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Examining the Effectiveness of Free Secondary Education on Access and Quality of Education: A Case Study of Lusaka District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Access to quality education remains a critical factor in national development and social equity. In Zambia, the government introduced the Free Education Policy to improve enrollment rates, reduce financial barriers, and enhance learning outcomes, especially among vulnerable and low-income populations. The policy aimed to create a more inclusive education system by removing tuition fees and related costs that had previously excluded many learners from progressing beyond primary school. While the policy has increased enrollment, questions remain about its overall effectiveness in improving both access and the quality of education. Concerns have emerged regarding overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, limited teaching and learning materials, and teacher shortages. These challenges have the potential to compromise the quality of education delivered under the free secondary education framework. This study examined the extent to which the policy has improved access to secondary education and investigated its impact on the quality of teaching and learning in public schools. The study adopted a exploratory case study design, utilizing a mixed method approach. The target population for this study consists of Teachers from selected public schools in Lusaka. The study made use of a convenience sampling technique. Chi-square was used for inferential statistics in order to determine the relationships between the variables. The study found that the introduction of free secondary education in Lusaka District led to an increase in pupil enrollment, with 77.1% of respondents reporting varying levels of growth and a significant proportion attributing this to previously unaffordable school fees. A statistically significant relationship was observed between enrollment growth and increased inclusion of low income students. Challenges identified included teacher shortages, infrastructure limitations, increased workloads, discipline issues, and uneven government support. Professional development opportunities and innovation strategies were not uniformly implemented across schools.

1. Introduction

Education is a fundamental human right and a driver of development, encompassing both the removal of fees to increase access and the provision of quality learning processes (Cole, 2022; Asante, 2024). While crucial for achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, the global implementation of free education shows mixed results. Successful models in nations like Norway contrast with challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa, where increased access has sometimes led to stagnating quality due to inadequate planning (Parvin, 2025; Nkrumah, 2020). In the SADC region, countries like Botswana and Malawi have pursued fee elimination but face overcrowding and teacher shortages (Likuru, 2022). In Zambia, the 2022 extension of free secondary education under the New Dawn government abolished tuition and other fees to boost enrolment and reduce dropouts (Sinkala, 2024). This policy aligns with international conventions like the Convention on the Rights of the Child and domestic frameworks such as the Education Act of 2011 (Thelma, 2024; Nkrumah, 2020). While proponents highlight reduced inequality, critics warn that without adequate investment in infrastructure and teachers, quality will decline (Harma, 2022). Recent evidence indicates sharp enrolment increases have led to double shift schooling and overburdened teachers, with monitoring systems still evolving (Kalonga, 2023; Chulu, 2021). This study therefore seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of Zambia's free secondary education policy in improving both access and quality within Lusaka District.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Although the Zambian government's commendable implementation of the Free Secondary Education Policy (FSEP) in 2021 to improve access, emerging evidence suggests a troubling trade-off between expanded enrollment and declining education quality (Mwanza, 2020). National data reveals a 30% surge in secondary school admissions (MoE, 2022), yet Lusaka District a key beneficiary now grapples with severe systemic strains: pupil-teacher ratios exceeding 1:60 (Mulenga, 2023), 45% of schools operating double shifts (ZNUT, 2023), and only 22% of classrooms meeting minimum infrastructure standards (World Bank, 2023). While access gains are undeniable, quality indicators paint a concerning picture: SESME 2023 results show a 15% decline

in mathematics pass rates since fee abolition, and teacher surveys report 67% of educators handling unmanageable class sizes (Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection, 2023). This dissonance mirrors global experiences where rapid enrollment expansions from Kenya's FDSE to Ghana's FSHS outpaced resource allocation, perpetuating a massification without quality paradox (Oketch, 2020). In Lusaka, urban rural disparities exacerbate these challenges, with peri urban schools facing triple the dropout rates of city center institutions (Zambia Statistics Agency, 2023). Without urgent interventions to address teacher shortages, infrastructure gaps, and equitable resource distribution, Zambia risks converting its access milestone into a long term learning crisis. This study therefore investigates this critical juncture where policy success in access threatens to undermine quality to propose actionable solutions for sustainable implementation.

1.2 Objectives of the study

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To establish the effectiveness of free secondary education on access to secondary education in Lusaka District.
- To examine the effect of free secondary education on the quality of education in selected schools.
- To establish the challenges arising from the implementation of free secondary education.

