

# "From Policy to Practice: Challenges in Delivering Free Education in Kabwe District Secondary Schools"

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEDU0741>

Received: 12 November 2025; Accepted: 24 November 2025; Published: 17 December 2025

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate the challenges encountered in the implementation of the Free Education Policy (FEP) using the perceptions of the teachers in secondary schools in Kabwe district. To achieve this, the study used a qualitative research approach and a case study design with a sample size of 30 participants upon reaching the saturation point. The data was analysed thematically using ATLAS.ti allowed themes and subthemes to emerge using Braun and Clark's (2016) thematic analysis. The study found stiff centralized control and excessive bureaucracy that limited the Headteacher's discretion to address immediate localized FEP challenges that emerged immediately when the FEP was launched in secondary schools in Kabwe district. The study also found some of the challenges of the FEP implementation to be: delayed and insufficient government grants, overcrowded classrooms and teacher workload pressure, compromised teaching and learning quality and limited infrastructure support. The implication of the study is discussed.

**Keywords:** Centralized Control, overcrowded classrooms, teacher workload pressure, limited infrastructure support.

## INTRODUCTION

The Zambian Free Education Policy (FEP), introduced in 2022, marks a historic shift toward universal, inclusive, and equitable access to education, especially in regions like Kabwe District (Ngulube et al., 2020). Implemented amidst aspirations to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4), the policy's practical ambitions encounter layered realities on the ground. These include surging enrollments, financial and infrastructural constraints, decentralization demands, teacher shortages, and persistent socio-cultural inequalities. By abolishing tuition fees from early childhood through secondary education, the government aimed to remove economic barriers to schooling, especially for marginalized and vulnerable populations. The Africa Report (2024) further affirmed that the policy has contributed to a national sense of educational revival, as children previously excluded from the system are now receiving formal education. Machinyise, Kasebula, and Chabu (2023) acknowledge the policy's success in increasing enrollment at primary and secondary levels, noting significant rises in Grade 1 and Grade 8 admissions. This surge in enrollment is attributed to the removal of school fees, which previously served as a barrier for many families. Additionally, the study observes a slight improvement in tertiary education enrollment, as financial relief at lower education levels has enabled some families to allocate resources toward higher education. However, the study critically highlights several challenges that have emerged alongside these positive developments.

However, the surge in enrollments has brought about significant systemic challenges. Existing infrastructure, already under strain, is now overwhelmed. In many schools, classrooms designed for 40–50 pupils are accommodating more than 100 learners, making effective teaching nearly impossible (BBC Africa, 2024). MedAfrica Times (2024) reported that teachers are experiencing burnout due to increased workloads, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teaching and learning materials. This situation not only affects learning outcomes but also diminishes teacher morale and instructional quality.

Benedict (2024) conducted a study on Zambia's bold move towards free education: the benefits and drawbacks. The study revealed that Zambia's Free Education Policy has significantly improved access to education across the country. The elimination of tuition fees allowed a large number of financially disadvantaged children to enrol in school, many for the first time. Chanda (2023) discussed that the majority of schools had pupil-teacher ratios exceeding the government's recommended standards of 35:1 to 40:1, with 84.3% of teachers reporting overcrowded classrooms. This overcrowding has led to strained resources, compromised quality of teaching, and lowered teacher accountability.

Even if the FEP enhanced access to education, significant challenges threaten the sustainability and quality of educational provision. The increased learner numbers have led to overcrowded classrooms and high pupil-teacher ratios, compromising effective teaching and learning. Mwanza and Silukuni (2020) indicated that increased enrollment rates led to overcrowded classrooms, inadequate educational supplies, and overworked teachers. These challenges have compromised the quality of education, as teachers struggle to provide individualised attention and adequate instructional support to students. Mwelwa, Bwalya, and Chibwili (2023) indicated that the FEP led to increased school enrollments and government funding. However, this surge in enrollment exerted pressure on already overstretched educational resources, including teachers, desks, textbooks, toilets, and laboratory facilities, indirectly affecting the quality of education.

