



Impact of Free Education Policy 2022 on Secondary Schools in Chongwe District, Zambia

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Abstract

This study examined the implementation and impact of Zambia's 2022 Free Education Policy on secondary education in Chongwe District. The policy removed tuition and fee barriers from Early Childhood Education through Grade 12, aiming to increase access, equity, and educational outcomes. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected via semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 28 purposively selected participants: head teachers, subject teachers, parents (PTA members), and pupils from four public secondary schools in rural and peri-urban Chongwe. Thematic analysis revealed that the policy achieved significant gains in enrolment, particularly among learners from low-income backgrounds who had previously dropped out or were excluded from formal schooling. However, several challenges emerged: overcrowded classrooms, teacher workload overload, shortages of learning materials, and limited infrastructure capacity. School administrators frequently lacked adequate financial management skills and faced delays in government disbursements. Parental involvement in oversight was minimal, reducing accountability mechanisms. The findings highlight a critical tension between access and quality. While the policy has succeeded in increasing enrolment and promoting educational equity, sustainable quality delivery remains under strain. Key recommendations include urgent investment in infrastructure (additional classrooms, sanitation, ICT), recruitment and retention of qualified teachers, capacity building in financial management and budgeting for school leadership, enhancing parental and community engagement, and establishing systematic monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Keywords: Free Education Policy, Secondary Education, Impact, Implementation, Zambia.

Introduction

Governments across the globe, particularly in low and middle-income countries, have increasingly committed to ensuring equitable access to free or low-cost education, guided by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (United Nations, 2015). Free education initiatives are seen as mechanisms to remove financial barriers, reduce dropout rates, and enhance educational equity (UNESCO, 2019). Yet, practitioners and scholars caution that increased access must be matched by investments in infrastructure, teachers, learning materials, and administrative capacity to avoid negative consequences on educational quality (Moon, 2016; Bold et al., 2017).

In Africa, free primary and secondary education policies have been introduced in various contexts. For example, Kenya's free primary education (2003) resulted in substantial enrolment jumps but also led to



overcrowded classrooms and shortages of materials (Oketch, 2007; World Bank, 2018). Uganda's universal secondary education likewise increased access, but many schools struggled to maintain quality due to teacher shortages and limited funds for infrastructure (Mugerwa, 2015). These examples underscore a recurring paradox: greater access without proportional investment can erode educational outcomes (Lewin & Sabates, 2012).

In Zambia, the Free Primary Education Policy of 2002 made primary school tuition-free, but secondary education remained fee-based. In 2021, the United Party for National Development (UPND) pledged to extend free schooling through Grade 12, and beginning January 2022, the Free Education Policy was launched (GRZ Ministry of Education, 2022). Under this policy, all public schools were required to eliminate tuition, enrolment, exam, PTA, and registration fees. The policy promised to relieve families of financial burdens, increase retention and transition rates, and ultimately elevate national human capital (Ministry of Finance, Zambia, 2021).

Despite its bold promise, early implementation of the policy raised concerns. Preliminary observations from districts revealed swelling class sizes, inconsistent teacher allocation, and increased demand for school infrastructure. Critics noted that while school fees had been removed, ancillary costs (uniforms, transport, books, meals) remained burdensome for poorer families, sometimes limiting the policy's efficacy in real access (Chibale & Banda, 2023). Moreover, anecdotal reports suggested that school administrators faced new administrative burdens, including needing to develop procurement plans, budgets, and reporting mechanisms, often without prior training.

Given these developments, it is crucial to document stakeholder perspectives on the policy's early outcomes, especially in peri-urban and rural districts. Chongwe District, chosen for its mix of rural and peri-urban schools and proximity to Lusaka, offers a representative setting for this evaluation. This study thus sought to understand how the Free Education Policy (2022) has affected enrolment, quality of education, and the challenges schools face in managing the policy.

The central aim of the study was to evaluate the impact and sustainability of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools of Chongwe District. Specific objectives included: (1) assessing changes in student enrolment; (2) analysing effects on educational quality; (3) investigating implementation challenges; and (4) proposing stakeholder-driven recommendations to improve policy effectiveness.

