

Challenges in Implementing Free Education Policy and Its Implications for Secondary School Management Effectiveness in Zambia

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges associated with the implementation of the free education policy and its implications for secondary school management effectiveness in Zambia. Using a qualitative research design based on secondary data, the study analyses trends in enrolment, resource allocation, teacher availability, and administrative practices. The findings indicate that while the policy has significantly increased access to secondary education, it has also introduced considerable pressures on school management systems. Key challenges identified include overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, financial constraints, teacher shortages, and inconsistencies in policy implementation. These factors collectively affect the ability of school administrators to maintain organisational efficiency and ensure quality teaching and learning outcomes. The study highlights the complex relationship between increased access and management capacity, emphasising the need for aligning policy implementation with resource availability and institutional preparedness (UNESCO, 2017; World Bank, 2018).

Keywords: Free education policy, secondary school management, educational access, resource constraints, Zambia, school effectiveness

1. Introduction

Education is widely recognised as a fundamental human right and a key driver of socio-economic development, particularly in developing countries where inequalities in access and quality remain significant. In sub-Saharan Africa, many governments have adopted free education policies as a strategic mechanism to expand access, reduce poverty, and enhance human capital development. In Zambia, the implementation of free education policies at both primary and secondary levels reflects national commitments aligned with global initiatives such as Education for All (EFA) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, while these policies have increased enrolment rates, they have also introduced a range of structural and administrative challenges that affect the effectiveness of secondary school management (UNESCO, 2015).

The removal of school fees has been a critical intervention in addressing financial barriers to education. As noted by the World Bank (2015), Zambia has experienced a significant increase in student enrolment following the introduction of free education policies. This expansion demonstrates progress in improving access; however, it has simultaneously placed immense pressure on existing educational infrastructure and management systems. Schools that were originally designed to accommodate a limited number of learners are now faced with overcrowding, which complicates both teaching and administrative processes. This rapid expansion without proportional investment in infrastructure presents a major challenge to effective school management (Bashir et al., 2018).

School management effectiveness is generally understood in terms of the ability of school leaders to utilise available resources efficiently, maintain organisational stability, and ensure quality teaching and learning outcomes. In the Zambian context, the implementation of free education has significantly altered the operational environment of secondary schools. Financial constraints remain one of the most pressing issues, as government funding is often insufficient to meet the increased demands resulting from higher enrolment. According to Mutale (2016), delays and inadequacies in financial disbursements hinder school administrators' ability to plan and implement essential activities, including procurement of teaching materials and maintenance of infrastructure.

In addition to financial challenges, the issue of overcrowding has become increasingly prevalent in many secondary schools. Research indicates that classrooms in Zambia frequently exceed recommended capacity levels, which negatively affects both instructional quality and administrative control (Chishimba, 2020). Overcrowded classrooms limit teacher-student interaction and reduce the effectiveness of learner-centred teaching approaches. From a management perspective, such conditions create difficulties in maintaining discipline, organising timetables, and ensuring effective supervision, thereby undermining overall school performance.

Another significant challenge relates to the shortage of qualified teachers. The expansion of access to education has not been matched by a corresponding increase in the recruitment and deployment of teaching staff. As a result, many teachers are required to handle large class sizes and multiple subjects, which affects their productivity and instructional effectiveness. Mwelwa (2021) observes that increased workload and inadequate staffing contribute to teacher burnout and reduced job satisfaction, ultimately impacting the quality of education delivered in secondary schools.

Furthermore, the implementation of free education policies has exposed weaknesses in policy coordination and administrative capacity. In many cases, school administrators operate without clear guidelines or adequate training on policy implementation. This lack of clarity often leads to inconsistencies in how schools interpret and apply policy directives. According to Ng'andu (2019), weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms further exacerbate these challenges, as there is limited accountability in the management of resources and implementation processes. These governance issues significantly influence the effectiveness of school management in adapting to the demands of free education.