The lack of infrastructure and resources not only burdens teachers but also compromises the quality of education that students receive. Pansho (2024) pointed out that the increased enrollment resulting from the Free Education Policy led to overcrowded classrooms and a significant strain on resources. Specifically, the lack of adequate equipment and infrastructure hindered the effective teaching of D&T subjects, which are inherently practical. Phiri (2022) lamented that the overwhelming lack of resources hinders the ability to provide quality education. Despite the government's efforts to recruit many new teachers and promises to build 120 new secondary schools, the implementation was rushed and lacked adequate planning. However, it is evident that while the Free Education Policy has successfully increased access to education, it has also exposed significant shortcomings in the education system's preparedness to handle such growth. Kafwanka and Phiri (2022) observed in their study in the Copperbelt Province that schools with inadequate learning materials often revert to outdated teaching methods, thus affecting learner motivation and performance. Therefore, material shortages undermine innovation and creativity in lesson delivery, further widening the gap between policy intention and classroom reality. The study also indicated that the shortage of materials has led to increased teacher workload and burnout. P15 highlighted that teachers spend more time improvising or preparing handwritten materials to compensate for the lack of textbooks and visual resources.

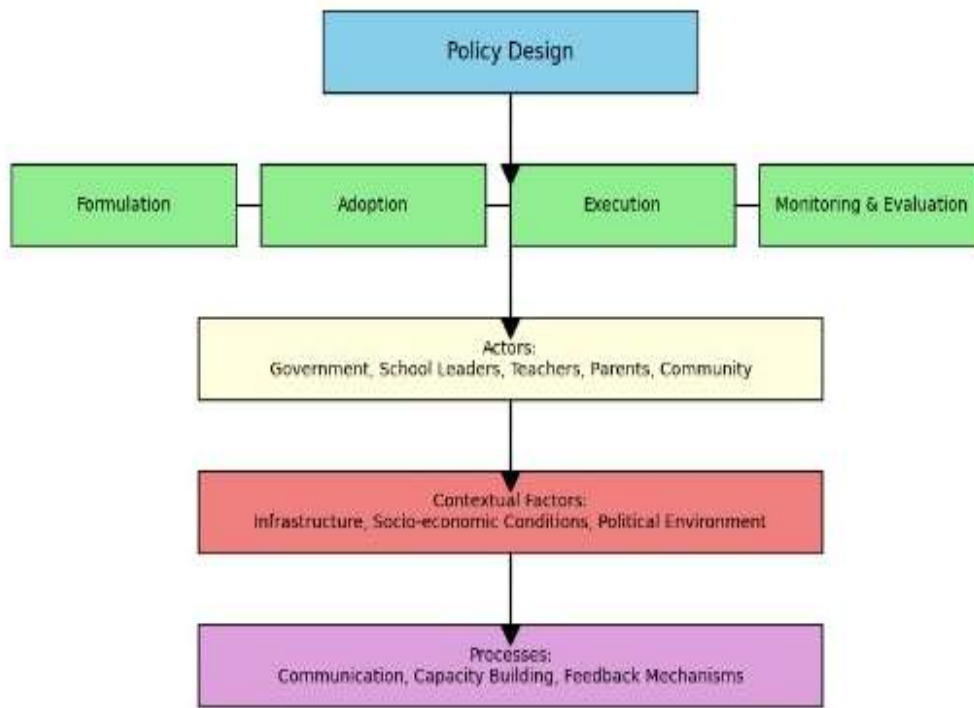
The Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) (2022) stated that, although the Free Education Policy is well-intentioned and has resulted in increased enrolments at grades 8 and 10 since its inception, there are still many challenges in its implementation. It is in this vein that the researcher observes that there seems not to be a clear study revealing how challenged the schools, in particular, are in implementing the free education policy. This study aims to explore the challenges encountered in implementing the Free Education Policy in selected secondary schools in Kabwe district, as perceived by teachers.

## **1.1 Theoretical Frameworks**

This study adopted an integrated framework combining the OECD Education Policy Implementation Framework and the Policy Implementation Process Framework to examine challenges in delivering Zambia's Free Education Policy in secondary schools in Kabwe District.

### **1.1.1 Integration Rationale**

The OECD framework emphasized the dynamic interaction between policy design, implementation actors, contextual factors, and processes. The Policy Implementation Process Framework added a structured, stagebased lens, formulation, adoption, execution, and evaluation, allowing for a chronological analysis of implementation breakdowns. The integrated framework is visually represented in the diagram below, illustrating the flow from policy design through implementation stages, influenced by actors, context, and processes.



Source: Integrated by the authors sourced from OECD Policy Implementation Framework by Romane Viennet & Beatriz Pont (2017) and Policy Implementation Process Framework by Donald Van Meter & Carl Van Horn (1975).

