing the policy's implementation, including better resource allocation, professional development for teachers, and improved infrastructure to ensure that the free education policy translates into high-quality educational outcomes.

**Keywords-** Free Education Policy, Quality of Education, Teaching and Learning, Challenges, Primary, Secondary Schools, Zambia.

## **I. Introduction**

Education is universally recognized as a fundamental human right and a driver of social and economic development (UNESCO, 2015). Governments worldwide have adopted free education policies to reduce inequality and promote sustainable growth. In Zambia, the Ministry of Education introduced the free education policy to abolish tuition fees and related costs, thereby removing financial barriers for primary and secondary learners (MoE, 2021). This initiative has significantly increased access, particularly for marginalized communities, and aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education (National Assembly of Zambia, 2023). However, while access has improved, concerns about quality have emerged. Schools face overcrowded classrooms, shortages of teaching materials, and strained teacher-student ratios, which compromise effective teaching and learning (ZIPAR, 2023). Teachers often struggle with increased workloads and limited training to manage larger classes, leading to diminished instructional quality and morale. Studies such as



Mwansa et al. (2020) confirm that resource constraints undermine instructional effectiveness. Despite these challenges, the policy presents opportunities to rethink resource allocation and strengthen support systems. Effective implementation requires evidence-based strategies to balance access with quality. This study explores the effects of the free education policy in selected schools in Monze District, offering insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in Zambia.

The introduction of Zambia's free education policy, announced in the 2022 National Budget, sought to expand access by abolishing tuition fees in public schools. While the policy has successfully boosted enrolment, concerns remain regarding its impact on educational quality. According to the Ministry of Education's 2022 statistical report, primary school enrolment rose by 16% following implementation. However, this surge has strained existing resources, including classroom space, teaching materials, and teacher-student ratios (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In Monze District, anecdotal evidence illustrates the scale of this challenge: one primary school reported an increase in enrolment from 800 to 1,200 pupils within a single year (Monze District Education Office, 2022). Yet, staffing levels and infrastructure have not expanded proportionally, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and overburdened teachers. The Teaching Council of Zambia (2022) notes that the recommended pupil-teacher ratio of 40:1 has escalated to over 70:1 in some rural schools, undermining instructional quality and learning outcomes. This disparity raises critical questions about the sustainability of the free education policy. Without adequate investment in infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and resource provision, the policy risks achieving access at the expense of quality, thereby weakening its long-term effectiveness in improving educational outcomes.

This study identifies a gap in research on Zambia's free education policies, particularly their localized effects in Monze district. While national studies highlight enrolment and equity, little is known about specific challenges schools face. By investigating four schools, this research provides nuanced insights into the district's unique consequences.

This study was guided by three key objectives that shaped the investigation into the effects of Zambia's free education policy on the quality of teaching and learning in selected schools. The first objective was to assess the effects of the free education policy on the overall quality of teaching and learning. This involved examining how increased enrolment, following the abolition of tuition fees, influenced classroom dynamics, instructional delivery, and student learning outcomes. The analysis highlighted both positive impacts, such as improved access, and negative consequences, including overcrowded classrooms and strained teacher-student ratios. The second objective was to explore the challenges schools face in providing quality education under the free education policy. Findings revealed that schools struggled with inadequate infrastructure, shortages of teaching materials, and overburdened teachers. These challenges were particularly pronounced in rural areas, where resource constraints were most severe. The third objective was to propose recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the free education policy in enhancing educational quality. Based on the findings, the study recommends increased resource allocation, targeted teacher



recruitment and training, and infrastructure development. These measures are essential to ensure that the policy achieves its dual aim of expanding access while maintaining high standards of education.

## II. Literature Review

Musset (2012) examined Finland's free education system, which has long been recognized for its success in combining access with quality. The study found that free education, supported by strong state investment in teacher training, small class sizes, and individualized attention, produced exceptional outcomes, with Finnish students ranking among the top globally in reading, mathematics, and science. Musset argued that the success of Finland's model lies not only in free education but also in its integration with social welfare policies, ensuring equity across socio-economic backgrounds. In contrast, Glewwe and Muralidharan (2016) evaluated India's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), which significantly increased enrolment, particularly among marginalized groups.

However, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, limited resources, and poorly trained teachers undermined learning outcomes, leading to higher dropout rates. Similarly, Maldonado and De Witte (2016) studied free secondary education in Latin America, noting increased enrolment and retention but varied impacts on quality. Argentina improved performance through targeted investments, while Chile and Uruguay struggled with overcrowding and funding disparities. Collectively, these studies highlight that while free education policies expand access, their success depends on adequate investment in infrastructure, teacher training, and equitable resource allocation to ensure both access and quality. This study highlighted that free education policies succeed only when access is matched with equity and quality. Zambia's policy must ensure both public and private schools uphold strong educational standards.

The implementation of free education policies across Africa has generated both enthusiasm and scepticism, as countries strive to balance increased access with the maintenance of quality education. A recurring theme in studies is the dual effect of these policies: while they expand enrolment, they often strain resources, leading to overcrowded classrooms, shortages of teachers, and diminished learning outcomes.

In Kenya, Bold et al. (2020) analyzed the Free Primary Education (FPE) policy introduced in 2003. The policy successfully boosted enrolment, particularly among marginalized groups such as girls and low-income children, thereby promoting equity. However, the surge in student numbers overwhelmed schools, resulting in overcrowding, poor teacher-pupil ratios, and declining performance. Similar findings were reported by Duflo et al. (2015) in Tanzania, where resource shortages undermined educational quality. Bold et al. concluded that free education policies must be accompanied by investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and resources to sustain quality. Uganda's Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy, introduced in 1997, was examined by Nishimura and Yamano (2013). Their study found that enrolment increased significantly, especially for girls and disadvantaged children, reducing inequities.



Yet, the rapid expansion led to overcrowding and resource shortages, with performance in core subjects declining. They argued that without parallel investments, free education risks compromising learning outcomes. Lesotho's Education Act of 2010 made primary education free and compulsory. UNICEF (2018) reported improved access, but challenges persisted, including insufficient funding, weak monitoring systems, and cultural barriers, particularly boys in rural areas expected to herd animals instead of attending school (Leckhetho, 2013). Gertler (2016) studied Kenya and Tanzania, finding that while enrolment rose, rural schools faced acute shortages of teachers and materials. Overcrowded classrooms and limited resources led to poor performance in national assessments, underscoring the need for infrastructure and teacher training investments. Collectively, these studies highlight that free education policies across Africa succeed in expanding access and promoting equity, but often at the expense of quality. The evidence emphasizes that sustainable success requires holistic approaches, combining fee abolition with investments in infrastructure, teacher development, and resource provision. For Zambia, where free education policies are more recent, these findings provide critical lessons: without adequate support systems, the policy risks replicating challenges seen elsewhere.

In Zambia, the introduction of free secondary education has expanded access but exposed serious challenges in maintaining quality. Mweemba (2021) found that enrolment rose significantly, especially in rural areas, giving disadvantaged students opportunities previously denied due to financial barriers. However, the benefits were unevenly distributed. Urban schools, with better infrastructure, textbooks, technology, and trained teachers, were able to provide enriched learning experiences and extracurricular activities. In contrast, rural schools struggled with overcrowded classrooms, poorly trained teachers, and limited resources, leading to high dropout rates and weaker learning outcomes. The disparity between urban and rural schools highlighted the urgent need for targeted interventions to ensure equity.

Without adequate investment in infrastructure, teacher training, and support systems such as counselling and mentorship, rural students remain at risk of exclusion despite increased access. Mweemba concluded that while free education is a vital step toward equity, it must be complemented by sustained government investment to strengthen teaching quality and resources in rural areas. Otherwise, the policy risks widening the gap between urban and rural learners, undermining its goal of equitable education for all.

Chilufya (2023) investigated Zambia's free secondary education policy introduced in 2022, focusing on its effects on enrolment and academic performance. The study revealed that the removal of financial barriers significantly boosted enrolment, particularly among children from low-income families who had previously been excluded. This expansion marked a major step toward educational equity by opening opportunities for marginalized groups. However, the surge in enrolment also exposed serious challenges, especially in rural schools. Overcrowded classrooms, shortages of qualified teachers, and limited access to learning materials undermined the quality of education. Teachers in rural areas were often overburdened and lacked professional development opportunities, making it difficult to manage large classes effectively. In contrast, urban schools, with better infrastructure and resources, were better equipped



to handle the increased student population, offering enriched curricula and extracurricular activities. This disparity highlighted growing inequalities between urban and rural schools, with rural students disadvantaged by inadequate facilities and support systems. Chilufya concluded that while the policy was a positive step toward equity, it risked widening the urban-rural divide unless accompanied by targeted investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and resource allocation.