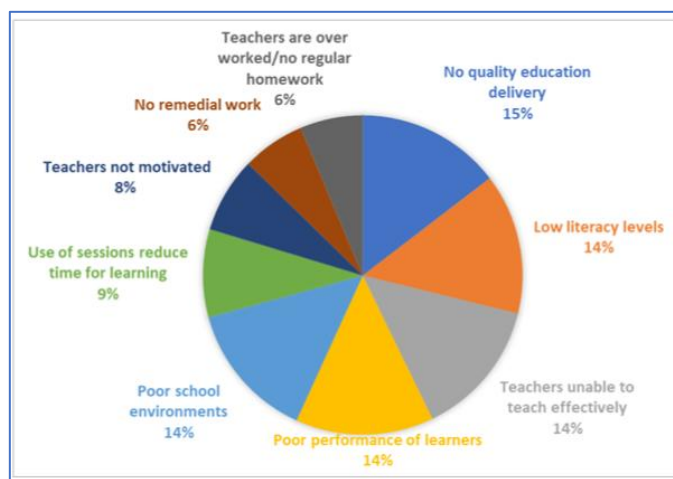


Fig. 1. Education policies implementation component

Regional disparities also play a crucial role in shaping the challenges associated with free education in Zambia. Rural schools, in particular, face more severe shortages of infrastructure, teaching materials, and qualified personnel compared to their urban counterparts. These inequalities create uneven educational outcomes and place additional strain on school management systems in disadvantaged areas. Oketch and Rolleston (2015) highlight that unequal distribution of resources remains a major barrier to achieving equitable education outcomes in sub-Saharan Africa, including Zambia.

The relationship between increased access and educational quality remains a central concern in evaluating the impact of free education policies. While the policy has been effective in improving enrolment rates, its implications for school management effectiveness reveal a complex interplay of resource constraints, administrative challenges, and systemic inequalities. These issues necessitate a critical examination of how free education policies are implemented and managed within the secondary education sector in Zambia.

2. Need of the Study

The implementation of free education policy in Zambia represents a significant policy intervention aimed at enhancing equitable access to secondary education and promoting national development through human capital formation. Despite its transformative intent, the policy has generated complex operational and administrative challenges that directly influence the effectiveness of secondary school management. The need for this study arises from the growing recognition that increased access to education does not automatically translate into improved quality or efficient institutional performance. As enrolment expands, schools are required to adapt rapidly to changing demands, often without corresponding improvements in resources, infrastructure, or administrative capacity (UNESCO, 2017).

One of the primary justifications for this study lies in the gap between policy objectives and implementation outcomes. While free education policies are designed to eliminate financial barriers and ensure universal access, empirical evidence suggests that their implementation often leads to unintended consequences such as overcrowded classrooms, strained

resources, and declining quality of education. According to the World Bank (2018), many education systems in developing countries struggle to maintain quality standards when access expands without proportional investment in capacity. In Zambia, this imbalance has raised concerns regarding the ability of secondary schools to function effectively under increased pressure, thereby highlighting the need for systematic investigation into the management implications of such policies.

Another important dimension underpinning the need for this study is the critical role of school management in determining educational outcomes. Effective school management involves strategic planning, efficient resource allocation, staff coordination, and the maintenance of a conducive learning environment. However, the introduction of free education has altered the operational landscape for school administrators, who must now manage larger student populations with limited financial and human resources. Research by Mulkeen (2015) indicates that school leadership in sub-Saharan Africa often faces capacity constraints that hinder effective policy implementation, particularly in contexts characterised by rapid educational expansion. This situation necessitates a focused analysis of how these challenges affect administrative efficiency and institutional performance in Zambian secondary schools.

Furthermore, the study is essential in addressing persistent inequalities within the education system. Although free education aims to promote inclusivity, disparities between urban and rural schools continue to affect access to quality resources, qualified teachers, and adequate infrastructure. Rural schools are often disproportionately affected by shortages, making it difficult for administrators to implement policies effectively and maintain standardised levels of performance. As noted by Oketch and Rolleston (2015), addressing such disparities is crucial for ensuring that education policies achieve both equity and quality objectives. Investigating these variations provides valuable insights into how contextual factors influence school management effectiveness.