The OECD Implementation Framework is ideal for analyzing how Zambia's Free Education Policy is interpreted and enacted at the school level, especially in diverse local contexts like Kabwe District, whereas the Policy Implementation Process framework helped to trace where breakdowns occur, from national directives/political pronouncements to classroom realities and identified systemic bottlenecks. This framework guides the study's data collection and analysis by mapping observed challenges to specific layers and stages of implementation.

The following research questions guided the study: How is the Free Education Policy communicated and received by stakeholders in Kabwe District? What challenges do key actors face during the execution of the Free Education Policy in selected secondary schools in Kabwe district?

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. This approach involves exploring the complexities of human behaviour, culture and social phenomena through in-depth examination and analysis of qualitative data. The researcher employed the qualitative research approach and used methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, observations and document analysis to collect rich, detailed data that capture the richness and depth of human experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 2.1 Research design:

This study used a qualitative case study because it helped to explore the real-world implementation of a national policy in a specific local context (Kabwe District). It also helped to capture multiple perspectives from stakeholders like teachers, administrators, and ministry officials. In addition, it unpacked complex challenges that are not easily quantifiable, including communication gaps, resource constraints, and sociopolitical dynamics.

For its contextual depth, it focused on selected secondary schools to understand how and why implementation challenges occur through the use of multiple data sources: Interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and observations. Flexivity and iterativity allowed the researchers to refine questions and explore emerging themes during fieldwork. In this study, homogenous purposive sampling techniques were used to select teachers, school

administrators and educational administrators at the district level. These participants were selected on the premise that they all had experience with the implementation of the free education policy in secondary schools. Teachers were chosen as key informants because of their day-to-day interaction with learners and school administrators. The study settled for a sample size of 30 participants upon reaching the level of saturation.

## 2.2 Data Analysis

Data that were collected through in-depth interviews, FGDs, and observations were qualitative in nature and were analyzed using thematic analysis using ATLAS.ti software. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis procedures introduced by Braun & Clarke (2016). Data was reduced to themes or categories through the coding process. Data from interviews were coded, categorized and eventually emerged as themes. This process helped to understand and interpret the perceptions of teachers on the sustainability of the FEP. Ethical clearance was obtained from all relevant authorities. To protect the participants involved in the study, the researcher adhered to all ethical protocols, including the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, freedom to withdraw, respect for privacy, and informed consent, to collect the requisite data.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 3.1 Findings to Research Question One: How was the FEP communicated and received by stakeholders in Kabwe?

The following table summarizes the findings on how the FEP is communicated and received by stakeholders in Kabwe:

**Table 1: Communication and Receipt of FEP in Kabwe Schools**

Participant	Thematic Insight	Pre-Policy Perception	Post-Policy Transformation
P2	Parental financial relief and revaluation of schooling	Education is viewed as a costly burden; many children are excluded	Education is seen as a worthwhile investment; financial stress is alleviated
P4	Shift from privilege to right and communal responsibility	Education is deemed unnecessary, especially in rural areas	Education is embraced as a right; stronger school-community partnerships
P7	Inability to transition from fee-based expenditure to grantbased expenditure	School administrators budgeted school needs according to the school fees anticipated to be received	Less predictive lump-sum government grants and delayed funding.
P9	Renewed hope and aspirational shift	Teachers perceived a rise in hope for the vulnerable children to return to school	Education is seen as a pathway out of poverty; aspirations for higher education
P12	Transformation of gender norms	Girls' education is deprioritized in favour of early marriage	Increased female enrollment, decline in early marriages, and promotion of gender equity
P15	Community leadership and advocacy	Limited educational advocacy from traditional leaders	Leaders actively promote education as a moral and civic duty

P18	Rushed FEP implementation challenged the Headteachers	Headteachers had control over the school learner population	Headteachers experienced centralized and excessive bureaucracy in enrolment. 'Every child was allowed back to school'.
Participant	Thematic Insight	Pre-Policy Perception	Post-Policy Transformation

**3.2 To answer the second research question, which reads:** What challenges do key actors face during the execution of the Free Education Policy in selected secondary schools in Kabwe district? The following challenges were reported:

### 3.2.1 Inadequate Textbooks and Teaching Aids

#### P16 reported that:

The most pressing challenge following the Free Education Policy was the shortage of textbooks in classrooms. Six to seven learners were often forced to share a single textbook, making it difficult for each student to follow lessons independently. This limited access affected the quality of learning, particularly in subjects requiring constant reference, such as Mathematics and English.

#### P17 described that:

Teachers frequently had to improvise lesson plans due to the lack of teaching aids. Subjects like geography and history suffered because maps, charts, and other visual materials were unavailable. This shortage forced educators to rely heavily on oral explanations, which reduced learner engagement and understanding.