### **III. Research Methodology**

#### **Study Site**

The study was conducted in Monze district, located in the Southern Province of Zambia. This site was chosen due to its relevance and accessibility, as it provides a representative context for examining the effects of free education in rural and semi-urban settings.

#### **Research Design**

The study adopted a mixed methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine the effects of Zambia's free education policy in four Monze secondary schools. Qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and observations captured stakeholders' lived experiences, while quantitative surveys and performance metrics provided measurable evidence. This triangulation enhanced validity, offering a holistic understanding of how the policy influenced teaching, learning, resources, and classroom dynamics, while highlighting complexities in implementation and quality outcomes.

#### **Target Population, Sample techniques and Sample Size**

The study targeted 1,520 individuals, including head teachers, teachers, pupils, and parents from four schools in Monze district, reflecting their critical roles in education. A sample of 152 participants (10%) was selected using purposive sampling to ensure rich, relevant insights. This approach intentionally identified participants with specific knowledge and experience, enabling a nuanced exploration of how free education policies affect administration, teaching, parental involvement, and student experiences within the district.

#### **Research Instruments, Validation and Reliability**

The research instruments comprised interview guides designed to collect qualitative data through open ended questions, enabling participants to share perspectives and experiences in depth. Validity and reliability were ensured through rigorous strategies. Content validity was established by reviewing relevant literature, consulting education and research experts, and aligning items with study objectives to accurately measure intended constructs. This methodological rigor strengthened the credibility of the instruments, ensuring they captured meaningful insights into the effects of Zambia's free education policy on teaching, learning, and resource availability in the selected schools.

#### **Data Collection Techniques and analysis**

Data collection employed semi structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. Interviews with head teachers, teachers, and parents explored



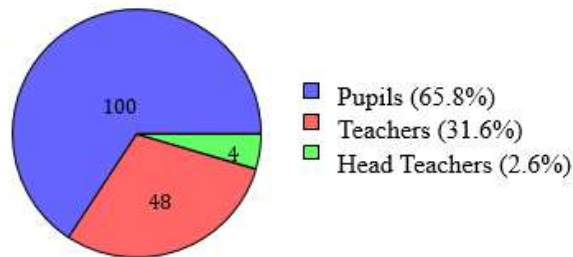
perceptions of free education, while focus groups with pupils captured collective experiences. Observations assessed classroom dynamics and learning environments. Thematic analysis identified recurring patterns, ensuring nuanced insights. Ethical integrity was maintained through informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and parental approval for minors, with secure data storage protecting identities. This approach balanced flexibility, depth, and rigor, providing reliable findings on the policy’s impact on teaching, learning, and resource availability in Monze district schools.

#### IV. Results

##### Findings as Brought Out in the Study

##### Demographics

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Category



This table shows that the majority of respondents (100 out of 152) were pupils, representing approximately 65.8% of the total participants. Teachers constituted 48 respondents (31.6%), while head teachers were the smallest group, with only 4 respondents (2.6%). The higher number of pupils ensures that the study captures direct experiences regarding the free education policy’s impact on learning. The inclusion of teachers and head teachers provides valuable insights into the challenges schools face in implementing the policy.

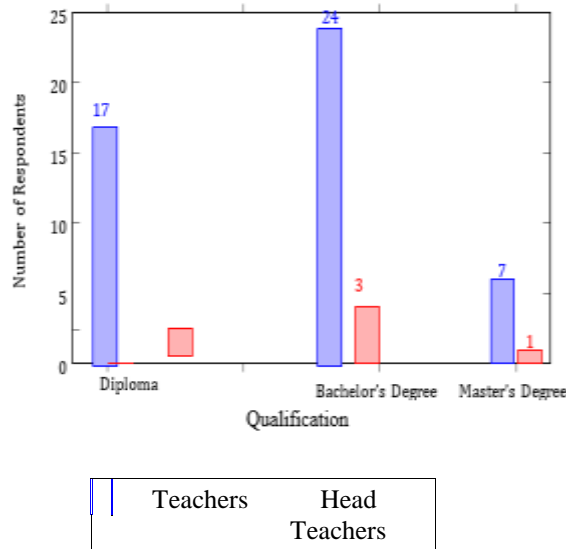
Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Pupils	Teachers	Head Teachers	Total Frequency
Male	55	26	4	85
Female	45	22	0	67
Total	100	48	4	152

The gender distribution indicates that 85 respondents (55.9%) were male, while 67 (44.1%) were female. Among pupils, there were slightly more male respondents (55) than females (45), which may reflect general enrolment trends in secondary education. Among teachers, 26 (55.6%) were male and 22 (44.4%) were female, showing a relatively balanced representation. However, there is a notable gender disparity among head teachers, who are all males, indicating potential gender inequalities in leadership positions within the education sector.



