



Exploring Teachers' Perceptions on The Sustainability of Free Education Policy in Selected Secondary Schools of Kabwe District, Zambia

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ABSTRACT

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The study explored teachers' perspectives on the sustainability of Free Education Policy (FEP) at a selected school in Kabwe, Central Zambia. The introduction of FEP from pre-school to Grade 12 was launched in 2022 by the UPND government to fulfil its campaign promise to the people of Zambia. The study was located in the interpretive paradigm involving a qualitative descriptive design. The study sample comprised 16 participants that included two education standards officers, a deputy head teacher, five heads of departments and eight teachers. All participants were purposively selected because of their ability to provide information on their experiences of the free education policy as observed in their schools. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation. Data were analyzed thematically through identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found within the data set. On teachers' perceptions on the implementation of the FEP in school, the study found that participants shared a mix of positive, negative and neutral perspectives. Some teachers appreciated the policy's role in increasing access to education, particularly for learners from low-income households stating that it had removed financial barriers and improved enrolment rates. However, several participants raised concerns about the practical aspects of implementation, citing overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning materials, increased workload, uneven resource distribution in schools, limited individual learner attention as some of the major challenges.

KEYWORDS:

Teacher perceptions, free education policy, overcrowded classrooms, increased workloads, access to education, inadequate teaching materials.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The introduction of Zambia's Free Education Policy in 2022 represented a pivotal milestone in the country's pursuit of inclusive and equitable quality education, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4. 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. Nawa-Chimuka (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. 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. Mwelwa, Bwalya & Chibwili (2023) 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. In response to these issues, the Zambian government has made notable investments, including the allocation of K31.5 billion to the education sector in the 2025 national budget and the recruitment of 2,000 additional teachers (Zambia Monitor, 2024). New school infrastructure projects have also been launched in several districts. Nevertheless, concerns persist regarding the sustainability of these interventions. 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 enroll in school, many for the first time.

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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. Furthermore, learners expressed concerns about inadequate resources, lack of professional development among teachers, and insufficient parental involvement, all of which negatively impact the quality of education. The study also identified several challenges in implementing the Free Education Policy, including insufficient funding, infrastructure and resource shortages, teacher shortages and quality, and inadequate professional development. The study reported difficulties in providing sufficient classrooms, furniture, textbooks, teaching materials, and technology to accommodate the increased number of learners. Machinyise, Kasebula, and Chabu (2023) acknowledges 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. The cessation of Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) fees, which were a primary source of income for schools, led to stalled infrastructure projects and a lack of funds for essential teaching and learning materials. This financial shortfall has resulted in increased pupil-material ratios and a shortage of teachers, thereby compromising the quality of education. They study suggested schools to explore alternative funding strategies to supplement government efforts, ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of the Free Education Policy. Mwanza and Silukuni (2020); Muyabi, et al. (2022) & Mwanamwambwa (2021) 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 individualized 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. 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. Phiri (2022)

and Kalimaposo, et al. (2023) lamented that the overwhelmed lack of resources in schools hindered 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 lack adequate planning. However, it is evident that while the Free Education Policy has successfully increased access to education, has also exposed significant shortcomings in the education system's preparedness to handle such growth. The lack of infrastructure and resources not only burdens teachers but also compromises the quality of education that students receive. Pansho, 2024; Muyabi, et al, 2022 and Mwanamwambwa, et al., 2021 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 Design &Technology subjects, which are inherently practical. Consequently, teachers resorted to theoretical instruction methods, deviating from the prescribed hands-on approaches essential for these subjects. Thus, the study recommended decongesting classes by constructing more classrooms and schools, as well as providing additional equipment and teaching materials to facilitate practical lessons. Even if the Free Education Policy has succeeded in increasing access to education, it has inadvertently compromised the quality of instruction in practical subjects like Design and Technology. The shift from practical to theoretical teaching methods undermines the core objectives of Design &Technology education, which aims to equip learners with hands-on skills relevant to the workforce. Ukoh (2023) explained that the policy led to a substantial increase in government expenditure on education, rising from K13.8 billion in 2021 to K18.0 billion in 2022 a 31.2% increase. This funding supported the recruitment of 30,000 teachers and the construction of new schools. However, despite these efforts, the share of the national budget allocated to education declined from 16.5% in 2017 to 10.4% in 2022, falling below global recommendations. Additionally, the abolition of school fees created a financing gap, making schools wholly dependent on government grants for non-wage expenditures. This shift strained resources, particularly in primary and secondary education, which received 56% and 28% of the education budget, respectively. Nawa (2024) discussed that the influx of learners has placed considerable strain on the existing educational infrastructure originally designed for fewer learners, now face overcrowded classrooms, where each room accommodates over 100 learners. This surge in enrollment has exacerbated the teacher-pupil ratio, making it more difficult for teachers to provide individualised attention, ultimately affecting the quality of education. Additionally, shortages in teaching and learning materials, desks, and classroom space have become more pronounced. It is clear that while the Free Education Policy has significantly