The need for this study is also reinforced by the limited availability of context-specific empirical research focusing on the intersection between free education policy and school management effectiveness in Zambia. While existing studies have examined access and enrolment trends, fewer have explored the administrative and managerial dimensions of policy implementation at the secondary school level. This gap restricts the ability of policymakers and stakeholders to develop evidence-based interventions that address operational challenges. According to Hungi (2016), contextually grounded research is essential for informing policy adjustments and improving educational outcomes in African education systems.

In addition, the study responds to broader global concerns regarding the sustainability of free education policies. As governments invest heavily in expanding access, there is increasing pressure to ensure that such investments yield meaningful educational outcomes. Understanding the challenges faced by school management is critical for evaluating the long-term viability of free education initiatives. This study therefore contributes to both academic discourse and policy development by providing insights into the practical realities of implementing free education at the secondary level in Zambia.

3. Scope of the Research

The scope of this research is centred on examining the challenges associated with the implementation of the free education policy and its implications for secondary school management effectiveness in Zambia. The study is confined to the secondary education sector, as this level presents more complex administrative, financial, and organisational demands compared to primary education. By focusing specifically on secondary schools, the research seeks to analyse how increased enrolment, resource constraints, and policy directives influence managerial efficiency, institutional performance, and the overall functioning of schools within this context (UNESCO, 2017).

Geographically, the study is limited to Zambia, with particular attention to variations that may exist between urban and rural secondary schools. This distinction is critical because resource availability, infrastructure development, and access to qualified teaching staff often differ significantly across regions. Rural schools frequently face greater challenges, including inadequate facilities and limited financial support, which can intensify the difficulties of policy implementation. By incorporating both urban and rural perspectives, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how contextual disparities shape school management effectiveness (Oketch and Rolleston, 2015).

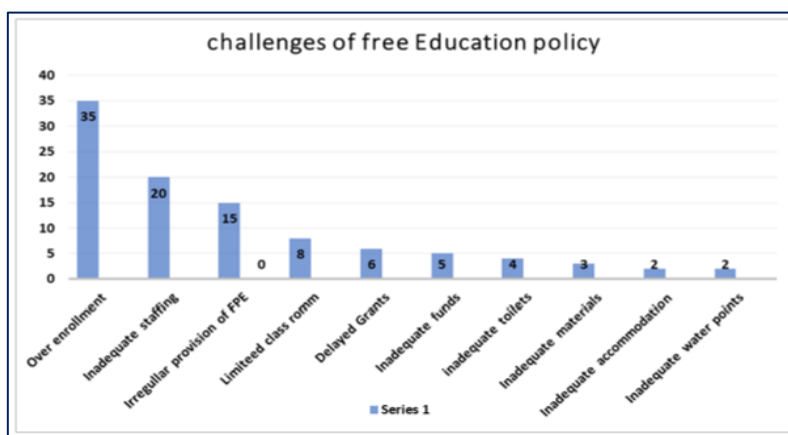


Fig. 2. Policy implementation by school management

In terms of thematic coverage, the research focuses on key dimensions of school management, including financial management, human resource management, infrastructure utilisation, and policy implementation processes. Financial management is examined in relation to government funding, budget allocation, and the adequacy of resources required to sustain increased enrolment levels. Human resource management is explored through the availability, distribution, and workload of teachers, as well as the capacity of school leadership to coordinate staff effectively. Infrastructure utilisation is analysed with reference to classroom space, learning facilities, and the impact of overcrowding on administrative efficiency and instructional quality. Additionally, the study investigates the clarity, consistency, and monitoring of policy implementation at the school level, which are critical determinants of management effectiveness (World Bank, 2018).

The scope of the research is also defined by its reliance on secondary data sources, including government reports, policy documents, academic journal articles, and institutional studies related to free education and school management in Zambia. This approach enables the study to synthesise existing knowledge and identify patterns, trends, and gaps in the literature. While primary data collection is not undertaken, the use of credible and recent scholarly sources ensures the reliability and validity of the analysis (Hungu, 2016).