Methods

Study Design and Setting

A descriptive qualitative research design was adopted for this study. This approach was well suited for exploring stakeholder perceptions, lived experiences, and contextual nuances (Burns & Grove, 2003; Creswell, 2014). The selection of descriptive qualitative design allowed for inductive emergence of themes and a holistic, emic view of policy implementation in Chongwe. Chongwe District was chosen for its mix of rural and peri-urban schools and proximity to Lusaka, offering a representative setting for this study.

Study Participants

The study was carried out across four public secondary schools in Chongwe District: Chongwe Secondary, Silverrest Secondary, Mulalika Secondary, and Palabana Secondary. These schools were purposively selected because each had been actively implementing the Free Education Policy since 2022, and together they represent a diversity of rural, peri-urban, and infrastructural capacities.



Study Sambling

A total of 28 participants were recruited purposively: four head teachers, four subject teachers, four PTA members (parents), and sixteen pupils (four per school). Participant selection prioritized those with sustained engagement in school operations and pupils learning since the policy rollout. Firstly, it was anticipated that 40 key participants would be enough to gain information sought. However, only 28 participated as information saturation was met.

Data Collection

Data was collected between mid 2024 and early 2025. Semi-structured interviews of 30-40 minutes were conducted with head teachers, subject teachers and PTA members. Focus group discussions (FGDs) of 40-60 minutes were held with pupils. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observational field notes were taken using a structured checklist covering school infrastructure (classrooms, desks, textbooks, laboratories, sanitation), teacher–pupil ratios, and evidence of resource constraints.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied following Creswell's (2008) process. Transcripts were read repeatedly, coded inductively, and codes grouped into themes aligned with the study objectives as shown in Table 1 below. Content analysis (Burns & Grove, 2003) helped generate primary categories, which were visualized in hierarchical diagrams. Subtheme relationships were clarified in descriptive summaries. Triangulation between interview, FGD, and observation data enhanced validity. Credibility was fostered through member checking; dependability through peer debriefing; transferability via detailed contextual description; and confirmability by maintaining an audit trail.

Ethical Consideration

The approval was sought from Chongwe District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Written consents and assents were obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Results

The results are presented in four parts: firstly, increased access and enrolment gains; secondly, impact on educational quality; thirdly, the administrative and financial capacity challenges, and fourthly, stakeholder engagement and accountability (Table 1).

Increased Access and Enrolment Gains

Participants unanimously reported a large increase in student enrolment since the implementation of the Free Education Policy. One head teacher noted that class enrolment almost tripled: "We had about 60 learners per class; now some classes have over 130 learners." Many parents and pupils echoed that those who had dropped out due to inability to pay fees returned to school. A PTA member remarked, "Even children who had stayed home for years because of fees are back in class, sometimes two or more streams full."

While increasing access was considered a major success, participants also reported that the influx of students placed significant strain on classroom space, desks, and learning materials. Observational data

revealed some classes held in under-sized rooms, desks doubled up, and textbooks shared between 5-6 pupils. One teacher lamented, “We do not yet have enough books, and many learners end up not following their own copy.”

Table 1: Key Thematic Categories.

Impact on Educational Quality

The surge in enrolment had a noticeable effect on the quality of education delivered. Teachers described increased workloads and reduced capacity to attend to individual learners. One teacher reported: “I used to mark assignments in a few days; now it takes me a week.” Pupils also highlighted difficulties: “Sometimes we must stand or share chairs; group work is a necessity even in practical classes because labs cannot accommodate large numbers.” In some schools, practical science experiments were cancelled or simplified because of lack of reagents or space.

Observation and participants’ accounts also revealed a mismatch between enrolment and learning resources. Textbooks, desk space, laboratory resources and ICT access lagged significantly behind enrolment growth. A head teacher noted, “The government provides grants, but these are small percentages of school operational needs; much more is required.” Some pupils expressed frustration: “Our school has no free Internet, so we cannot do quick research for assignments.”

Administrative and Financial Capacity Challenges

A substantial number of participants flagged weak financial management capacity as a key challenge. Head teachers admitted that they had not been trained in budgeting or procurement planning in the context of increased grants and resources. One reported, “We were told to prepare procurement plans and budgets, but nobody trained us on how to do that.” PTA members echoed concerns about transparency, noting that review meetings and financial reports rarely occurred.