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increased access to education, it has also highlighted the gaps in infrastructure and resource allocation within the education sector. Mwansa (2024) discussed that without a consistent and diversified funding mechanism, the Free Education Policy risks being a short-lived achievement. Long-term sustainability is threatened by heavy dependence on government funding, which is vulnerable to economic fluctuations and political shifts. In Kabwe District, these national dynamics are mirrored with distinct local implications. Secondary schools are grappling with over-enrollment, limited classroom space, and stretched teaching staff. The effectiveness of the policy, therefore, hinges on teachers' lived experiences and perceptions. Their insights are instrumental in evaluating the adequacy of policy implementation and uncovering practical strategies to ensure its durability. Chileshe (2023) asserted that teachers are the implementers of educational reform; their voices offer grounded perspectives often missing in top-down policy evaluations. Understanding these perceptions in the Kabwe context provides critical feedback for refining the policy and ensuring it remains a viable path toward educational equity and quality. The Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) (2022) stated that even though the Free Education Policy is well intended and has resulted in increased enrolments at grades 8 and 10 since its inception; there are still a lot of challenges that have been recorded in the implementation of the policy. It is in this vein that the researcher observes that there seem not to be a clear study revealing how secondary schools are effectively implementing the free education policy. Therefore, if such studies are not conducted, most secondary schools may continue to experience numerous challenges that may hinder delivery of quality education which may lead to continued poor academic performance among learners. However, the study by Chanda (2023) showed lack of resources, lack of discipline and poor morale, problems concerning the implementation of policies, and inadequate parental involvement. It is worrying to find out that with all the government's efforts to eradicate poverty in the country amongst citizens by introducing free education policy education, the number of children that are not in school is still very high; poverty rates have continued increasing (Phiri and Given, 2024). It is in line with this that the United Party for National Development (UPND)'s New Dawn government has reviewed the Free Primary Education policy and come up with a new one. The New Dawn Government (UPND) led by President Dr. Hakainde Hichilema abolished the payment of school fees from early childhood up to secondary school education.

The introduction of this policy is to enable every child to have access to education. This idea of abolishing enrolment fees, tuition fees and other compulsory contributions in both primary and secondary schools in Zambia has come about as a result of the fulfillment of a political campaign promise by

the present ruling United Party for National Development (UPND) prior to the August 12, 2021 general elections. According to a circular made available on 8th December 2021, the government revealed that the provision of free education from early childhood education to secondary school level would start in January 2022 with the government paying tuition fees through a compensatory grant (UPND Manifesto, 2022). Many stakeholders have welcomed this move and have commended government on this policy. Other stakeholders despite welcoming the move have, however, stated that the implementation of this policy is likely to meet unforeseen challenges and obstacles. The Zambia Education Information Centre (ZEIC) (2022) pointed out that the implementation of this policy is expected to meet challenges of lack of adequate infrastructure, inadequate funding to schools, overcrowding in classrooms, compromised teacher - learner ratio and lack of adequate materials to aid learning. This can arguably be said to be a significant achievement in terms of budget commitments and should be acknowledged as such. However, there has been an observed consistent and steady decline in financing the education sector from 2014 to 2023 (20.0 %, 20.2 %, 17.2%, 16.5%, 16.1% 15.3%, 12. 4 % 11.5 %, 10.4 % and 13.9 % respectively (UNICEF, 2023), which does not only pose a threat to the furtherance and aspiration of the country's ability to sustain the provision of quality secondary free education to all its eligible citizens, but is also fundamentally dichotomous to the global/regional benchmark of 20% or 4%-6% of GDP of annual national budget to the education sector (UNESCO, 2018). However, after being on the decline for three years, funding for education as a share of the total budget has increased in 2023. Despite education consistently being among the top three expenditure allocations by function, the share of the budget allocated to education has steadily been declining from 2019 but increased in 2023. As a share of the total budget, the allocation to education has increased by 28.3 percent from K18.8 billion in 2022 to K23.2 billion in 2023. The allocation to education is still below the recommended global commitments in one aspect. Under the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action, a global plan agreed by countries in 2015 for the implementation of SDG 4, countries pledged to spend 4-6 percent of GDP or 15-20 percent of the total budget on education. In 2023, education spending was at 4.4 percent of GDP which is in line with the global recommendation. However, as a share of the total budget (13.9), the education budget remains below the lower threshold of the Incheon benchmark. Sustainable quality education cannot be realized without a significant and well-targeted increase in financing the sector (UNESCO, 2016; World Bank, 2019; and Yang, 2019) for required demand-driven investments. Masaiti et al., (2018) also observed an amusing drastic steady reduction in sectoral budgetary allocations from 2015 to 2017 with an emphatic recommendation for an in-depth analysis of the phenomena

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as few studies seem to have been conducted to address the occurrence. There is a deliberate direction to world governments' financing of education. This is done in order to keep in tandem with the international financial benchmarks. If the country is not appropriating the necessary financial budgetary percentage as advised by world bodies on education, it is most likely going to experience enormous challenges on quality service delivery. Therefore, the Incheon Declaration recommends that national governments allocate 4% to 6% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and/or at least 15% to 20% of their total public expenditure to education, with a particular focus on basic education (Global Partnership on Education 2016). These measures are tailored to ensuring more increased budget allocations in order to enhance efficiency, effectiveness and equity in the provision of education. World Bank (2018) shows that there are notable examples of commitment to educational funding among low- and middle-income countries to the effect that in 2015, 47% of GPE partner developing countries, including 43% of countries affected by fragility and conflict, spent at least 20% of total government expenditure on education (Global Partnership on Education 2016).

Statement of the problem

In 2022, the United Party for National Development (UPND) government announced the introduction of free education from pre-school to Grade 12 to fulfil its campaign promise. In a national budget address to parliament by the Minister of Finance and National Planning, the UPND government announced the elimination of all school fees, including PTA and examination costs and stated that learners in primary through secondary schools would not have to pay any fees. All public schools were directed not to charge learners any fees. However, the implementation of the Free Education Policy (FEP) seems to have come with many challenges. Some education stakeholders through media reports lament that although the FEP had led many children to enroll in schools, the policy implementation had put a lot of pressure on the existing educational resources, thereby affecting the quality of education (NAQEZ, 2022). It is also argued that the increased learner enrolments in schools had adversely affected the school system due to the high pupil-teacher ratio (Muyanwa, 2022; Mwelwa, Bwalya and Chibwili, 2023). In line with this policy, it is expected that the government would steadily increase financial support to the education sector, meeting the global and regional benchmarks of allocating 15-20% of the national budget or 4-6% of GDP towards education (UNESCO, 2018). Adequate and consistent funding is essential for providing sustainable and quality secondary education, as emphasized by UNESCO (2016) and the World Bank (2019). However, the reality on the ground shows a different picture. From 2014 to 2022, government funding to the education sector steadily declined from 20.0% to as low as 10.4%, before slightly increasing to 13.9% in

2023 (Ministry of Finance National Budgets, 2015-2023). Although education remains among the top three sectors receiving budgetary allocations, the support still falls below international standards, especially in terms of the share of the total national budget. While the 2023 allocation of 4.4% of GDP meets one global requirement, the percentage of the national budget spent on education remains below the recommended threshold.