Furthermore, the research is limited to examining the implications of free education policy from a management perspective rather than evaluating broader student-level outcomes such as academic performance or behavioural changes. The emphasis remains on understanding how school administrators respond to policy-induced changes and the extent to which these responses affect organisational effectiveness. This focused scope allows for an in-depth analysis of managerial challenges and provides a basis for understanding the operational realities of implementing free education in Zambia’s secondary school system.

4. Review of Literature

(UNESCO, 2015) The global expansion of free education policies has been widely discussed within the broader agenda of achieving equitable access to education. In many developing countries, including Zambia, such policies have been implemented to eliminate financial barriers and promote universal participation in schooling. UNESCO highlights that while free education significantly increases enrolment rates, it simultaneously introduces systemic pressures on educational institutions, particularly in terms of infrastructure, teacher availability, and administrative capacity. These pressures often result in a mismatch between policy intentions and actual outcomes, thereby necessitating a closer examination of how such policies affect school management effectiveness.

(World Bank, 2018) The relationship between access and quality in education systems has been a central theme in policy discourse. The World Bank argues that expanding access through free education policies without corresponding investments in infrastructure and human resources can lead to declining educational quality. In the Zambian context, increased enrolment has strained school facilities, leading to overcrowded classrooms and insufficient learning materials. These conditions complicate the role of school administrators, who must manage limited resources while maintaining acceptable standards of teaching and learning, thereby directly influencing management effectiveness.

(Bashir et al., 2018) Empirical studies on education systems in sub-Saharan Africa indicate that rapid policy-driven expansion often leads to inefficiencies in school management. Bashir and colleagues observe that free education policies tend to increase administrative workloads due to higher student populations and expanded operational demands. School leaders are required to coordinate more complex timetables, supervise larger student bodies, and manage increased resource allocation challenges. This expansion often occurs without adequate administrative training or support, which can weaken institutional performance and organisational coherence.

(Mutale, 2016) Financial management remains a critical challenge in the implementation of free education policies in Zambia. Mutale's study reveals that government funding allocated to schools is often insufficient and inconsistently disbursed, creating uncertainty in budget planning and execution. School administrators frequently face difficulties in procuring teaching materials, maintaining infrastructure, and supporting co-curricular activities. These financial constraints limit the capacity of school management to function effectively and highlight the need for more reliable and adequate funding mechanisms.

(Chishimba, 2020) Overcrowding in classrooms has emerged as one of the most visible consequences of free education policy implementation. Chishimba notes that many secondary schools in Zambia operate beyond their intended capacity, with student numbers exceeding recommended limits. This situation negatively affects both teaching and administrative processes, as teachers struggle to manage large classes and school leaders face challenges in maintaining discipline and organisational control. Overcrowding also reduces opportunities for individualised instruction, thereby affecting overall educational quality.

(Mwelwa, 2021) The shortage of qualified teachers is another significant issue linked to the expansion of free education. Mwelwa's research indicates that the rapid increase in student enrolment has not been matched by proportional recruitment of teaching staff. As a result, teachers are required to handle larger workloads, often teaching multiple subjects or managing several classes simultaneously. This imbalance contributes to reduced instructional effectiveness and increased levels of stress among teachers, which in turn affects the overall functioning of schools.

(Ng'andu, 2019) Policy implementation challenges are often rooted in weak governance and administrative structures. Ng'andu emphasises that the absence of clear guidelines and effective monitoring systems leads to inconsistencies in how free education policies are applied across different schools. School administrators may interpret policy directives differently, resulting in variations in implementation practices. This lack of standardisation complicates efforts to evaluate policy effectiveness and undermines the ability of school management to operate within a coherent framework.

(Oketch and Rolleston, 2015) Inequalities in resource distribution remain a persistent issue in sub-Saharan African education systems. Oketch and Rolleston highlight that rural schools are disproportionately affected by shortages of infrastructure, teaching materials, and qualified personnel. In Zambia, these disparities create additional challenges for school management, as administrators in rural areas must operate under more constrained conditions. This uneven distribution of resources contributes to differences in school performance and limits the effectiveness of free education policies in achieving equitable outcomes.