Additionally, delays in government grant disbursement exacerbated resource shortages. Teachers reported that sometimes grants arrived late, leaving schools unable to purchase necessary materials in a timely manner. One teacher observed, “By the time money arrives, students have already exceeded capacity; then we face a scramble for desks or textbooks months into the term.”

Stakeholder Engagement and Accountability.

Community and parental involvement was described as low in many schools. Some PTA representatives reported only occasional meetings, with limited follow-through on oversight of how school funds and materials were used. One parent stated, “We attend one PTA meeting, but rarely do we see financial reports or a follow-up.” Pupils similarly expressed lack of knowledge of school finances or decision-making processes.

Nonetheless, some positive instances emerged: in two of the four schools, teachers and PTA collaborated to mobilize local donations of furniture or stationery. These local contributions helped reduce immediate shortages, but were not seen as sustainable long-term solutions.

Discussion

This study’s findings align with and extend prior evidence on the effects of free education initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa. The large increase in enrolment observed in Chongwe echoes experiences in Kenya (Oketch & Rolleston, 2007), Uganda (Mugerwa, 2015), and Malawi (Bold et al., 2017), where removal of



fees resulted in marked improvements in access. However, as seen in those settings, the surge in numbers often outstrips resource and infrastructure capacity, resulting in overcrowded classrooms, strained pedagogical delivery, and reduced individual learner support. This study confirms that pattern: classes with over 130 learners, desk sharing among 4-5 pupils, and delayed assignment marking are symptomatic of system stress.

One contribution of this study is its emphasis on stakeholder voices, particularly head teachers, teachers, PTA members, and pupils as to how the policy plays out in practice. While quantitative data from government sources point to macro-level gains in enrolment and transition, this qualitative study reveals the lived consequences: teacher burnout, diminishing quality of interaction, frustration among pupils, and limited institutional readiness for new administrative burdens (such as procurement, budgeting).

Moreover, the study surfaces the often-overlooked dimension of financial and administrative capacity at the school level. School administrators reported being untrained in budgeting and procurement, suggesting that policy design needs to consider capacity building as a core component of any rapid-scale reform. This finding is consistent with earlier studies in Zambia and elsewhere: Simukoko (2018) and Chibale & Banda (2023) stressed the need for administrative training alongside fee abolition.

The observed delays in grant disbursement compound the strain on resources. Schools often must wait for government funds, sometimes months into the academic term, before purchasing textbooks, desks, or materials. This delay undermines the policy's intended responsiveness and creates periods during which students attend classes without materials or appropriate infrastructure. This finding parallels experiences in Ethiopia (Asadullah & Yalonetzky, 2012) and Ghana (World Bank, 2018), where funding timeliness significantly influenced policy success.

Parental and community involvement emerged as a potentially powerful moderating factor. While involvement was generally low, in schools where PTA members actively mobilized local donations, shortages were mitigated temporarily. This suggests that local stakeholder engagement can augment government support, though it cannot substitute for structural investment. It aligns with the argument by Rose (2009) that community participation enhances ownership and resource mobilization, but success depends on transparency and regular accountability processes.

The study also sheds light on the equity implications of free education. By enabling previously out-of-school and financially excluded learners to return, the policy contributed to narrowing the equity gap. However, equity cannot be fully realized if quality declines; large class sizes and limited resources risk perpetuating inequalities for those learners, particularly slow learners or those with special needs. This nuance is important: access is necessary but not sufficient.

Policy implications are clear, while free education policies are essential for promoting access and equity, they must be accompanied by systemic support: teacher recruitment and retention, infrastructure investment, reliable grant disbursement, capacity building for school leadership, and fostering robust stakeholder accountability. Without these complementary measures, the gains in enrolment risk being undermined by declines in quality.