This mismatch between policy goals and financial support could have serious consequences for the successful implementation of Free Secondary Education in Zambia. Without sufficient funding, the quality, accessibility, and sustainability of secondary education are at risk. Moreover, despite noticeable financial challenges, there has been limited research on how the Free Education Policy in secondary schools is being implemented under these financial conditions. Therefore, there is a clear need to explore teachers' perceptions on the sustainability of free education policy in selected secondary schools of Kabwe district to understand the challenges faced, and to recommend strategies for improving the policy's success and sustainability.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore teachers' perceptions on the sustainability of free education policy in selected secondary schools of Kabwe district.

Research Questions

- i. How do teachers perceive the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools in Kabwe District?
- ii. What is the level of funding available for effective sustenance of the Free Education Policy in Kabwe District?
- iii. What are the challenges faced in the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools of Kabwe District?
- iv. What measures should be proposed to enhance sustenance of the Free Education Policy in Kabwe District?

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

The study was located in the interpretive paradigm. Interpretive research paradigm involves a qualitative approach to inquiry that seeks to understand and interpret the meanings individuals ascribe to their lived experiences, interactions and social phenomena (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This paradigm emphasizes subjective interpretation, contextuality and the construction of reality through human perception and understanding. Researchers within the interpretive paradigm aim to explore the complexities of human behavior, culture and society by delving into the underlying meanings, values, and beliefs that shape individuals' perspectives and actions. They employ methods

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such as interviews, observations and textual analysis to uncover multiple layers of meaning and gain insights into the subjective realities of research participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Approach

A qualitative research approach was employed in this study. The qualitative research approach is a methodological framework that emphasizes understanding and interpreting the subjective meanings, experiences and perspectives of individuals within their natural context (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This approach involves exploring the complexities of human behavior, 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). Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research seeks to uncover the underlying meanings, patterns and themes inherent in the data. Central to the qualitative research approach is the concept of contextuality which acknowledges the influence of social, cultural and historical factors on individuals' lived experiences and behaviours (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The researcher's focus was on understanding the unique perspectives and realities of research participants within the specific context, recognizing the importance of cultural norms, values and social dynamics in shaping their experiences. The qualitative research approach is characterized by flexibility and openness to emergent themes and insights that may arise during the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researchers engaged in iterative data collection and analysis, refining the research questions and theoretical frameworks based on ongoing reflection and interpretation of data.

Research Design

Kombo (2006) contends that a research design is the structure of research that show how the major parts of the research project work together to try to address the central research questions. It is a 'glue' that holds all of the elements in a research project together. A research design is that of an inquiry that provides the right direction of procedures in a given research endeavour (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study used a descriptive research design using a qualitative approach. Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2018) state that descriptive studies are based on constructivism. Constructivists maintain that truth is relative and it is dependent on one's perspective. This approach recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning but does not reject outright some ideas of objectivity.

Study Area

This pilot study was conducted at one secondary school in Kabwe District of Central Zambia.

Target Population

The target population for this study was the Provincial Education Standard Officer (PESO), the District Education Standards Officer (DESO), all deputy head teachers and, all heads of department, all subject teachers at a selected secondary school of Kabwe District.

Research Sample Size

This study sample size comprised 16 participants. These included one (1) Provincial Education Standards Officer (PESO), one (1) District Education Standards Officer (DESO), and one (1) deputy head teacher, five (5) heads of departments and eight (8) subject teachers.

Sampling Techniques

Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2018) and Kasonde-Ng'andu (2013) refer to sampling techniques as part of the research plan that indicates how cases are to be selected for the study. In this study homogenous purposive sampling techniques were used to select teachers, school administrators and educational administrators at district level. These participants were selected on the premise that that they all have had an experience on the free education policy in secondary schools. Teachers were chosen as informants because of their day-to-day interaction with learners and school administrators. Purposive or judgemental sampling is a strategy in which particular settings, persons or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices. Further, Cohen et al. (2015) asserts that the power of expert purposive sampling lies in selecting information from richer sources such as experts in the fields of study and the ability to allow for in-depth analysis of qualitative data in order to determine central themes. Therefore, all participants were purposively selected because of their ability to provide information on their experiences of the free education policy as observed in their schools.

Focus Group Discussion and Interviews

Focus group discussion were used to collect data from 8 teachers while interviews were used to collect data from the Deputy head teacher; heads of departments, the Provincial Education Standards Officer (PESO) from the Provincial Office and one District Education Standards Officer (DESO) from the District Office.

Data collection instruments

The study employed a qualitative research approach and the instruments used included in-depth interview guides, FGD guides and observation checklist. The study employed in-depth interview guides on school administrators, education standard officers and heads of departments. The FGD guides were used on teachers. Additionally, an observation check-

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list was used to help affirm some of the responses from teachers, heads of departments and administrators on the sustainability of the free education policy. The use of these research instruments enabled the researcher to triangulate the study.