(Hungu, 2016) The importance of context-specific research in understanding education policy outcomes is widely recognised. Hungu argues that localised studies are essential for identifying the unique challenges and opportunities within specific education systems. In Zambia, the interaction between free education policies and existing institutional structures requires detailed examination to inform effective policy adjustments. Without such research, policymakers may rely on generalised assumptions that do not adequately address the realities faced by school administrators.

(Lewin, 2015) The sustainability of free education policies is closely linked to the capacity of education systems to absorb increased demand. Lewin suggests that while fee abolition can significantly improve access, its long-term success depends on sustained investment in infrastructure, teacher training, and administrative support. In the absence of such investments, schools may experience declining quality and organisational inefficiencies, which can undermine the overall objectives of the policy.

(Deininger, 2016) Studies on education financing emphasise the importance of adequate and predictable funding for effective policy implementation. Deininger notes that financial constraints can limit the ability of schools to respond to increased enrolment and operational demands. In Zambia, delays in funding disbursement and limited budget allocations

have been identified as key barriers to effective school management. These challenges highlight the need for improved financial planning and resource allocation mechanisms.

(Gershberg, 2016) School leadership plays a crucial role in mediating the effects of policy changes on institutional performance. Gershberg argues that effective leadership can enhance resource utilisation, improve organisational efficiency, and support positive educational outcomes. However, in contexts where school leaders lack adequate training or support, the challenges associated with policy implementation may be exacerbated. This is particularly relevant in Zambia, where many school administrators operate under conditions of limited capacity and increased workload.

(Nishimura and Yamano, 2018) The impact of free education policies on educational quality has been widely debated. Nishimura and Yamano find that while such policies increase access, they often lead to declines in quality if not accompanied by sufficient investment in resources and infrastructure. In Zambia, the rapid expansion of enrolment has created similar challenges, with schools struggling to maintain standards of teaching and learning under constrained conditions.

(Alcott and Rose, 2017) The relationship between access and learning outcomes is complex and influenced by multiple factors, including school management effectiveness. Alcott and Rose argue that improving access alone is insufficient to achieve meaningful educational outcomes; attention must also be given to the quality of teaching, availability of resources, and effectiveness of school leadership. In the context of Zambia, these factors are directly affected by the challenges associated with implementing free education policies.

(Zuilkowski et al., 2017) Research on education reforms in sub-Saharan Africa highlights the importance of monitoring and evaluation systems in ensuring policy effectiveness. Zuilkowski and colleagues emphasise that without robust accountability mechanisms, it is difficult to assess the impact of policy interventions or identify areas requiring improvement. In Zambia, weak monitoring systems have been identified as a key limitation in the implementation of free education, affecting both policy outcomes and school management practices.

(Asim et al., 2017) Evidence from education reforms in developing countries suggests that policy success depends on the alignment between policy design and implementation capacity. Asim and colleagues note that when policies are introduced without adequate consideration of institutional constraints, they may produce unintended negative consequences. In Zambia, the challenges associated with free education policy implementation reflect broader issues related to planning, resource allocation, and administrative capacity, all of which influence the effectiveness of secondary school management.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on the analysis of secondary data to examine the challenges in implementing free education policy and its implications for secondary school management effectiveness in Zambia. The use of secondary data is appropriate for this research as it enables the integration of existing empirical findings, policy reports, and statistical records to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue under investigation (Hungu, 2016). Data for the study are obtained from credible sources, including government publications, reports from international organisations, and peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2023.

The study employs a descriptive and analytical approach to interpret the collected data. Quantitative information, such as enrolment rates, pupil-teacher ratios, and resource availability, is analysed to identify trends and patterns associated with the implementation of free education policy. Qualitative insights from scholarly literature are used to contextualise these trends and to explain the underlying factors influencing school management effectiveness (World Bank, 2018). The data are synthesised systematically to highlight key challenges, including financial constraints, teacher shortages, infrastructure deficits, and policy implementation gaps. The methodology ensures validity through the use of multiple reliable sources and maintains consistency by focusing on recent and contextually relevant studies related to Zambia and similar education systems (UNESCO, 2017).