1.3 Research Question

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How effective is free secondary education in improving access to secondary education in Lusaka District?
- What is the effect of free secondary education on the quality of education in selected schools in Lusaka District?
- What challenges and opportunities have arisen from the implementation of free secondary education in Lusaka District?

2. Literature Review

This chapter reviews literature to understand the current state of knowledge, identify critical gaps and points of disagreement in this field and how this current study can contribute to it.

2.1 Effectiveness of free secondary education on access to secondary education

Quality education, central to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda under SDG 4, is viewed as a tool for global transformation, promoting social stability and long term development (Ahmad, 2019; Pandey, 2018). Despite global initiatives, in 2018, 20% of children were out of school, and many enrolled lacked basic literacy, highlighting the challenge of achieving universal literacy by 2030 (Adipat, 2022). Research confirms that sustainable development is unattainable without universal access to quality education, as inadequate investment limits human potential and exacerbates inequality (Adipat & Chotikapanich, 2022). A key strategy to Improve access, particularly in developing countries like Zambia, is the implementation of free education policies. Through removing financial barriers such as tuition and exam fees, these policies aim to enhance enrollment and retention (Mwanza, 2020; Mwelwa, 2023). The most immediate impact is a significant increase in enrollment, especially among low income and rural families, and for marginalized groups like girls, helping to reduce gender disparities (Aithal, 2019; Bwembya, 2024; Stenzel, 2024). This surge reflects a latent demand previously suppressed by economic constraints (Maambo, 2020). Free education policies contribute to a notable reduction in dropout rates. Through alleviating the financial burden on families, more students, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, can remain in school, improving progression and completion rates (Kaumba, 2021; Machinyise, 2023). This continued education has profound social implications, including delaying early marriage and reducing child labor (Thelma, 2024; Stenzel, 2024). The success of these policies is not automatic. Increased enrollment often strains school capacity, leading to overcrowding and overburdened teachers (Sinkala, 2024). To ensure quality, increased access must be matched with investment in infrastructure, teaching resources, and supportive services (Lungu, 2020).

2.2 The effect of free secondary education on the quality of education.

Reducing class size is a key education policy concern, yet research from various African contexts reveals that overcrowding remains a significant challenge, often exacerbated by policies aimed at increasing access. Likuru and Mwila (2022), guided by Social Cognitive Theory, found that classrooms in Ilemela Municipality, Tanzania, were severely overcrowded, with over 90 students per stream against a national standard of 45. This negatively impacted teaching and learning by hindering the implementation of a competence based curriculum and limiting effective classroom management. Similarly, the implementation of free education policies, while boosting enrolment, has introduced new pressures. Mmasa (2020) examined stakeholder involvement in Tanzania's fee free education and found a strong link between the availability of teaching and learning resources and student academic performance, recommending increased stakeholder contributions. In Zambia, the 2022 free education policy has yielded comparable outcomes. Machinyise (2023) reported increased access, particularly in Grades 1 and 8, but noted a negative effect on quality due to the suspension of infrastructure projects following the removal of Parent-Teacher Association fees. Schools struggled with a high pupil to material ratio and teacher shortages, making classroom management difficult. Corroborating these findings, Mwelwa et al. (2023) investigated the policy's impact across ten Zambian provinces and confirmed that the surge in learner numbers strained resources such as teachers, desks, textbooks, and sanitation facilities, negatively affecting the quality of education. Grounded in the Capability Approach, their study recommended strengthening the policy through sustainable financing, infrastructure development, and teacher recruitment to manage overcrowding and its detrimental effects on the learning environment.