#### P18 reported that:

Schools were not adequately stocked with essential materials such as chalk, manila paper, and visual aids. Teachers often had to reuse old charts or create hand-drawn diagrams, which were time-consuming and less effective. The policy's success in increasing enrolment was undermined by the inadequate provision of learning resources.

#### Insufficient Practical and Laboratory Equipment

#### P17 reported that:

The teaching of practical subjects such as science, home economics, and technical subjects had been severely compromised due to a lack of laboratory equipment. Teachers teach these subjects theoretically, without allowing learners to conduct experiments, which significantly limits hands-on understanding and practical skill development.

#### P18 revealed that:

Students' comprehension of scientific concepts had been negatively affected without microscopes, chemicals, or laboratory apparatus; experiments that would normally illustrate key principles could not be performed. As a result, learners struggled to visualize and internalize concepts, which were reflected in poor performance in examinations.

### 3.2.1 Delayed and Insufficient Government Grants

#### P21 reported that

Schools often receive government grants late in the academic term, which disrupts the smooth running of school operations. Essential purchases such as chalk, exercise books, and teaching aids are delayed, forcing teachers to improvise lessons or reuse outdated materials, negatively affecting the quality of instruction.

### **P17 revealed that**

The amount of funding provided is inadequate relative to the surge in enrolment caused by the Free Education Policy. Schools have doubled their learner population without a corresponding increase in financial support, leaving them unable to meet the needs of classrooms, laboratories, and libraries effectively.

### **3.2.2 Overstretched Physical Resources**

#### **P19 reported that:**

The surge in enrolment following the Free Education Policy placed enormous pressure on school infrastructure. Classrooms originally designed for 40 learners are now accommodating over 70 learners, making it difficult for teachers to move around and monitor individual learner progress effectively.

#### **P14 revealed that:**

School furniture is insufficient, with some learners sitting on the floor during lessons. This not only affects comfort but also limits learners' ability to focus, creating a less conducive learning environment and contributing to classroom management challenges.

#### **P18 described that:**

Libraries and laboratories are overcrowded, with inadequate space for learners to study or conduct practical lessons. This overcrowding disrupts lesson delivery and diminishes the effectiveness of both academic and practical activities.

#### **P22 reported that**

The limited number of classrooms forces some schools to introduce double sessions to accommodate all learners. While this helps manage enrolment numbers, it shortens lesson periods, reduces contact time, and increases teacher fatigue, thereby affecting teaching quality.

### **3.2.3 Teachers' Personal Financial Sacrifices**

#### **P21 explained that:**

Some teachers personally funded practical lessons in science and technical subjects. Experiments and practical demonstrations often require chemicals, tools, or materials that were unavailable in schools, forcing teachers to cover costs to ensure learners gained hands-on experience.

#### **P26 described that:**

Teachers sometimes pool their own funds to create improvised teaching materials, such as charts, flashcards, or models. This creative effort was essential for maintaining learner engagement and lesson effectiveness, but it placed additional financial and time burdens on teachers.

### **3.2.4 Overcrowded Classrooms and Workload Pressure**

#### **P1 reported that:**

The number of learners per class has more than doubled since the introduction of the Free Education Policy. Before the policy, his average class size was around forty-five learners, but it had now ballooned to over ninety pupils in a single classroom. This sharp increase makes it extremely difficult to provide individual attention to learners, especially those struggling academically. Overcrowding limits teachers' ability to move freely around the classroom, check learners' work thoroughly, and offer personalized guidance, which in turn compromises lesson effectiveness and learner engagement.

### **P3 revealed that:**

Classrooms have become so congested that learners were forced to share desks, while others sat on the floor or stood during lessons. The lack of adequate furniture and space had created discomfort for both teachers and learners, as the physical arrangement of desks had become nearly impossible. This situation not only hinders classroom participation but also creates an unsafe environment, as students often trip or collide due to cramped spacing. Consequently, both teaching and learning have become physically and emotionally exhausting experiences.

### **3.2.5 Increased Teacher Workload and Fatigue**

#### **P2 reported that:**

Since the implementation of the Free Education Policy, the workload for teachers has increased tremendously. The surge in enrolment led to more classes, more learners, and consequently more lesson preparation, marking, and record keeping. Tasks which previously took a few hours now consume entire evenings and weekends. Many teachers are struggling to balance their professional duties with personal commitments, leading to fatigue and reduced enthusiasm for teaching.

