

Subsidised education, enrolment and completion rate in Zambian primary schools, opportunities and challenges in Kitwe district

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Abstract

The study investigated opportunities and challenges of free primary education and enrolment in Zambian schools of Kitwe District. The study targeted fifty five public primary schools in Kitwe district of which twenty (20) primary schools and the DEBS' office were sampled. The study used both the quantitative and qualitative approaches to collect data by using questionnaire and interview schedules. Quantitative data was analyzed using STATA while thematic analysis was employed in analyzing qualitative data. The findings of the study revealed that free education presented both opportunities and challenges on the levels of enrolment in primary schools. The findings established that enrolment was generally high as a result of government policy to subsidize primary education. The study further posted a positive correlation between free education completion rates in primary schools. However, there were alleged questions on the quality of education being provided and inadequate funding from government which resulted into poor and inadequate teaching and learning material provision. Therefore, it emerged from the study that government should increase funding to primary schools and disbursed the funds in good time to allow management from such schools to plan adequately and provide quality education. Another recommendation among others is that government should increase infrastructure such as classrooms, build more schools and employ more teachers to ease the problem of over enrolment.

Keywords: free education, opportunities and challenges

1. Introduction

It is a mandate of every government to create equal opportunities toward the provision of education to its citizens. As a liberal society, the state is obliged to protect and promote fundamental human and civil rights, to formulate educational policies aimed at nurturing the holistic development of individuals and promote social economic welfare of society (Kelly, 1991)^[8]. Hence, 'primary education must be universal and ensure that the basic learning needs of all children are satisfied (Kelly, 1991)^[8]. The matter of providing free education is however delicate and requires wide consultation. Moreover, the phenomenon of free education has over the decades become a global policy issue.

1.1 Background to the study

At the time of Zambia's attainment of independence in 1964, Zambia's educational system was one of the most poorly developed. As a result, Zambia had to invest heavily in the education sector. It took the then UNIP government to provide free excise books, pens and pencils to all children irrespective of their parents' ability to pay. The parents' responsibility was only to buy uniforms and pay a token in the form of school fund. In other words, the policy provided for equal and adequate provision of educational opportunities to all children (MOE, 1967)^[11].

The free education policy has generally been pro-poor although the challenge is now to improve the quality of education and create a more sustainable learning environment. Zambia and Kenya are among countries in which the removal of user fees in primary schools has improved access to schooling for children. A study by

UNICEF (2005),^[20] reports that countries such as Kenya, Lesotho, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Swaziland and Zambia have implemented targeted mechanisms for raising enrolment rates for orphans and vulnerable children through free education.

The change of government from the Movement of Multi-Party Democracy (MMD) to the Patriotic Front (PF) in 2011 further energized governments' commitment to uphold the right to a free, compulsory quality education. Therefore, the provision of free primary education has remained the responsibility of government in collaboration with parents and communities as may be appropriate (PF Manifesto 2011-2016:7)^[18]. Furthermore, there have been major pronouncements from government through Ministry of General Education on the free education policy. There has been further indication from government of possibilities of extending free education from grade one to grade twelve in order to enable many children access education. In addition, subsequent budgetary allocations have been increasing over the years, an indication of commitment on the part of government in the quest to actualize free primary education.

1.2 Statement of the problem

In Zambia primary education is the basic stage of formal learning comprising the first seven years of the child's schooling; a preparatory stage for further learning which need not be compromised. 'Education is a human right,' (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948).^[21] In view of this, the Zambian government like many other governments across the globe is mandated to fulfill its obligation by making primary education not only accessible to all its citizens but also by

promoting equality. However, opportunities and challenges of free education and enrolment rate in Zambia remain unknown, hence this study.

1.3 Significance of the study

The study was important because the findings would provide some insights on the opportunities, challenges and enrolment rate of free education. The findings would further generate new knowledge that in turn would help the Ministry of General Education to reflect on the efficiency, effectiveness, impact, relevance, accountability and sustainability of implementation free primary education policy.

1.4 Literature Review

Studies at global and regional level suggest that user fees have a negative impact on school enrolment. The findings indicate that parents in Indonesia, China, the Solomon Islands, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya cited user fees as a major obstacle to enrolling children in school (Oxfam, 2001 in Kattan, 2006) ^[17, 6]. It is for such reason that countries such as the United States of America have prioritized primary education by making elementary schooling free and compulsory. India was by 1994 able to provide 80 percent to finance free education (World Education Services, 2004, Government of India, 1994 in Kattan 2006) ^[6].