2.3 Challenges and opportunities arising from the implementation of free secondary education.

One major challenge of free education policies is the strain of overcrowding on resources, which often compromises quality despite increased access (Aithal, 2019). The sudden influx of students typically exceeds institutional capacity, leading to overcrowded classrooms that reduce individual attention, hinder learner engagement, and increase indiscipline (Bhuwania, 2022; Daka, 2020). This strain extends to teachers, where recruitment lags behind enrollment, resulting in overwork, burnout, and reduced instruction quality (Mwanza, 2020). Physical infrastructure also suffers, with shortages of desks, textbooks, libraries, and laboratories making learning uncomfortable and less effective (Stenzel, 2024). Hidden costs persist even after tuition removal. Expenses for uniforms, transport, stationery, and examination fees create significant barriers for the poorest families, sometimes forcing children to drop out (Earle, 2018; Kaumba, 2021). Girls face additional challenges related to menstrual hygiene, which is often overlooked in budgeting (Mwanza, 2020). The success of free education is heavily dependent on adequate infrastructure and staffing, yet enrollment surges are rarely matched by investment (Thelma, 2024). This mismatch results in insufficient classrooms, forcing students into shifts or onto floors, and a shortage of learning materials that limits curriculum engagement (Daka, 2020; Kretzer, 2020). Staffing shortages lead to over-reliance on underqualified teachers and excessive workloads, particularly affecting rural areas (Mmasa, 2020). This creates a fundamental trade off between quantity and quality. Expanding access without corresponding reforms leads to passive learning and a decline in educational standards (Mwalwa, 2023). Research by Abbasi (2025) across 78 low and middle income countries confirms that simply increasing education expenditure is insufficient; expanding secondary enrollment has a stronger impact on completion rates. The study concludes that budget increases must be accompanied by reforms in governance, teacher development, and infrastructure to achieve meaningful progress toward goals like SDG 4.

3. Methodology

According to Moran (2020), study design encompasses a set of tools and techniques tailored for a specific purpose, outlining the justification and procedures for their implementation. Similarly, research design functions as a strategic framework that guides researchers in data collection, analysis, and interpretation to address research questions effectively. In line with this, the study adopted an exploratory case study, utilizing a mixed method approach. By definition, a population is defined as a collection of objects, events, or individuals sharing common characteristics that the researcher is interested in studying (Willie, 2024). The target population for this study consisted of Secondary School teachers from selected schools in Lusaka.

3.1 Sub- Methodology

A sample is a subset of a population that is used to represent the entire group (Hennink, 2022). The sample size for this study consisted of 150 respondents. The sampling design for this study was a convenience sampling technique. This method involved the deliberate selection of specific individuals or groups from the target population at based on predefined criteria that are relevant to the research objectives (Golzar, 2022). The main research tool used in the study was a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of both open ended and closed ended questions. Primary data was collected through structured surveys. These methods involved the use of standardized questionnaires and face to face interview but mostly electronic questionnaire to gather data on the research variables. Data entry and statistical analysis was done using STATA. Graphical presentation of descriptive statistics were done using Microsoft Excel 365. Chi-square was used for inferential statistics in order to determine the relationships between the variables (Lugo-Armenta, 2024). Thematic analysis was used to analyze qualitative data (Squires, 2023)he. The study employed triangulation as a research strategy to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Triangulation involved the use of multiple data sources, data collection methods, and/or researchers' perspectives to corroborate and cross verify research results. In this study, triangulation was achieved by obtaining quantitative data collected through surveys. This approach helped mitigate potential biases and provided a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the research phenomenon, increasing the overall robustness of the study's conclusions.

3.2 Sub- Methodology

The study upheld ethical aspects, including obtaining informed consent, safeguarding participant confidentiality and privacy, and utilizing acquired information solely for academic purposes. Stringent confidentiality measures were in place. Equal and unbiased treatment was given to all participants, who had the choice to participate or decline without any adverse effects. The study carried no risk of physical harm. The study had several limitations. First, it was limited to Lusaka District, which may not reflect the experiences of other districts in Zambia, particularly rural or less-resourced areas. This restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the small sample size, determined by time and resource constraints, may not have captured the full diversity of experiences across secondary schools. The study depended on the subjective views of teachers which may have introduced bias. Variations in how the Free Secondary Education Policy was implemented across different schools also posed a challenge in assessing the policy's impact consistently. Furthermore, limited access to official data from some institutions reduced the ability to verify findings through multiple sources. Lastly, the short duration of the study made it difficult to observe long-term effects of the policy on educational outcomes.

4. Findings

The Free Secondary Education Policy in Lusaka District successfully increased access, with 23.3% of respondents noting that 81-100% of new students came from households previously unable to afford fees. This confirmed the removal of financial barriers, aligning with national data showing a 30% enrollment increase. This surge strained quality. Pupil teacher ratios exceeded 1:60 in 19.3% of schools, leading to a shift from participatory teaching to lecture based instruction. Consequently, 22.7% of respondents reported declining exam performance, with a 15% drop in mathematics pass rates. Infrastructure and resources were

overwhelmed; 18% of schools rated facilities as inadequate, and textbook shortages worsened. The Impact was uneven. Peri urban schools faced overwhelming demand and triple the dropout rates of urban schools, while government schools saw steeper quality declines than grant aided institutions. Hidden costs like uniforms continued to limit participation for the poorest. Positive outcomes included improved gender parity and the return of older students, enriching classroom diversity. Teacher workload increased significantly, contributing to burnout and higher staff turnover. Comparisons with Kenya and Ghana show that without concurrent investment in teachers and infrastructure, rapid enrollment gains can compromise quality. The findings suggest that sustaining FSEP's success requires addressing these systemic strains to prevent the creation of a two tiered system where free education is synonymous with lower quality for the disadvantaged.