#### **P4 revealed that:**

The increased workload resulted in frequent burnout among teachers. Teachers are now expected to handle more than five classes a day, each with between seventy and a hundred learners. This workload makes it almost impossible to rest or properly plan for lessons, leading to mental exhaustion and stress. The lack of additional staffing support forces teachers to endure overwhelming schedules, diminishing both the quality of teaching and their overall well-being.

#### **P9 pointed out that:**

Administrative responsibilities had multiplied with the growth in school populations. Teachers are now required to maintain expanded attendance registers, record continuous assessments, and prepare cumulative reports for large numbers of learners. This clerical work often extends beyond school hours, forcing teachers to stay late or take work home. The absence of clerical assistants in most schools had left teachers burdened with non-teaching duties, contributing to exhaustion and decreased classroom performance.

#### **P14 reported that:**

The number of lesson periods per teacher has increased significantly since the Free Education Policy was introduced. Schools with limited teaching staff redistributed lessons among available teachers, causing each teacher to handle more subjects or classes than before. This expansion in teaching responsibilities reduces the time teachers can dedicate to lesson planning, assessment, and individualized learner support. As a result, lessons often become rushed, and meaningful learning interaction declines.

#### **P17 revealed that:**

Teachers' workloads have increased due to the frequent need to improvise learning materials. The shortage of textbooks and teaching aids forced teachers to spend additional time preparing handwritten notes, photocopying exercises, or designing teaching charts. This preparation work consumed hours outside official teaching schedules, further straining teachers' time and energy. Despite these challenges, teachers continue to sacrifice their rest to ensure lessons are delivered effectively.

#### **P20 discussed that:**

Teachers are finding it difficult to maintain a healthy work-life balance because of the heavy workload. Lesson preparation, marking, and administrative duties extended late into the night, leaving little time for rest or family interactions. This lifestyle had led to physical exhaustion and stress among teachers, affecting their mental health and productivity. Without workload reduction or additional staffing, teacher burnouts continue to rise, ultimately

compromising education quality.

**P22 described that:**

The pressure of handling large classes has affected teachers' enthusiasm and teaching creativity. Due to fatigue, many educators now opt for traditional lecture methods instead of interactive or practical lessons that require more energy and preparation. The passion and innovation that once characterized teaching had diminished, as teachers focused on survival rather than excellence. Sustained fatigue has turned teaching into a mechanical routine instead of a fulfilling profession.

### **3.2.6 Compromised Teaching and Learning Quality**

**P3 reported that:**

The increase in learner enrolment compromises the overall quality of teaching and learning. With too many learners in a single class, teachers are unable to provide individualized attention or track each learner's progress effectively. Weak learners require additional guidance, often go unnoticed, while brighter learners lose motivation due to a lack of academic stimulation. This imbalance widens the achievement gap and weakens the overall academic performance of classes.

**P6 revealed that:**

The Free Education Policy has unintentionally reduced lesson depth and content coverage. Teachers are overwhelmed by time constraints and large classes, are now rushing through the syllabus to have wide coverage rather than focusing on mastery of concepts. This situation limits opportunities for remedial lessons or enrichment activities. As a result, many learners complete terms with only a surface-level understanding of subjects, which threatens long-term educational outcomes.

**P9 described that:**

The overcrowded classrooms have led to a decline in learner participation and engagement. Previously, almost every student in discussions and class activities, but now only a few could actively participate due to limited time and space. Many learners remained passive throughout lessons, especially those seated at the back of crowded classrooms where teacher supervision is minimal. Consequently, lessons have become one-sided and less interactive, undermining learner-centered approaches.

### **3.2.7 Strained School Infrastructure and Facilities**

**P7 described that:**

The increase in enrolment had overwhelmed the school's furniture and seating capacity. Many learners are sharing desks, while others sit on the floor. This discomfort negatively affected learners' concentration and posture during lessons. The government should anticipate the infrastructural demand that accompanies the Free Education Policy and ensure schools are adequately equipped before its implementation.

**P9 pointed out that:**

The existing classroom blocks deteriorate faster due to overuse. Constant pressure from the high number of learners leads to cracked walls, broken windows, and damaged floors. The maintenance budget is insufficient to handle frequent repairs, leading to an unsafe learning environment. If infrastructure is not urgently expanded and rehabilitated, the policy's success can be undermined by physical deterioration of school buildings.