In 1990, the Jomtien World Conference on Education resolved and agreed on the 'Education for All' (EFA) campaign whose main focus was the achievement of Universal Basic Education. Following the EFA campaign, in 2000, the World Education Forum was held in Dakar and later on the Millennium Summit further reaffirmed the need for the achievement of Universal Basic Education and the target was 2015. These global commitments are clear that countries that were party to the agreements had to abolish school fees in their respective countries. However, a survey conducted by the World Bank in 2005 showed that the implementation at the time was fragmented thus it was only successful in part (Kattan, 2006) ^[6].

Regardless of the cause for the introduction of free education, the challenges were interrelated. For instance, the programme was in most instances characterized by heavy borrowing of loans and closely tied technical assistance. According to Kattan (2006: 37), ^[6] "there is some evidence that governments that have eliminated user fees have attempted to fund such policies through increased spending on education." For instance, education expenditures in Uganda grew from 16.4 percent of the national discretionary recurrent budget to about 30 percent while Cameroon reported per student government expenditure on primary education rose by 114 percent. However, most countries' public spending on education is generally very insufficient considering the gravity of the task (Kattan, 2006) ^[6].

1.4.1 Zambian perspective

The Zambian government has made strides in creating an enabling environment where various educational agencies would participate in education development (Education Act, 1966) ^[2]. In a bid to fulfilling the aforesaid obligation, government embarked on programmes of offering free education. For instance, the current free education policy existing in Zambia was re-introduced in 2002 during the basic Education Sub-Sector Investment Programme (BESSIP) whose major focus was to improve access to and quality of

basic education following the declining enrolment in preceding years (Open Society Foundations, 2013) ^[16].

It is on record that the abolition of school fees in Zambia in 2002 prompted an increase in the number of basic school from 5 300 in 2000 to more than 8000 in 2006; this also translates into increased classrooms from 25 000 to 35 000 a remarkable achievement by means of enrolment which had increased by 67% in six years. The evaluation report suggests the increased enrolment at that time did not have any negative impacts on the average tests as examination results did not deteriorate. Thus, among the benefits; the most vulnerable children gained access to education and at the same time more teachers were employed. However, in the long run, the programmes became rather unsustainable as a result of severe underfunding, lack of qualified and motivated teachers and head teachers and a lack of effective management capacity at the school and district levels.

However, going by the aforesaid makes interesting reading considering that 2015, the target year has elapsed especially that much seems not to have been gained in the provision of free education. The consequences of the free education provision should be compelled by the need to providing educational materials such as exercise books, pens, pencils, rulers, rubbers, text books and other materials to make education completely free. Of course, the government has embarked on building a number of schools across the country, but there is no practical evidence that the government is offering free education from Grade one to Grade twelve. The policy document MOE (1996) ^[12] makes mention of the free education but the provision of free basic education on materials seems to be erratic. Perhaps the failure could be attributed to the declining economics.

Additionally, the government has been inconsistent in the provision of free education materials and this still remains a challenge. It is for this reason that schools are ill-equipped with essentials for learning and teaching and the financial burden of government often forces parents to get involved in providing for primary education despite being pronounced free (Museba 2012:31) ^[14]. Perhaps it is in the same vein that there seems to be contradictions in our education system thus raising the question; 'how free is free education?' (Kelly, 1991: 151) ^[8]. In view of the above mentioned challenges, the World Bank suggests that 'there should be no blanket policy on user fees' and further argue that there is no case for primary school fees unless government is unreliable thus, calls for governments to meet the cost of education. In other words, elimination of user fees will require that governments increased spending on education (Kattan, 2006) ^[6].

Furthermore, there are positive reports of increased enrolments recorded by schools country wide as the country makes strides to achieving EFA and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the school grants which government sends to schools through the respective provinces and districts seem inadequate to meet the cost of purchasing resources for the schools to promote effective teaching and learning (Museba, 2012) ^[14]. Of course the allocation is based on the school size, but there are still some inadequacies such as the money not reaching the recipient schools in time to the extent that the quarterly grants could only be received may be twice while they are also insufficient to meet the cost of running institutions. For instance, a school of an enrolment of over 2000 pupils only receives about K3000 on average as a quarterly grant which in turn makes the running of schools at

mercy of the Parents' Teachers Associations (PTAs) fundraisings which are equally often met with suspicion and apathy because parents expect education to be completely free.