4.1 Presentation of Results on Background Characteristics of the Respondents.

Figure 1: respondents by gender

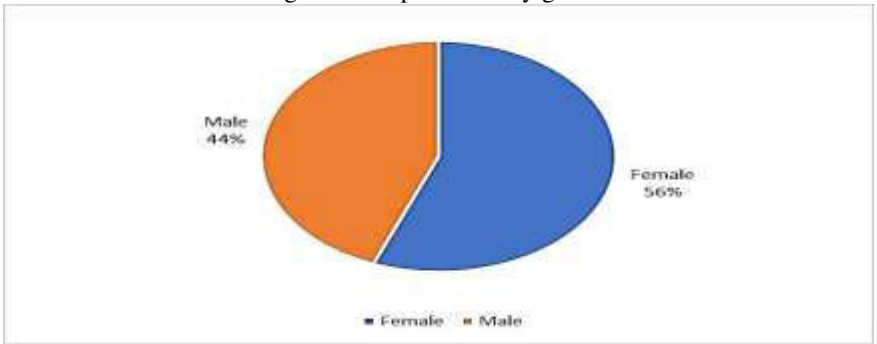
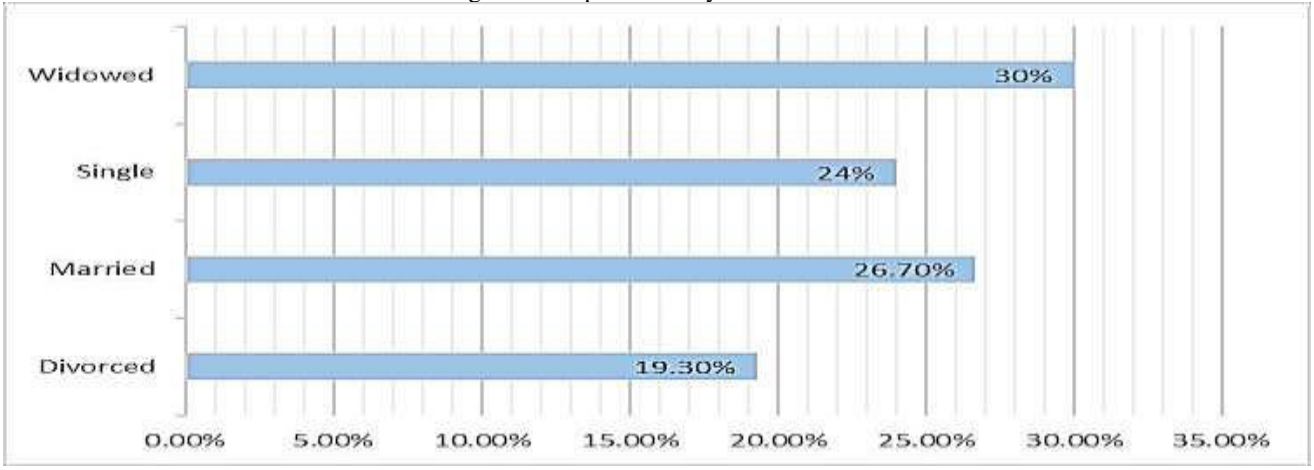


Figure 1The study sample consisted of 150 participants. Out of these, 84 respondents were female, accounting for 56% of the total sample. The remaining 66 respondents were male, representing 44%.

Figure 2: respondents by marital status



Among the 150 respondents, 45 individuals were widowed, making up 30% of the total. Married participants accounted for 26.7%, while 36 respondents were single, representing 24%. Additionally, 29 respondents were divorced, constituting 19.3%.