Table 3: Academic Qualifications of Teachers and Head Teachers



This bar chart reveals that most teachers (24) hold a Bachelor's Degree in Education, followed by 17 teachers with a Diploma. Similarly, the majority of head teachers (3) also have a Bachelor's Degree. Only one head teacher possesses a Master's Degree, highlighting a gap in advanced educational qualifications among school leaders. The lack of teachers with postgraduate qualifications may impact the overall quality of education delivery, as higher education levels often correlate with better teaching strategies and administrative effectiveness.

Table 2: Years of Teaching Experience for Teachers and Head Teachers

Years of Experience	Teachers	Head Teachers	Total Frequency
1-5 years	10	0	10
6-10 years	15	1	16
11-15 years	13	1	14
16-20 years	7	0	7
Above 20 years	3	2	5
Total	48	4	52

This table shows that a significant portion of teachers (10 out of 48) have less than five years of teaching experience, indicating a relatively young workforce. Most teachers (15) fall within the 6-10 years range, while only a few (3) have more than 20 years of experience. Among head teachers, 2 have over 20 years of experience,



demonstrating leadership longevity. However, the limited number of highly experienced educators may pose challenges in maintaining high teaching standards, especially under the free education policy.

#### Effects of the Free Education Policy on the Overall Quality of Teaching and Learning

##### **Teachers' Responses:**

- One teacher said, "The introduction of free education has increased enrolment significantly, but this has led to overcrowded classrooms, making it difficult to give individual attention to learners."
- Another teacher stated, "We appreciate the policy, but the shortage of teaching materials such as textbooks and laboratory equipment has negatively affected the quality of education."
- One teacher remarked, "Due to the increased number of pupils, the workload on teachers has doubled, and this has affected lesson preparation and overall effectiveness in teaching."

##### **Pupils' Responses:**

- One pupil said, "I am happy that I can attend school without paying fees, but sometimes we don't have enough desks, and we sit on the floor, which makes learning uncomfortable."
- Another pupil commented, "The number of students in our class has increased, and sometimes it is difficult for the teacher to hear us when we ask questions."
- A pupil mentioned, "Some of my friends come to school but do not take learning seriously because they feel they are not losing anything since education is free."

##### **Head Teachers' Responses:**

- One head teacher stated, "While the policy has improved access to education, the available infrastructure is not sufficient to support the increased number of learners."
- Another head teacher remarked, "We have challenges in maintaining discipline among pupils because the policy has encouraged some learners to be careless, knowing that they will not be sent away for non-payment of fees."
- A head teacher observed, "Teacher recruitment has not matched the increase in enrolment, and this has led to an overstretched workforce."
- Parents' Responses:
- One parent said, "I am grateful that my children can attend school without paying fees, but I have noticed that the quality of education is not as good as it was before."
- Another parent noted, "Since the introduction of free education, there have been reports of overcrowding, and my child complains that sometimes they don't finish lessons due to lack of time."
- A parent mentioned, "We appreciate free education, but we still have to buy uniforms, books, and other necessities, which is a challenge for some of us."
- One teacher expressed, "The lack of adequate learning materials has forced us to use outdated textbooks, and sometimes we rely on photocopies, which are not enough for all pupils."



- Another teacher mentioned, "Marking assignments has become overwhelming because of the large class sizes, and providing detailed feedback to individual pupils is now a challenge."
- A teacher observed, "The number of slow learners has increased, and due to the congestion in classes, it is difficult to provide remedial lessons."
- One teacher stated, "Some pupils have become reluctant to take school seriously since they are not paying anything, and this has affected their discipline and motivation."

**Pupils' Responses:**

- One pupil said, "I used to enjoy group discussions, but now we are too many in class, and it is hard to concentrate during lessons."
- Another pupil noted, "Sometimes teachers rush through topics because they have so many students to handle, and this makes it hard to understand everything properly."
- A pupil observed, "We no longer have enough time for practical lessons in science subjects because the equipment is limited, and too many pupils share the same materials."
- One pupil complained, "There are not enough teachers in some subjects, and sometimes we go for weeks without a teacher in certain subjects."