Thus, Kattan (2006:40) ^[6] reports that Zambian households bear significant expenses related to education even after the formal abolition of fees. For instance, reports of studies showed that fees collected by government schools increased between 2002 and 2003 and some schools have begun to charge PTA fees again due to inadequate government funding (Mwansa *et al.*, 2004 & Global Campaign for Education 2004 in Kattan, 2006) ^[15, 6] On the other hand, user fees collections from Grade 8 and 9 pupils may equally not have been enough and at the moment not very promising since the government has embarked on restructuring and reverting to the old system of running primary schools (Grades 1-7) separately from secondary schools (Grade 8 -12) (Patriotic Front Manifesto 2011-2016) ^[18].

The implementation of free education on the other hand reduces the schools' resource base (Oxfam, 2001). Therefore, it was imperative for the timely financing of all costs so that schools do not have to charge fees. One of the ways such problems could be solved would be to pay attention to financing and flow of funding issues (Boyle *et al.* 2002) ^[1]. Furthermore, the government must understand the problems primary schools were facing by considering the basic school requirements other than focusing on meeting partial requirements. For instance, planning should be considerate of both the medium term and long term impact of the free education. Similarly, Kattan (2006: 54), ^[6] asserts, "Careful advance planning of policy implementation is essential with estimation of total costs and their calibration with macroeconomic prospects, government financing capacity and external assistance perspectives to ensure sustainability." However, in Zambia the Ministry of General Education was expected to implement the Free Basic Education policy immediately after the president's announcement, thus, there was no adequate time for planning for the transformation as such, the government didn't carry out a school census or needs assessment but instead gave each school big or large, urban or rural the same amount of grant money (Mwansa, *et al.* 2004) ^[15].

Furthermore, Museba (2012) ^[14] conducted studies in Solwezi in the North Western province and points out that the free education policy in Zambia like in many other countries is aimed at reducing the parents' cost of education. He further reports that free basic education in Zambia was also in response to the 2002 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper which outlined the elimination of user fees for basic education as a strategy to reduce poverty (GRZ, 2002). Mwansa *et al.* (2004) ^[15] also conducted studies on free basic education in Zambia and pointed out that the enrolment increase being experienced in schools due to the Education for All and Universal Basic Education mandates did not receive adequate funds to purchase resources for the schools to promote effective teaching and learning despite the fact that the allocation was based on the size of the school. There were challenges in the manner the resources were disbursed and the study further suggests that the free basic education policy was implemented hurriedly as there was little time to adequately plan for its implementation.

Other studies by Africa map and the Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa revealed the introduction of free

education in Zambia in 2002 significantly improved access to primary education although insufficient budgeting undermined delivery and quality of education among other challenges such as a shortage of teachers and teaching and learning materials. Additionally, matters of concern raised by the same studies are that more than a quarter of a million children are out of school while 47 percent of those enrolled do not complete the primary cycle. This study raised a number of other concerns among them the inefficiency system characterized by poor transition rates and poor reading and arithmetic competence skills at mid-primary level and unsatisfactory examination performance at both primary and secondary school levels and describes the state of education in Zambia as robust and vulnerable to shocks (Macmillan, 2013) ^[9].

1.4.2 Comparative studies

Considering the studies that have been undertaken in Zambia and in other parts of the world, it is clear that primary education is crucial not only in Zambia but in almost every country and this is because it is the most accessible to the poor and its higher rates of return than secondary and tertiary education levels. It is in this vein that most government spending on primary education was more likely to be higher than at other levels. Furthermore, reports show increased enrolment rates which suggest that inability to pay fees is indeed a major obstacle to education for the poor and other disadvantaged groups such as girls, orphans and disabled children. For instance, in Zambia the pupil school enrolment increased from 2.9 million in 2005 to 3.6 million in 2009 which translates to the net enrolment rate increase from 93% in 2005 to 97% in 2009 (GRZ, 2011) ^[5].