### **3.2.8 Delayed and Inadequate Funding**

**P2 reported that:**

The delayed disbursement of government grants creates operational difficulties in running the school effectively. Sometimes, schools often wait before receiving the promised funds, leading to interruptions in basic



administrative activities such as purchasing chalk, paying support staff, and repairing classrooms. The uncertainty around funding timelines make planning impossible, as head teachers are constantly forced to make unbudgeted adjustments to sustain operations.

**P5 explained that:**

The amount of funding allocated per school was insufficient to meet the growing demands brought by the Free Education Policy. While the government had expanded enrolment, it has not increased financial allocations proportionally. Schools are now accommodating more learners but operating on the same on the same reduced inadequate budget. School administrators to prioritize urgent needs and neglect important areas like maintenance and learning materials.

**P7 revealed that:**

The abolition of user fees had removed a key source of income that schools once relied on for daily running costs. Before the Free Education Policy, parent contributions supplemented government grants and enabled schools to function smoothly. Now, without these contributions, schools have become entirely dependent on delayed and inadequate government funds. This dependency weakened school autonomy and delayed response to urgent needs, such as minor repairs or fuel for school activities.

**P9 pointed out that:**

Delayed funding forces schools to incur debts with local suppliers. Some schools purchase essential supplies like chalk, printing paper, and cleaning materials on credit, hoping to pay when the government releases funds. However, prolonged delays often strain relationships and lead to mistrust. This situation undermined school-community relations and created reputational risks for school management.

### **3.2.9 Insufficient Teaching and Learning Materials**

**P1 reported that:**

Despite the increase in learner enrolment, the supply of teaching and learning materials had remained inadequate. Most textbooks were old and insufficient to meet the needs of large classes. In some cases, three or more learners share a single textbook, which make it difficult to assign homework or encourage independent reading. Without enough learning materials, teachers rely heavily on chalk-and-talk methods, which limit learner participation and understanding.

**P4 discussed that:**

The shortage of teaching resources creates inequality among learners. Those who can afford to buy personal textbooks or printed notes performed better than those who relied solely on shared or borrowed materials. This disparity contradicted the principles of free and equitable education. The situation worsens in science subjects, where the lack of laboratory materials and equipment makes practical lessons almost impossible to conduct.

### **3.2.10 Limited Infrastructure Support**

**P2 reported that:**

The school infrastructure has not kept pace with the rapid increase in learner enrolment brought about by the Free Education Policy. Most classrooms are old, overcrowded, and in poor condition, with cracked walls and leaking roofs. During the rainy season, lessons are interrupted because learners have to move to one side of the classroom to avoid rainwater dripping from the roof. While access to education improved, the learning environments deteriorated due to insufficient investment in infrastructure maintenance.

**P5 described that:**

Many schools lack essential facilities such as science laboratories, libraries, and computer rooms. This deficiency made it difficult to implement practical aspects of the curriculum, particularly in STEM subjects.

Learners often relied on theoretical explanations without any practical exposure, which limited their understanding and performance. Without proper infrastructure, the promise of quality education remains unfulfilled despite the policy's good intentions.

### **3.2.11 Poor Maintenance of Infrastructure**

#### **P1 reported that:**

Many school buildings are in a deplorable state due to years of neglect and lack of maintenance funds. Classroom walls are cracked, paint has faded, and ceilings are collapsing in some blocks. Despite repeated reports to the district education office, no renovation works have been carried out. The government's focus on enrolment expansion has overshadowed the need to preserve existing infrastructure, leading to unsafe learning conditions for both teachers and learners.

#### **P6 described that:**

Schools lack regular maintenance budgets, making it impossible to fix minor damages before they worsen. Even simple issues like replacing door locks, repairing furniture, or painting walls required lengthy bureaucratic approval. If schools are given autonomy to manage small maintenance funds, they can address minor repairs quickly and prevent deterioration. The centralization of maintenance budgets has made infrastructure management inefficient and reactive.

#### **P10 reported that:**

Some classroom roofs have not been replaced for decades. Termites have damaged roof trusses and ceiling boards, creating safety hazards. Teachers often avoid using certain classrooms for fear of accidents, but due to space shortages, learners still occupied them. Preventive maintenance should be prioritized to ensure the safety and longevity of school infrastructure.

#### **P24 described that:**

The lack of maintenance extends to school furniture and teaching equipment. Many desks were broken and chairs were missing legs, forcing learners to sit uncomfortably or share. Blackboards are worn out and difficult to write on, while some classrooms lack notice boards or storage cabinets. Such conditions make it difficult to organize teaching materials and create an environment that discourages learning.