**Head Teachers' Responses:**

- One head teacher explained, "We struggle to manage resources because funding does not always come on time, and this affects the running of the school."
- Another head teacher stated, "Discipline cases have increased because some pupils feel they are entitled to education without any responsibility."
- A head teacher observed, "Some parents no longer take an interest in their children's education because they assume everything is being taken care of by the government."
- One head teacher noted, "We have a serious shortage of furniture, and in some classrooms, three to four pupils share a desk meant for two."

**Parents' Responses:**

- One parent said, "I am happy that my children can go to school, but I worry about the quality of education they are receiving due to the large number of pupils in classes."
- Another parent remarked, "Some teachers are overworked, and I fear that my child is not getting enough attention from them."
- A parent noted, "My child sometimes complains that they do not have enough textbooks, and they are asked to share with other pupils, which makes studying at home difficult."
- One parent commented, "I have noticed that some children go to school just to play because there is no fear of being sent away for non-payment of fees."
- Another parent mentioned, "While education is free, I still have to spend money on uniforms, books, and transport, which can be a burden."



## **Challenges Schools Face in Providing Quality Education Under the Free Education Policy**

### **1. Overcrowding in Classrooms**

"One teacher said, 'Our classrooms are now too full. We used to have about 40 students per class, but now we have over 70, making it difficult to manage learners effectively.'"

"A pupil stated, 'Sometimes, we have to share desks, and some of us even sit on the floor. It is hard to concentrate when the classroom is so packed.'"

### **2. Shortage of Teaching and Learning Materials**

"One head teacher mentioned, 'The number of students has increased, but we still receive the same amount of learning materials. We are forced to share textbooks among many learners, affecting their ability to study independently.'"

"A parent explained, 'My child complains that they do not get enough text books from school, so we have to buy extra. Some parents cannot afford that, and their children struggle.'"

### **3. Inadequate Staffing and Increased Teacher Workload**

"A teacher remarked, 'We are overwhelmed. The teacher-to-student ratio has increased significantly, making it hard to give individual attention to learners.'"

"One head teacher said, 'The government has employed some teachers, but the numbers are still not enough. We need more teachers, especially in science and mathematics.'"

### **4. Decline in Student Discipline**

"One teacher commented, 'Since education is free, some pupils do not take school seriously. They come late, miss classes, and lack motivation because they know they are not paying.'"

"A head teacher explained, 'Cases of absenteeism have risen. Some students leave school to engage in business activities, knowing they can come back at any time without consequences.'"

### **5. Infrastructure Challenges**

"A parent stated, 'Some schools do not have enough classrooms to accommodate all the learners. Children are learning in makeshift shelters, which is not conducive for education.'"

"A pupil added, 'Our school has only a few toilets, and with the increased number of pupils, they are always dirty and overcrowded. Sometimes, we even avoid using them.'"

### **6. Limited School Funding and Resources**

"A head teacher said, 'The grants we receive are not enough to cover all school needs. We cannot maintain infrastructure, buy materials, or hire extra teachers. It is a big challenge.'"

"One teacher pointed out, 'Previously, we relied on PTA funds for some school improvements, but now, since parents do not pay, we struggle to meet some essential needs.'"



### **Recommendations for Improving the Effectiveness of the Free Education Policy in Enhancing the Quality of Education**

#### **Teachers' Responses:**

- One teacher stated: "The government should increase funding to schools so that we can have enough teaching and learning materials. Right now, we struggle with inadequate textbooks, which affects lesson delivery."
- Another teacher mentioned: "There is a need to reduce the teacher-to-pupil ratio by recruiting more teachers. In my class, I have over 80 pupils, which makes it difficult to provide individualized attention."
- A different teacher observed: "Infrastructure development should be prioritized. Some classrooms are overcrowded, and this affects both teaching and learning."

#### **Pupils' Responses:**

- One pupil explained: "The school should have more desks because some of us sit on the floor, which makes it hard to concentrate in class."
- Another pupil said: "There should be more science and computer equipment. We learn about experiments in books, but we don't get to do them in real life."
- A pupil from another school added: "More teachers should be employed. Sometimes we go for weeks without having lessons in some subjects because there are not enough teachers."