The statistics made available indicate the net enrolment rate in primary education was 96% and 97% in 2005 and 2006 respectively while the completion rate for grade 7 during the same period was 81% and 83% in 2005 and 2006 respectively according to the Zambia Millennium Development Goals Progress Report of 2008. Despite the increase in enrolment, the following were some of the notable challenges; where enrolment increased drastically, the quality of education was sacrificed because it meant fewer hours of learning in order to allow all children learn especially in urban areas hence the triple and quadruple sessions which meant few hours of learning, overage children were also admitted into schools but this meant that places for the eligible children were taken up by the over age children and the situation was also worsened where pupils repeated grades. Furthermore there was an increased dropout rate especially in rural areas. For instance, the 1983, 1994 statistics revealed that the completion rate for girls was 71.4% while for boys it was 86.9% (MOE, 1996:17) ^[12].

Of late, it appears that many African countries have abolished school fees although there are still a number of challenges including consequences of hidden costs; the persistence of some kind of fees and other private costs of schooling that remain a global issue despite countries having officially and legally abolished fees (*ibid.*). Something needs to be done. Generally, the scenario is that almost everywhere free education has a positive impact on enrolment rates (Museba, 2012) ^[14]. The rapid progress in enrolment was not only recorded in Zambia but in other countries such as Burkina Faso, Ethiopia Mozambique ... (EFA Global Monitoring Report, 2008). In Malawi for instance, the circumstances

surrounding the rapid quantitative expansion of the primary sector together with donor dependence has raised a number of issues regarding the long-term impact of the 1994 FPE policy of the Malawi Government. The country has recorded a remarkable enrolment expansion while the quality is believed to have deteriorated (Kadzamira and Rose, 2001 in Riddell, 2003). [7] Perhaps this scenario relates to Zambia where it is reported “the internal system was very inefficient and characterized by poor transition rates and poor reading and arithmetic competency skills at mid- primary level and generally unsatisfactory examination performance” (Open Society Foundations, 2013) [16].

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research design

The study was a descriptive case study and employed both the qualitative and quantitative methodologies to answer the research questions effectively. The case study design was the most appropriate for the study because it was easier to describe the conditions for data collection. It further provided for the physical collection of data and furnished us with in-depth information on the opportunities and challenges of free education and enrolment rate in Kitwe District.

2.2 Target population

The target population for the study included all the fifty five public primary schools in Kitwe District. The study targeted all the head teachers, teachers and pupils, the DEBS, DESO, ESO and other Ministry of Education staff.

2.3 Sample size

The sample size of the study comprised fifty (50) respondents who included twenty (20) head teachers, twenty (20) teachers, five (5) pupils all drawn from primary schools, one (1) DEBS, one (1) DESO and three (3) other members of staff from the Ministry of Education. Out of the total number of fifty (50) respondents, sixteen (16) were male representing thirty two (32%) of the participants while thirty four (34) respondents were female representing sixty eight (68%) of the total sample size.

2.4 Sampling technique

Simple random and purposive sampling procedures were used in this study. For instance, the simple random sampling technique was used to select primary schools in Kitwe District to participate in the study because all public primary schools are mandated to provide free education. The random sampling was used in order to circumvent personal bias in selecting participants. Furthermore, the purposive sampling technique was used to select the DEBS and other Ministry of Education officials because they were a rich source of data for the study.

2.5 Instruments for Data Collection

In the collection of primary data for the study, questionnaire and interview schedules were used while secondary data was obtained from books, journals, records, reports, newspapers, the internet and dissertations.

2.6 Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data both quantitatively and qualitatively. The statistical software package called (STATA) was used to analyze the quantitative data that was

collected for the study. Data was coded and systematically entered on Microsoft excel sheet and later interpreted into tables, bar graphs and pie charts. The qualitative data that was collected was analyzed theoretically under their respective emerging themes and sub themes. It was also interpreted using descriptive statistics in form of frequencies and percentages.

3. Findings and Discussion

In order to ascertain the impact of free education, its opportunities and challenges respondents gave their views on different questions asked. Some of the questions focused on issues such as enrolment, pass and dropout rates, teacher pupil and pupil desk ratios, literacy levels.

3.1 The free education and enrolment

3.1.1 Average class enrolments

According to respondents’ assertions, the average enrolment of the classes which they taught and or the schools which they run had between 51 and 60 pupils representing 17(34%) of the respondents. At least 12(24%) of the participants said the enrolment was between 41 and 50 pupils per class while 9(18%) of the participants said the enrolment was between 61 and 70 pupils per class. Other respondents, for instance 2(4%) said the enrolment of their classes were between 71 and 80 and 1(2%) of the respondents said the enrolment was above 90. Furthermore, 3(6%) of the respondents did not say anything concerning the enrolment of the pupils per class while 4 (8%) of the respondents said the enrolment was between 31 and 40.