#### **P28 pointed out that:**

Poor maintenance has long-term financial implications for the government. Neglecting small repairs often led to major damage that required complete reconstruction. Establishing a routine maintenance schedule would be more cost-effective than waiting for buildings to deteriorate completely. Without a structured maintenance policy, the country risked losing valuable educational infrastructure despite the progress made in access and enrolment.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Discussion on the Communication of FEP in Kabwe District**

According to the key actors in Kabwe, teachers and headteachers, the Policy communication adopted a top-down approach, where directives flowed from the Ministry of Education down to the DEBS offices, to the Head teachers and lastly to the teaching staff. The launch of the FEP in early 2022 was 'rushed' to fulfil an immediate campaign promise, followed by communication prioritizing the 'announcement and enrollment directive', *like no fees must be charged* over detailed operational guidelines. Initial guidelines were vague, leading to Head teachers and school bursars having to operate in an environment of ambiguity. In Kabwe, communication was primarily one-way, often receiving inadequate official channels for headteachers in Kabwe to quickly transmit their real-time challenges (like the lack of desks) back to the DEBS or MOE for timely intervention.

## 4.2 Reception of FEP by Key Actors

The reception of the FEP by the school key actors in Kabwe was bifocal. While they received the policy with high positivity because of its objective, they were significantly challenged regarding its rushed implementation. The study found that most headteachers appreciated the policy's goal to increase access and were relieved that financial barriers for vulnerable children were removed. This finding is supported by the findings of Kalimaposo, Wahuna and Mofu (2025). The Head teachers also faced negative anxiety as they experienced immediate massive operational pressure. Their main challenge at inception was unpreparedness and under-resourcefulness without the promised financial or human resources in place. This put enormous strain on their institutional capacity. This finding is similar to what Phiri and Kalimaposo (2022) found. On the part of the teachers, their core professional morale was boosted and shared the philosophical view that education should be accessed by all Zambian Children, but it was short-lived due to the rapid high increase in enrollment directly translating to unmanageable workload overload. Their class sizes swelled beyond reasonable limits, requiring them to teach in difficult. Overcrowded spaces with a shortage of textbooks and teaching materials. This severe strain on their morale led them to a perception that access was being prioritized over quality, and being the frontline workers, they felt the policy strain acutely.

## 4.3 Discussion on Challenges of the Implementation of FEP

The study found that the shortage of teaching and learning materials remained a major challenge affecting the effectiveness of the Free Education Policy. Consequently, learners were forced to share textbooks, and teachers resorted to dictation, which reduced lesson efficiency and limited learner participation. This situation demonstrates that while the policy succeeded in increasing enrolment, it failed to provide the essential resources required to sustain quality teaching. UNESCO (2023) similarly reported that in many developing countries. The study further revealed that the shortage of teaching materials disproportionately affects subjects that rely heavily on visual and practical demonstrations. This challenge restricts learners' ability to grasp complex scientific concepts, discouraging interest in critical STEM-related disciplines. This is supported with the findings of Mwangi (2021), in a study conducted in Kenya, found similar results were inadequate learning resources in science subjects led to lower academic performance and reduced enthusiasm among learners toward science-based careers. This similarity across contexts highlights the vital role of adequate teaching resources in enhancing comprehension, curiosity, and learner engagement across all subjects. Additionally, the study revealed that the lack of adequate instructional materials creates an overreliance on teacher-centered approaches, which limit interactive and learner-centred pedagogy. P6 expressed that because there were few or no visual aids available, lessons became more theoretical and less engaging, resulting in passive learning experiences. This challenge undermines the goals of the Free Education Policy, which seeks to promote not only access but also the delivery of quality education that nurtures critical thinking and problemsolving skills. Kafwanka and Phiri (2022) observed in their study in the Copperbelt Province that schools with inadequate learning materials often revert to outdated teaching methods, thus affecting learner motivation and performance. Therefore, material shortages undermine innovation and creativity in lesson delivery, further widening the gap between policy intention and classroom reality. The study also indicated that the shortage of materials has led to increased teacher workload and burnout. P15 highlighted that teachers spend more time improvising or preparing handwritten materials to compensate for the lack of textbooks and visual resources. This additional burden not only reduces instructional efficiency but also contributes to fatigue and frustration among educators. MedAfrica Times (2024) reported that teachers are experiencing burnout due to increased workloads, overcrowded classrooms, and insufficient teaching and learning materials. The OECD (2023) found similar patterns globally, noting that inadequate classroom materials reduce teacher productivity and increase job dissatisfaction. These findings demonstrate that resource shortages have a cascading effect, limiting both teacher performance and learner outcomes, thereby weakening the broader educational ecosystem necessary for policy success.