#### **Head Teachers' Responses:**

- One head teacher noted: "Government should ensure that the disbursement of funds to schools is timely. Delays in funding make it difficult for us to manage school operations effectively."
- Another head teacher remarked: "There is a need for more investment in professional development programs for teachers. When teachers are well-trained, the quality of education improves."
- A different head teacher emphasized: "Parents should be engaged in school activities. Some parents think that free education means they have no role to play in their children's learning."

#### **Parents' Responses:**

- One parent suggested: "The government should find a way of supporting schools with feeding programs because some children come to school hungry, and they fail to concentrate."
- Another parent stated: "We need to be involved in decision-making regarding school matters. Right now, we are just informed about policies, but we are not consulted."
- A parent from a different school shared: "The government should ensure that there is enough security in schools. Some schools don't have fences, and this puts children at risk."

### **Additional Responses on Recommendations for Improving the Effectiveness of the Free Education Policy in Enhancing the Quality of Education**



**Teachers' Responses:**

- **One teacher emphasized:** “More workshops and training sessions should be provided for teachers to enhance their skills, especially with the increased number of learners.”
- **Another teacher pointed out:** “The government should introduce a monitoring system to ensure that free education funds are used appropriately to benefit the learners.”
- **A different teacher remarked:** “We need more support staff, such as laboratory assistants and librarians, to help improve the learning environment.”
- **One teacher suggested:** “Schools should be given the autonomy to generate additional income to supplement government funding, for example, through agricultural projects or skill-based programs.”

**Pupils' Responses:**

- **One pupil commented:** “Our school needs more toilets. Sometimes we have to wait in long queues, which wastes our time and makes the school environment uncomfortable.”
- **Another pupil suggested:** “The government should provide more scholarships for bright students who struggle to afford school supplies like uniforms and shoes.”
- **A pupil from a rural school added:** “There should be more dormitories for students who travel long distances. Some of us walk more than 10 kilometers to school every day.”
- **One pupil expressed:** “The school should have more co-curricular activities like music and sports to make learning more enjoyable.”

**Head Teachers' Responses:**

- One head teacher observed: “There should be clear guidelines on how schools can raise additional resources without contradicting the free education policy.”
- Another head teacher stated: “The government should ensure a steady supply of textbooks and learning materials, as some subjects have very few copies available for pupils.”
- A head teacher from a peri-urban school noted: “We need more partnerships with NGOs and private institutions to support schools with infrastructure and technology.”
- One head teacher suggested: “The government should decentralize decision-making on resource allocation so that schools can directly address their immediate needs.”

**Parents' Responses:**

- One parent stressed: “Parents should also be educated on how they can contribute to their children's education even though it is free. Some parents have abandoned their responsibilities.”
- Another parent suggested: “Community members should be encouraged to support schools through voluntary work, like helping to maintain school infrastructure.”
- A parent from a farming community said: “The government should provide agricultural support to schools so that they can generate income and feed learners.”



- One parent proposed: “There should be more sensitization on the importance of education so that children don’t drop out even when school is free.”

## V. Discussion

The Free Education Policy has expanded access to schooling by removing financial barriers, enabling more disadvantaged children to enroll and improving literacy rates. However, the rapid surge in enrolment has strained infrastructure, leading to overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching materials, and increased teacher workloads. These challenges have reduced individualized attention and heightened stress among educators, affecting teaching quality. Some pupils now view education as an entitlement, impacting motivation and engagement. Globally, similar policies have boosted enrolment but often compromised quality due to resource shortages. Zambia reflects these trends, with schools facing inadequate facilities, limited trained teachers, and administrative inefficiencies. While access has improved, quality remains uneven, requiring balanced strategies that strengthen infrastructure, teacher training, and resource allocation. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that free education achieves both equity and sustainable improvements in learning outcomes. Overcrowding emerged as a major concern among teachers, pupils, and head teachers, with rising enrolment leading to congested classrooms that hinder individualized attention and interactive teaching.

UNESCO (2019) and Azevedo et al. (2018) confirm that large class sizes reduce engagement, weaken classroom management, and compromise learning outcomes. In Zambia, this strain is compounded by inadequate teaching resources, including outdated textbooks and limited laboratory equipment, forcing students to share materials and restricting effective lesson delivery. Teachers also reported heavier workloads, with increased marking, lesson planning, and feedback responsibilities, often without additional staff support. This has heightened stress, reduced efficiency, and negatively affected teaching quality. The combined challenges of overcrowding, resource shortages, and excessive workloads highlight the risk that free education policies, while expanding access, may undermine quality unless accompanied by investments in infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and learning materials. Addressing these issues is essential to balance equity with sustainable improvements in educational outcomes.