In other words, the aforementioned enrolment figures meant that the teacher - pupil ratio was quite high with the district average of between 51 and 60. This means that the most common teacher pupil ratios ranged between 41-50, 51-60 and 61-70 well above the recommended normal teacher pupil ratio of between 1:35 and 1:40 pupils per class. However the results of the study also revealed that few schools had teacher pupil ratios ranging from 31-40 which were very rare as the study only shows 4(8%) of the respondents stating that they had such enrolments whilst others had teacher pupil ratios as high as 1:90 or more although these were equally quite low. Furthermore, the high enrolment figures were testimony of the overcrowding in classrooms in most schools as reported by some respondents. These findings were similar to earlier findings which revealed teachers had very large classes and teaching was not easy because teachers could not afford to attend to individual learners’ needs (Macmillan, 2013). Equally a study conducted in Solwezi district reported teachers were unable to assign adequate homework and teach all the subjects on the time table per day (Museba, 2012) [14]. However, the free education policy was on course to improving social cohesion and promoting equity and equality in terms of educational provision in Kitwe District.

Table 1: Pupil desk ratio

Ratios	Frequency	Percentage
None	12	24%
1 to 2	7	14%
1 to 3	31	62%
Total	50	100%

Source: Field Work, 2015

Table 1 shows the pupil desk ratio as reported by respondents. Out of the fifty (50) respondents, at least 31(62%) of the participants revealed that the pupil desk ratio in their schools was 1 to 3. The other 7(14%) of the participants said the pupil desk ratio was 1 to 2 while 12(24%) participants did not reveal the pupil desk ratio as can be seen from the table. The statistics on the pupil desk ratio given above showed clearly that the pupil desk ratio in the district was quite good despite the reported high enrolment because there were no revelations of pupils sitting on the floor.

3.1.2 Pupil book ratios

Following the study's revelations, the pupil-book ratio in Kitwe district ranged from 1 to 1 to about 1 to 15. For instance, some of the respondents 10(20%) said they had no books for the pupils to read whereas 8(16%) of the respondents reported the book ratio of 1 to 3 and 6(12%) 1 to 2. Only 2(4%) of the respondents reported book ratios of 1 to 1, 1 to 4, 1 to 5 and 1 to 10 respectively. In addition to the pupil – book ratio of 1 to 3, 1(2%) of the respondents further said the classes they taught had book ratios of 1 to 6 while another 1(2%) of the participants said the pupil – book ratio was 1 to 15. Other respondents lamented that most subjects and grades were lacking in terms of text books. Some of the teachers said the classes they were teaching had no text books except for teachers' copies and 14(28%) of the respondents did not say anything on the pupil- book ratio either due to the variations in the questionnaires or because they did not want to; some questionnaires did not require the respondent to state the pupil-book ratios.

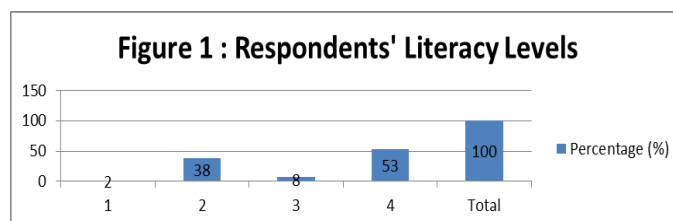
The pupil – book statistics given above depict a very bad picture where literacy promotion is concerned and leaves much to be desired even though the Ministerial statement issued in 2011 reported pupil book ratios of 1 to 2 for grades 1 to 7 across the nation (MOE, 2011) ^[13]. The scenario on the ground was not as the case could have been then because books were prone to tear and wear thus need to be replenished all the time. Therefore, the ratios reported by respondents ranged from 1 to 1 to 1 to 15 and in some instances some respondents said there were no text books for pupils to read, although a good number of respondents representing 28% of the total sample size did not give any response concerning the pupil book ratio. However 20% of the respondents said books were not readily available. Of course this was in view of the grades they taught. Furthermore, higher pupil book ratios were as good as not having the books in school because it was not practical for more than three pupils to share a text book and read effectively. Moreover, even the 1 to 3 ratio was not very good. In most institutions it was clear schools had just received books for grade 1, 2 and 5 while the rest of the grades were in acute need of the books. Thus, literacy was to a certain extent a challenge.