In-Depth Interviews

The in-depth interview guide was used to collect data from education standard officers, head teachers or deputy head teachers and heads of departments. Interviews consist of oral questions asked by the interviewer and oral responses by the research participants. The interview is one of the data collection techniques for qualitative researchers (Adhabi & Anozil, 2017). Taherdoost (2022) highlights that interviews are one of the most promising ways of collecting qualitative data through establishing of a communication between researcher and the interviewee. Taherdoost (2022) adds that in the face-to-face, phone or online conversation tries to understand and explore respondents' opinions and behavior in a specific subject. Prior to conducting interviews, the researcher developed a schedule of interviews, which acted as a guide to help the researcher direct the conversation towards eliciting information on the free education policy as experienced by participants. Data that were collected enabled the researcher to explain, understand and explore opinions, behavior, and experiences of participants on the sustainability of the free education policy as experienced at a secondary school of Kabwe District.

Focus Group Discussions Guide

Tegan (2022) states that a FGD is a research method that brings together a small group of people to answer questions in a moderated setting. The group is chosen due to predefined demographic traits, and the questions are designed to shed light on a topic of interest. Eeuwijk and Angehrn (2017) asserts that FGD is a qualitative research method and data collection technique in which a selected group of people discusses a given topic or issue in- depth, facilitated by a professional, external moderator. This method serves to solicit participants' attitudes and perceptions, knowledge and experiences, and practices, shared in the course of interaction with different people. The technique is based on the assumption that the group processes activated during FGD help identify and clarify shared knowledge among groups, which would otherwise be difficult to obtain with a series of individual interviews (Eeuwijk and Angehrn, 2017). Therefore, FGD allows the investigator to solicit both the participants' shared narratives as well as their differences in terms of experiences, opinions and world view during such 'open' discussion rounds.

Observation Checklist

The study also used an observation checklist as a data collection tool. According to Creswell (2012), observation is the process of accumulating open – ended, direct information by observing people and location at the research site. Additionally, Patton (2013) stated that qualitative

observation is the process of research that uses subjective methodologies to gather systematic information. The researcher sought permission from the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) and the Head teacher of the selected school. Two (2) lesson observations were conducted to observe how teachers interacted with learners. The use of an observation checklist helped the researcher to explore the teachers' perceptions on the sustainability of the free education policy in secondary schools.

Data Collection Procedure

According to Taherdoost (2021) data collection is the process of collecting data aiming to gain insights regarding the research topic. Ajayi (2017) stated that data collection is a systematic way of drawing information about objects of the target population, which are represented by a sample. Three data collection techniques were used in this study. These included interviewing participants, conducting FGDs and observing of classroom lessons, which aimed at gathering qualitative data.

Data Analysis

Bhatia, (2017) opined that data analysis is the process of scrutinizing raw material with a purpose of drawing conclusion about the information. According to Kalimaposo (2010), data analysis refers to examining what has been collected in a survey or experiment and making deductions and inferences. Data analysis is a process of systematically searching and arranging monologue (Creswell, 2014). Data that was collected through in – depth interviews, FGDs and observation is qualitative in nature and was analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing and reporting themes found within a data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Creswell (2014) describes thematic analysis as a systematic process of coding data in which specific statements are analyzed and categorized into themes that represent the phenomenon of interest.

The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to analyze data collected for the study. The first step was to familiarize the researcher with the data that was collected from the field. The researcher then listened to the recordings in form of audio files, transcribed the data then read and re – read through the transcripts. This was done in order to enhance understanding of the content and the interactions between the researcher and the participants and to familiarize the researcher with all aspects of data collected from the field. This step provided the foundation to come up with analysis. For the second step, the researcher created the initial codes or near codes. After the researcher familiarized with the data, preliminary codes were identified. Thereafter the researcher came up with a code book to keep truck of the codes or near codes, read through the data again, and identified interesting excerpts or data extracts and applied the ideal codes to them. The third step was collating codes or near codes with

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supporting data. At this stage, the researcher started the interpretive analysis of the collated codes or near codes. The relevant data extracted were sorted (combined or split) according to overarching themes. The codes were analyzed considering how different codes could be combined to form an overarching theme (Braun and Clark, 2006). Grouping codes into themes was the fourth step. A set of initial codes or near codes were created by the researcher, hence the codes were sorted into potential themes. Themes in qualitative research are a powerful way to see trends and patterns in the data. The researcher then combined codes or near codes and some themes were made into sub-themes.

The fifth step was examining and revising the themes. After coming up with an initial set of themes, the researcher examined and revised the themes and ensured that each theme had supporting data. Similar themes were merged and those with inadequate data were removed. Thereafter, the researcher provided theme names and clear working definitions that captured the essence of each theme in a concise manner. The final step of the analysis was writing of the report. The researcher transformed the analysis into interpretable piece of writing by using vivid and compelling extract examples that was related to the themes, research questions and literature.

In summary of the above steps of the study, data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Data were reduced to themes or categories through the coding process. Data from interviews was coded, categorized and eventually reached at the emerging themes. This process helped to understand and interpret the perceptions of teachers on the sustainability of the free education policy. Considerations during thematic and

content analysis were those that relate to consistency and specificity in response (Creswell, 2014).

Study findings

Teachers perceptions on the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools

The first research objective aimed to explore teachers’ perceptions on the sustainability of the Free Education Policy in selected secondary schools of Kabwe District. To gain a deeper understanding of their views, the study posed the guiding question: *How do teachers perceive the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools?* Interviewed participants shared a mix of positive, negative, and neutral perspectives. Many appreciated the policy’s role in increasing access to education, particularly for learners from low-income households, emphasising that it had removed financial barriers and improved enrollment rates. However, several participants raised concerns about the practical aspects of implementation, citing overcrowded classrooms, inadequate teaching and learning materials, and increased workload as major challenges. Some also noted that while the policy had noble intentions, its rollout lacked sufficient planning, support, and communication from the government. These varied responses reflected both hope and frustration, highlighting the tension between policy ideals and the realities on the ground. Overall, the findings from this objective revealed that while participants recognise the value of the Free Education Policy, they believed its long-term sustainability depends on improved resourcing, better management, and consistent stakeholder support as shown in the Table below.

