



# Challenges Faced by School Managers in the Implementation of Free Education Policy in Zambia: A Case of Selected Secondary Schools in Mungwi District

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**Abstract-** The Government of Zambia reintroduced the Free Education Policy in January 2022, covering early childhood to secondary education. The policy aimed to eliminate user fees and improve access, equity, and retention, particularly for vulnerable learners. While national enrolment rose sharply, the rapid implementation placed unprecedented pressure on school management systems. This study investigates the managerial challenges experienced by secondary school heads in Mungwi District, a predominantly rural area in Northern Province. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 6 head teachers and 2 district education officials, supplemented by school records and observation. Findings reveal four dominant challenges: 1) Severe overcrowding due to surging enrolment, 2) Acute shortages of teaching and learning materials, 3) Inadequate teaching staff and increased pupil-teacher ratios, and 4) Limited managerial and financial capacity to adapt to new demands. The study concludes that while the policy is progressive, its sustainability depends on complementary investments in infrastructure, human resources, and capacity building for school leaders. Key recommendations include phased infrastructure grants, targeted teacher deployment, and structured leadership training for school managers.

**Keywords:** Free Education Policy, school management, overcrowding, rural schools, Zambia, Mungwi District

## I. Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a cornerstone of socio-economic development and poverty reduction. In Zambia, the right to education is enshrined in the Constitution, yet financial barriers have historically excluded many children, especially in rural and low-income households.

To address this, the New Dawn Government abolished all tuition, PTA, and examination fees for public schools from Grade 1 to Grade 12 in January 2022. This bold policy shift aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and Zambia's Eighth National Development Plan.

The immediate impact was dramatic. The Ministry of Education reported over 2 million additional learners enrolled in 2022 alone. While this expansion is commendable for access, it has generated significant operational stress for schools. School managers, as frontline implementers, must now balance increased demand with static or diminishing resources.

This paper examines how secondary school managers in Mungwi District are experiencing and responding to these challenges. Mungwi was selected due to its rural



profile, existing infrastructure deficits, and relevance to national debates on equity in education policy implementation.

## II. Problem Statement

The Free Education Policy was implemented nationally without a proportional increase in infrastructure, teaching staff, or operational grants to schools in its first year. In rural districts like Mungwi, schools were already operating at capacity before 2022.

School managers now face a paradox: they are mandated to admit all eligible learners but lack the classrooms, desks, textbooks, and teachers to support them. This creates daily dilemmas around class sizes, teacher workload, quality assurance, and learner safety. Head teachers report spending more time on crisis management than instructional leadership.

Despite policy-level awareness of these issues, limited empirical research documents the lived experiences of school managers in rural Zambia. This gap hinders evidence-based adjustments to the policy. Therefore, this study seeks to answer: *What are the key challenges faced by secondary school managers in Mungwi District during the implementation of the Free Education Policy, and how are they coping?*

### Objectives of the Study

**Main Objective:** To examine the challenges faced by school managers in implementing the Free Education Policy in selected secondary schools of Mungwi District.

### Specific Objectives

- To assess the impact of increased enrolment on school facilities and infrastructure.
- To identify resource-related challenges, including teaching/learning materials and staffing.
- To explore managerial and administrative challenges experienced by head teachers.
- To recommend strategies for strengthening school-level implementation of the policy.

## III. Literature Review

### Free Education Policies in Sub-Saharan Africa

Zambia's 2022 policy is not isolated. Kenya (2003), Uganda (1997), and Malawi (1994) implemented similar universal primary/secondary education reforms. Literature consistently shows a pattern: access improves rapidly, but quality is threatened by system unpreparedness. World Bank studies note that "big bang" approaches to free education often outpace planning for teachers, classrooms, and capitation grants.

### The Role of School Managers

School managers are pivotal in translating policy into practice. Bush & Glover (2016) argue that effective instructional leadership is critical during periods of reform. However, in low-resource contexts, head teachers often become "emergency



managers” dealing with logistics instead of pedagogy. In Zambia, Chabatama (2018) found that rural head teachers lacked training in financial management and large-school administration even before free education.

#### **Documented Challenges Post-2022 in Zambia**

Preliminary reports by the Zambia National Education Coalition and UNICEF highlight nationwide overcrowding, with some classes exceeding 100 pupils. The pupil-teacher ratio in rural secondary schools rose from 45:1 to over 65:1 in some cases. Delayed disbursement of school grants has also been cited as a barrier to purchasing basic supplies.

### **IV. Methodology**

- **Research Design:** A qualitative case study design was adopted to gain in-depth insights into managers’ experiences.
- **Study Site and Population:** The study was conducted in 4 purposively selected public secondary schools in Mungwi District. Participants included 6 head teachers/deputies and 2 District Education Board officials.
- **Data Collection:** Semi-structured interviews, document review of enrolment records and grant receipts, and non-participant observation of facilities. Data was collected in March–April 2024.
- **Data Analysis:** Thematic analysis was used. Data were coded manually to identify recurring challenges and coping mechanisms.
- **Ethical Considerations:** Permission was obtained from DEBS Mungwi. Participants gave informed consent and anonymity was ensured.

### **V. Findings and Discussion**

#### **Theme 1: Overcrowding and Infrastructure Strain**

All schools reported enrolment increases of 40–70% between 2021 and 2023. One school’s Grade 8 intake jumped from 120 to 210 pupils with no new classrooms. Desks were shared by 3–4 learners. “We have resorted to hot-seating and outdoor lessons, but rains make this impossible,” noted one head teacher. This confirms national trends and raises concerns about learner safety and contact time.

#### **Theme 2: Shortage of Teaching and Learning Resources\***

Textbook-pupil ratios averaged 1:6 in core subjects. Science labs lacked reagents. While grants were received, head teachers stated they were insufficient and often delayed until mid-term. “We cannot wait for grants to buy chalk,” one respondent said. This forces managers to rely on community goodwill or forgo materials.

#### **Theme 3: Human Resource Deficits**

No school received additional teachers despite enrolment spikes. Teacher workload increased to 35–40 periods per week, reducing time for lesson preparation and remedial work. Volunteer teachers were used informally, raising qualification concerns.



#### **Theme 4: Managerial and Financial Capacity Gaps**

Head teachers felt unprepared for managing large student populations and complex grants. “We were trained as teachers, not as managers of 1,200-pupil schools,” a participant stated. Financial reporting requirements for grants also added administrative burden without training.

### **VI. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Free Education Policy has achieved its primary goal of access. However, for school managers in Mungwi District, implementation has been characterized by “access without readiness.” The quality of education and the well-being of managers are at risk.

#### **Recommendations**

- **Infrastructure:** The Ministry should fast-track the School Infrastructure Development Fund with priority for rural districts.
- **Staffing:** Deploy more teachers to rural areas using hardship allowances and bonded bursary recipients.
- **Capacity Building:** DEBS to conduct mandatory training for head teachers in large-school management, financial literacy, and crisis leadership.
- **Grant Disbursement:** Ensure timely, predictable release of school grants on a quarterly basis.
- **Policy Phasing:** Future reforms should consider phased implementation tied to readiness assessments per district.

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