Figure 3: Highest level of education

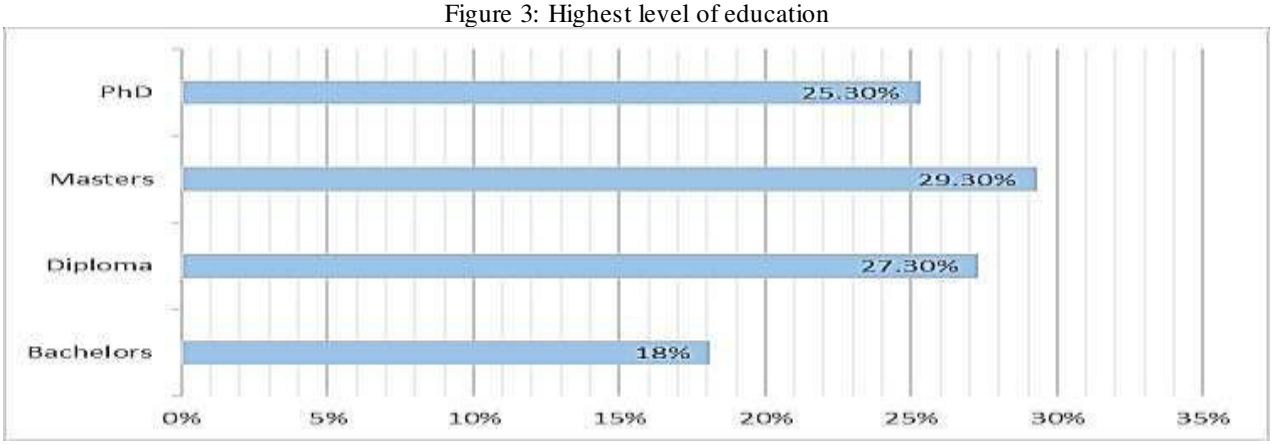
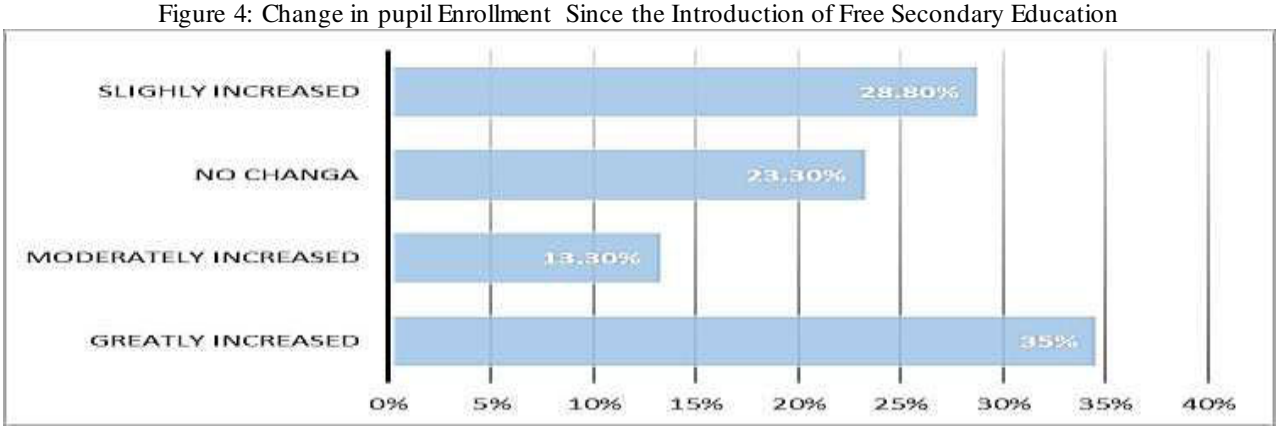


Figure 3 Regarding educational attainment, 44 respondents held a master's degree, making up the largest group at 29.3%. This was followed by 41 respondents with a diploma, representing 27.3%. Participants with a PhD numbered 38, accounting for 25.3%, while 27 individuals had a bachelor's degree, constituting 18%.