The study revealed significant challenges schools face under Zambia’s Free Education Policy. Overcrowding was the most pressing issue, with class sizes exceeding 70 learners, limiting teachers’ ability to provide individualized attention and maintain discipline. Students often shared desks or sat on the floor, reducing concentration and engagement. Resource shortages compounded the problem, as textbooks and instructional materials failed to match rising enrolment, forcing students to share and hindering independent study. Teachers struggled to compensate, but their efforts were constrained by inadequate supplies. Parents also faced financial burdens in purchasing extra materials, deepening inequalities.

Additionally, teacher workloads increased dramatically, with larger classes and insufficient staff leading to stress, reduced lesson preparation, and diminished teaching



quality. These challenges collectively undermine the policy's intended benefits, highlighting the need for urgent investment in infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and resource provision. Without such interventions, the policy risks widening disparities and compromising long-term educational outcomes, despite its success in expanding access. The study highlights major challenges undermining Zambia's free education policy. Overcrowded classrooms, often exceeding 70 learners, reduce individualized attention, weaken discipline, and hinder interactive teaching. Teachers face burnout from excessive workloads, especially in critical subjects like science and mathematics, where shortages of qualified staff persist. This compromises lesson quality and student comprehension. Discipline issues, including absenteeism and disengagement, stem from students' lack of financial investment and weak enforcement mechanisms. Financial pressures also push some pupils into income generating activities, further disrupting learning. Infrastructure deficiencies, such as inadequate classrooms and poor facilities, exacerbate these problems, limiting focus and academic achievement.

The findings highlight several critical recommendations for enhancing the quality of education under Zambia's Free Education Policy. First, increased funding is essential to ensure the availability of teaching and learning materials. Teachers emphasized that shortages of textbooks and resources undermine lesson delivery, a concern supported by UNESCO (2016) and Psacharopoulos & Patrinos (2018), who link financial investment directly to improved student performance. Equally pressing is the need to address high teacher pupil ratios, with classes exceeding 80 learners. Research shows that smaller class sizes improve achievement, while teacher shortages in key subjects exacerbate poor outcomes. Recruitment of more qualified teachers is therefore urgent. Infrastructure development also emerged as a priority, as overcrowded classrooms and inadequate furniture hinder concentration and engagement. Studies affirm that well equipped environments foster effective learning, underscoring the importance of investment in buildings, sanitation, and classroom facilities. Timely disbursement of funds was another recommendation, as delays disrupt school operations and create inefficiencies. Teacher professional development was strongly emphasized, with calls for workshops and training to equip educators with skills for managing diverse, growing classrooms. Finally, parental involvement and school feeding programs were identified as vital. Strengthening parent engagement and addressing student hunger would improve discipline, motivation, and learning outcomes, ensuring the policy balances access with quality.

## **VI. Conclusion**

The free education policy in the selected secondary schools in Monze District has had a profound impact on both the accessibility and quality of education. The research findings indicate that while the policy has enabled more students to attend school, challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials, and underqualified teachers have hindered the overall quality of education. However, despite these setbacks, the policy has also created opportunities for greater educational participation and has made strides in improving access to secondary education. To enhance the effectiveness of the policy, it is essential to address these challenges by investing in adequate resources, improving teacher training, and enhancing infrastructure. Additionally, the active involvement of local communities and



stakeholders in policy implementation could help create a more supportive environment for both teachers and students. By addressing these areas, the free education policy has the potential to significantly improve the quality of education, contributing to the development of a more educated and skilled workforce in the region.

### **Recommendation**

The study recommends several strategies to strengthen the effectiveness of Zambia's Free Education Policy. First, increased government funding is crucial to improve infrastructure, provide adequate teaching resources, and recruit more teachers to manage rising enrolments. Recruitment of additional teachers, supported by incentives, would reduce the high teacher student ratio and improve morale. Provision of textbooks, laboratory equipment, and digital tools is essential to enhance lesson delivery and student comprehension. Teacher training programs should be expanded to equip educators with skills for handling large classes and adopting innovative teaching methods. Strengthening school management systems is also necessary to address discipline challenges and create conducive learning environments. Furthermore, schools should encourage parental and community involvement to sustain engagement despite the removal of financial contributions. School feeding programs were also highlighted as vital to support student well being and learning.

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