The study revealed that the policy's success in increasing enrolment has inadvertently led to overcrowded classrooms, which has placed immense strain on teachers, learners, and school infrastructure. P22 reported that some classes now accommodate more than sixty learners, making it extremely difficult for teachers to provide individualized attention or monitor learner progress effectively. The overcrowding has also resulted in limited classroom movement, excessive noise levels, and general discomfort, which collectively reduce the quality of instruction. The World Bank (2022) similarly reported that in several African countries, free education initiatives have expanded access but simultaneously led to congestion and diminished instructional quality. The study

further found that overcrowding negatively affects learner engagement and concentration, thereby limiting effective participation during lessons. P18 explained that learners sitting at the back of congested classrooms often struggle to follow instructions and fail to engage meaningfully in discussions. The study noted that group work and practical activities have become impractical due to limited space, leading to reduced interaction and participation. This challenge resonates with Nyambe and Tembo (2021), who found in their Zambian study that classroom congestion reduces learner attentiveness and increases absenteeism among younger learners. The similarity in findings highlights that overcrowded classrooms transform teaching into a process of control rather than active facilitation, hindering the development of critical thinking and collaborative learning skills essential for 21st-century education.

Moreover, the study indicated that overcrowding has contributed to increased teacher workload and fatigue. P5 stated that teachers spend more time marking large volumes of books, controlling class behavior, and providing feedback, leaving little room for lesson preparation and personalized support. This situation compromises the quality of teaching and heightens teacher stress and burnout. According to UNESCO (2023), high pupil-teacher ratios in sub-Saharan Africa have been identified as a major cause of teacher demotivation and declining learning standards. These findings reveal that the policy's positive outcome of increased enrolment must be accompanied by sufficient recruitment and deployment of teachers to maintain instructional quality. Without such a balance, the system risks overwhelming its human resources, thereby undermining long-term sustainability. The study also found that overcrowding has led to the deterioration of classroom infrastructure and learning environments. P10 observed that desks, chairs, and teaching aids wear out more quickly due to overuse, while sanitation facilities become strained, leading to poor hygiene and discomfort. This has a direct effect on learners' health and attendance rates. A study by Mbewe and Lungu (2022) in the Copperbelt Province confirmed that overcrowded classrooms in public schools increase maintenance costs and shorten the lifespan of school facilities. These findings suggest that overcrowding is not only an instructional issue but also a structural and financial one, placing pressure on limited school budgets and infrastructure maintenance systems. Mwelwa, Bwalya, and Chibwili (2023) indicated that the FEP led to increased school enrollments and government funding. However, this surge in enrollment exerted pressure on already overstretched educational resources, including teachers, desks, textbooks, toilets, and laboratory facilities, indirectly affecting the quality of education.

The study further found that the increased workload negatively affects lesson delivery and pedagogical innovation. P19 revealed that teachers are often forced to rush through lessons, leaving little time for remedial instruction or the adoption of creative teaching methods. Musonda and Chirwa (2022) similarly reported that overburdened teachers demonstrate lower motivation and reduced engagement in the classroom. This evidence suggests that teacher workload is not merely an operational issue but a key determinant of teaching quality and learner outcomes. When teachers cannot invest sufficient time in planning or adapting lessons to diverse learner needs, the effectiveness of the Free Education Policy is inherently limited. The study highlighted that high workloads exacerbate teacher fatigue and stress, which can further erode performance. P7 indicated that prolonged teaching hours and multitasking responsibilities contribute to exhaustion, reducing the capacity for attentive and responsive instruction. This aligns with global findings showing that excessive workloads are strongly associated with burnout and attrition among teachers in systems implementing free education policies (OECD, 2023).

## CONCLUSION

The success of the FEP is ultimately measured in the classroom. The Policy implementation in Kabwe was accompanied by widespread political and community acceptance, yet it produced institutional anxiety and operational strain experienced largely by the Head teachers and the teachers due to the rushed communication and inadequate resource provision. The centralized control and excessive bureaucracy limited the Headteacher's discretion to address immediate localized FEP challenges. Effective FEP required decentralized leadership that empowers the Headteachers to innovate and adapt the national policy to the specific immediate needs of schools in Kabwe.

## Recommendations Complete this part

**Funding Sources:** This study received no external funding.

## Acknowledgement:

Conflict of Interest:

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