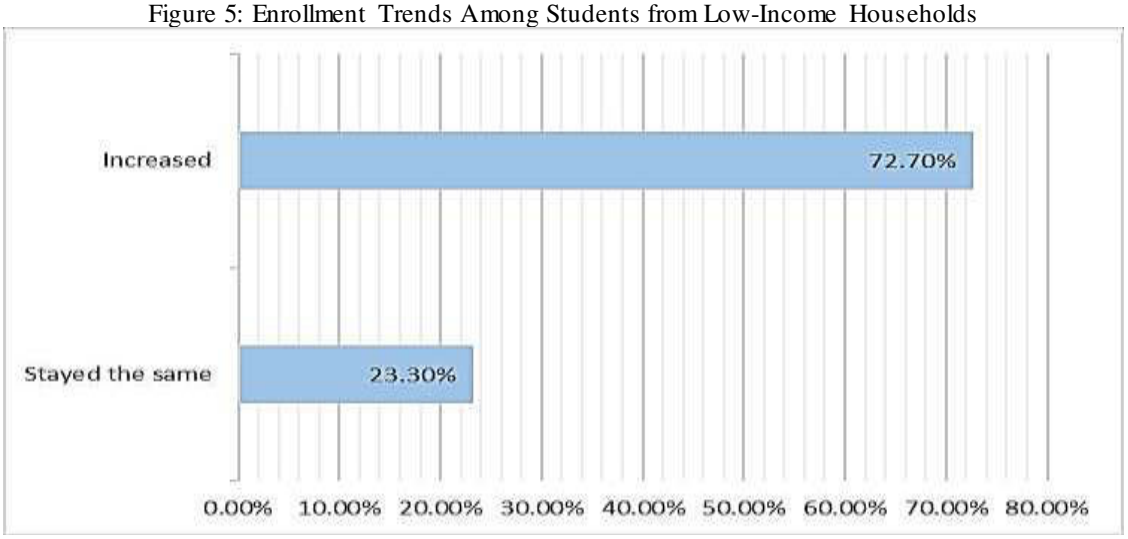
4.2. Effectiveness of free secondary education on access to secondary education in Lusaka District.

Figure 4: Change in pupil Enrollment Since the Introduction of Free Secondary Education



The study found that 35% of respondents reported that pupil enrollment had greatly increased. Meanwhile, 13.3% indicated a moderate increase. A total of 28.8% observed that enrollment had slightly increased, showing a modest improvement. However, 23.3% of respondents reported no change in pupil enrollment.

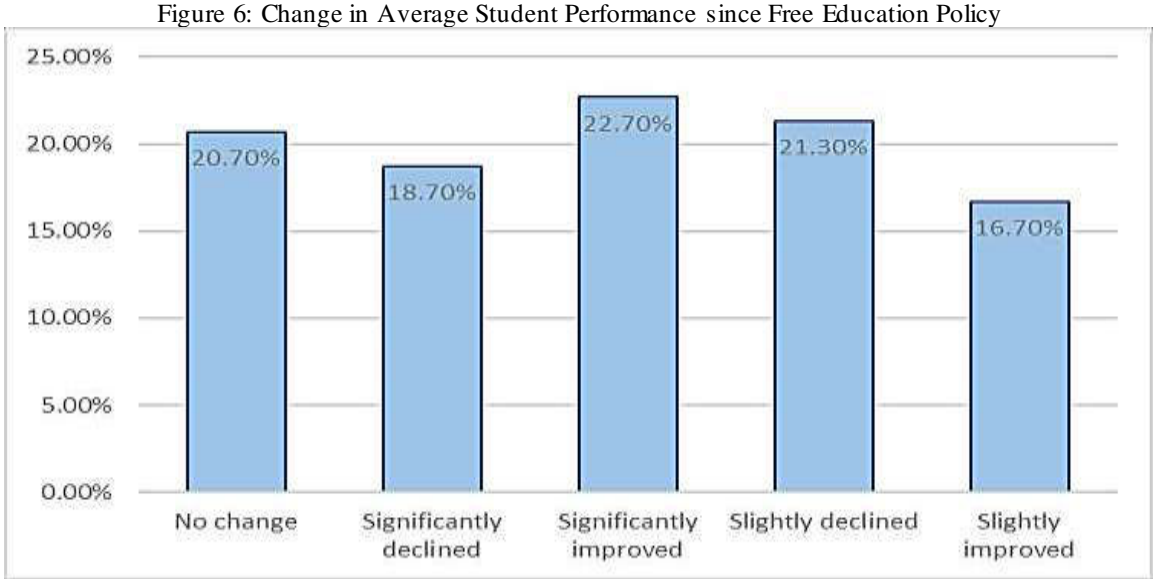
Figure 5: Enrollment Trends Among Students from Low-Income Households



Enrollment Frequency of Students from Low Income Households Compared to Before. Responses to this question were distributed across multiple categories. About 27.3% believed enrollment rates from low-income households stayed about the same, while 72.7% reported that enrollment increased.