Limitations

This study was limited by its narrow geographic scope: Chongwe District only, which may limit generalizability to other Zambian districts with different socio-economic contexts. The sample size was small (28 participants), and findings relied on self-reported perceptions, which may be influenced by recall or social desirability bias. However, the study's strengths include method triangulation (interviews, focus

groups, observations), capturing multiple stakeholder perspectives (teachers, head teachers, parents, pupils), and applying rigorous thematic analysis. The purposive sample of engaged participants enriched the depth of insight into policy implementation. The study also offers early qualitative documentation of the Free Education Policy's impact.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Zambia's 2022 Free Education Policy has achieved significant success in removing financial barriers to secondary education in Chongwe District and increasing enrolment and educational equity. Many learners who formerly dropped out due to inability to pay fees were able to return to school, reflecting inclusive gains and greater access. However, the policy's rapid implementation has exposed critical system weaknesses: overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, material shortages, delayed disbursement of grants, and limited financial and administrative capacity among school leaders. These bottlenecks have tangible consequences: reduced individualized attention, increased teacher burnout, delays in assignment marking, and frustrations among pupils due to insufficient resources and learning materials. The mismatch between enrollment growth and infrastructural and administrative capacity raises concern that the quality of education may decline if not addressed.

Nonetheless, there is clear evidence that stakeholder involvement, particularly from PTA groups, can play a mitigating role, although such efforts appear sporadic and unsystematic. Realistically, transforming increased access into sustained educational quality requires multi-faceted policy support.

Above all, while the Free Education Policy stands as a critical step toward educational inclusion, its long-term success depends on investments in infrastructure, human resources, school leadership capacity, stakeholder engagement, and effective monitoring. The findings provide actionable insights to guide policy adjustments and resource mobilization, ensuring that the promise of free secondary education in Zambia is fulfilled in both access and quality.

Recommendations

- Expand investment in infrastructure: build additional classrooms, laboratories, libraries, sanitation, and ICT facilities to accommodate increased student load.
- Recruit, train, and retain qualified teachers to reduce pupil-teacher ratios and manage workload.
- Ensure timely and predictable disbursement of government grants to schools to avoid procurement delays.
- Provide capacity-building training for school heads and administrators on budgeting, procurement, monitoring, and financial reporting.
- Strengthen parental and community involvement through regular PTA meetings, financial review sessions, and community-led resource mobilization.
- Improve provision of learning materials: textbooks, stationery, desks, computers, and Internet access for research.
- Establish continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track enrolment, resource adequacy, teacher workload, and student performance indicators.
- Explore performance-based incentive schemes for teachers to improve motivation under increased workloads.
- Facilitate peer-learning platforms among school administrators to share best practices in resource management and policy adaptation.



Abbreviations

DEBS: District Education Board Secretary; MoE: Ministry of Education; MoF: Ministry of Finance; PTA: Parents Teachers Association; UN: United Nations; UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation; WB: World Bank.

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Author contribution

KM conceptualized the study, conducted the literature review, designed the study, collected the data, analyzed data and drafted the manuscript.

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Availability of Data and Materials

The field notes, recorded interviews and data generated during data collection and analysis of this study are not publicly available to ensure confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The approval was sought from the Chongwe District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Written consents and assents were obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Competing Interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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Figures and Legends

Table 1: Key Thematic Categories

Major Theme	Subtheme	Key Illustrative Points
1. Increased Access and Enrolment Gains	• Surge on student enrolment - Enrolment tripled • Strain on infrastructure and materials	• Enrolment tripled • Many pupils who had dropped out returned • Overcrowded classrooms • Shared materials
2. Impact on Educational Quality	• Teacher workload and learner support • Inadequate teaching and learning resources	• Teachers overwhelmed by marking and managing large classes • Reduced individual



		attention to learners • Shortages of textbooks, desks, lab reagents etc.
3. Administrative and Financial Capacity Challenges	• Weak financial management • Delayed government funding	• School managers untrained in budgeting and procurement • Lack of transparency and irregular financial reporting. • Late disbursement of grants • Delayed purchasing of teaching and learning resources
4. Stakeholder Engagement and Accountability	• Low parental/community involvement • Local initiatives and contributions.	• Few PTA meetings • Limited oversight of funds • Poor accountability structures • Some schools mobilized local donations *(furniture) • Though the support is unsustainable.