While most schools were under pressure to resolve the challenges of books, some respondents said the free education policy had resulted into rigidity on the part of most parents who were looking up to the government to provide all the needs of the pupils. Depending on the community in which the school was situated, the community's educational background also had an influence on the pupils' literacy. For instance, parents with a good educational background value education highly as such they were keen to provide supplementary literacy materials for their children or dependents and expose the children highly; educational

exposure was helpful to children, consequently it would help raise the literacy among children.

3.1.3 Percentage distribution of literacy levels

The results of the study showed that 1(2%) of the respondents alleged that the literacy levels were high. At least 19(38%) of the respondents alleged that literacy levels were average and 4(8%) of the respondents said the literacy levels were low while about 26(53%) of the respondents did not specify what the literacy levels were like in their institutions as shown on the figure below. It appears the literacy levels in Kitwe district could be rated as average following the respondents' revelations.



Source: Field Work, 2015

Out of the 24 respondents who affirmed their position on literacy levels, the majority confirmed the literacy levels were average. Could these literacy levels translate to the much desired high quality of education? We need not underestimate the importance of literacy in the economic development of the nation; Literacy is one of the key indicators of development. Due to the inadequate infrastructure for instance, some schools were still running the triple and quadruple sessions which meant fewer hours of learning in order to allow all children learn. It was an undisputable fact that reduced hours of learning impact negatively on pupils' literacy especially because teachers often have large classes. Consequently, a study conducted by Afrimap and the Open Society for Southern Africa discovered that there were poor transition rates and poor reading and arithmetic competence skills at mid-primary level and describes the state of education in Zambia as robust and vulnerable to shocks (Macmillan, 2013). ^[9] However, some teachers were doing all they could to attend to pupils who needed extra attention outside normal lessons according to their revelation even though carrying out surveys on the matter would help prove whether the assertions were true or not.

3.1.4 Pupil dropout rate

Various reasons allegedly contributed to pupil drop out in Kitwe district in 2015. For instance, the 52 reported cases of illness accounted for five percent (5%) of the total dropout rate, economic reasons also accounted for nineteen percent (19%), marriage two percent (2%), expulsions one percent (1%), pregnancies fourteen percent (14%), orphaned four percent (4%), deaths six percent (6%) and other reasons forty-nine (49%). In spite of the various reasons pointed out for pupil drop out ranging from illness, economic, marriage, expulsion Nonetheless, the study revealed a dropout rate of about 1.6%.

On the contrary, the study discovered that Kitwe district' grade 7 pass rate was high. For instance, 5(10%) of the respondents alleged the pass rate was above 80% while 33(66%) said the pass rate was between 60% and 80%. Therefore, it was evident most of the pupils who sat for grade

7 examinations qualified to grade 8. High failure rate could have been one of the contributing factors to low completion rates but in Kitwe District the case was different as the pass rate was reportedly high. In addition, the free education policy has not only been able to get children into school but the common scenario for all countries that have eliminated user fees also recorded high completion. For instance, it was true that the completion rate did not only increase in Kitwe district and Zambia in particular but Kenya, and Malawi also reported increased completion due to free education (UNESCO, 2005)^[20]. According to Mwansa *et al.*, 2004^[15] in Kattan, 2006), Education for All, 2000^[6] the abolition of fees helped students who had dropped out to return to school. When interviewed, the pupils revealed that those who failed grade 7 were in fact given further chance to repeat the grade which meant that pupils were sometimes given more than one chance to sit for grade 7 examinations. Assuming the pupils were paying user fees, perhaps it could have been difficult for many to repeat grades.

4. The opportunities of free education

Following the revelations made by respondents concerning the opportunities of the free education, the majority of the respondents said; free education improved access to education. The assertion was confirmed as follows; “removal of user fees has improved access to education—specifically the ability to reach the poor, girls, orphans and other disadvantaged groups” (Kattan, 2006: 9)^[6].

The study revealed further that the major opportunity for free education included increased completion which meant that the policy was very helpful to vulnerable families. On the other hand, free education was one of the requirements of education for all to improve access to basic education and it is true that it was not merely increased access because a country’s educational quality is related to its long term economic growth. Primary education being the basic form of education should equip learners not only with literacy and numeracy skills but must also help children learn self confidence, self esteem and get along with others.

(Education for All, 2000). The aforementioned makes clear that primary education must be of quality but there are costs related to improving the quality of education in terms of text books, teaching/learning materials, in-service teacher training and upgrading and school building operations and maintenance (Education for All, 2000)^[4].