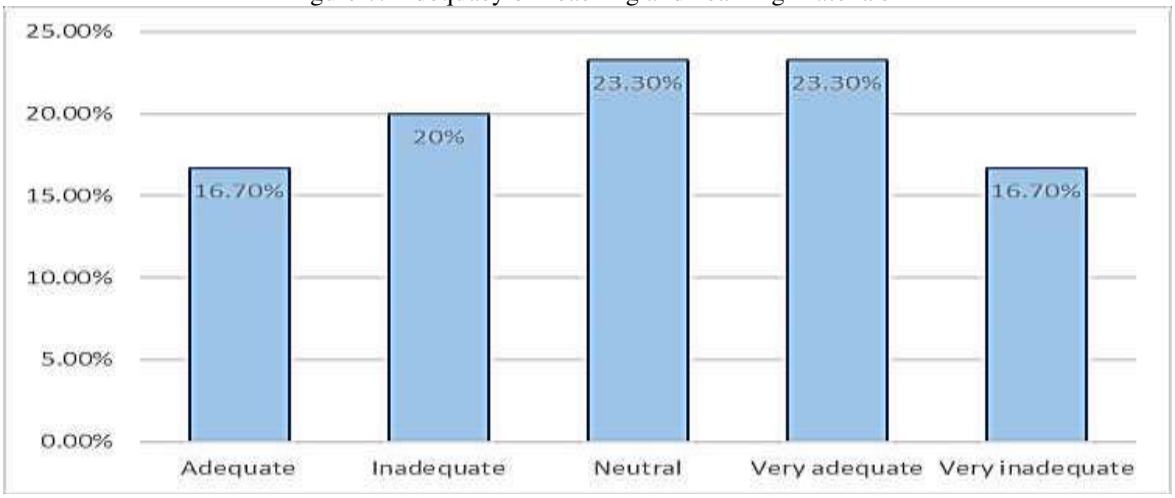
4.3. Effect of free secondary education on the quality of education in selected schools.

Figure 6: Change in Average Student Performance since Free Education Policy



Respondents were divided in their assessment of how student performance changed after the introduction of free education. Abo ut 22.7% indicated that exam scores significantly improved, while 21.3% observed a slight decline. A similar propo rtion (20.7%) saw no change, and 18.7%reported a significant decline. Only 16.7% observed a slight improvement.

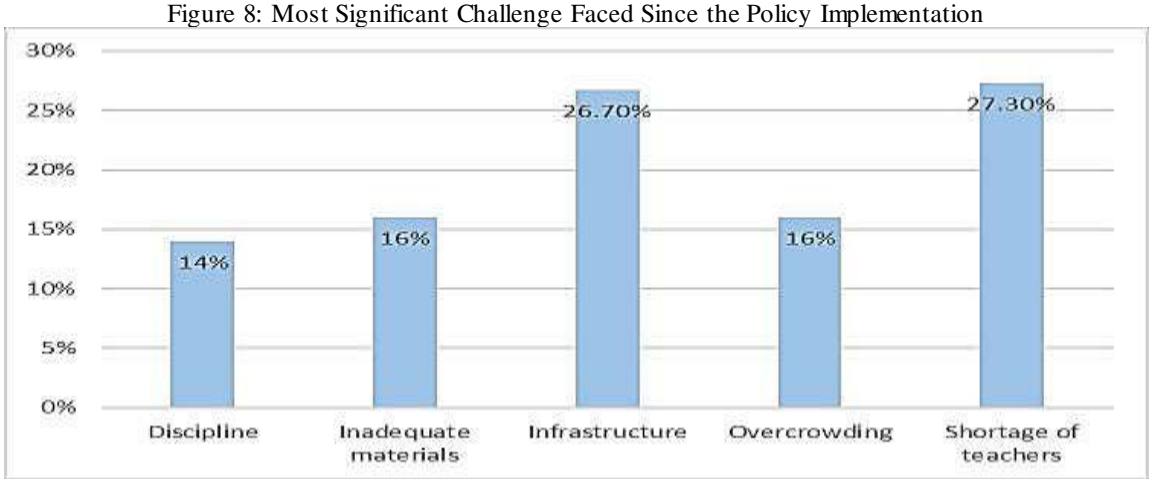
Figure 7: Adequacy of Teaching and Learning Materials



Perceptions on the availability of teaching and learning materials were mixed. A combined 40% of respondents rated the materials as either very adequate (23.3%) or adequate (16.7%), while 36.7 percent rated them as either inadequate (20%) or very inadequate(16.7%). A neutral position was held by 23.3%.