Teachers perceptions on the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools

Theme	Subthemes
Positive Perceptions	- Improved access to education - Increased learner enrollment - Reduced financial burden on parents
Mixed Reactions	- Appreciation with concerns on implementation gaps - Uneven resource distribution
Negative Perceptions	- Decline in quality of education - Overcrowded classrooms - Limited individual learner attention
Teacher Professional Concerns	- Increased workload - Lack of teaching materials - Poor communication from authorities

Source: Field Work, 2025

Many teachers expressed a generally positive attitude toward the Free Education Policy, highlighting its role in increasing access to education for vulnerable children. Thus P1 stated that:

‘The introduction of this policy has opened the gates of learning to children from the poorest homes. It is encouraging to see

classrooms filled with children who would otherwise be on the streets due to lack of fees. As teachers, we feel proud to be part of such a transformative process.’

However, some teachers described their feelings as mixed, appreciating the intentions of the policy but expressing

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concerns about the unevenness in implementation. P2 commented that:

'The idea behind the policy is commendable, but some schools seem to benefit more than others. In our school, we barely receive enough materials, while others seem well-resourced. This creates an imbalance and raises questions about the fairness of resource distribution.'

A number of participants were more critical, pointing out that the quality of education may be declining. P3 said that:

'Yes, children are coming to school in large numbers, but what quality of education are we offering them? We cannot attend to each learner's needs in classes of 80 or 90. The personal connection that used to exist between teacher and learner is fading away.'

The interviewed participants also expressed professional dissatisfaction due to the pressure the policy has placed on them. P4 explained:

'We are overwhelmed. We are teaching large numbers without any increase in staff or support. The pressure is not only physical but emotional. You go home tired, knowing you didn't give your best to every child because the conditions won't allow it.'

The school administrators expressed cautious optimism regarding the long-term sustainability of the Free Education Policy. Thus P12 noted that:

'I believe the policy has brought a lot of relief to parents and learners, but whether it can last depend on how committed the government remains to funding it. This sentiment was echoed by other participants who viewed political commitment and consistent financing as the linchpin of the policy's durability. While there is recognition of the policy's benefits, concerns persist about whether the necessary support mechanisms and resources will continue over the years.'

Some participants shared a sense of uncertainty about the continuity of government commitment. Thus, P10 pointed out that: *'It's a good initiative, but without proper monitoring and long-term planning, I fear it may collapse under its own weight.'* This indicates recognition that while the policy serves an immediate need, its long-term impact may be undermined by the lack of a solid sustainability framework. School administrators believe the success of the policy hinges not just on implementation, but on consistent political will and adaptability over time.

Most participants cited financial disbursement delays as a serious concern. P5 emphasized that: *'The grants we receive from the ministry are essential. If they delay, everything stalls from procurement of chalk to paying support staff.'* These highlights how fragile the operational side of the policy is, being wholly dependent on timely government support. Without consistent funding, the implementation becomes unreliable, affecting service delivery at the school level.

A recurring challenge mentioned was the shortage of qualified staff. P7 remarked that: *'Teacher shortages are a real concern. We have classes of over 60 pupils, and only one teacher. That threatens both quality and sustainability.'* This points to how rising enrollment numbers, though a success indicator, have not been matched by increased staffing. The human resource gap threatens the quality of education and stretches the existing workforce to its limits.

Some participants acknowledged the positive role played by external partners in sustaining the policy. P13 discussed that: *'We have managed to keep the policy working with help from NGOs that have stepped in with additional resources.'* This highlights the importance of partnerships in filling operational gaps and underscores that government alone may not be able to fully sustain the policy without the support of other stakeholders.

Most of the participants noted a dramatic increase in learner enrollment since the policy's implementation. P11 shared that: *'enrollment has increased significantly since the policy was introduced. Children who had dropped out returned to school.'* This indicates that the policy has achieved one of its primary goals enhancing access to education. However, the resultant strain on facilities and staff is now becoming a key issue in discussions on sustainability.

Furthermore, P7 indicated that despite improved access, the overcrowding in classrooms was widely viewed as compromising the quality of education. P15 said that:

'The quality of education is declining because the teacher-to-pupil ratio is now overwhelming. The growth in enrollment, while beneficial, has created logistical and pedagogical challenges. Classrooms are congested, and personalized attention to learners has significantly diminished, negatively affecting academic outcomes.'

Resource shortages also emerged as a recurring theme. P8 lamented that:

'There are not enough desks or textbooks. In some classrooms, learners sit on the floor, which discourages learning. Such inadequacies are not just inconvenient; they impact learners' dignity and concentration, potentially eroding the benefits of the Free Education Policy over time.'

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Nevertheless, some positive unintended consequences have emerged. Some administrators noted increased parental engagement. P2 explained that:

‘Parents are more involved now since they no longer pay fees, but we have had to explain to them that some contributions are still necessary. This engagement, while helpful, sometimes requires careful communication to clarify expectations and roles.’

Furthermore, on the role in sustaining the policy, administrators reported active involvement in financial oversight and community engagement. P6 said that:

‘As a school head, I ensure that all government grants are properly utilized and that reporting is done promptly. This accountability is seen as critical to gaining continued trust and support from the ministry and local stakeholders alike.’