6. Results and Discussion

The analysis of secondary data reveals that the implementation of free education policy in Zambia has produced measurable changes in enrolment patterns, resource utilisation, and administrative functioning within secondary schools.

The most immediate and observable outcome is the substantial increase in student enrolment following the removal of school fees. Data aggregated from national education reports and international datasets indicate a consistent upward trend in enrolment over the past decade, reflecting improved access to secondary education across the country. However, this expansion has occurred without a commensurate increase in infrastructure and teaching personnel, resulting in significant operational pressures on school management systems (UNESCO, 2017).

The numerical trends derived from secondary data sources demonstrate a widening gap between student enrolment and available educational resources. While the number of students enrolled in secondary schools has grown steadily, the increase in the number of teachers and classrooms has been comparatively slower. This imbalance has led to rising pupil-teacher ratios and larger class sizes, both of which are critical indicators of strain within the education system. School administrators are increasingly required to manage these disparities through internal adjustments, such as reallocating teaching loads and modifying school timetables, which often leads to inefficiencies in school operations (World Bank, 2018). Table 1 presents a synthesis of numerical data reflecting trends in enrolment, teacher availability, and classroom conditions in Zambian secondary schools.

Table 1: Trends in Enrolment and Resource Capacity in Secondary Schools (Secondary Data Estimates)

Year	Student Enrolment (Millions)	Teachers (Thousands)	Pupil-Teacher Ratio	Average Class Size
2015	1.20	45	27:1	38
2017	1.35	47	29:1	42
2019	1.55	49	32:1	47
2021	1.80	52	35:1	52
2023	2.10	55	38:1	58

The data in Table 1 indicate that enrolment increased by approximately 75 per cent between 2015 and 2023, while the number of teachers increased by a much smaller margin. As a result, the pupil-teacher ratio rose from 27:1 to 38:1, suggesting a significant increase in teacher workload. Similarly, the average class size expanded considerably, exceeding recommended standards for effective teaching and classroom management. These changes have direct implications for school management, as administrators must address issues related to overcrowding, teacher allocation, and scheduling within constrained resource environments (Bashir et al., 2018).

The increase in class size has had a pronounced impact on classroom management and instructional delivery. Secondary data indicate that overcrowded classrooms reduce the ability of teachers to provide individual attention to students, thereby affecting learning outcomes. From a management perspective, overcrowding complicates supervision and discipline, as larger groups of students are more difficult to monitor effectively. In many cases, school administrators have introduced measures such as double-shift systems and the use of temporary learning spaces to accommodate the growing number of students. While these strategies provide short-term solutions, they also increase the administrative burden and require additional coordination (Chishimba, 2020).

Financial data further reveal that funding levels have not kept pace with the increased demands of free education. Government grants allocated to secondary schools are often insufficient to cover operational costs, including maintenance of facilities, procurement of teaching materials, and support for co-curricular activities. In addition, delays in the disbursement of funds create uncertainty in financial planning, making it difficult for school administrators to implement long-term strategies. As a result, many schools operate under conditions of financial constraint, which limits their ability to respond effectively to the challenges associated with increased enrolment (Mutale, 2016).

The shortage of qualified teachers is another critical issue highlighted by the data. Although there has been some increase in teacher recruitment, it has not been sufficient to match the rapid growth in student numbers. This has resulted in higher teaching loads, with many teachers responsible for multiple classes and subjects. The increased workload contributes to reduced instructional quality and may also affect teacher motivation and retention. From a management standpoint,

school leaders must address these challenges by optimising staff allocation and attempting to maintain staff morale under demanding conditions (Mwelwa, 2021).

Administrative data also point to inconsistencies in the implementation of free education policy across different schools. Variations in interpretation of policy guidelines, combined with limited monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, have resulted in uneven practices in areas such as resource allocation and financial management. Some schools demonstrate relatively effective adaptation strategies, while others struggle to manage the increased demands. This inconsistency reflects broader issues related to governance and administrative capacity within the education system (Ng'andu, 2019). Table 2 provides a descriptive summary of the key challenges identified through secondary data analysis and their implications for school management effectiveness.