5. The challenges of free education

The challenges of the free education as reported by respondents include poor funding of the primary schools, late or inconsistent funding of the schools, poor supply of educational materials such as text books and free education pupils’ requisites, overcrowded classes, low literacy levels, high pupil teacher ratios all of which impede the provision of quality education to the pupils resulting in the teachers’ inability to teach effectively due to lack of the necessary requirements. For instance, this can be seen from the respondents’ claims on how often the free education materials were received by primary schools. Only 2(4%) respondents acknowledged primary schools received the free education materials quarterly meaning that the materials were distributed four times annually while 13(26%) of the respondents said the educational materials were received termly meaning that every four months schools received the

free education materials whereas 35(70%) of the respondents reported that the frequency of the distribution of the free education was uncertain; they were only distributed when they were available.

The findings further showed that facilities were inadequate as most respondents called for the improvement of facilities which included classrooms, teaching and learning materials such as text books and various types of equipment. Commenting on the same matter, some respondents observed, some schools have old infrastructure, inadequate space to cater for the rising population while resources were limited to meet the demand of pupils and it was also observed that the materials needed were not readily available in schools therefore, the claim was not only on improving the facilities but also providing more facilities where they were nonexistent and it was in the respondents’ view that, inadequate teaching and learning materials will not help the quality of education to improve. Thus, with the stated challenges, quality education was farfetched in most primary schools and much need to be done. For example, a similar study that was conducted in Solwezi district revealed that poor facilities discouraged pupils from attending lessons regularly and in some cases where pupils attended school, they could not participate fully in class (Museba, 2005).^[14]

Reporting on the same matter, 20 (40%) of the respondents observed grants were received termly while 13(26%) of the respondents said schools received funds quarterly whereas 17 (34%) of the respondents could not tell how many times schools received grants per annum. Knowing very well that free education meant that parents were not supposed to pay user fees for children in primary school grades, 1 to 7, that is, government should commit itself fully to providing for the financial needs of the primary schools. However, it was evident the government of the Republic of Zambia has time and again increased its allocation to education but this has been outweighed by the increasing population growth.

Despite the reportedly high financial allocations to the education sector in the national budget, primary schools faced a lot of financial challenges possibly because the cost of education was very high. Indeed the problem of funding to primary schools needs adequate attention because it was one of the major elements that would contribute to good and quality education. Besides, the number of pupils enrolled in the primary schools whose needs must be met due to the free education policy was overwhelming yet the funds received by individual primary schools were far from being adequate. Of course, the figures which the government releases to the different provinces let alone districts may appear quite colossal but the number of primary schools in the nation was equally great meaning that allocating funds to individual primary schools was a challenge. Moreover, while the idea of allocating funds following individual schools’ enrolment figures was good but surely if for example a school with an enrolment exceeding 1900 pupils received K2 500 per term with the current inflation, how helpful will this amount be to the institution?.

It was in the same vein that grades 8 and 9 pupils were seemingly playing a very big role in sustaining the smooth running of the primary schools as reported by some respondents. Therefore, primary schools without grades 8 and 9 classes’ financial problems were even worse. Moreover, some of the respondents revealed that the flow of the funds to primary schools was not reliable as the disbursement of the

funds reportedly delayed so much that sometimes a term would elapse without primary schools receiving any funds for the implementation of free education. "This situation however, is not unique to Africa, for example, in Cambodia, cash flow delays have led some schools to unofficially collect fees from parents in order to cover the financing gap" (Kattan, 2006:41)^[6]. In fact, all studies conducted so far have raised similar concerns that the funds which primary schools received as grants were inadequate and disbursement was inconsistent; hence the outcry by most respondents to persuade the government to increase funding to primary schools and send the money consistently. The findings were similar to the findings of the studies conducted by various scholars such as Meki, 2004,^[10] Mwansa *et al.*, 2004^[15] and Museba, 2005^[14]. In other words, the government should do something to uplift the plight of primary schools.

Since primary schools did not receive enough money for their day to day operations, they were unable to purchase essential educational materials. The majority of the respondents thus called on the government to provide the necessary teaching and learning materials to primary schools. Most likely that is why the pupil book ratios were very high; schools were not empowered to purchase books and other materials for use to improve educational standards because of the limited funds which they receive. Therefore, teachers faced multifaceted challenges of teaching overcrowded classes without the necessary materials and sometimes in dilapidated infrastructure. However, the state of infrastructure in most schools in Kitwe district was not much of a challenge rather the quantity posed a challenge leading to most respondents calling on the government to increase infrastructure due to the high enrolment in the district.