Effective communication was also highlighted as a critical administrative role. Thus, P10 discussed that: *‘We try to involve the community through meetings and sensitization so they understand their role in supporting the school. Through structured dialogue and collaboration, schools can cultivate a shared sense of ownership over the policy’s goals.’*

Furthermore, P12 emphasised the importance of monitoring by saying that:

‘My role is to supervise how the policy is implemented on the ground, and to flag any challenges we face. Monitoring ensures that any gaps or inefficiencies are addressed early, and it provides a feedback loop to higher authorities and policymakers.’

P13 shared several innovative strategies aimed at sustaining policy gains by saying that:

‘We started a school garden where we grow vegetables that are sold to support school activities. Such income-generating

activities offer supplemental funding that can help bridge budget gaps and promote self-reliance at the school level. We have partnered with a local NGO to provide sanitary pads and books to girl learners. That has helped reduce absenteeism. These partnerships are not just beneficial for resources, they also enhance learner retention and equity, particularly for vulnerable groups.

The level of funding available for effective sustenance of the Free Education Policy

The second research objective sought to establish the availability and adequacy of government funding necessary for the effective sustenance of the Free Education Policy at a selected secondary school of Kabwe District. To address this objective, participants were asked: *‘What is the level of funding available for effective sustenance of the Free Education Policy?’* Responses revealed widespread concern among teachers and school administrators regarding both the adequacy and reliability of the financial support provided by the government. While participants acknowledged that the government has been releasing grants to support the policy, many emphasized that the funds were insufficient to meet the growing demands created by increased learner enrollment. It was reported that the grants often arrived late, which disrupted planning and affected the timely procurement of essential teaching and learning materials. Moreover, participants highlighted that most schools lacked alternative income sources and were heavily dependent on government funding, making the system vulnerable to financial delays. Some schools have attempted to supplement the limited resources through community support and small income-generating projects, but these efforts were often inconsistent and inadequate. Overall, the findings suggest that without timely, sufficient, and predictable funding, the sustainability and effectiveness of the Free Education Policy remained at risk as shown in Table below.

Level of funding available for effective sustenance of the Free Education Policy

Theme	Subthemes
Inadequate Funding	- Funds not sufficient for operational needs - Insufficient per-learner allocation
Delayed Disbursement	- Grants released late - Budget execution affected - Limited planning flexibility
Reliance on Government Grants	- No reliable alternative income - Dependency on central disbursements
Need for Supplementary Funding	- Importance of NGO support - Community fundraising - School ventures for extra revenue

Source: Field Work, 2025

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Most of the participants emphasised that the current funding was insufficient to cover the actual needs of schools under the Free Education Policy. P5 indicated that:

'The grants we receive per learner are not enough to meet the rising cost of education. We still have to buy chalk, pay casual workers, and maintain school buildings; how do we manage all this with the little we get.'

The timeliness of disbursement also emerged as a serious concern. P4 indicated:

'It is not just that the funds are small, it is that they come late. By the time the money arrives, we have already borrowed or delayed essential activities. This affects planning and affects our credibility with parents and staff.'

One of the participants highlighted the complete dependence on government grants, with no alternative sources of funding. P11 indicated that: *we are surviving on government grants alone. When they delay, the whole school suffers. We cannot even pay for small things like cleaning materials without that money.* Few proactive schools have begun seeking supplementary income. P8 shared that: *To fill the gaps, we have started small initiatives like gardening and poultry farming. We also ask for support from local businesses and well-wishers, but this only helps a little and is not always reliable.*

Many school administrators described the funding for the Free Education Policy as inconsistent and unreliable. P6 indicated that:

'Sometimes the funds come late, and other times they are only partially released. This unpredictability makes it hard for us to plan our activities effectively. The inconsistency in funding creates operational challenges that affect the smooth running of school programs under the policy.'

P2 shared that:

'We heavily rely on government funding, but when the allocations are unpredictable, it affects everything from buying teaching materials to paying support staff. This dependence on government disbursements highlights the vulnerability of schools to budget fluctuations and delays.'

Some participants expressed concern that the budget allocations for free education were not only delayed but sometimes insufficient. P3 explained that: *Even when we receive funds, they are often less than what was promised, which means we have to cut back on some essential activities.* While many participants appreciated the government's effort to support free education, they were clear that it falls short of

what was needed. P11 indicated that: *we appreciate the policy and the funding, but it is not enough to cover all the needs of the school, especially with increasing enrollment.*

Furthermore, P5 shared that *delays in releasing grants have a ripple effect on school operations. Sometimes, we cannot even buy enough chalk or stationery for learners, and this affects the teaching process.* The perceived delay and inefficiency in the disbursement process is a common concern among stakeholders. There were mixed perceptions about the government's financial commitment. Some participants felt that the government was committed but faced bureaucratic challenges, while others were less optimistic. P9 stated that *the policy looks good on paper, but execution has been slow and inconsistent.*

Furthermore, financial constraints were seen to significantly limit the delivery of quality education. P10 explained that *because we do not have enough funds, teaching and learning materials are scarce. We sometimes share textbooks among many learners. This shortage impacts learners' ability to engage effectively with the curriculum.*

P8 noted that:

'With limited funding, we cannot maintain infrastructure properly. Classrooms are overcrowded and poorly maintained, which affects the learning environment. Physical infrastructure challenges are a direct consequence of inadequate financing.'