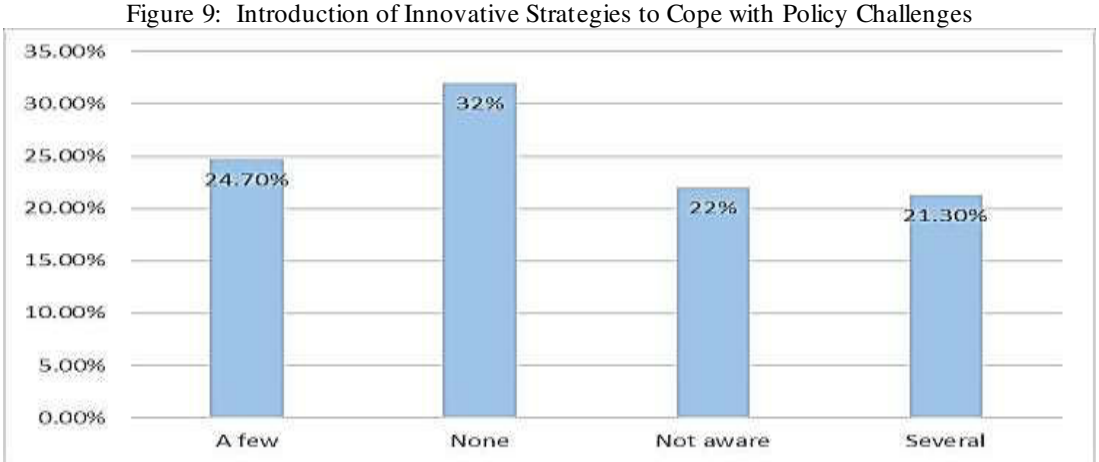
4.4. Challenges arising from the implementation of free secondary education.

Figure 8: Most Significant Challenge Faced Since the Policy Implementation



The most commonly cited challenge since the introduction of the free education policy was the shortage of teachers, reported by 27.3% of respondents. This was closely followed by infrastructure challenges at 26.75. Other significant issues included inadequate materials and overcrowding, each reported by 16%, and student discipline issues at 14%.

Figure 9: Introduction of Innovative Strategies to Cope with Policy Challenges



When asked about innovation, 24.7% of respondents reported a few strategies had been introduced, and 21.3% noted several strategies. However, 32% said no strategies had been introduced, and 22% were not aware of any. These findings suggest that although innovation is occurring in some schools, a considerable number have yet to respond strategically to the challenges of free education.

5. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Summary

The study's findings have important implications for policy adjustment. They suggest that while FSEP's core premise remains valid, its implementation requires refinement to address emerging challenges and capitalize on new opportunities. Other countries' experiences show that such mid-course corrections are normal and often necessary for long-term success. Moving forward, Zambia's education system faces the task of addressing immediate challenges while strategically developing identified opportunities. This dual approach could follow the example of countries like Rwanda and Ghana, which successfully balanced access expansion with quality preservation through phased, responsive implementation.

5.2 Conclusion

The study shows that the introduction of free secondary education has significantly increased pupil enrollment, especially among low-income households and across various age groups. However, this growth has led to challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, uneven access to teaching materials, heavy teacher workloads, and inconsistent assessment practices. Academic performance results are mixed, with some schools reporting improvements while others see declines. Key issues include teacher shortages, inadequate infrastructure, and student discipline problems. Government support and professional development opportunities are uneven, and innovation in managing these challenges remains limited. Overall, while access to education has improved, addressing resource constraints and quality concerns is essential to sustain and enhance the policy's positive impact.

5.2 Recommendations

Increase Investment in Infrastructure and Learning Resources: The government should prioritize building additional classrooms, expanding sanitation facilities, and ensuring adequate supply of teaching and learning materials to reduce overcrowding and improve the learning environment. Recruit and Retain More Qualified Teachers: To address teacher shortages and heavy workloads, efforts should be made to recruit additional teachers and provide incentives for retention, particularly in high-demand areas. Enhance Teacher Training and Professional Development: Continuous professional development opportunities should be expanded to equip teachers with skills to manage larger classes and improve instructional quality. Standardize Assessment Practices: Schools should be supported to implement regular, curriculum-based assessments to monitor student progress effectively and guide teaching strategies. Strengthen Government Support and Accountability: Increased and more consistent government funding is needed, alongside transparent monitoring to ensure resources are effectively allocated and utilized. Promote Innovation and Best Practices: Schools should be encouraged to develop and share innovative strategies to manage challenges arising from increased enrollment and resource limitations. Foster Partnerships and Community Engagement: Strengthening collaboration with parents, local communities, NGOs, and private sector actors can help mobilize additional resources and support for schools.

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