Definitely, it is a must that learning must be as stimulating as possible, but if the learning conditions were not very favourable it is likely some pupils will not be motivated and the end result would be poor performance and the teachers will not teach effectively. In fact the issue of inadequate facilities was not new rather the problem affected Zambia's education and was affirmed by the World Data on Education as follows, most infrastructure is very poor, making the provision of quality education extremely difficult; Learning and teaching materials are scarce and there is a marked reduction in teacher morale mainly due to poor working conditions. However, the government was committed to addressing the said challenges through the processes of decentralization, liberalization and cost-sharing as can be seen from the liberalized provision of teaching and learning materials such as text books, tools and equipment as well as the establishment of learning institutions.

Through the said processes, private organizations, individuals, religious bodies and local communities now have the right to establish and control their own schools while one major feature of decentralization was the establishment of Education Management Boards through which decision making power was devolved to the local level (*ibid*). However, the Management Boards could not yield their desired purpose in primary schools as they did in secondary schools. Moreover, the structure of the boards was designed in a way that primary schools report to District Education Boards (DEBs) which are responsible for managing programmes and activities in the district but the task might have been too taxing for the District Education Boards.

The study further discovered that enrolments were very high in Kitwe District sometimes reaching as high as eighty or ninety pupils in one class. A reasonable class size in a normal circumstance should be between thirty five (35) and forty (40) pupils. The challenge was that the space meant for about forty pupils was being occupied by over eighty pupils more than double the population leading to overcrowding. Some respondents thus stated the over enrolment did not only impact negatively on the quality of education rather posed some health risks to both the pupils and the teachers. The respondents cited risky diseases such as skin diseases and air borne diseases which they said could easily spread among the pupils and one of the respondents observed it was unhygienic. The named challenges further correspond to those reported in the findings of the study which was conducted in Solwezi District in 2012 which claimed the enrolment outnumbered the available resources such as classrooms, text books, desks, toilets and water points therefore putting pressure on the few educational facilities and resources in the district (Museba, 2012)^[14]. The situation however, was not only unique to Zambia, it was particularly acute in Malawi where in 2000, the average student teacher ratio for standard 1 was 100:1, with many classes surpassing this ratio. It was further stated the over enrolment and other related variables would impede progress to attain universal primary education by 2015 (Kattan, 2006)^[6].

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

The free education policy currently existing in the country was reintroduced in 2002. Free education is one of the global requirements which were agreed upon at different conventions held at different time periods such as Education for All Summit which was held in Dakar and the Millennium Summit where the matter gained prominence. Being one of the signatory to the ratifications, the government of the Republic of Zambia is committed to promoting and supporting the policy without fail. Since its introduction, pupils in primary grades are not expected to pay user fees and the belief among most citizens was that pupils they were supposed to learn free of charge because government was taking care of the primary schools' needs. The findings of the study however revealed that the policy was ideal because almost everyone was able to send children to school and the results showed that the enrolment rates were high. The increase in the enrolment was in fact one of the anticipated benefits of the policy considering that the majority of parents could not afford to pay user fees thereby denying children access to education. However, the policy was facing a number of challenges some of which include overcrowded classes, lack of teaching and learning materials due to poor and inconsistent government funding. Other challenges included the inadequate infrastructure and high teacher pupil ratios, high pupil book ratios, and poor literacy levels although the named challenges were not exhaustive.

6.2 Recommendations

6.2.1 Recommendations to the Ministry of General Education

- a) The government through the Ministry of General Education should provide clear guidelines on the free education policy explaining clearly the role of parents and

communities in the implementation of free education policy.

- b) The government through the Ministry of General Education should fund primary schools more than secondary schools because of the free education policy; primary schools have limited means of raising funds.
- c) The Ministry of General Education should undertake feasibility studies of primary schools to establish their financial needs in order to plan adequately for their efficient operation.

6.2.2 Recommendations to Parents/Communities

- a) Parents and communities should form surveillance committees in their respective areas to guarantee the safety of their respective schools rather than comprise matters of safety.
- b) Parents should take keen interest in the education of their children and dependents by Working closely with their respective PTAs so that they were well informed of their children' educational needs in order to enhance quality education.

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