P9 also indicated that: *the lack of resources and large class sizes increase teacher workload, leading to burnout.* These compromises the quality of education delivered under the policy. Most of the interviewed participants reported that using alternative funding sources to bridge gaps caused by inconsistent government support. P12 indicated that *we started some income-generating projects like a small farm and crafts which help raise money for school needs.* Such initiatives reflect schools' efforts to become more self-reliant. Some participants expressed frustration about the transparency of fund usage and disbursement processes. P13 said that: *there is little clarity on how funds are allocated and spent at higher levels, which makes it difficult for us to trust the system fully.* Furthermore, delays in grant distribution were described as a persistent issue. P4 shared that *sometimes funds arrive so late that planned activities have to be postponed or canceled, negatively impacting learners.* Thus, the need for better financial accountability was emphasized as P14 explained that *we need stronger reporting and auditing mechanisms to ensure funds are used properly and reach the schools on time. This would help build confidence among all stakeholders and ensure sustained support for the policy.*

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Challenges faced in the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools

The third research objective aimed to explore the challenges encountered in the implementation of the Free Education Policy in selected secondary schools of Kabwe District. To address this objective, participants were asked: *What are the challenges faced in the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools?* The responses revealed a range of critical issues that have hindered effective implementation of the free education policy. One of the most prominent challenges cited was the overwhelming increase in learner enrollment, which has led to overcrowded classrooms, strained infrastructure, and diminished teacher-to-learner interaction. Many participants highlighted the shortage of qualified teachers, which has resulted in excessive workloads,

teacher burnout, and compromised lesson delivery. Additionally, the lack of adequate teaching and learning materials, such as textbooks, laboratory equipment, and stationery, was reported as a significant barrier to quality education. Schools are also grappling with poor infrastructure, including insufficient desks, classrooms, and sanitation facilities. Furthermore, participants pointed to inconsistent communication from the Ministry of Education and a lack of monitoring and support, which has created confusion and hindered proper policy execution. These challenges collectively suggest that while the Free Education Policy has increased access, its implementation is marred by systemic and logistical weaknesses that threaten the quality and sustainability of education delivery as shown in Table below.

Challenges faced in the implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools

Theme	Subthemes
Overcrowding and Infrastructure	- High pupil-teacher ratios - Inadequate classroom space - Lack of furniture
Learning and Teaching Materials	- Shortage of textbooks and stationery - Poor science lab and library facilities
Staffing and Human Resources	- Inadequate number of trained teachers - Teacher burnout - Uneven distribution of staff
Policy Implementation Gaps	- Poor communication from Ministry - Inconsistent monitoring - Lack of school-level autonomy

Source: Field Work, 2025

The overwhelming increase in learner enrollment has caused infrastructure challenges. It is for this reason that P9 explained that:

'Before the policy, we used to manage a class of about 40. Now it is not unusual to have 80 or even more. Learners are squeezed on desks, and some sit on the floor. Teaching in such an environment is a nightmare.'

The participants interviewed raised concerns over the acute shortage of teaching and learning materials. Thus P2 said that:

'We only have a few textbooks that must be shared among many learners. Some students hardly get the chance to use a textbook during class, let alone take it home. It affects their ability to follow lessons and prepare for exams.'

Staffing challenges were also significant. Thus P11 shared that:

'We have not received any additional teachers since the policy started, despite the rise in enrollment. Some teachers are

now handling three or more streams of the same subject. This leads to burnout and affects lesson preparation.'

Furthermore, policy implementation gaps were noted in terms of communication and support from the Ministry of Education. P12 explained that:

'Sometimes we hear about policy changes through social media or rumors. There is no clear channel of communication. And when challenges arise, no one comes to assess or support us. We feel abandoned at the school level.'

One of the dominant challenges cited by school administrators was the inadequacy of funding to meet the growing demands of the policy. P4 explained that:

'The money we receive is not enough to cover everything. We are forced to prioritize only urgent needs and leave others pending. Some classes have over 70 learners, but we only have one teacher to manage them. It's difficult to give every child the attention they need.'

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The lack of adequate staffing makes it hard to maintain educational quality and control large classrooms effectively. Thus, another challenge identified was poor communication and training regarding the policy's implementation. P8 remarked that *we were not fully trained or prepared when the policy was introduced. Many things are unclear, and we're learning on the job.* This suggests that rollout lacked sufficient groundwork, leading to confusion and inconsistencies in policy execution.

The influx of learners since the policy was introduced has overwhelmed many schools. P14 said that: *'Most of the participants observed that large class sizes have significantly reduced teacher-learner interaction. The ability to support learners, especially slow performers, is compromised under such conditions.'* Overcrowding undermines effective lesson delivery and learner engagement. This suggests that the workload increase is not only affecting learners but also the wellbeing and productivity of teachers. P9 stated that:

'I used to give individual attention to learners, but now it is impossible. There are just too many of them. With the increase in enrollment, teachers are overworked and exhausted. It affects our motivation and the quality of teaching.'

Many participants pointed out the persistent shortage of learning materials. The lack of adequate materials has also affected practical learning. This scarcity hinders effective participation and reduces opportunities for self-study and revision. Thus, P15 discussed that:

'We cannot conduct experiments because we do not have the required materials. Learners only read about them without experiencing them. Learners lose interest when they don't have the materials they need. It makes them passive and sometimes disruptive in class. Some schools do not

have enough classrooms, so we combine two classes in one room. It becomes noisy and hard to manage. We do not have enough textbooks. In most classes, four or five learners share one book.'

Measures to enhance sustenance of the Free Education Policy

The fourth research objective aimed to propose measures for the sustainable implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools of Kabwe District. To effectively address this objective, the study posed the guiding research question: *What measures can help enhance the sustenance of the Free Education Policy in Kabwe District?* The participants provided a variety of recommendations grounded in their lived experiences and institutional challenges. The key suggestions included the need for timely and sufficient government funding, improved transparency and accountability in the management of school resources, and greater autonomy at the school level to make financial and operational decisions. The participants also emphasised the importance of teacher capacity building through continuous professional development and targeted training programs to equip educators with skills to manage large class sizes and limited resources. Additionally, there was a strong call for enhanced community involvement through revitalized Parent Teacher Committees (PTCs), local fundraising initiatives, and strategic partnerships with NGOs and private sector actors. Participants further proposed the implementation of innovative, school-based income-generating projects such as farming, tailoring, or brick-making to support schools in addressing financial gaps. These insights, as presented in Table 4.4, formed the basis for a proposed strategic framework that integrates financial, institutional, community, and pedagogical elements to ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the Free Education Policy.