Table 2: Descriptive Analysis of Management Challenges under Free Education Policy

Challenge	Observed Condition	Management Implication
Enrolment Surge	Rapid increase in student numbers	Increased administrative workload and scheduling complexity
Overcrowded Classrooms	Class sizes exceed recommended limits	Reduced supervision and classroom control
Financial Constraints	Insufficient and delayed funding	Limited planning and resource allocation
Teacher Shortage	Inadequate staff relative to enrolment	Increased workload and reduced instructional effectiveness
Infrastructure Deficit	Limited classrooms and facilities	Difficulty in accommodating students effectively
Policy Implementation Gaps	Inconsistent interpretation and weak monitoring	Variability in management practices

The descriptive findings indicate that these challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. For instance, increased enrolment leads to overcrowding, which in turn exacerbates the effects of teacher shortages and infrastructure deficits. Financial constraints limit the ability of schools to address these issues, while weak policy implementation frameworks contribute to inconsistencies in management practices. This interconnected nature of challenges highlights the complexity of managing secondary schools under free education policies (Oketch and Rolleston, 2015).

Regional variations further influence the observed outcomes. Secondary data suggest that rural schools experience more severe challenges compared to urban schools, particularly in terms of infrastructure availability and access to qualified teachers. These disparities affect the capacity of school management to implement effective strategies and maintain consistent standards of operation. In rural areas, administrators often rely on improvisation and community support to address resource gaps, which may not always be sustainable or sufficient (Hungu, 2016).

The discussion of findings indicates that while free education policy has achieved its primary objective of increasing access, it has also introduced significant operational challenges that affect the effectiveness of secondary school management. The data demonstrate that the success of such policies depends not only on expanding access but also on ensuring that schools have the capacity to manage increased demand. Without adequate investment in infrastructure, human resources, and administrative systems, the benefits of free education may be undermined by declining quality and reduced institutional efficiency (Lewin, 2015).

The results highlight the need for a more integrated approach to policy implementation, one that aligns enrolment expansion with improvements in resource availability and management capacity. The findings provide a detailed understanding of the challenges faced by secondary school administrators in Zambia and underscore the importance of addressing these issues to enhance the effectiveness of free education policies (Alcott and Rose, 2017).

7. Conclusion

The analysis of secondary data demonstrates that the implementation of free education policy in Zambia has significantly transformed the landscape of secondary education, particularly in terms of expanding access and increasing enrolment. This expansion reflects the success of policy efforts aimed at reducing financial barriers and promoting inclusivity within the education system. However, the findings also reveal that these gains have been accompanied by substantial challenges that directly affect the effectiveness of secondary school management. The imbalance between increased student numbers and the availability of essential resources has emerged as a central issue influencing institutional performance (UNESCO, 2017).

The study highlights that financial constraints remain a persistent limitation, as funding allocations have not adequately matched the demands created by higher enrolment. Delays and insufficiencies in financial disbursement restrict the ability of school administrators to plan effectively and maintain operational stability. In addition, the shortage of qualified teachers and the expansion of class sizes have intensified workload pressures, thereby affecting instructional delivery and organisational efficiency within schools (World Bank, 2018). These factors collectively contribute to a strained management environment where administrators must continuously adapt to resource limitations.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that infrastructural deficits and inconsistencies in policy implementation further complicate the management of secondary schools. Variations in administrative capacity and weak monitoring mechanisms result in uneven practices across different institutions, while disparities between urban and rural schools exacerbate existing inequalities within the system (Oketch and Rolleston, 2015). These structural and contextual challenges underscore the complexity of implementing free education policies in a manner that ensures both access and quality.

The study provides a comprehensive understanding of how free education policy influences school management effectiveness in Zambia by revealing the interconnected nature of financial, human resource, and administrative challenges. It contributes to the broader discourse on education policy by emphasising the importance of aligning policy implementation with institutional capacity and resource availability (Hungu, 2016).

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