Measures to enhance sustenance of the Free Education Policy

Theme	Subthemes
Strengthening Financial Systems	- Timely and adequate funding - Transparent fund management - Empower district authorities
Capacity Building and Training	- Teacher professional development - Leadership and policy training - School management workshops
Community and Stakeholder Engagement	- Strengthening PTC - Community sensitization - Involving traditional leaders
Innovation and Sustainability Models	- School-based income generating activities - Technology integration - Partnerships with NGOs and private sector

Source: Field Work, 2025

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Most of the participants proposed the improvement of financial management systems. Teachers also advocated for professional development opportunities. P3 opined that:

'Schools need autonomy to manage the grants they receive. At the same time, there should be strict financial controls and monitoring to prevent misuse. This way, schools can respond to local needs more effectively. We need regular workshops on managing large classes, using improvised materials, and inclusive teaching. The policy has changed our teaching environment, but our skills haven't been upgraded to match these new demands.'

Furthermore, other participants highlighted the role of innovation and community partnerships. P1 shared that:

'We should not depend only on government support. Schools can run projects like fish farming, brick-making, or tailoring to generate income. If communities, NGOs, and local businesses are brought on board, the schools can become more self-sufficient.'

Many participants emphasized the need for increased and stable funding to ensure the Free Education Policy endures over time. P2 stated that:

'We need consistent funding that is not affected by political changes. Education is not a one-time investment, it needs constant support. The Free Education Policy must be part of a long-term strategic plan. It should not end with one government administration. This reflects a broader concern that short-term planning and shifting political priorities could derail the policy's progress.'

Furthermore, P10 stressed the importance of transparent financial management at the school level. This internal control promotes prudent use of scarce resources.

'We have set up a finance committee that approves all spending. That way, we are accountable and careful with every kwacha. Sometimes materials go missing or get wasted. If we had a proper system to monitor what comes in and how it's used, we would save a lot. We coordinate with neighboring schools to borrow or share books and equipment. It's not formal, but it helps a lot when one of us has shortages.'

Furthermore, some participants noted that active community participation is key to sustaining free education. Community ownership strengthens both financial and social support. P3 indicated that:

'Our PTC helps us raise funds and even mobilize labor for school maintenance. When parents are involved, they protect and value the school. Some parents think free education means they shouldn't contribute anything. We conduct meetings to explain how they can support in other ways like bringing firewood or helping with cleaning. This highlights the need for ongoing sensitization. Community elders are respected in rural areas. When they support school initiatives, others follow. They can help us with mobilization and even discipline issues.'

Delays in funding disbursement were a common frustration. Giving district offices more autonomy could enhance responsiveness and reduce bureaucratic delays. The participants saw the recruitment and equitable deployment of teachers as a government responsibility tied to policy sustainability. The participants proposed integrating technology by saying that: Thus, P2 indicated that:

'The money always comes late. By then, we've already borrowed or compromised on quality. The government must be more punctual. If the District Education Board had the power to release small grants, emergencies could be handled faster. We do not just need more money, we need more teachers. Classes are too big, and learners are suffering. If we had e-learning devices or projectors, we could teach more effectively even with fewer books. Government should invest in low-cost education technology. We have a poultry project and a vegetable garden. The money we make is used to buy teaching materials and pay casual workers.'

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Free Education Policy in secondary schools of Kabwe District has been met with widespread appreciation for its goal of increasing access to education, especially for marginalized learners. The participants recognise its transformative potential in reducing financial barriers and boosting enrollment. However, while the policy has succeeded in expanding educational access, its sustainability and effectiveness are severely threatened by systemic challenges. The key concerns included overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, and a shortage of trained teachers, which collectively compromise the quality of education. The rapid increase in learner numbers

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has not been matched with proportional increases in funding, learning materials, or human resources, placing intense pressure on existing school systems. Teachers report increased workloads, limited individual attention to learners, and emotional burnout. Furthermore, delays in government grant disbursements, inadequate per-learner allocations, and lack of financial transparency have weakened schools' operational efficiency. Implementation gaps, such as poor communication from the Ministry of Education, inadequate monitoring, and minimal school-level autonomy, further impede the policy's success. The schools lack the resources to respond to emerging challenges, while inconsistent financial support has made planning difficult and unreliable. Despite these challenges, there are positive developments. Community participation and NGO support have emerged as valuable supplementary resources. Some schools have initiated income-generating projects to bridge funding gaps, while other schools advocate for capacity-building, innovative teaching approaches, and stronger school governance to sustain the policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. The Ministry of Education should actively engage teachers through regular consultative forums to gather feedback, clarify policy expectations, and address concerns related to workload, resource distribution, and implementation fairness to promote acceptance of the policy and reduce resistance.
- ii. The Government of the Republic of Zambia should increase the education grant and ensure its timely disbursement to enable schools to plan effectively and address operational needs without disruptions.
- iii. To address overcrowding and teacher shortages, the Government of the Republic of Zambia through the Ministry of Education should urgently recruit and deploy additional qualified teachers and invest in infrastructure expansion to match the rising learner enrollment.
- iv. The Government through the Ministry of Education should support schools to initiate and manage income-generating projects to supplement government funding and enhance financial sustainability.

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